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### **Address by H.E. Dr. Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga President of Latvia at the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, Bratislava, 6 July 2006**

#### *Integration Processes at the National, Regional and Global Levels*

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to address the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, which was founded only a few months after Slovakia gained its independence. I have no doubt that this association played no small part in helping to ensure Slovakia's evident foreign policy successes, which include your country's accession to the European Union and NATO, as well as Slovakia's active participation in the UN Security Council.

Latvia and Slovakia share a great deal in common. Our two small European nations have succeeded in maintaining their language and their culture during centuries of foreign occupation. We share similar historical experiences, including decades of communist repression during the 20th century. Thankfully, both of our nations have now gained their rightful place on the world stage. During the 13 years that have passed since our two countries established diplomatic relations, we have undergone parallel paths of social, political and economic reform, and we have succeeded in realizing our common goal of acceding to the EU and NATO. The people of our two countries share the same overriding beliefs and values. We believe in freedom, democracy, the respect for human rights and the rule of law. We share the common desire to create a united, secure and prosperous Europe that is free from the artificially imposed divisions of the past.

These common values and goals form a solid basis for strengthening the friendly relationship that our two countries already enjoy. My state visit here to Slovakia testifies to Latvia's strong interest in establishing closer ties with this dynamic country, and in working together with Slovakia to address the common challenges we face at the European and global level.

One of the challenges that nearly every European country faces today – and certainly Latvia and Slovakia – is in creating a truly integrated society within its own, national borders. Each of our countries thus shares the goal of combining the multiethnic, multireligious and multiclass elements of its population into a healthy and viable whole.

In order for any society to advance, its constituent elements must be united by a set of shared, fundamental values. In the case of Latvia and Slovakia, these are the democratic-centred values I have just mentioned. An additional unifying force in any country is a shared sense of national identity.

Upon regaining its independence in 1991, my country was faced with the difficult task of forging a united and cohesive society out of a population that was neither linguistically nor religiously homogenous. We in Latvia have worked out an integration model that respects every minority's right to maintain its language and culture, while safeguarding and strengthening the native Latvian language and culture. Year by year, we have been making progress in integrating our minorities, without attempting to assimilate them. This is an ongoing process that is continuing to this very day. Here in Slovakia as well, your

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country has undertaken concerted efforts to integrate its multiethnic population and has achieved notable progress in this regard.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I think we can justly say that the common desire by Slovakia and by Latvia to integrate into such regional structures as NATO and the European Union did a great deal to promote the integration of our societies at the national level. That is because in order to meet the strict standards for entry into the EU and NATO, each of our two countries had to implement sweeping social, political and economic reforms, which have worked out, on the whole, for the benefit of our populations.

The Visegrad 4, a regional organisation consisting of Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, was created in part to promote the integration of these four Central European countries into the EU and NATO. Now that this goal has been successfully achieved, it remains to be seen how the V4, which Slovakia has just begun presiding over, will evolve in the future. Since the ultimate interest of the V4 is to promote democratic development in all parts of Europe, Slovakia has indicated that cooperation with the EU's eastern neighbours is a dimension that should be further pursued by the V4 countries together.

Latvia, for its part, is a member of the Council of Baltic Sea States, or CBSS, which consists of 11 countries that either border or lie close to the Baltic Sea, as well as the European Commission. The CBSS is a less homogenous organisation than the V4, encompassing a distinctly more disparate group of countries that have attained varying degrees of economic and democratic development. It extends from Russia in the East to Iceland in the West and also includes Latvia and her two Baltic neighbours, Estonia and Lithuania.

Like the V4, the CBSS has served as a driving force for multi-lateral co-operation, and as the UN's Secretary-General Mr. Kofi Annan has remarked, "the CBSS plays a key role in helping to underpin a stable, democratic, prosperous and undivided Europe." This is also the principal goal of the EU's Neighbourhood Policy, in which both Slovakia and Latvia are active contributors. Ultimately, the collective benefits that our countries can gain from regional integration will depend on the political will they can muster to agree upon and implement policies of mutual interest.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

One of the main functions of the European Union as a unique kind of larger, regional organisation is to promote economic integration, both between its member states and within each one of them. This involves the reduction of economic disparities between the rich and the poor, as well as the consolidation of a sufficiently large middle class in each country. Time and time again, the EU has proven quite successful in this regard, with a wide range of instruments available at its disposal for promoting the economic development of its less developed regions.

Within the relatively short time span of thirteen years, Ireland's GDP per capita practically doubled from 68% of the EU average in 1988 to 117% in 2001. Spain, Portugal and Greece have also benefited greatly over the years from the EU's cohesion policies. Now Slovakia, Latvia and the other most recent EU member countries are also determined to quickly catch up with their Western neighbours and attain comparable standards of living.

Unfortunately, Europe also faces a number of serious economic challenges. The overall EU GDP growth rate has not attained the targets set in the Lisbon Agenda, which was designed to turn the EU into the world's most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy by the year 2010. Europe is losing its competitiveness compared to other

fast-growing world regions like Asia, and is faced with a continually ageing population that is posing an increasing strain on its social security networks.

Insufficiently flexible labour markets, along with a complex regulatory environment and taxes that are too high, are also driving companies out of the EU's older member states. The result in some countries is high unemployment, stifled economic growth, strained social support and health care systems, and rising dissatisfaction among the EU's citizens. That is why the EU's older member states will have to display a greater degree of commitment in the implementation of a whole series of urgently needed reforms. But as you have noticed, reforms are not always popular. Indeed, it can be very difficult to convince populations that they truly are necessary.

The EU has also reached an impasse over the future of its Constitution, which, despite having being ratified by 15 of the EU's 25 member states, will most probably have to be revised at some point in the future. Fortunately, the most recent Eurobarometer poll, which was conducted in February and March of this year, indicates that the vast majority of the EU's citizens do want to live in a strong and dynamic European Union. For many, the EU is synonymous with security: social security, security against cross-border crime, and even the security of having a guaranteed workplace.

We will all have to continue working together to arrive at a consensus on Europe's future, for we are all facing the same 21st-century challenges in an increasingly globalized world. The French economist, Alain Minc, once compared the dynamics of globalization with the law of gravity. His conclusion was: "You can't be for or against the law of gravity, you just have to accept it." In a sense, it is the same with globalization. We face the same common threats to our security, including terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, illegal immigration, organized crime and trafficking of narcotics and human beings. We have to face up together to the spread of disease and to environmental degradation. No single country alone is capable of surmounting these pressing problems all by itself.

Unlike the law of gravity, however, we can and must affect the future course that globalization assumes. Latvia sees the NATO alliance as indispensable for maintaining international security, and for dealing with such modern-day threats as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the outbreak of regional conflicts and the spread of terrorism. We will only be able to overcome these new, 21st-century challenges to our security if Europe and North America are able to join their efforts. Latvia is proud to have been chosen as the host for the next NATO summit in November of this year. Although the central themes for the Riga Summit will focus on NATO's political and military transformation, I have no doubt that we will also address the issue of NATO partnerships with other countries, including the EU's eastern neighbours.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

At the global level, the World Trade Organisation and the United Nations are the most effective international organizations we have at our disposal for creating greater economic integration on a world scale. We must continue to combat the scourge of poverty, which fuels illegal immigration and the trafficking of drugs, arms and human beings. Poverty is a source of disillusionment that can lead to the espousal of radical ideologies and to the manifestation of intolerance and violence, including the murder of innocent civilians through terrorist acts. Therefore in our common endeavours to reduce poverty all across the globe, we must simultaneously combat terrorism and intolerance in all of their forms.

Latvia and Slovakia are both working actively to promote the reform of the UN. I, personally, have been involved in this effort as one of the five Special Envoys of the Secretary General on UN reform. Despite of the undeniable difficulties in reaching consensus, significant progress has been achieved. The Human Rights Council, established

by the General Assembly, will hopefully be an improvement on the previous Human Rights Commission. The Peace Building Committee should soon start to play an important role in achieving lasting peace in areas of continued strife and armed conflict. And, last but not least, let us hope that the Security Council can be successfully reformed in order to make it more representative of the current world situation.

As small European countries with similar interests and goals, Latvia and Slovakia understand the need for working together in international forums to strengthen their common agendas. Whatever the challenges that we have to face, I have no doubt that during the years to come, we will grow closer to overcoming them and achieving our goals.