



## Latvijas Republikas Valsts prezidenta kanceleja Prezidenta preses dienests

Pils laukums 3, Rīga-50, LV-1900, tālr. 7092122, fakss 7320404,  
prese@president.lv, www.president.lv

---

### **Address by H.E. Dr. Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, President of Latvia, at the international tourism seminar Buy Latvia, Buy the Baltics, Riga, February 7th, 2007**

Minister Strods,  
Mr. Vītoliņš,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is truly a pleasure for me as President of the Republic to open this international seminar, which is highlighting Latvia and the Baltic States as a safe and captivating destination for tourists from many lands. The impressive number of participants from nearly 30 countries indicates that this region is indeed becoming an increasingly attractive goal for travelers and a promising location to do business.

I have no doubt that this seminar, together with the biggest tourism exhibition in the Baltic States (BALTTOUR 2007), will provide opportunities for tourism companies to establish new contacts and help to increase the number of travelers in this region. I wish you all very fruitful seminar and I hope that besides your official activities, you will also take the advantage of this opportunity to see more of our beautiful country. My warmest welcome to you all.

Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

The development of tourism can certainly be counted among the highest priorities of my country. After all, Latvia had been erased from both the mental and the physical maps of the world, and certainly from the consciousness of tourists for five long decades, from the end of Second World War until 1991. This is all the more reason to rejoice about how much the world has changed since then.

Today we are a modern country striving to nurture our unique traditions, our culture, our open and protected nature and other assets. For many people around the world, Latvia still remains to be discovered. We would like more people to see with their own eyes how interesting we are and how unique each of the three Baltic States is.

Since the spring of 2004, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania have been full members of both the European Union and of NATO. These developments have brought us back into the family of democratic nations, where we rightfully belong. They have also had a positive impact on the economic development of our countries. Between 1999 and 2006, Latvia's gross domestic product grew steadily by an average of nearly 8% per year, and last year it reached about 12%, which is one of the highest growth rates in the world and currently the highest in the EU. Rapid economic growth has of course had some drawbacks as well, including inflation, which has been over 6% per year since 2004, the year we joined EU. Latvia's government will have to work hard to stem this inflationary pressure, which is currently preventing us from fulfilling the criteria for joining the Euro zone.

As you are extremely all well aware, tourism is an important source of income, a generator of employment and a significant factor for regional and social development. The

---

WTO forecasts that the volume of tourism will double within the next 20 years and that Europe will become the most important tourism destination. In this respect, I sincerely hope that Latvia, with the further development of its infrastructure and the improving of the competitiveness of its tourism sector, will be among the beneficiaries of this trend.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

In the beginning of the 1990s, the tourism industry in Latvia started practically from zero. In that perspective, the achievements that we have managed to attain are quite remarkable. In recent years, the growth of the tourism sector has demonstrated its potential as an extremely promising form of economic activity, and is fast becoming a key source of income in many parts of Latvia. In 2005, the tourism sector contributed nearly 2% of Latvia's GDP, which is beginning to look respectable, and we have high hopes that this figure will increase with every coming year.

Currently, Latvia's tourism industry, along with its GDP, is one of the most rapidly growing in the European Union and this growth is much faster than the average in the world, which, as I understand, is about 10% per year. From 2004 to 2005, the tourism sector in Latvia grew by a whopping 24%, and it is estimated that the number of tourists arriving in Latvia in 2006 already surpassed 4 million. This might not sound like an enormous number compared with other places in the world, but this is quite a lot if one considers that Latvia has a population of only 2.3 million inhabitants. We still have to turn our tourism balance from a deficit into a surplus, but we do feel that we are well on our way.

The increasing number of new hotels, guesthouses and tourism companies, as well as the rising number of foreign visitors in Latvia has been very good for our economy. We invite foreign companies to explore the opportunities that our growing tourism industry can offer and to exploit them for our mutual benefit.

Latvia is working very hard to display its unique features and to efficiently exploit its competitive advantages, such as its clean and diversified natural environment, its rich cultural traditions, and a vast historic and architectural heritage, which is of international significance. The center of Riga, as you know, is a UNESCO protected heritage site.

Last year Latvia was proud to host two significant international events. The first was the World Ice Hockey Championship, which took place in Riga in May. During these exciting days, we had the pleasure of receiving a great many foreign visitors and hockey fans. Last November, Riga had the honor of hosting the 2006 NATO Summit, with the participation of 26 heads of State and Government. Never before had Latvia seen such a large gathering of world leaders. Both of these occasions demonstrated the ability of our country, including its tourism professionals, to host and organize major international events. I am fully convinced that these successes have shown tourists, business people, governments and international institutions that Latvia and Riga in particular are attractive places to visit for leisure, business, conferences or other activities.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I hope that for all of you, your stay here will be both rewarding and enjoyable. I hope that you will return home with good memories of your experiences in Latvia and with new ideas for your business projects. You may think of returning here soon, but certainly no later than 2008, when the next major Latvian Song and Dance Festival will take place there in Riga. I can promise that this will be one of the most spectacular events that you have ever witnessed.

I wish you all a successful seminar, fruitful meetings, new impressions and a good time!

All the best!