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### **Address by H.E. Dr. Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, President of Latvia, at the conference EU-50 - A European celebration, Brussels, 24 March 2007**

#### *The Historic Significance of European Integration*

(transcript)

Your Majesties,

Your Royal Highnesses,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with deep emotion that I stand before you as President of a country that a mere 16 years ago would not even have had the possibility of being represented, even as a guest, at such a celebration. And it is therefore with all the more joy that I speak here on behalf of my country Latvia, but also on behalf of all those, who for long decades were kept behind an iron curtain and not allowed to develop along with the rest of Europe, for all those long decades after the Second World War. It is a pleasure for me particularly, having left my country, to be allowed like Ulysses to come back to my Ithaca, even if it took me twice as long as it ever took him before I was able to see my native shores again.

But having returned to Europe, I look upon it not just with that deep affection rooted in my native soil, with that deep affection, which I have derived from having been nurtured in not just my own, but in four other languages and cultures of the European heritage. But having lived so many years on other continents: in North Africa, in North America – I have looked upon Europe also in a cold light of critical reason. I have looked at it dispassionately at the same time as I am keen for it passionately. And it is precisely because of that cool vision from the distance that I admire all the more what Europe has accomplished in the past 50 years and that I can tell you with full conviction I am a great fan of Europe, I hope you are too.

But let us look back on what has been accomplished in these past 50 years and I think it is particularly important to do so any time as it so happens when we feel discouraged, when we somehow have felt that enthusiasm that the founding fathers felt at their time, we do not feel it quite burning in our chests as we would like to see it.

But the very fact that the Treaty of Rome was signed at all is almost a miracle in itself, for scarcely a decade had passed since the end of the most brutal and most devastating conflict that Europe had ever experienced in its very long and bloody history. We have had *two* world wars in the space of two short decades. Or in fact if you like to count them together two and a half decades in between and four decades of trouble and tension. In 1957, when the Treaty of Rome was signed, the terrible wounds of these tragic events were still fresh in everyone's minds. It took a great deal of will and a remarkable spirit of reconciliation for France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg to undertake the historical and unprecedented integration project that they did with their former enemies, Germany and Italy.

The path that these six founding European countries embarked has been complex and fraught with difficulties, but nevertheless it remains a cause for celebration. The European

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Union did not spring like Athena from the Zeus forehead fully armed. European Union was build step by step with patient negotiation, with respect for the others, with a sense of solidarity and a deep conviction of a better future. Think back to 1957. Few would have believed then that within this space of short years, the European Coal and Steel Community would transform into perhaps the largest integration project ever undertaken anywhere – into this union of free and democratic nations that we now are: these 27 sister nations. Few would have believed then in the viability of a project that was built on the sharing of power, on a partial relinquishment of one's national sovereignty. There was absolutely no historical precedent for a voluntary handover of authority to such a large degree among such a wide and diverse group of nations, many of which, most of which had been at war with one another for centuries past.

Your Majesties,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Few would have imagined back in 1957 that 50 years later, almost half of the EU's member States, stretching from the Mediterranean to the Arctic Circle, would have forsaken their national currencies in favour of the euro. Few would have imagined that a single economic market of 27 countries and half a billion people would successfully be established, with wide work, travel and study opportunities for all their inhabitants.

Few could have imagined that there would no more frontiers and controls between 15 European countries, that the establishment of a Common Foreign and Security Policy and Rapid Reaction Force were being brought forth as manifestations of this will of collaboration. In short, never before have so many Europeans in such a vast territory enjoyed such an advanced level of integration.

The European Union has also been unique in bringing together Western and Eastern Europe, in helping to heal the wounds not only of decades, but in many cases of centuries past. The elimination of artificially imposed dividing lines has shown that European integration is first and foremost based on common, overriding values, values that we all share: democracy, the rule of law, the respect for human rights.

The EU has been so successful that a number of neighbouring countries have expressed the wish to join it, while Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia aspire to closer relations. It has been so successful that it has become as a beacon to other nations who see it as a model for regional cooperation in many other parts of our planet.

One of the EU's greatest accomplishments is the climate of peace that it has established among its member States. The lengthy period of sustained, peaceful development that Europe has experienced is a value in itself. We only have to look on what your daily television screens have shown to appreciate what peace can be. Europe can serve as a positive example to others, and particularly to those who just has been torn apart by very sanguinary conflicts. Naturally, it is not something that we can impose on others by force. But it can be a beacon and a sign of hope. We can do this through a dialogue with all those who are ready to engage in a dialogue; and I hope that this dialogue can be extended in the future: between civilizations, between countries in the North and those in the South, between the rich and the poor, all over our world.

During these past 50 years, the Europeans have learned to respect and even to celebrate each other's cultures and their differences. Within a relatively limited area of the globe, Europe now encompasses a vast cultural, historic and linguistic diversity that is one of its greatest treasures. Every member nation of the union, no matter how small in size, has a unique and valuable contribution to make. Although we have been living *alongside* each other for centuries and even millennia, it is only since the Treaty of Rome that we began living *together*.

Majesties,

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Royal Highnesses,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

As we celebrate the results of half a century of progressive integration – attained with great effort, determination and patience – we must build on what we have already accomplished and acquired. We must be ready to face the unexpected and the unknown with confidence in our abilities and with full optimism about the future. We must not get mired down in details, we must not become discouraged by lack of progress in certain issues, we must keep faith in the same way that the founding fathers did 50 years ago. Of course, many of our citizens are legitimately concerned about maintaining their current levels of prosperity, many are fearful of becoming marginalized in this increasingly competitive and globalized world. Each generation comes with its own concerns and its own problems and we must fully respect them.

Nevertheless, these challenges should not deter us from establishing a broader vision of the European Union and its future; a common vision about the EU's mission, its unique role in the world and a Europe of innovative ideas and shared, overarching values, these values of solidarity, equal rights and the accommodation of differences. What we have accomplished during the past half century, should encourage us in facing all those challenges that still lie ahead of us. What we have accomplished has included looking back on the memory of each nation. And I think that enriching each other with a common memory that is on a scale of a continent, the golden age of each country, as well as its dark ages, the joys and accomplishments of each nation, as well as its injustices and its sufferings, all of that is past, our common heritage and as our children when they grow up become cognised of this very rich past, which goes beyond their national borders, I think that we will be bringing up generations of Europeans who should be doing even better than the ones that went before.

Majesties,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

In looking to the next 50 years of the European continent, what I would like to see is a European Union that does not just rest on its laurels or as a British poet said – he who rests on its laurels wares them in the wrong place, the European Union that is able to accept its accomplishments, but is not being broken down into the bureaucratic description in minute detail of every single regulation that our lives are to be built on. I think that in many ways it has been the sort of thing that the populations have felt as a source of disenfranchisement, as a source of estrangement from what is so uncommonly and unjustly called Brussels. Of course, Brussels is not at fault. We ourselves are at fault here. It is up to us in every country, every member of the Union not to blame the Brussels but to blame ourselves for everything that goes wrong and to see to it that we can set it right.

But it is my hope that as we look to the future, we look not only to improving our economy, competitiveness, in improving our ability to stand up to all the challenges and to let the rest of the world enfold us, that we would not only look for a grater prosperity and renewed peace and better understanding among each other, but that this Europe of tomorrow will also be one not just of the body and not just of the state, not just one of commerce and free markets and politics, but that this Europe also would be one of a heart and of a spirit. I wish for the next 50 years that we have a growing Europe, a Europe with soul.

Long live Europe!