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Address by the President of Latvia, H.E. Dr. Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, at the State Dinner in Honour of H.E. Mary McAleese, the President of Ireland, Rīga, May 21st, 2007

Madam President,
Dr. McAleese,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen!

It is a great honour and a true pleasure for me to greet the President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, and her husband, Dr. Martin McAleese, as my guests. The first state visit of an Irish President to Latvia is an affirmation of the maturity of the Latvian-Irish relationship, a sign of the strong friendship between us and evidence of the constructive dialogue that has taken place since Latvian independence was restored.

I often fondly recall my visit to your lovely and friendly country in June of 2002, Madam President, and my meeting with you in Dublin on May Day in 2004 – a meeting that took place at such a historic moment, when Latvia and nine other countries became Member States of the European Union. Our accession took place when Ireland held the presidency of the EU, and I am proud of having had the opportunity to witness this long-awaited event.

Madam President!

The relations between our countries began soon after our independent states were founded, when Latvia and Ireland worked together in the League of Nations. Latvia will never forget that Ireland was among the states that refused to recognize the legality of our annexation by the Soviet Union. Our countries are linked by a world-view that derives from similar historical experiences – being small nations with complicated past relationship with our bigger neighbours, we both understand the difficulties of national survival and of attaining and maintaining independence. We know how hard it is to protect our languages and face the challenges posed by migration.

The complexity of our historical experience makes the support and solidarity of other countries very important to us, whether it came in the darker periods of the 20th Century or whether it comes in the new, more promising century of a united Europe. I am convinced that together we have the strength to continue to build upon the legacy of our predecessors, the founders of this new Europe. We can and will construct a secure and prosperous Europe in which democracies cooperate, human rights prevail, and our values stand as a shining example in a changing world.

At this moment, following the EU enlargement of 2004, the relations between Ireland and Latvia are special. Physical distance between lands is not the barrier it once was. In opening its labour market to citizens of the new EU Member States, Ireland welcomed Latvians and made it possible for many to expand their horizons. It is my hope that most will return to Latvia with the skills and experience they have gained in Ireland. The freedom of movement and the right to work will hopefully allow Latvians to learn from Ireland's renowned transformation into one of Europe's wealthiest states. The personal connection that many will retain can become a basis for the further development of the close

relations between our countries.

A Europe without walls has made it possible for our nations to get to know each other more intimately. A significant portion of Latvia's population has chosen to find a home in Ireland, where they have been warmly welcomed and feel valued. I would like to thank you, Madam President, for the interest you have taken in the Latvian community. It is a pleasure for me to observe that the Latvian community in your country is increasingly active, not only in their everyday lives and in maintaining their ties to friends and relatives here in their homeland, but also in organizing new community structures. There are several community associations, a Latvian newspaper, and a weekend school that will help them pass on their heritage and language to their children. There are church services that are held in Latvian, and the national holidays of both our countries are celebrated.

I would like to emphasize our links in the realm of culture, Madam President. Latvians have long been acquainted with the great works of Irish literature. Latvian readers have long loved Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Iris Murdoch and other Irish authors. Samuel Beckett's plays are performed in our theatres. The seminal and monumental work of literary modernism, *Ulysses*, has been translated into Latvian not once but twice, and thanks to the efforts of your Ambassador, His Excellency Tim Mawe, Ventspils University College will celebrate James Joyce and learn about his life and work this year. A recent film festival made it possible for some here to see the latest productions by major Irish filmmakers and offered insight into contemporary Ireland and its history. Both our peoples are famed for their singing, and visiting Latvian choirs have done well in competitions in Dublin, Cork, and Drogheda.

Madam President!

Ireland became an EU Member State in 1973 and soon became a success story known around the globe. Taking careful advantage of the opportunities the EU offers, your country became famous as the Celtic Tiger. Latvia has now embarked upon this path, but as yet we are only at its beginning. We look at your accomplishments with admiration and wish to emulate them – to become a Baltic Tiger. I want to offer my heartfelt thanks to you and the Irish nation for the help you have given us in rejoining Europe and for sharing your knowledge with us.

The economic ties between us have been increasing, and I am pleased to note that there is reason to expect them to continue to grow. There is still considerable potential for economic cooperation between Latvia and Ireland, and I hope that your visit will help the business community to take note of the many investment opportunities that Latvia has to offer. Rīga is not only the hub of the Baltics – it is again a major centre of finance and trade for the entire Baltic Sea region.

Madam President!

I can say with firm conviction that the links and contacts between our nations form a foundation for ever-closer cooperation in the near and distant future! Please permit me to propose a toast to you, Madam President, and to you, Dr. McAleese! To the prosperity of the Irish and the Latvians, and to the steadfast friendship between Latvia and Ireland within a united Europe!