



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 Vike-Freiberga, President of Latvia, at the conference "Negotiating Futures States, Societies and the World", Riga, November 12, 2004

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to see the good attendance at a conference that I would like to see as being a historic one, as marking the first of a very long series of intellectual debates taking place here in Riga, the capital of Latvia, and devoted to an in-depth analysis of both where we come from and where we need to go in the future.

Latvia, like its neighbours and others, stands at the beginning of a new historical period. The year 2004 is a historical watershed. From being a captive nation a mere 13 years ago, we have become a member of the European Union. From being unable to determine our own fate, from having lost our sovereignty to an armed invasion and annexation, we have become members of the NATO Alliance and have thereby ensured guarantees for the survival of our sovereignty and our freedom in the foreseeable future.

We now stand at the threshold of a new period, to face challenges that are no different from those that more fortunate nations in the rest of Europe have been facing for rather a longer time. But together with our neighbours, we are now faced with the task of uniting Europe, not just in terms of administrative structures and economic agreements, not just under the political common will of all those willing to stand under that star-spangled banner of Europe, but also of forming a common vision of what Europe is about. Where does Europe come from, where is it going? What does anyone of us see here in Latvia or anywhere else, be it among the member States of the European Union or among our neighbours near and far what does anyone of us foresee and envisage as the future of this continent, as the future for each and everyone of our nations? Most of all, what sort of future does anyone of us, as individuals, as citizens, have in store?

Latvia had been literally wiped off the map of Europe for far too long ever since the Second World War, and obviously such a state of affairs has left a mark on our people. Europe had been divided into spheres of influence since the infamous 1939 agreement between two totalitarian dictators, Hitler and Stalin, as to how to split up the continent among themselves. Europe remained divided by the Iron Curtain, thanks to the compliance of the Allies when faced with the Stalinist Soviet Union and its demands. It remained so for many decades and it is not until 1991, at the end of the August coup, that the former captive nations were able to start on their path of, first of all ensuring their sovereignty, their freedom, regaining democracy, regaining all the rights that that entails, but most of all of entering into discourse and interaction with the rest of Europe. The Iron Curtain had not been just the Berlin Wall and the barbed wires and the dogs and the sentries all along the borders of the Soviet Union and of its satellite countries.

The Iron Curtain was lowered so as to stop the flow of ideas and the flow of information. I think that is the wall that we would like to break down now, by integrating our thinkers and our general population into the flow of ideas, into a mix from which, we hope, sparks will ignite and insights will be generated and whereby all of us will be

enriched by the debate, even if, as the rector alluded, we do not always have the same outset position and start from the same premises, nor do we necessarily reach the same conclusions by the same arguments.

My dream as President is to see Riga regain its place as an intellectual centre of Europe. I see this conference, in this hall, as a symbolic declaration of that intent. Riga, after all, is the place where Kant published his Critique of Pure Reason, even though he had written it in Knigsberg. Riga is the place where Herder developed his ideas about the folk, about folk-songs and the meaning of nationhood. Herders ideas, in interaction with those of other important thinkers of the movement of German Romanticism, among them Harder, Hamann, the brothers Grimm, Lessing and others, their thoughts about the meaning of culture and the source of ideas were to revolutionise Europe.

At the time when German Romantics came forth with their ideas that all national languages, as well as the cultural heritage of the common folk had an important contribution to make, Europe was governed by an aristocratic view of the world of ideas. Apart from the obvious role of the Christian faith, secular ideas were mostly inherited from Classical Antiquity. They were transmitted and embellished by an intellectual elite and supported by royalty or the more enlightened members of the nobility. The Royal Society of England was founded by Charles II immediately after his restoration. Twenty-five years earlier, the French Academy had already been founded by Richelieu for the King of France. Academies were founded in Berlin and other capitals under royal patronage in the more powerful and prosperous nations of Europe.

Ideas were propounded by great thinkers and by scientists, but they were supported by an aristocratic, authoritarian system of governance. The German Romantics came up with the notion that ideas are not generated only from the top down. They can also work their way from the bottom up. This is a very democratic idea in that it views culture as a multi-layered and multi-faceted phenomenon that includes the contributions of the common folk as an integral part of it. The common folk in their cottages transmit traditional knowledge in tales and folk songs and oral literature that frequently contains as much insight and wisdom as the most erudite and the most turgid of academic discourses.

This was a novel and a revolutionary conception. It helped to fuel the numerous National Awakening movements across Europe. It played a role in the creation of new nation-states in Europe after the First World War, simply on the basis of the fact that they possessed a different language and a different culture. It also led eventually, as good ideas often do, to distortions and caricatures and to the reversal of what was originally a very noble idea. We saw some aspects of it picked up in German National Socialism and in Italian Fascism.

The last century has been rough on Europe and it certainly has left a bloody mark on the Latvian population and on Latvian soil. We would like the next century to be better, to be radically different. That is why the time has come for us, now that we have recovered our freedom, now that we have achieved the immediate policy aims that our nation had set for itself, to think about our priorities in the future, to think more deeply about what it means to be a European and what the values are that unite us on this continent. What really are the values that we so often invoke: those of democracy, of individual rights and freedoms, of the free market economy, of the possession of private property, of rights of authorship and so on?

Politicians, and especially in Latvia, may have a short career at the helm of their state. Intellectuals can hope for a longer career, but they do not have the power of decision-making in their hands, they cannot directly change the direction of the ship of State. In a democracy, ideally, we would like the people to be the ones to determine the course of the nation. But in order to do so, the people must be well-informed and they must be able to form their choices as rational and informed choices, not as emotional whims based on the popularity of this politician or of that slogan.

This is a formidable challenge. We saw it in the last elections of the European Parliament, how few people in Europe feel directly interested in electing their members of parliament to this legislative body, how little faith they have in its ability to represent them and to bring about any substantial change of direct concern to them. We are experiencing a similar scepticism here in Latvia. We have waited so long for our freedom, we have fought so hard and worked so hard to become members of the European Union. Now that we are in it, what are we going to do? What are our priorities going to be, and how are we to set out about determining them?

A few years ago I invited the population of Latvia to sit down on New Years Day and to draw up a list of 99 of their most ardent wishes, to make among these a set of concrete priorities that they would like to see come into effect within the next year. Many people told me afterwards that they found this a singularly difficult challenge and many had difficulties in finding even ten goals that they felt were important, that they would like to see fulfilled during the coming year. I must admit that when I tried to follow my own advice, I got as far as 33 wishes and ran out of speed for myself, personally.

Setting goals and priorities is not an easy task. It is far easier to see what is wrong in the world. It is far easier to try and diagnose the ills that beset us. That, of course, needs to be done as well and that is part of the task that some of you will be engaging in at this conference. Proper diagnosis of our ills is a necessary starting point, but we must get beyond that. We must get beyond griping, whining and complaining and condemning. We must get to dreaming about what we would like to be, about what we would like to become. It is not easy, it takes work and effort. It is just as hard as learning to fly. But one must fly in imagination and one must have a vision for the future. I invite you therefore to put your heads together and to help us in this strategic form of thinking. We have created, under the auspices of the President of the Republic, a Strategic Analysis Commission. The aim of this Commission is to gather our brightest minds in a variety of sectors, to get them to engage specialists in various areas as well as the general public in debating, in exchanging ideas and in presenting goals about our future.

It is important for us as Latvians to find the goals and priorities that we wish to accomplish here and now for our country. When I took office as President, I declared publicly that I was ready to listen to anyone who would be ready to offer advice to me as President about what needs to be done in the country. I got many letters, I got quite a substantial response. Many of them were very long: 17, 18, 20 pages long, with a lengthy list of complaints about what was wrong with the country. Very few of them came with concrete suggestions as to what should be done to improve the state of our nation. I did receive one letter, though, from an elderly gentleman who outlined 20 points that, in his view, needed to be changed. Soon after I got an angry letter from him, saying:

Two weeks ago I went to the trouble of setting down 20 things that need to be set right in the country and I am very disappointed that you have not yet realised them.

Debating about what we need to accomplish and forming a clear mental image of our goals and our aspirations is not enough. It is also important to set up a practical road-map of how we might get from here to there, what are the steps needed to get us from A to B. The roads chosen, of course, will vary in their details. This is where in a democracy, the role of political parties and interested groups comes into play, each one of them making and outlining a road-map with different sign-posts about the tasks that lie ahead.

In a democracy, we also have to find a way of harmonising all these different ideas in setting our national goals. We have to formulate those goals that are best for the nation as a whole, that are in the interests of the nation in the long term and not just the short term. This is a very difficult task in the governance of a country. It is definitely a challenge. We need ideas, and good ideas, for going about it in the best possible way.

These challenges are similar in other countries. I would like to welcome in particular today the substantial delegation from Lithuania. Thank you for being here. I am sure that

your ideas and your insights will enrich the debate in this conference. I welcome all those visitors from far-away lands. Thank you for being here. We value your contribution and your ideas.

The challenges that we face are not unique. We like to think that we Latvians, just as much as anybody else, have a contribution to make. A contribution that is as unique as individuals are in a crowd or in a nation. In a democracy the whole point is to allow every individual a chance to reach the height of his or her potential. In a democratic union of nations such as the European Union, much the same applies to the contribution of individual nations. Some have longer histories and greater accomplishments, but every one of them brings the human resources of its people, their accumulated experiences and their unique skills for survival and growth.

Each nation, because of its own unique history, has its own unique national heritage and collective wisdom. I quite agree with the German Romantics in that regard. Our desire, then, is to make our voice heard in the chorus of European voices. Our desire is for every nation to be so heard. Every nation can make a contribution, be it large or small. Each has something to offer and we all have something to gain from our interaction. I wish you well in this conference.

I wish you well in all your personal endeavours. I hope that this is the beginning of a long journey in which we will continue to meet annually during the cold autumn month of November in Latvia. November marks our liberation, the creation of our state, which we commemorate on the 18th, our national holiday. We would like to see the misty month of November become a month of intellectual debate here in Riga for many years to come: of debates through which nebulous notions will be turned into lucid formulations, and clear recommendations arise out of the fog of conflicting claims and interests. Thank you for coming. My best wishes to you all!