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Address by H.E. Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of Latvia, at Lusiada University, Lisbon, September 15, 2004

Latvia in the New Europe

Honourable Rector Durão,

Professor Motta,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to address this distinguished audience of academicians and students at Lusiada University, which has attained a high degree of prestige since its foundation only 18 years ago. As a former professor of psychology at the University of Montreal, I am truly delighted to find myself again in such a stimulating academic environment.

Although Latvia and Portugal are located at the very opposite ends of Europe Latvia to the North and East, and Portugal to the West and South the relations between our two countries are now closer than they have ever been before, thanks to the historic expansion of the NATO Alliance and the European Union. If we look back in history, then we will discover that the first written record of contacts between Portugal and Latvia dates back to the end of the 14th century, when a brisk trade developed between the two maritime ports of Lisbon and Riga.

Later in the mid 1600s a trade agreement was formalized between Portugal and the Duchy of Kurland in Western Latvia. Two years after Latvia first declared its independence in 1918, Portugal supported Latvias efforts to consolidate its place as a new democracy in the family of free European nations, by voting for Latvia accession to the League of Nations. Then, during the darkest period of Latvias history, when the countries of Central and Eastern Europe languished under communist repression, Portugal refused to officially recognize the brutal Soviet occupation of the three Baltic States: Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania.

Portugal was one of the first countries to recognize the reestablishment of Latvias independence in 1991, and I am very pleased that the relationship between Latvia and Portugal has strengthened in recent years through increased trade links, as well as through practical cooperation at the political level. Latvia is also grateful to Portugal for supporting its long-cherished dream to join the European Union and the NATO Alliance. This dream finally became a reality earlier this year, and for Latvians, this is great cause for celebration.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This historical eastward expansion of the EU and of the NATO Alliance represents the end of an old era for Europe and the beginning of a new one. It signals the end of the outdated, obsolete and obscene concept of spheres of influence; a concept that brought about the artificial and unfounded division of our continent into two opposing ideological camps.

The enlargement of NATO and the EU represents the end of a historical injustice that had led to the decades-long subjugation of Central and Eastern Europe. Now, for the first

time in its history, Europe is on the road to becoming a united continent, not on the basis of force and armed conquest, as during centuries past, but of its own free will.

For the first time in their history, Europes nations have established a broad consensus on the way their countries should be run, namely, on the basis of free-market economic principles, democratic political institutions, the respect of human rights and the rule of law. For the first time in our history, we have laid the foundations for building a new European home of secure, prosperous and stable nations that will eventually encompass the entire European continent. This is an opportunity that must not be missed.

Clearly, European integration is a continuing process that cannot be completed in just a few months or years. Most likely, the process of building Europe will never be complete. One major challenge lies in reducing the large economic disparities that still exist between the EUs older and newer member States, and to do so as rapidly as possible. For it is only once the distinction between Old and New Europe is eliminated, at least in regard to economic development and well-being, that the European Union will be fully complete.

One course of action that the EU candidate countries can take to reduce the discrepancies between old and new is to adopt development models that have already proven to be successful. They can learn from both the successes and the mistakes made by the EUs current members in order to make full use of the assistance available from Brussels. The mechanisms that the EU is able to deploy for reducing regional disparities are undeniably effective. Its equalization programmes and development funds have produced viable and tangible results, and have greatly contributed to raising the standard of living of one new member State after the other, including Portugal, Ireland, Spain and Greece.

Latvia and her fellow new NATO and EU members are eager to contribute to Europes development. We look forward to the day when our countries will be able to provide substantial assistance to others, and contribute more to the EU budget than they expend. We share the wish to ensure peace and stability in Europe and the world at large.

The European Union is a large family of diverse and democratic nations, where the interests of each and every member are respected, and where solidarity is the cornerstone of co-operation. This rich diversity, which may at times present challenges to consensus-building, is nevertheless one of Europes greatest strengths and assets. It is a resource that must be nurtured and cherished.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Latvia wholeheartedly advocates the assumption of greater responsibility by the EU in ensuring worldwide peace and security, and believes that the new European security strategy is a step in the right direction. EU crisis control operations have already demonstrated the European Unions ability to contribute to multilateral security-enhancing efforts. However, any comprehensive and serious EU measures to enhance Europes security should be coordinated with those of the NATO Alliance, so as to avoid duplication and overextending our capabilities. Regardless of the differences in opinion that have arisen between several European countries and the United States concerning the crisis in Iraq and other issues, we all share the same fundamental values and ideals, which we must protect by acting together. After all, it is precisely due to this close Transatlantic partnership that peace and stability have been maintained in Europe since the end of the Second World War. The expanded European Union of 25, and later 27 States will be able to flourish and prosper only if the worlds democracies remain united in the defence of their common ideals.

The foreign policy of the new and expanded Union must endeavour to enhance the security and promote the prosperity of the EUs border regions. Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and Poland are now the EUs direct neighbours with Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. In developing the EUs relationships with these three countries, we must provide as much support as possible to democratic reform processes within them.

Russia, for example, will certainly benefit from the presence of stable, peaceful and predictable neighbours at its Western borders, just as it has gained from bordering Norway over the last decades. Our neighbours to the East will only gain from the expansion of the area of peace and stability, and from the eradication of obsolete, Cold War era prejudices and suspicions.

As a neighbouring country of Russia, Latvia is interested in the evolution of Russia as a democratic state with a functioning market economy, a state open to dialogue with the West. Latvia can serve as a valuable partner in this dialogue, and is ready to participate in it at any moment.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The expansion of Europe's space of prosperity, security and stability must continue to include those countries that conform to the Copenhagen criteria and that aspire to accede to the Union. If all goes as planned, then we will be welcoming Bulgaria and Romania into our fold in the year 2007. Croatia, with which accession talks are set to begin next year, should follow soon after.

During the past few years, Turkey has achieved immense progress in the implementation of political reforms and in the consolidation of a democratic, law-abiding State. The prospects of EU accession have provided an added stimulus to Turkey's rapid economic and political transformation. Turkey might one day make history by becoming the first Moslem country to join the EU, and contribute to fostering greater understanding between Europeans of different faiths. I express the hope that Turkey will continue with the reforms it has undertaken, and that it is seen by the international community as a country that respects the rights of its ethnic and religious minorities; as a country that is governed by the principles of democracy and the rule of law.

Later this year, the European Council will decide on whether to begin EU accession talks with Turkey. I am confident that this decision will be made objectively, based on the same Copenhagen criteria that were used to evaluate the readiness of the EU's ten most recent members.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Europe's nations face the challenge of effectively dealing with such pressing common concerns as unemployment and poverty, illegal immigration and cross-border crime, drug addiction and disease, and environmental pollution. Cooperation measures in various fields should therefore be strengthened both within and outside of the EU. Regarding the protection of the environment, I could mention the implementation of the Kyoto Protocols, as well as the improvement of shipping security through the banning of single-hull oil tankers, which present a constant threat to our oceans and beaches. Regarding our collective security, it is only by working more closely together in justice and internal affairs that we will be able to effectively deal with the insidious spread of international terrorism.

Overall, we have already accomplished a great deal. For the first time in our history, we have succeeded in uniting our continent of our own free will, and we live in a Europe that is, for the most part, prosperous and at peace. Yet there is confusion and apprehension about the new Europe that we wish to build. Many people see the EU as an intrusive, bureaucratic morass run by corrupt officials who cater to big business and powerful, corporate lobbies. Less than half of Europe's citizens or 46 percent say they trust the EU's institutions. The same proportion, 46 percent, voted in this year's elections of the European Parliament, with those least likely to vote being young people and blue-collar workers.

The average citizen has become largely indifferent to Europe and does not identify with it. The moral crisis that has arisen in our prosperous States is reflected in our increasingly frivolous entertainment industries, which wilfully titillate and arouse our basest desires for sex, excitement and violence. On the streets we see increasing disillusionment, social tensions, intolerance and a return to nationalistic tendencies.

More and more people are reverting to their nation state as the lynchpin of their identity, and paradoxically, many are turning to their deputies in the European Parliament to defend what they see as their national interests.

We need to revive the Europe of culture and the Europe of ethics. We need to revive, as Goethe wrote hundreds of years ago, a respect for the God who created us, a respect for our planet, a respect for our fellow human beings, and a respect for our fundamental values. The European citizen must not be reduced to the utilitarian function of being a cog in the machine of wealth production, of being a mere consumer of goods.

Each one of us is part of a greater community, a cultural community, a spiritual community, a community of people wheel themselves as brothers and sisters under the sun. This is the community that we have joined as Latvians, as Portuguese and as Europeans.

We now have a unique opportunity both old member states and new to make Europe stronger and more united than it has ever been before. I have no doubt that in the years to come, we shall realize our centuries-long dream of a stable, secure and prosperous Europe, of which we are all proud of being a part.