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Address of the State President V.Vike-Freiberga at the Parliament of Europe

Ladies and gentlemen,

I shall now be switching to English in my presentation. Besides helping to reduce economic disparities within Latvia's own national borders, the EU's expansion eastward, together with the accession of the three Baltic States to the NATO Alliance next year, will have an enormous political and economic impact on the whole Baltic Sea Region, significantly improving its overall investment and business appeal. The union of old and new democracies, of mature and emerging markets, of established structures and new alliances, is going to become a strength and not a weakness.

However, the European Union faces one major challenge that of reducing the large economic disparities that still exist between the EU's current and future 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 EU's 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 Ireland, Spain, Portugal and Greece.

The future members of the EU, including Latvia, have been enjoying remarkably high rates of growth in recent years, as well as healthy increases in trade and investment flows. Nevertheless, most of them still need to continue with the hard work of reforming their institutions, building their administrative capacity, implementing EU norms and fighting corruption throughout the early years of their euro-integration. This will require serious, focused and continuing efforts by their governments. The rate of progress achieved will depend on the intensity of the effort put forth and on the strength of the political will exercised by each new EU member.

Ladies and gentlemen,

With the Intergovernmental Conference just under way, it is a true pleasure to see that the EU's next round of member States are participating in it as full members and that Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey are also sitting at the negotiating table as observers. We in Latvia see this important gesture as a sign that the principle of equality will remain as the primary basis of cooperation among the countries of the European Union. Europe cannot be divided into large and small, old and new, or rich and poor member countries.

For Latvia, one fundamental aspect of the principle of equality lies in each country's right to nominate a member of the European Commission. We believe that all Commissioners, without exception, must be equal in every respect, and that all should have

the right to vote. How else will the Commission remain a collegial institution that represents the common interests of its member States?

Another manifestation of the EUs deep-rooted principle of equality can be seen in the rotating presidency of the Council of Ministers, which Latvia believes should remain as one of the Councils primary features. This rotating presidency provides each member State, regardless of its size, with the invaluable opportunity to lead and to coordinate the work of the EU.

The principle of equality among the EUs member States is also manifest in several other close forms of European integration, including that of monetary policy with the implementation of the euro, and that of internal affairs and justice through the Treaty of Schengen. These aspects of EU membership must remain open to all member States, regardless of the number of inhabitants each country may have or the extent of financial resources at its disposal.

In this regard Latvia has carefully considered the Conventions proposals concerning a common European defence policy. We believe that all member States must have an equal say in the adoption of decisions that concern our continents security. In Latvias opinion, the division of the EUs constituent members as a function of their military capabilities would not be conducive to the cohesiveness of the European Union.

Latvia shares the common wish of the EUs current and future member States to create a strong and united European Union. It is therefore essential for the EU to work as effectively as possible, to make full use of its existing institutions, and to precisely define the functions of any new institutions that are to be created. Any division of competencies between the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission and the Foreign Minister of the European Union must be clear and unambiguous. Otherwise we run the risk of undermining the existing institutional balance of the EU.

If the post of President of the European Council is eventually created, then Latvia believes that his or her principal mandate must lie in coordinating the internal work of the Council and in preparing the agenda of the Councils meetings. In other words, the new Council President should undertake those tasks that up until now have been performed by the Prime Minister of the EUs presiding country.

Since both the President of the European Council and the Foreign Minister of the European Union will represent the EU internationally, we must ensure that their mandates do not overlap. There must be no doubts about when the Foreign Minister can act on his or her own initiative, and when he or she must consult with the Council of Ministers.

In order for the European Union to operate with a maximum degree of efficiency, it must be equipped with simple and straightforward decision-making procedures. Latvia supports the Conventions proposal to implement a double majority voting system within the European Council and Council of Ministers. This uncomplicated scheme, where each country is accorded one vote, would also be easily understood by the EUs inhabitants, unlike the qualified voting system as defined in the Treaty of Nice. However, Latvia believes that the double majority voting system would manifest itself most effectively with the implementation of parity between the majority of countries and the majority of inhabitants, involving at least half of the EUs member States and half of its inhabitants.

Regarding the future number of deputies in the European Parliament, Latvia firmly believes that it would not be desirable to reduce the minimum number of deputies representing any one country from five to four. Such a measure would significantly reduce the ability of Latvia and other small EU member States to take part in the European Parliaments decision-making processes.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Latvia would like a strong, integrated and united Europe to assume a more prominent role in the international community. We hope that the EUs Foreign Minister will prove

successful in consolidating a common European foreign and security policy, while simultaneously maintaining Europe's close partnership with North America. 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 States will be able to flourish and prosper only if the world's democracies remain united in the defence of their common ideals.

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 Union's ability to contribute to multilateral security-enhancing efforts. Nevertheless, any comprehensive and serious measures to enhance Europe's security should continue to be undertaken to the fullest possible extent in partnership with the United States and Europe's other NATO allies.

The insidious security threats posed by terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, collapsing States and internecine conflict demand a united response by those countries that abide by the principles of democracy and human rights. The EU and NATO member States, together with their allies, have experienced considerable success in the implementation of joint peacekeeping operations, and have greatly contributed to the reestablishment of peace and stability in the Balkan region. The development of a common European Security and Defence Policy would provide the EU with the additional potential to enhance its cooperation in international peacekeeping and other security operations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The forthcoming expansion of the European Union underscores the importance of the EU's relations with its current and future eastern neighbours. The foreign policy of the new and expanded Union must therefore endeavour to enhance the security and promote the prosperity of the EU's border regions. Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and Poland will soon become direct focal points of the EU's trade and other relations with Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. In developing the EU's relationships with these three countries, we must provide as much support as possible to democratic reform processes within them.

The involvement of Russia in European processes is essential both for the Baltic Sea region and for Europe as a whole. While the relations between Latvia and Russia have sometimes been strained in the past, the positive changes that have already occurred with the expansion of the EU and the NATO Alliance in the Baltic Sea region provide a good basis for a continued rapprochement between Russia and her immediate Western neighbours. Latvia certainly wishes to promote increased cooperation between the EU and Russia at a practical, pragmatic level.

Mesdames et messieurs,

Pour maintenir le poids et l'importance de l'Europe dans le monde actuel, il nous incombe de bien manager tout principal de ce continent que nous partageons : sa mosaïque varie de cultures, de langues, et de nations diverses. La pluralité linguistique et culturelle de notre continent est une richesse inestimable qui constitue le cœur même de la construction européenne. Elle contribue à la raison d'être de l'Union, comme telle qu'exprime par la nouvelle devise proposée par la Convention sur le futur de l'Europe : unis dans la diversité.

Tout au long d'un demi-siècle, la Lettonie a dû subir le plein poids du totalitarisme. C'est donc en pleine connaissance de cause que les lettons ont un sens particulièrement aigu de ce que signifie le libre choix et les libertés civiles. Nous ferons donc tout ce qui est à la mesure de nos moyens pour que l'esprit de tolérance, de compréhension et de respect mutuel continue de régner parmi les peuples de notre continent, et qu'il soit au centre de nos efforts

de coopération accrue.

Dès sa fondation en 1918, la Lettonie s'est rime en Etat ouvert et démocratique. Malheureusement, le grand rêve du peuple letton de vivre en liberté dans un pays stable et prospère fut trop vite transformé en cauchemar. L'entente secrète entre Hitler et Staline, conclue en 1939 dans le pacte infâme de Molotov-Ribbentrop, divisa l'Europe Centrale et Orientale en sphères d'influence allemande et russe, déclencha la guerre la plus destructrice que l'humanité ait jamais connue, et raya les noms des trois Pays baltes des cartes politiques du monde.

Durant cinquante longues années, la Lettonie subit deux occupations brutales nazies et soviétiques et perdit plus d'un tiers de ses habitants avant-guerre. Progressivement, la langue lettone fut engloutie par une autre, le russe, dans la vie publique et quotidienne. Les Lettons, pour leur part, n'avaient pas loin de devenir une minorité dans leur propre pays d'origine.

La Lettonie a donc reçu un lourd héritage du régime d'occupation soviétique. La politique linguistique imposée par Moscou pendant un demi-siècle était visée à la russification totale de la Lettonie et à la destruction de son identité nationale. Cette politique malveillante générera des conséquences douloureuses et durables que le pays est destiné à surmonter au fur et à mesure des prochaines années, avec l'aide du programme gouvernemental d'intégration de la société lettone.

Tout en respectant pleinement le droit de chaque personne de préserver sa langue, sa culture et son identité ethnique, chaque pays démocratique porte simultanément l'obligation de créer les conditions préalables qui permettent à tout habitant de participer pleinement dans la vie politique et économique de son pays. Je ne connais aucun Etat du monde actuel où une telle participation serait possible sans la maîtrise adquate de la langue nationale, en l'occurrence le lettone.

J'aimerais souligner que les minorités ont joué un rôle important dans l'établissement de l'Etat lettone en 1918, ainsi que dans l'établissement de l'indépendance de la Lettonie en 1991. L'Etat lettone, pour sa part, a entrepris des efforts considérables pour permettre aux minorités de sauvegarder leur culture et leur identité, de maintenir leurs langues et leurs traditions. Dans mon pays de seulement 2,3 millions d'habitants, plus de cent organisations de culture nationale minoritaire reçoivent le soutien financier de l'Etat.

Suivant l'établissement de l'indépendance de la Lettonie en 1991, un système national d'éducation financé par l'Etat fut mis en place, fournissant l'occasion aux enfants de fréquenter des écoles d'éducation primaire enseignant soit en lettone, soit en une de huit langues minoritaires, dont le russe, l'ukrainien, le polonais, le biélorusse, l'hébreu, le roumain, le slovaque et le lituanien. Peu de pays peuvent se vanter d'un tel accomplissement.

Cette politique lettone est fondée sur la conviction déjà avancée, que les langues et les cultures diverses forment une des plus grandes richesses de notre continent. Il en résulte logiquement que l'Etat lettone porte une responsabilité toute particulière à l'égard de la langue lettone, une de seulement deux langues survivantes de la famille de langues baltes. Le lettone tant parlé par moins de deux millions de personnes dans le monde constitue donc un patrimoine culturel européen unique.

Le défi et la mission principale du système d'éducation lettone est de créer les conditions pour l'épanouissement de la jeune génération. Par conséquent, la réforme du système d'éducation envisagée par l'Etat prévoit le maintien de l'enseignement primaire soit dans la langue lettone, soit dans une des huit langues minoritaires que j'ai mentionnées. À partir de septembre 2004, les écoles secondaires devront assurer l'enseignement au moins 60% de leurs matières en langue lettone, mais auront libre choix sur ce fait.

J'ajouterai que la politique lettone envers ses minorités conforme entièrement aux critères internationaux, et que ce fait a été confirmé maintes fois durant les dernières années par la Commission Européenne, le Conseil de l'Europe, l'OSCE, les Nations Unies, et plusieurs autres organisations internationales.

Mesdames et messieurs,

Toute volont collective de se librer d'un passé totalitaire ne peut véritablement réussir qu'en prenant conscience des manifestations et des formes que ce mal peut prendre. Pour cette raison la Lettonie exprime son soutien à la proposition de résolution présente le 25 septembre dernier à l'Assemblée parlementaire du Conseil de l'Europe sur la nécessité d'une condamnation internationale du communisme totalitaire. Cette résolution prévoit la formation d'une commission politiquement indépendante pour rechercher les crimes commis pendant cinq décennies par les régimes communistes dans les pays de l'Europe Centrale et de l'Est. Une telle condamnation internationale du communisme totalitaire, des meurtres, des déportations en masse, et d'autres formes de répression pratiquées en son nom, basée sur de l'information objective et sur des faits indiscutables, serait d'une signification inestimable.

L'expérience de l'Allemagne suivant la fin de la Seconde guerre mondiale nous montre que si les forces anti-fascistes avaient vaincu le régime nazi uniquement sur les champs de bataille, leur lutte aurait été vainqueur. Ce n'est qu'en vainquant l'idéologie nazie totalitaire qui demeurerait dans l'esprit de millions de gens que l'entamation de la construction européenne, et de ce qui est aujourd'hui devenu l'Union européenne, sera avérée possible. Maintenant, en continuant la reunification d'une Europe jadis déchirée, il est nécessaire une fois pour toutes de mettre fin aux conséquences néfastes engendrées par le communisme totalitaire.

Pendant des millénaires, notre continent a survécu à une succession interminable de guerres sanglantes et de conflits internationaux, qui culmina avec les deux guerres mondiales et les nettoyages ethniques du 20ème siècle. Maintenant, pour la première fois dans notre histoire, nous avons devant nous l'occasion de créer, de notre propre gré, une Europe nouvelle, unie et en paix, stable et prospère. Je souhaite de tout cœur que nous soyons à la mesure de relever ce défi. J'espère de tout cœur que nous soyons à la hauteur de la tâche pour utiliser pleinement tous les avantages et toutes les ressources que l'histoire a enfin mis à notre porte.