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Latvia & Poland: Prospects for Regional and Transatlantic Partnerships after Prague and Copenhagen 26.February 2003

Rector Wgleski,

Excellencies,

Dear students and professors,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Having spent many years as an academic and university professor, I am delighted at the opportunity to address an intellectually minded audience such as this one here at Warsaw University. It is an honour to be speaking at one of Eastern Europe's most significant centres of study and research, and at a university that has played such a major role in the history of your country. During decades of oppression and foreign domination, Warsaw University served as a bastion that kept alive the ideals of freedom and patriotism in Poland.

The people of Poland can be proud of their national traditions and of Poland's glorious past as a great European power. Latvia has been strongly influenced over the period of several centuries by the Polish presence in the Baltic Sea Region. This influence has been manifest in a wide variety of areas extending from architecture to religion.

Sadly, our common geographical location between other large European nations has also brought us tragic periods of subjugation at the hands of foreign powers. Poland was partitioned and erased from the map of Europe, while Latvia fought to consolidate its national identity under Russian rule. By the end of the First World War, however, our shared desire for independence would link our nations once more.

In November of 1918, both Poland and Latvia proclaimed their independence. Immediately thereafter, our countries were forced to defend their newfound freedom on the battlefields of war. In 1920, our armies successfully fought together in the eastern Latvian province of Latgale under the command of General Edward Rydz-Smigly. Poland's contribution to Latvia's War of Liberation will always be remembered with gratitude in Latvia.

This common and successful struggle to consolidate our countries' independence provided a firm basis for the friendly relations that existed between Poland and Latvia during the interwar period in the 1920s and 1930s. The Polish-Latvian border on the shores of the Daugava River served not as a barrier, but as a link between our two nations, which engaged in active commerce and trade. During this time, the Polish minority in Latvia experienced an unprecedented cultural revival.

Following the tragic days of September 1939, when Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia put an end to Polish independence, thousands of Poles found refuge in Latvia. This sense of security would be only temporary, for Latvia's fate had also been sealed by the same, infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop pact that led to the invasion of Poland and to the onset of the Second World War. After the Soviet Union occupied Latvia and her Baltic neighbours in June of 1940, thousands of people, including many Poles, were either killed or deported to the Gulag.

Following the War, Poland and Latvia languished for decades under communist, totalitarian rule. While Poland was allowed to maintain some attributes of statehood, Latvia was completely absorbed into the Soviet Union. The Polish non-violent struggle for true liberty and independence in the early 1980s inspired Latvias own Singing Revolution a few years later. In 1991, not long after Poland regained the genuine ability to run its own affairs, Latvia returned on the international stage as a sovereign country.

Latvias Polish minority actively supported the Latvian struggle to end Soviet rule, and has played a significant role in the consolidation of Latvias renewed independence. One of my countrys most ardent patriots was Ita Kozakvia, a shining intellectual who headed the Polish community in Latvia and served as a parliamentary deputy.

Approximately 60,000 Poles live in Latvia. They make up about 2.5% of the population, are one of the best integrated minority groups in the country. Currently the Latvian government is providing state funding to six Polish schools, as well as the main Latvian Polish community organization, so as to promote the safeguarding of Polish traditions and culture in Latvia.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As friends, as neighbours, and as fellow victims of past events, the people of Poland and Latvia fully understand the true value of freedom. We also understand the terrible cost of losing it. We realize that at the beginning of the 21st century, we cannot safeguard our independence as neutral and non-aligned countries. We cannot rely on formal security guarantees from our neighbours. We need allies that we can depend upon when our security is in danger, and we must be ready in turn to assist our friends when they call for our help.

Latvia, Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries have chosen to join the NATO Alliance, and to assume all of the rights and responsibilities that membership in this organization entails. Poland has been one of the most active supporters of Latvias membership aspirations, and I would like to take this opportunity to express Latvias sincere thanks to your country and to its President, Mr. Aleksandr Kwasniewski.

The Transatlantic Alliance is one of the foundations upon which postwar Europe has developed and prospered. Europe and America share a common civilization. We share common values, common goals, and a common vision of the future. Millions of Europeans of different backgrounds have helped to create, over the centuries, what is now known as the United States of America. America, in turn, helped Europe to triumph over Nazi imperialism. It helped Western Europe to rebuild from the destruction of the Second World War, and it helped to topple the Soviet colossus that had stifled the development of Central and Eastern Europe for decades.

As allies of America, Poland and Latvia are ready to stand by the United States in its war against terrorism, and to help prevent another world tragedy of the scale that occurred in September of 2001. That is why Poland and Latvia share a common position with the United States in the worldwide efforts to disarm Iraq. We believe that a war with Iraq can be avoided, but only if Iraq complies completely with the demands of the UN Security Council. Iraq must prove to the international community that it has disposed of its biological and chemical weapons. It must prove that it has destroyed its long-range missiles. It must prove that it does not pose a nuclear threat to the Persian Gulf region.

Nobody wants a war in Iraq. Certainly not Poland, and certainly not Latvia. Poland, Latvia, and many other European countries have already experienced far too much bloodshed. The older generations of our countries still hold vivid memories of the destruction of the Second World War. However, our historical experience also indicates that the price of inaction can be unbearably high.

If the international community had turned against Hitler after he annexed Austria in 1938, then the following Nazi invasion of Poland and the Baltic States may well have been avoided. If genuine international pressure had been placed on Stalin to withdraw from

Central and Eastern Europe after the Second World War, then our countries might have regained their freedom several decades sooner.

The international community is now faced with the threat of a ruthless dictator in Iraq, who has yet to prove that his country has eliminated its weapons of mass destruction. We have already waited twelve years for Iraq to fulfil its international obligations. We cannot afford to wait much longer. If we choose to remain passive and to forsake our Western allies call for support, then we risk standing alone and isolated if and when our hour of need arrives.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to now turn to another pivotal event that will affect our countries future for decades to come: the accession of Poland, Latvia and eight other countries to the European Union in May of next year. Sixty years ago, Europe was in the throes of the most devastating war that humanity has ever experienced. Ever since, thanks in large part to the stabilizing effect of the European Union and the NATO Alliance, our Western neighbours are enjoying an unprecedented period of peace and prosperity.

Today, a new chapter is being turned in our continents history. For the very first time, Europe is being united by peaceful means, rather than by force of arms. For the very first time, we are all participating together in the building of our future. The people of Poland and Latvia are taking part in decision-making processes themselves, rather than having decisions made in their place.

In May of 2004, Poland and Latvia will begin a new and closer partnership as full members of the European Union. This new Union will be very different from the one our countries sought to join when accession negotiations began. It will be an expanded Union of 25 countries, rather than the current 15.

Many high hopes and expectations are being placed upon this modified Union. If the EU is to live up to them, then it will have to be capable of dealing with many daunting challenges. It will have to deal with unemployment, poverty, and uneven economic development.

This new Union will have to work efficiently and effectively, which is why the Convention on the Future of Europe has been assigned to establish an optimal model for the EU's future operations. The Convention's recommendations will determine what type of Union the people of Poland and Latvia will vote to join in national referendums later this year.

Our inhabitants will need to be fully informed about the Convention's final recommendations. Our delegations will need to obtain full voting rights when the next Intergovernmental Conference is held in 2004 to forge out a new framework for the Union. Otherwise, there is a risk that the people and the parliaments of our countries may choose to vote against acceding to a modified Union that they had little part in shaping.

The European Union of the future must be closer to its citizens and easier to understand. Latvia believes that the Convention on the Future of Europe must work out a single document that plainly and clearly explains the EU's goals, the mechanisms for reaching them, and the role of each EU institution.

Any reforms of the EU must not compromise the long established practice of arriving at decisions by consensus, nor should they significantly alter the fine balance of power that exists between the EU's current institutions. Latvia believes that the creation of new institutions may not necessarily be the most desirable option. Latvia supports the continuation of a rotating presidency within the Union, and believes that this practice should be altered only to the extent that it optimises the operations of an organization that has expanded to 25 members.

The European Union that Latvia wishes to join is a Union of sovereign nations that enjoy equal rights, including the right to express their opinion. This right should apply equally to all of the Unions member states: large and small, old and new. Currently, Europe is divided over the course of action to be taken regarding Iraqs failure to comply with numerous UN resolutions. I believe that we should not let disagreements over this and other issues poison the good relations that we Europeans have worked so hard to build among ourselves. Europe still has a long road to travel before it arrives at a common foreign and defence policy. Until it does, we must live with the diversity of opinions expressed, and we must respect them.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Within a very short time, Poland, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania will have to share an important responsibility; that of assuring the security of the European Unions eastern borders. But we will also be presented with unprecedented new opportunities, as the EUs centre of gravity shifts eastward. Our countries will have an important role to play in the further development of the EUs, as well as NATOs relations with Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. Latvia fully supports President Kwasniewskis Riga initiative, which foresees, among other things, the gradual intensification of our relations with these three countries.

I believe that one way of promoting better relations with Russia is through closer cooperation within the Baltic Sea Region. This region in which we are located is growing into one of Europes most dynamic areas of development. Today over 65 million people live near the shores of the Baltic Sea. If we include those who live further inland, then the number of people who are directly affected by the policies that are realized in the Baltic Sea Region rises to 120 million.

Fully one tenth of the worlds trade is conducted in this region. This amounts to a staggering 100 billion US dollars per year. The Baltic Sea Region is endowed with several major assets, which include a highly educated workforce and a well-developed infrastructure, including 76 ports. All these advantages provide the Baltic Sea Region with the perspective of becoming one of the most economically advanced areas in the world.

Poland, the Baltic States and Russia still have a great deal of untapped potential for further economic growth. The rapid and sometimes painful reforms that Poland and the Baltic States have implemented are now bearing fruit and are paving the way for our countries further development within the EU and the NATO Alliance. I am confident that Russia as well will continue on its path of democratic, economic, and social transformation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

One important stimulus for the further advancement of our region will come in the form of EU structural funds. All of our countries will benefit greatly from the channelling of such resources into the development of our roads, railways, and communications.

The *Rail Baltica* project, for example, would provide more efficient and rapid rail service from Helsinki to Berlin through Riga and Warsaw. The Via Baltica road network from Helsinki to Warsaw would serve as a supplementary and vital link between Central Europe and Scandinavia. As President of Latvia, I hope that the modernization of our common infrastructure through projects such as these will continue in earnest once our countries join the European Union.

Evidently, the close links that exist between Poland and Latvia extend far beyond road and rail networks. We are bound by history, by friendship, and by kinship. These form a firm foundation for our future partnership as members of the European Union and the NATO Alliance. Soon we will be taking common decisions that will affect not just our own countries, but the entire continent. I am convinced that these decisions will permit us to build a better future, and to realize our centuries-long dream of a stable, secure and prosperous Europe.