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### **Statement by H.E. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of the Republic of Latvia, at the New Neighbours Initiative of the European Conference in Athens, 17 April 2003**

Mr. President of the Council,  
Mr. Secretary General of UN,  
Dear friends and colleagues,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank the Presidency for convening European conference which is both very important and timely. Yesterdays signing of the Accession Treaty reminds us once more that we are just a couple of steps away from the enlargement of the EU, an event that is bound to influence the destiny of all the countries represented here today. I welcome the participation and significant contribution of the Secretary General of UN.

The forthcoming enlargement of the EU will obviously extend the area of security, stability and prosperity in the European Union itself. But it is also bound to work to the benefit of the EUs neighbouring countries. We are all interested in achieving close, stable and mutually beneficial relations with the enlarged European Unions eastern neighbours, as well as with countries of its Southern flank.

No one wishes to see the external borders of the European Union become barriers to economic development and democratisation. Latvia views it as essential to develop an EU Russia dialogue, where Latvia intends to play a full and active role. Latvia hopes that the New Neighbours Initiative will support Ukraines European integration aspirations and contribute to stability and security in the region. The inclusion of Belarus is also of importance to Latvia as Belarus is our direct neighbour.

In order to further develop the relationship between the enlarged European Union and its new neighbours, we should provide as much support as possible to the democratic reform process in these countries. Latvia is ready to help with its reform experience and knowledge.

Latvia believes that the EUs relationship with its neighbouring countries should be based on a differentiated approach, depending on the level of political, social and economic reforms reached by the countries concerned.

In Latvias opinion, the present agreements concluded between the EU and the countries concerned by the New Neighbours Initiative should be implemented to their full extent before we proceed to a further expansion of the EU. At the same time, additional medium-term financing would also be desirable to promote the successful development of our neighbouring countries.

The central aspect of the New Neighbours Initiative should focus on spreading stability and prosperity to the direct neighbourhood of our enlarged Europe or, to quote the President of the European Commission, on creating a ring of friends around the Union. I have full confidence that we will succeed in this task.