



## 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

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### **Address by H. E. Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of Latvia, at the University of Zurich, October 31, 2002**

#### **Re-defining Europe: a Latvian perspective**

President Villiger,

Rector,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is always a pleasure for me, as a former academic, to address a university audience, but it is a particular honour to speak at the University of Zurich, which is known for its long-established tradition of academic excellence. This institution can pride itself on being the first to award a doctoral degree to a woman in the German-speaking world, and the first university in Europe to be founded by a democratic state, rather than by a monarch or by a religious establishment.

The strong democratic traditions for which Switzerland is known are deeply rooted. They are the foundation stone on which Switzerland has built its success as one of the most prosperous and stable countries on the planet. These traditions date back at least to the year 1291, when the three small Alpine communities of *Scwyz*, *Uri* and *Unterwalden* established an alternative to the military expansion and conquest, which was the order of the day. The inhabitants of these communities engaged in one of the first recorded undertakings of voluntary integration and sharing of sovereignty in Europe, and in so doing established the foundations of the Swiss Confederation.

Switzerland's successful model of cooperation and integration among communities of different backgrounds has long been an inspiration to many in Europe, as well as in other parts of the world. The post-war reconciliation among Western Europe's countries and the unprecedented degree of economic integration that has followed within the framework of the European Union are based on the same principles of equal partnership and mutual respect that have long held sway among Switzerland's diverse cantons. It may seem somewhat of a paradox that Switzerland's neighbours have engaged in integrative initiatives spreading far across their international borders, while the people of Switzerland, as pioneers of sovereignty sharing in Europe, have chosen not to extend their integrative practices beyond their national frontiers.

For centuries, Switzerland has been an island of peace and stability in a continent ravaged by war after war. It has provided a safe haven for persecuted intellectuals and political leaders from many a nation. In the canton of Ticino stands a monument dedicated to Italy's freedom fighters. Its inscription reads: back when there was still no Italy to speak of, your homeland was here.

These same words might just as well have applied to numerous exiled Latvians. At the beginning of the 20th century, when Latvia had not yet gained its independence, two of Latvia's greatest writers, Rainis and Aspazija, found refuge in Castagnola. One of their countrymen, an illustrious politician named Mielis Valters, had also been persecuted by the Czarist regime for his socialist convictions, and published his own social-democratic newspaper while in exile. Mielis Valters, who was one of the first activists to campaign for a

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free and independent Latvia, obtained his doctoral degree here at the University of Zurich. Latvians will always remember the safe haven and inspiration that Switzerland has provided to some of Latvias greatest minds.

After gaining its independence in 1918, Latvia, like Switzerland, adopted a policy of neutrality. Our neutrality, alas, was not respected by our neighbours. Latvia was invaded by Nazi Germany as well as Soviet Russia, and was erased from the map of Europe for more than half a century after being forcefully incorporated into the USSR.

Now, slightly more than a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the end of totalitarian rule in Central and Eastern Europe, our continent stands at a significant crossroads. For the first time in its history, Europe has the opportunity to create a lasting stronghold of peace, security, stability and prosperity spanning a large part of the continent. The opportunity is there to establish a dynamic community of free and democratic nations that share the same fundamental values, and that have been united not by brute force and conquest, but of their own free choice and of their own free will.

Latvia envisions a strong and united Europe that can maintain the rich diversity of its many languages, cultures and traditions, for these are among Europes principal assets. We envision a Europe where smaller countries can contribute on an equal footing with their larger neighbours to the common benefit of all; a Europe of innovation and development; a Europe bound by an overriding vision of where it wants to go, and where common, long-term aspirations will take sway over narrow, short-term interests.

A majority of Europeans have decided to unite their efforts within the framework of two institutions, the European Union and the NATO Alliance. Latvia hopes to receive official invitations to join these organisations by the end of this year. For Latvia, accession to the EU and NATO would signal its true return to the European family of free and prosperous nations, and the end to the abhorrent division of our continent into two opposing camps, which endured for so many long decades.

At the same time, Latvia fully understands and respects Switzerlands unique situation, and its decision to abstain, for now, from acceding to such supra-national organisations. Nevertheless, Switzerland, as an island surrounded by EU and NATO member states, may seriously consider accession to the European Union at some later time in the future. As it is, Switzerland has already developed very close economic ties with the EU. The vast majority of Switzerlands foreign trade is conducted with the Unions member countries, and Switzerland holds the distinction of being the EUs second largest trading partner, after the United States of America.

In this new age of globalization and increasing interdependence, many pertinent issues such as internal security, migration and asylum, the prevention of disease, and the protection of the environment require joint efforts among neighbouring countries. Switzerland has an obvious interest in intensifying its cooperation with the EU in these areas, and it will be up to Swiss voters to decide again in a future referendum what forms this cooperation will take.

As a relatively small country, Latvia is prepared to relinquish certain aspects of its sovereignty to common European structures within the framework of the EU, in exchange for the opportunity to take part in decisions that it would otherwise have little means of influencing. These include decisions relating to security, health and environmental issues, as well as trade, taxation, agriculture, and many other spheres of economic activity.

The EU to date has successfully balanced the interests of its larger and smaller members, and Latvia is confident that this spirit of fairness and equal partnership will continue to be a fundamental feature of the Union during the foreseeable future. Clearly, the EUs institutions and structure will need to be reformed and its operations will have to be streamlined in order for a Union of 25 countries to function effectively. But such a Union shows the promise of becoming a formidable economic and political force, provided its

resources are channelled efficiently and its decision-making runs smoothly.

Ladies and gentlemen,

While Latvia sees the European Union as the driving force of our continents future development, it also envisions a significant role for the Council of Europe and the OSCE. These two organisations complement the EU with their focus on democracy, human rights and the respect for minorities. They provide useful institutional frameworks for increased cooperation with such non-EU member countries as Russia and her CIS neighbours, as well as the United States and Canada. And they are furthering the implementation of European standards and norms in European countries that have not applied for membership to the EU.

Latvia also sees a role for regional organisations in the coordination of inter-state cooperation on a more local basis. The Baltic Sea Region, for example, is once again experiencing a revival, after being divided for five decades by the Iron Curtain. The Council of Baltic Sea States, which was founded ten years ago in 1992, incorporates all of the countries that border the Baltic Sea coast, including Russia, as well as the European Commission. It has successfully worked to promote greater unity between the countries of the Baltic Sea Region, particularly between the three Baltic States and the Nordic countries.

Indubitably, one of the most pressing challenges for all sovereign nations is that of security. Most European countries, including the aspirant nations of Central and Eastern Europe, have chosen to cooperate in this field within the framework of the NATO Alliance, and to do so in close partnership with the United States and Canada. This transatlantic partnership has proven extremely successful over the years, and few will dispute that Europes neutral and non-aligned countries, including Switzerland, Austria, Sweden and Finland, have also benefited indirectly from the American military presence in Europe.

While NATO was initially created to deal with the threat of a Soviet military invasion, it is now working to address the latest security challenges, which include conflict prevention and peacekeeping in Europes peripheral areas, as well as the dismantling of terrorist networks worldwide. These challenges require a collective international response, to which Latvia has already been contributing for several years, in partnership with its Baltic neighbours. Latvia looks forward to increased cooperation with Russia through the NATO-Russia Council, and supports the creation of a European Defence Force that could operate both within and without of the NATO framework.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Although Switzerland has chosen to maintain its centuries-long policy of neutrality, it has been active within NATOs Partnership for Peace programme, and has served a traditional and invaluable mediating role in the resolution of international conflicts. Switzerlands immeasurable contribution to the humanitarian operations of the Red Cross and the United Nations has been widely recognized and appreciated for decades. Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, hardly any country in the world can afford to be an island unto itself. Switzerlands recent decision to join the United Nations as a full member can be seen as a recognition of this new reality. Latvia looks forward to working together with Switzerland on an even closer basis, both within the framework of international organizations and bilaterally. We stand united in our aims to reduce violence, injustice and inequality in the world, and to do what we can to make our planet a better place to live for all of its inhabitants.