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### **Address by H. E. Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of Latvia, at a discussion forum organized by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and the Institute of International Relations, Prague, 2 May 2002**

#### **Our common future in the Transatlantic community**

Director edivij,  
President Dine,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank the Institute of International Relations and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty for organizing this discussion forum here at the Czech Foreign Ministry in Prague.

Twelve years ago, few people would have imagined that an event such as this one could take place; that Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania would soon become independent countries; and that the democratically elected presidents of the three Baltic States would one day meet in Prague with the democratically elected President of the Czech Republic.

Few would have imagined that the person chosen by the Czech people to lead their country would be a former dissident and political prisoner. Few would have imagined that the Czech Republic would leave the Warsaw Pact and join the NATO Alliance without bringing about a Russian-led military intervention of the kind that occurred in 1968.

And fewer still would have imagined that by the middle of the first decade of this new century, the Czech Republic and the three Baltic States might one day become joint partners as members of the European Union and the NATO alliance.

Indeed, the changes that have occurred during the past decade in Europe have been nothing short of remarkable. These changes have led to a unique situation where for the first time in history, the people our continent have acquired the opportunity to create of their own free will a united Europe that is stable, secure and prosperous. They have acquired the opportunity to put an end to the tragic legacy of the Second World War, and to the outmoded division of Europe into competing spheres of influence.

And they have acquired the opportunity to create an enduring and strengthened partnership with their like-minded allies in North America.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In this increasingly interdependent and globalized world of the 21st century, no country can stand alone as an island unto itself. The tragic terrorist attacks last September in the United States revealed that even the richest and most powerful countries are vulnerable to destructive acts by subversive organizations with well-organized, clandestine networks stretching across the globe. The spread of organized crime, disease and environmental pollution, and the fight against poverty can also be addressed only through joint international efforts.

But in order for us to address these pressing issues, we must also assure the long-term and sustainable development of our countries. One indispensable precondition for this is

security, or the simple absence of armed threats to the normal functioning of our societies. As we speak, plans for a Common European Foreign and Security Policy are still in their infancy. In the meantime, most of Europe's democratically oriented countries have already been acting jointly with their North American allies for over half a century, and ensuring a common security space through the NATO Alliance.

Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania hope to be formally invited to accede to the Alliance here in Prague Summit this November, and we are extremely grateful for the outspoken support that has been provided to our cause by President Vaclav Havel and the Czech government. We are convinced that our accession will make the Baltic seaboard and Europe as a whole even more stable and secure than it is at present.

There are good reasons for thinking that this will indeed be the case. NATO has experienced several expansions in the past, and each has been successful.

The most recent accession of the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary in 1999 has led to a dramatic improvement in these countries' relationship with Russia, as well as a considerable rise in the volume of foreign investments in Prague, Warsaw and Budapest. I am convinced that the presence of a greater number of prosperous, stable and secure EU and NATO partners on Russia's western border will ultimately serve to help Russia's interests.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In this day and age, no country can survive without allies. The Baltic States and the Czech Republic learned this through their bitter experience during the Second World War. Our natural allies are those countries that share our common commitment to freedom, democracy and the respect for human rights. That is why we are seeking membership in the European Union and the NATO Alliance. As President Havel said in his eloquent speech in Bratislava last year, the European post-Communist countries truly belong to the West geographically, historically, culturally as well as in terms of their values.

The success we have attained in rebuilding our economies and in restructuring our societies is also a success of our Western neighbours' policy of engagement, outreach and, ultimately, enlargement. Together, we will be celebrating this success on July 5th and 6th in Riga at the summit meeting of the ten NATO candidate countries, which will be attended by representatives from several NATO member states. This summit will permit us to look back at the reform processes of the last ten years and to pay tribute to the consolidation of common democratic values in our countries.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The concept of a Europe whole and free is not restricted to a Europe within the EU and NATO. We are also keen to establish close relationships with those countries that do not wish to become formal members of these two organizations. Latvia is already sharing its EU integration experience with Ukraine and Georgia, and will be hosting a major naval exercise in its territorial waters this year entitled Open Spirit, to which the Russian navy has been invited to participate.

Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania have also been doing their part to support NATO-led peacekeeping operations in the Balkans. We have been there with our personnel since the inception of IFOR 1996.

We also plan to contribute to the US-led international anti-terrorist operation Enduring Freedom. Many of the assets that we can provide to NATO's capacities have been developed jointly since we regained our independence. I can mention BALTBAT, BALTRON, BALTNET and BALTDEFCOL, which are all products of active Baltic regional cooperation in defence. We are willing and able to contribute to the NATO Alliance in a meaningful manner, so that the relationships within the Transatlantic community are vibrant and beneficial to all.

The countries of Europe have already achieved a great deal during the past decade to bring the continent closer together than ever before.

Through the EU and the NATO Alliance, we will finally have a genuine opportunity to create a Europe that is truly whole and free. A Europe that is bound together in such a way that ensures a common commitment to the values that we hold dear. A Europe that will not only uphold the principles of democracy and individual liberties, but will stand ready to defend them. I am confident that ultimately, we will succeed in our dream of creating a prosperous, stable and secure Europe for our future generations.