

Speech by Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs at the annual Foreign Policy Debate in the Latvian Parliament (Saeima), 24 January 2019

Published: 24.01.2019.

News



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Mr President, Madame Speaker, Mr Prime Minister, Members of Parliament, Ministers, Excellencies,

Two thirds of the recently-elected 13th Saeima members are new, and that is a rare occurrence in the history of European parliamentarianism. The new Cabinet, led by Krišjānis Kariņš, who is committed to the consistent pursuit of the course of Western geopolitical orientation followed by the state, was approved yesterday. Therefore, this debate is unique in a certain way, providing a good opportunity for presenting the government's perspective on its foreign policy and listening to your opinions and viewpoints.

On the eve of the anniversary of the international recognition of the Republic of Latvia, I would like to voice hope that cooperation in foreign policy and European affairs between the Latvian Foreign Service, the Saeima and the new Cabinet will be successful, mutually supportive and unifying, thereby helping us strengthen the foreign policy interests and national interests of our country in the longer term.

Let me also thank the 12th Saeima and the head of the previous Government, Māris Kučinskis, for excellent cooperation and support in carrying out the foreign policy of our state.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

The present-day world is not the one depicted in the fairy tales of our outstanding writer, Kārlis Skalbe, where peace and happiness rules over the Land of Peace and Contentment, and everybody has their spoons stuck securely in the clouds. Alongside the rapid advance of the digital age and the openness and transparency of the world we are experiencing great uncertainty in everything that is going on. Uncertainty is pervasive in the global politics too. Even states with strong democracies see the rise of intolerance, aggression and hate speech. The global wave of populism has not subsided, seeking to distort reality and feed society with unsubstantiated illusions, half-truths or even blatant lies. Targeted disinformation campaigns controlled by certain states to influence political processes in other countries are still under way.

This will also be a year of new challenges for the stability of the international system, with new centres of power emerging across the globe. These circumstances can shift the balance of power in a number of regions worldwide.

China's political, economic and military might is rapidly increasing. That leaves a considerable influence not only across Asia and Oceania, but also elsewhere in the world. Islamist fundamentalism is destabilising peace in many regions in Africa and the Middle East. In a foreseeable future, the Middle East will also remain one of the greatest security challenges, which can trigger migration flows and have a direct impact on Europe. The European Union still has not found its role in the Middle Eastern region – its role keeps dwindling, and increasingly reminds us of that of a bystander, someone sitting in the bleachers.

Last year, in the Sea of Azov, Russia demonstrated that it continues its aggression against Ukraine and it continues to flout international law.

The political future of the European Union will be decided by the elections to the European Parliament this coming May, and the appointment of the European Commission. In addition, the European elections see anti-European forces openly announcing their presence already at this point, so that in the case of victory in the elections they could weaken the European Union from within.

It may seem that a period of comparative calm and peace has been established in the Baltic and Nordic region, which is, however, deceptive. When taking decisions on domestic and external policy this year, the word 'security' will be of paramount importance. The concept of security is related to the complicated geopolitical security in our immediate neighbourhood, including several Eastern Partnership countries.

The solution of the issue of an uncertain future after the United Kingdom leaves the European Union on 29 March is still obscured by a thick London fog. The internal and external turmoil of a new European Union stirred by domestic political processes in several Member States, including departure from the rule of law and vital democratic norms as well as the course of negotiations on the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework for the next period and the emerging migration risks do not add to the overall security in present-day Europe.

Exactly because of that, parliamentary democracy is an essential instrument for the protection of Latvia's interests. Enhancing the NATO presence, drawing up of the Multiannual Financial Framework, support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and respect for human rights are among the issues where input from the Members of Parliament is particularly needed this year. Your meetings and discussions and exchanges with parliamentarians of other countries, members of governments and leaders of international organisations form a significant share in the overall protection of Latvia's foreign policy interests.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Latvia's foreign policy is rooted in the values enshrined in the *Satversme* (Constitution) of the Republic of Latvia, which honours human dignity, respects human rights and freedoms that are characteristic of every modern and democratic state. Latvia's foreign policy is a foreign policy of balanced interests. And it is not implemented on a whim.

Those circumstances also determine Latvia's priorities in its foreign policy and the tasks for the Foreign Service in 2019.

The mission of Latvia's foreign policy remains unchanged – to safeguard the welfare and the external security of people living in Latvia. This is the principal priority of Latvia's foreign policy.

Therefore, first and foremost, Latvia will continue to strengthen its internal and external security, standing up for the preservation and development of the current international system.

Secondly, Latvia actively advocates a united and secure European Union after the withdrawal of the United Kingdom. This will be done on the basis of the Baltic and Nordic cooperation format, which is a strategically important source of Latvia's economic prosperity and security.

Thirdly, our country will continue strengthening the Trans-Atlantic link, which is rooted in relations between Latvia and the North Atlantic Alliance and close bilateral relations between Latvia and the United States of America and Canada.

Fourthly, we will support Latvian companies to assist them in exploring new export opportunities and entering new markets, thereby helping them harness foreign investments.

Finally, by utilizing the Diaspora Law, the connection with the Latvian community abroad will be strengthened through assistance to the diaspora organisations.

Esteemed Members of Parliament!

Ever since the restoration of Latvia's independence, the Government of Latvia and the diplomatic service have ensured security and partnership for Latvia in the international system. Regrettably, the international system in which Latvia's statehood was reborn is often challenged these days. The prevailing balance of power, rooted in the understanding of the international community and the unquestionable character of international obligations and rights, is waning.

Latvia is a member of a number of international organisations; this, however, does not imply an immediate solution to all problems we are facing here at home. In the contemporary world, Latvia must be prepared to respond swiftly to changes in the situation, and the country should endeavour to support the preservation of the existing international system and principles.

The United Nations was the first international organisation that Latvia joined having regained independence. The UN and its bodies have been rightly criticised for failure to ensure peace and human rights in the world. Nevertheless, the UN is the main safeguard of international law.

Latvia has not yet been elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. The Security Council is the most influential forum of multilateral negotiations on a global scale. Latvia deserves global visibility and influence. And in this regard, with the aim of strengthening Latvia's national security and the ongoing partnerships and building the capacity of its diplomatic service, it is important for our country to assume the post of a non-permanent member on the UN Security Council from 2026 to 2027.

Membership of the UN Security Council offers a country many advantages. Membership of the UN Security Council is tangible proof of a country's sovereignty: only the members of the Council take part in addressing the most vital global security matters. Not only would membership of the UN Security Council bring prestige; it would also raise the country's profile, including in regions and places where Latvia's name is not so familiar. For Latvian businesses, this candidacy could bring practical benefits in the process of finding contacts and promoting their products and services, and the Foreign Ministry is preparing for this.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

"It's the job that's never started as takes longest to finish". This quote by the English writer J.R.R. Tolkien aptly characterises the chain of events related to the process of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, or Brexit. Brexit is a kind of a shadow zone, where uncertainty still reigns. It should be concluded with regret that there are no winners in the Brexit process, and never will be. Nevertheless, Brexit is neither the end of history nor of the European Union.

The United Kingdom is home to the largest community of Latvian nationals – thousands of people whom we call our own. Latvia, for its part, plays host to over 1000 British citizens, for whom, like before, we will also ensure conditions that are as good as possible and support under all Brexit scenarios. To this end, a Declaration is being drafted at the Saeima on the rights of the United Kingdom's citizens after Brexit. At the same time, Latvia expects an equally favourable attitude by the United Kingdom towards Latvian nationals in the United Kingdom.

Regardless of disagreements on Brexit in the United Kingdom itself, it is important for Latvia that there is a clear agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union both concerning the withdrawal process and the future relationship, since Britain is and will remain an important cooperation partner for Latvia.

Our countries also have deep and extensive business links and shared security interests – we are unanimous with the United Kingdom in the NATO framework and concerning the countering of threats created by the Russian Federation worldwide. The United Kingdom has deployed sizeable troops in the Baltic Sea region.

Latvia is interested in a continued strengthening of bilateral ties also after Brexit. Therefore, regardless of the outcome of Brexit, we are prepared to cooperate with the United Kingdom at all levels.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

It is no secret that the European Union has already been operating in a crisis regime for several years, which was also evidenced last year, by the European Union citizens' consultations on the future of the European Union. The principal demand of our people is a strong and united European Union, which we, politicians, should take on as a very strict and concrete assignment.

Regardless of upheavals experienced by the European Union, my hopes lie in a strong future for the European Union! And that is also Latvia's future. Why? There is a very practical reason for that. Only a united European Union can be competitive, and an equal player on the global arena, especially in the global economy and diplomacy. There is no other way forward for the European Union.

A divided and fragmented European Union can only waste its resources. The European Union should further remain united in diversity, and based on strong national states. Under globalisation, the European Union should not split up into small and quarrelsome interest groups.

We must create a strong defence identity for the European Union, an identity that is complementary to NATO capabilities. While committed to support for the strengthening of European defence capabilities, we reject the idea of a European army that would duplicate NATO's functions. We need a firm and uniform European foreign policy. We need a unified European energy policy. We need stable and strong relationship between the European Union and the United States of America.

It must be admitted that the failure of the U.S. and the European Union, and Europe as a whole, to understand one another was largely reminiscent of a domestic quarrel; however, Europe has received much greater support from the U.S. than from any other region of the world on almost all major and fundamental issues.

In addition, Europe and the U.S. are connected by close historical, cultural, political and security ties. I am certain that there is no better partner to the United States of America than Europe, and conversely, the US is the greatest friend to Europe. Europe will remain faithful to the ideals that have placed both the U.S. and European countries amongst the most developed countries worldwide.

Complicated negotiations will continue this year about the European Union's Multiannual Financial Framework for the next period, on which the withdrawal of the United Kingdom is bound to leave a direct impact.

The Brexit agreement will have a direct influence on the planning of the European Union's future budget. However, Brexit should not become the reason for reducing, in a disproportionate manner, the amount of cohesion funding and direct payments under

the common agricultural policy in the next Multiannual Financial Framework. Latvia finds unacceptable the proposal concerning the common agricultural policy and cohesion policy.

In the agricultural sector, the proposal fails to comply with the commitment made in 2013 on the convergence of direct payments between Member States.

Both in regard to the cohesion policy and in terms of a general principle, Latvia will strongly advocate convergence, or levelling out disparities in the standard of living, to reduce differences among regions in the European Union. And that should remain the main priority in a discussion on the EU's next Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021–2027.

The next multiannual budget must make it possible to carry out our region's largest project – *Rail Baltica*. European Union policies and funding will also have a crucial role to play in the strengthening of energy security and the development of science and research.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen!

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the strongest military alliance globally – NATO. NATO was established when Soviet troops were stationed on the banks of the Elbe River and Germany was split in two. Today's world and new threats are completely different; however, NATO continues to exist also after the Cold War. NATO remains the best defence against political and military blackmail, whichever direction they may come from.

Latvia has been a member of the Alliance for 15 years, actively and by its own example, taking care of the strengthening of collective security across Europe.

In the alliance, the Baltic States are a successful example of streamlining procedures for the movement of the allied forces across the Baltic States within days or even hours if required. Support provided by Latvia as a host country for the allied soldiers from Albania, Canada, the Czech Republic, Italy, Montenegro, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain, which ensure NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic States, is highly appreciated. I would like to thank our allies today for their great contributions to the strengthening of the common security of the Alliance.

The Alliance is facing new security challenges today – the hybrid threat and the risks of cyber security – have considerably increased, and a response must be given to instability both in the Eastern and Southern flanks.

I am convinced that NATO and the U.S. are still connected by common political and security interests, which is the strongest Trans-Atlantic link joining both sides. Security comes at a price. Therefore, Latvia supports a considerable increase in the U.S. military presence in Poland. Steps like these should reinforce both security in the region and across the entire Alliance.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

The European Union's Eastern Partnership policy is and remains a priority for the foreign policy of Latvia. As regards the countries covered by that policy, our opinion as well as that of other European allies is clear – each of our eastern partners is free to choose its own domestic and external policy course. Latvia will never agree to any spheres of influence in the European continent, which have usually led to bloody conflicts.

The largest Eastern Partnership country is Ukraine, with which we have been building an active political and economic dialogue since the 1990s. Latvia supports Ukraine's aspirations of moving closer to the European Union and NATO.

Russia is unable to accept Ukraine's choice of building its own independent state; consequently, the present year is going to be a difficult one. We have provided all possible support for our Ukrainian colleagues both bilaterally and multilaterally. I would like to

highly commend the visit by the Speaker of the Saeima to Ukraine last summer – Ms Mūrniece became the first Chair of a European Member State parliament to visit Donbass – as well as President Raimonds Vējonis, who took part in the commemorative events for the 85th anniversary of the Holodomor.

Latvia will firmly support Ukraine's efforts of restoring territorial integrity of the state and will call on Russia to abide by international law, as well as the release of political prisoners and the Ukrainian sailors which were detained. We will continue putting the spotlight on the condition of Crimean Tatars in the occupied Crimean Peninsula.

Of course, for that policy to be successful, consistent and coherent action is required by all the European allies and the U.S.; therefore Ukraine will still remain on my agenda.

On a positive note, Georgia is firm on its course of Euro-Atlantic integration, with Armenia vigorously following a similar path after a truly free and democratic election. Latvia will continue providing all possible support for their courage and determination to enact reforms.

Latvia rates positively the role of Azerbaijan in the diversification of energy resource supplies to Europe. At the same time, it is essential that a solution be sought to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Our political dialogue with Belarus is very good, though the economic potential has not been fully unlocked so far, especially in the transit sector. At the same time, Latvia carefully follows the trends in relationship and mutual rhetoric between its neighbouring countries, Belarus and Russia – which have recently been undergoing considerable changes.

In Moldova, a test for democracy and further development of the country will be, to a great extent, the upcoming parliamentary election scheduled for February. As concerns the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, we hope that, with support from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and other international actors, further progress will be made to seek a solution to the conflict with respect for the territorial integrity of Moldova.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

We have complicated relationship with the Russian Federation. We will never accept Russia's behaviour manifested as violations of the principles of international law and using force against its neighbours. We find the policy of information warfare pursued by Russia unacceptable, since that seeks to undermine the fundamental principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

In my opinion, anyone would be happy to have a neighbour like Latvia, a country which respects freedom and human rights, strengthens democracy and ensures the development of the country. We are interested in cooperation with Russia in the areas where those values and interests coincide. A good neighbour is interested in the prosperity of its neighbour; therefore, we wish Russia to become a democratic and prosperous country which honours international law.

Esteemed Members of the Saeima!

This year, Latvia holds the presidency of the Baltic Assembly and the Baltic Council of Ministers. The priorities we have set are the strengthening of security in the region, the development of regional connectivity, and the protection of common interests in the European Union. Latvia will draw other countries' attention to the problems of pollution of the Baltic Sea basin, plastic waste having emerged as one of the greatest threats to the Baltic Sea basin ecosystem over the past decade, which calls for an immediate solution to mitigate the threat.

Esteemed Members of the Saeima!

The situation that has persisted non-addressed for a long time, related to restricting financial flows right here in Latvia, poses threat to the credibility and international reputation of Latvia's financial system.

It is not coincidental that a separate chapter in this year's foreign policy report addresses the fight against money laundering. Therefore, I would like to underline and call your attention to certain causal links. The fight against financial crime and the compliance with international sanctions is a generally accepted norm in the Western financial world. If a country fails to comply, market mechanisms or other countries disengage themselves from that country. And the market mechanisms – disengagement from legally troubled, or toxic, assets – are even stronger than the action by countries in that respect.

The financial sector of any country can assume the risks it can manage effectively. Latvia must currently take urgent risk reduction measures so that we could remain part of the international financial system. Still, it would be wrong to speak only about the responsibility of the state and financial institutions, since every company should make its contribution to the purity of economy, namely, demonstrate intolerance for terrorist financing and money laundering. The fight against economic crime is important not only because it is prescribed by law but first of all because that is the right thing to do, and it must be done with a genuine commitment, not only as a burden.

Latvia and the international community expect effective collaboration between non-financial and financial sector, raising awareness of money laundering and related crime, good corporate governance, and tangible results in the field of criminal law. Therefore, it's time to act instead of complaining.

The key to Latvia's security is a strong and competitive economy, since a prosperous Latvia is also a secure Latvia. Regardless of challenges in Latvia's financial sector, this is the right time for Latvia to strengthen its economic potential. Consequently, in the field of external economic relations, it should be considered how to provide support for the sectors of information technologies, food processing, pharmaceuticals, and industry, notably in the Middle East, South America and North America, the Gulf States, and Africa. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is prepared to offer all assistance that our companies may need.

A considerable contribution to the economic growth of the European Union this year will be made by the Union's new trade agreements with Japan, Mexico, and Singapore, which just like the recent European Union's agreements with Canada and New Zealand will open up new markets and opportunities for Latvian companies – exporters of goods and services. It is also important to achieve progress in trade relations between the European Union and the US.

It is vital to be aware that following a long-term upward trend, the global economic cycle is nearing its decline; in the light of that, we expect new challenges to export and investment attraction in the coming years. To this end, we must be able to harness all emerging opportunities, to get foothold in the existing markets and to detect possible risks in time. That would make it possible to safely go through the downward spiral of the cyclic world economies and see the next upward swing.

In the coming years, it is strategic importance for the Latvian Government, together with its Estonian and Lithuanian counterparts, to provide all the required support for the implementation of the Rail Baltica project, which is undeniably the largest and most significant project in our region. Therefore, a common concerted approach and coordinated lobby efforts are more important than ever in order to achieve as favourable conditions for the project as possible in the European Union's new financial perspective.

The work launched on the creation of a regional natural gas market should be continued to ensure the highest market liquidity possible and strengthen the security of energy supply and reducing energy dependence on a dominant supplier country. For the regional market to function successfully, the planned investments in the strengthening and modernisation of the Baltic States interconnections should be leveraged.

The vote on the bid to host the XXV Winter Olympics is to take place this coming summer. There is a substantial likelihood that the Kingdom of Sweden will host the games, with the Sigulda Bobsleigh and Luge Track becoming one of the Olympic venues. This could be an excellent opportunity for Latvia's tourism sector and promotion of the international image of Latvia. Therefore, already at this point, we are prepared to offer all the necessary support so that Latvia could host Olympic Games in Sigulda.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

It is important for Latvia to take part in development cooperation projects. There are purely practical reasons for that. In the framework of development cooperation, countries can effectively and in a targeted manner pursue their foreign policy interests and increase their influence in a definite region. With a limited financial contribution on the part of the state, Latvian companies and members of non-governmental organisations have limited possibilities of taking part in the European Union and UN development cooperation programmes. This in turn limits the possibilities of mobilising project funding from other countries.

Over the past decade, our Latvian non-governmental organisations in the Eastern Partnership countries and Central Asian countries have offered substantial contribution to the matters of good governance, media literacy and strategic communications. Let me thank them for their current work! In light of this, I urge you to take a strategic decision on the allocation of adequate state funding in the long term for the further implementation of development cooperation policy.

Esteemed Members of the Saeima!

The Latvian state is interested in the many thousands of Latvian nationals living abroad not only preserving their link with Latvia but also keeping our native language alive for the coming generations. In the age of mobility, we must be able to ensure the sustainability of relations between the Latvian state and the diaspora, reinforce the link with the diaspora and cooperate closely with diaspora organisations. This can be best achieved through strengthening of the Latvian identity and the sense of belonging to Latvia, preserving the Latvian language, doing research in and safeguarding culture.

The diaspora should be involved, in a targeted manner, in the development of Latvia's economy, public administration and science, especially through support for the diaspora's self-organisation efforts in the field of economy and innovations. Latvia's interests lie in using the diaspora's intellectual resources and experience for the benefit of the country by involving the diaspora in economic and political activities and formulating common long-term goals for cooperation with the diaspora. The Diaspora Law produced in a genuinely common effort, came into force on 1 January. Its drafting was an example of the ability to engage with a large number of organisations and institutions, to communicate and reach an agreement. I hope that we will be able to ensure that the law is put in practice. The Saeima will have a major role to play in that – by adopting the required amendments to 12 sector-specific laws and assigning the necessary funds in the state budget.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen!

This is a landmark year for Latvia's Foreign Service. On 29 July, we will celebrate the centenary of our diplomatic service and pay tribute to the Latvian diplomats who stood up for the Latvian state under the occupation and in exile, or died in the penal camps of the USSR and Nazi Germany.

On behalf of the Latvian Foreign Service, I would like to thank all the line ministries, central and local authorities, civil society organisations, social partners and especially the people working for the Foreign Service of Latvia, who helped fulfil Latvia's foreign policy tasks. Thank you for the job you've done!

Our generation is able to live in a free, democratic parliamentary republic. We can live in our own country and be part of its formation, strengthening and growth. With this in mind, I invite you to join efforts for the benefit of our country!

Thank you for your attention!



and the European Union (2018) 

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