

Speech by Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs at the annual Foreign Policy Debate in the Latvian Parliament (Saeima), 25 January 2018

Published: 25.01.2018.

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Mr President,

Madame Speaker,

Members of the Presidium,

Members of Parliament,

Excellencies,

I am glad that the foreign policy debate at the Saeima has become a well-established tradition of Latvia's parliamentarism. The debate gives a snapshot of the international system as it is at the moment, and this helps better capture the new foreign policy challenges and strengthens the national interests of our country in the long term.

The same values and principles that the fathers of *Satversme*, the Latvian Constitution, once laid at the foundation of the Latvian state also determine the existence of our state and its course in the present-day Latvia.

On 18 November 1918, Latvia was not bequeathed its independence as a gift, it was born in battles. During the War of Independence, everyone made sacrifices – in whichever place they were and each to their own ability – so that the state of Latvia could become reality. And after that followed the work of diplomats in the new country that had been created.

“Latvia has covered two stages in its fight for national independence, namely, Latvia’s liberation and Latvia’s recognition. From both of these battles, we emerged victorious. The first was fought with arms in hand and loss of lives, the second required nothing more than a pen and a keen mind.” These words were spoken by the first Latvian Foreign Minister, Zigfrīds Anna Meierovics, during a Saeima session in this very building.

Ladies and gentlemen!

This year, Latvia’s foreign policy enters its second centenary. This is not only a symbolic milestone. Regardless of globalisation, each sovereign state will contribute to shaping policy worldwide also in future – both bilaterally and via international organisations. Latvia is no exception.

What is the world of today and what will it be like tomorrow? It is, and will be full of surprises. We often face conflicting geopolitical choices. The status of Jerusalem, Iran’s nuclear deal or the Paris climate accord are prime examples.

Although we would like to see international relations as a game of chess played by grand masters, those relations often remind one of the game, “Chutes and Ladders”. Heated rhetoric, carelessness of players or unfortunate rolls of the dice can lead to an unplanned result – one would like to climb the ladder to the very top, while more often as not one is forced to slide down a “chute”. A game like this can go too far.

Honourable Members of Parliament,

Since the restoration of independence, divergent views still appear in the discussions on Latvia’s foreign policy goals and on the work to be done. There are those who consider Latvia to be an entryway or a bridge, or a place to stop on the road to Russia.

And there are those who see Latvia as a full-fledged part of the Western system with its confidence – so characteristic of that system – based on the values of a democratic state governed by the rule of law.

These are mutually exclusive approaches.

Ever since the state of Latvia was established, the goal of Latvia’s foreign policy has remained unchanged – to safeguard the independence of our state. This goal is still there.

In the future as well, the foreign policy of Latvia will remain based on a strong European Union and NATO, the strengthening of international justice and increasing our own prosperity.

Latvia has always stood up for the respect of international law, since we all are well aware what brute force in international relations means. Nobody has cancelled the principles of international law in the relations between countries. And they must be observed!

Support for compliance with the principles of international law positions Latvia as a responsible partner in international cooperation. Therefore, Latvia advocates the enhancement of the role of the United Nations, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Council of Europe in international relations.

International law also guarantees the territorial inviolability of states, and it is of vital importance for Latvia that this principle be upheld, it being closely related to Latvia’s security. Latvia will always stand up for the territorial integrity of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.

Latvia will also continue its unwavering policy of non-recognition of the illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea.

Ladies and gentlemen,

“To get closer, you should approach people instead of waiting for them to approach you”. These words by the Latvian poet Imants Ziedonis aptly characterise the ongoing processes and challenges in the European Union. In the discussion on the European Union’s future, Latvia has a clear position: the countries that aspire to do more should be given the opportunity of building closer cooperation. It is essential for such cooperation to be open to all Member States. Latvia’s interests are in being at the core of Europe.

A question is often raised on how united the European Union actually is. In 2018, too, the European Union is united! True, not everything in the European Union takes place in an optimal manner; decisions sometimes come slowly and laboriously. The decisions may be delayed but this does not mean that we are too late with something. It is in the very nature of the European Union to pool efforts in doing things that can be more effectively accomplished together and make us all strong.

The European Union is not only the Single Market or an economic union. It is a union of values and law, a union that is also in the interests of our existence as a nation state. We are part of a free, democratic world, we adhere to European values; this is our European identity, something that must also be upheld. An effective EU makes a strong Latvia.

The refugee crisis near the European Union’s borders is still a burning issue. Although the Member States have divergent opinions on solutions to the migration crisis and the importance of a strong fiscal discipline, those are not the matters that are going to cause insurmountable difficulties to the European Union. The tendencies of populism and radicalism pose a much higher risk to the European Union’s unity. Therefore, we cannot speak at this point of a West-East, a north-south or an old-new divide between the Member States. The dividing line runs between a responsible politics or populism and chaos.

In the years ahead, we will have to resolve several issues – Brexit, the EU Multiannual Financial Framework and the European Union’s future.

I am certain that all the 27 EU Member States will succeed in finding a mutually acceptable model of relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union when the Brexit negotiations are over. The first phase of the talks has been concluded, and basic interests of our citizens have been taken into account. Now it is vital to build close relations between the European Union and the United Kingdom in trade and security.

Latvia should actively contribute to the strengthening of the European Union’s defence capabilities, to the development of the Euro area and a digital, energy and transport union. We are open to proposals on how to strengthen the management and effectiveness of the Euro area.

In discussions on the European Union’s post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework, Latvia’s position should focus on the Cohesion Policy and the Common Agricultural Policy. This is essential for the development of our region and the convergence of living standards. Latvia is prepared to engage in further discussions to find the right balance between the EU’s internal development goals and the new challenges such as migration and defence.

Those are only few but highly relevant questions that will underpin domestic and foreign policy choices over an extended period.

Esteemed Members of Parliament,

There is no room for compromise on the issues of our country’s security and defence. Only genuine participation in the European Union and NATO guarantees the security and independence of our state.

As of this year, we’re already spending 2 % of our GDP on defence. This is a significant contribution by Latvia to its own security and to strengthening of the Alliance’s collective defence. This is not just a line item in accounting records, and it’s not an aim in itself, but a contribution to boosting our capabilities.

In order to strengthen resilience in the face of traditional threats and modern challenges, the funding towards our country’s defence and security should be further increased in the near future. We cannot stop at what has been achieved also in terms of

NATO presence in the region: the elements of NATO's air and sea defence should be reinforced and the command and control principles should be enhanced.

Let me thank our allies from Canada, Spain, Poland, Slovenia, Italy and Albania for their participation in the NATO multinational battlegroup in Latvia. The United States of America and Canada are proving, by real actions, the close transatlantic link in the strengthening of collective defence in the region. And I would like to thank Danish and Italian contingents currently engaged in policing NATO's airspace over the Baltic States.

Latvia is not only a 'consumer' of security, but also a contributor, and this is evidenced by our participation in missions. Therefore, I would like to extend gratitude to those who represent Latvia in military operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Mali, the Mediterranean, and off the coasts of Somalia, and also in civilian missions in Ukraine and Georgia.

Cooperation between NATO and the European Union is one of Latvia's priorities in security and defence, and it needs to be developed. The facilitation of cross-border military mobility is also of high importance for Latvia. Cooperation between NATO and the European Union on security is growing increasingly closer. The framework of the Permanent Structured Cooperation, or PESCO, is a major step in the consolidation of the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

We are aware of the geographical proximity of Russia, while in terms of values we are quite distant. Therefore, the relations with that country are built both through a dialogue, where it is possible, and through advocating the policy of deterrence and sanctions vis-à-vis Russia as long as Russia will be violating international law and sovereignty of other states.

A dialogue with Russia is pursued in matters concerning tangible cooperation between both countries. The final document for the demarcation of the border between Latvia and Russia was signed last year. This is a great step not only towards strengthening of Latvia's security, it was also necessary for an effective fight against illegal migration and organised crime. Latvia needs a well-managed border in order to effectively protect the external frontier of NATO and the European Union.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Improvements to Latvia's economic competitiveness depend only on our own effort, while economic growth also depends on external factors. Latvia can unlock its foreign trade potential both in the markets of our closest neighbourhood, and in vast and rapidly growing regions across the globe. Therefore, the European Union's internal market, especially the Baltic-Nordic region, is still important for us.

At the same time, great attention is devoted to North America, also China, India, Japan and Southeast Asia, as well as the Gulf region. Entering new markets opens new opportunities to our businesses, makes it possible to increase competitiveness and reduce dependence on politically manipulated markets.

Every effort should be made in the years ahead so that Latvia comes to be recognised for its quality products and innovations. May every activity by central and local authorities and the private sector be driven by one vital leitmotif – here in Latvia, we do any work in good quality, honourably and competently, that is, we do it well. It is not easy and yet it is not impossible.

In this context, Latvia's Centennial is an excellent opportunity for directing our foreign partners' attention to what Latvia has achieved and promoting further cooperation in tangible projects – in business, security, culture, education, and science. To be dynamic and convincing, and highlight Latvia's achievements is the daily mission of the Foreign Service.

At the same time, it should be borne in mind that our diplomats cannot stand in for the work that needs to be done to improve Latvia's competitiveness. The most effective reforms are often undertaken because of an external impetus, not only their urgency. Thus, the process of accession to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, or OECD, helped us put in place the much-needed improvements in the financial sector and the governance of state-owned enterprises.

What is left to our own discretion is at times subject to chaotic change and fragmented measures. This tendency also influences

the mid-term tasks of Latvia's foreign policy, since endless changes in one area and lack of improvements to other sectoral policies is a hurdle to harnessing significant investments and conquering new export markets.

Esteemed Members of Parliament!

We are a small nation, while also being a global powerhouse in many ways. Our outstanding cultural figures and athletes, scientists, students, and each and every professional in their respective fields worldwide make us great. Latvia is great. Latvians abroad are united by the Latvian language and their sense of belonging to Latvia, their home. Our diaspora contributes to the preserving and fostering of Latvia's identity. They all are our Latvia and our wealth. The Latvian state is under an obligation to protect and take care of that wealth. The Latvian state is providing consistent support for the diaspora weekend schools, where the Latvian language is taught and learned.

The Latvian state is interested in building a clear and predictable long-term relationship with the Latvian community abroad. Consequently, the time has come to draw up a legal framework for the support of Latvian diaspora. This would be an opportunity to harness the diaspora's potential for Latvia's growth and the protection of its interests internationally. Let me thank all the diaspora organisations worldwide for their work and mutual support.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen!

We are on the eve of the anniversary of *de iure* international recognition of the Republic of Latvia. Speaking both for myself and on behalf of the Latvian Foreign Service, I would like to thank the President, the Saeima, the Prime Minister, all the line ministries, central and local authorities, civil society organisations, social partners, those who restored our state, and especially – Latvian diplomats. Thank you everyone who is taking care of Latvia in their deeds and their thoughts, day after day, here at home and beyond; and let me also offer thanks to all our friends across the globe. Thank you for the job you've done!

Independence is won with hearts and defended with minds. As we celebrate Latvia's centennial, let us applaud and take pride in all the Latvian people who, day by day, are making our country more secure, stronger, better and more beautiful!

Thank you for your attention.

 [Annual Report of the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the accomplishments and further work with respect to national foreign policy and the European Union \(2017\)](https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/article/speech-foreign-minister-edgars-rinkevics-annual-foreign-policy-debate-latvian-parliament-saeima-25-january-2018) 

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