

Speech by Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs at annual Foreign Policy Debate in the Latvian Parliament (Saeima), 26 January 2017

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News



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Mr President, Madame Speaker, Members of the Presidium and Members of Parliament,

Excellencies,

It was a year ago that I addressed you at the annual Saeima foreign policy debate saying that *'from the perspective of international and security policy, 2016 is going to be difficult, intense and unsettled, since the whirlpool of endless crises across the globe is a reality that we must deal with on an almost daily basis'*. And that is in fact what this year turned out to be.

The past year was a fruitful one, I think, for people predicting the end of the world, the descent into chaos, and for those who are ready to accept conspiracy theories, all trying to outdo one another with flashy news headlines. No doubt, societies in many countries have shown their discontent and staged protests against current policies pursued by the authorities. What transpired in 2016 had its roots in the lack of vision and will on the part of policymakers to adequately tackle political, economic and social challenges, and thereby prove by deeds and actions that growth of a country is also an achievement of society that will improve the lives and well-being of the next generation.

However, the past year in foreign policy has been successful for Latvia: the foreign policy tasks we set for ourselves have been accomplished. Last summer, Latvia became a member of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). At the NATO Summit in Warsaw, we not only received recognition of our concerns by the Allies, but also saw concrete action being taken on the military strengthening of NATO's eastern flank. A summit of the Eastern and Central European countries and China convened in Riga. This work would be impossible to imagine without our shared commitment to the consolidation of Latvia's

economic and security space. I would like to thank the President of Latvia, Prime Minister, the Saeima, the Cabinet of Ministers, all the ministries, national institutions and local authorities, non-governmental organisations, social partners, and especially the Latvian Foreign Service staff, who helped in achieving Latvia's foreign policy aims. Many thanks to you all for your contributions!

Dear Members of Parliament!

We should not expect the world to end in 2017! And a military offensive against Latvia is also not in the cards. Each and every one of us must understand that it depends on us and only on us in what kind of country, and in what kind of environment – secure or insecure – we shall continue to live.

In a globalised world, it is beyond the power of any single country to stand up to challenges all by itself – be they related to safeguarding peace and security, or the fight against terrorism, or migration flows, or climate change. It is only by working closely together that we can achieve results.

We often hear that Latvia should keep a low profile – like a little rabbit hiding under a fir tree, while a big bad wolf prowls nearby. We acted like this once in the past, and lost our independence for a while. We must not stand to the side and just watch what is happening around us! Latvia's foreign policy must become more visible and Latvia's voice – more vocal and audible in the global arena – day by day, and every step of the way. Latvia must not be weak in either its internal policy or its foreign policy.

Although Latvia has many friends and allies, who will come to our assistance in times of need, first of all, it is we who must take care of the growth, development and security of our country. Latvia's international reputation, competitiveness, prosperity, as well as its political culture and maturity are in our own hands.

Nobody in Brussels nor in any other capital city is to blame if we are unable or do not want to take decisions in favour of the further development of our country.

Indeed, this year is going to be a rigorous time of trial – in Europe and across the globe. This year in the international policy is going to be full of sharp twists and turns – which remind some of us of a rollercoaster ride, and others – of a bobsleigh track. I am sure that Latvia, being a powerhouse in skeleton and bobsleigh, will also be able to overcome these challenges.

Elections are coming up in the Netherlands, France and Germany. The United Kingdom is launching negotiations on leaving the European Union. The crisis in Syria, as well as the conflict in the east of Ukraine shows no signs of abating. Regrettably, we'll have to confront the mindset and actions of some countries denying the right of nations to decide their own destiny.

We witness international tensions in many regions across the world, and the huge numbers of refugees in the European Union and at EU borders have not decreased over the past year. The threat of terrorism has grown dramatically. World peace is threatened by state-of-the-art weapons in the hands of irresponsible or weak governments.

Foreign policy issues are becoming a means and a pretext to address domestic problems and exacerbate internal political rhetoric.

In 2016, more acutely than ever, we were exposed to targeted and controlled online campaigns of slander and disinformation. The non-stop flow of information via various media sources is becoming increasingly fragmented and superficial. The number of half-truths, deliberate disinformation and blatant lies propagated by the global and local social networks and media are on the rise.

This phenomenon has become a tool in internal and external policy. The governments are just starting to muster for action to counter this phenomenon; however, the involvement of civil society is also crucial.

With this in mind today, I wish to thank both the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and the East StratCom Task Force of the European External Action Service for their active work.

Special thanks go to Internet blogger Jānis Polis and other enthusiasts. On their own initiative, they have explored the devastating power of propaganda in Latvia's social media. An effective remedy in the fight against disinformation is an educated society with well-developed skills of analysis and critical thinking.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Latvia's foreign policy is a policy of cooperation. This underpins Latvia's foreign policy priorities and tasks for the Foreign Service in 2017:

firstly, Latvia will continue strengthening its internal and external security. The strength of our country depends on each one of us;

secondly, our country, in a pragmatic and constructive manner, will bring its contribution to the strengthening of a united and secure European Union. This will be done on the basis of Baltic-Nordic cooperation, which is a strategically important source of economic well-being and security for Latvia;

thirdly, we shall support Latvian companies to help them explore new markets for export and to facilitate the attraction of foreign investments;

fourthly, we shall support and maintain close links with our diaspora.

Too often we have taken many things for granted – including NATO and the European Union. Now it is clear that both organisations have entered a new cycle of development.

I would like to emphasise yet again Latvia's reliability as a country and partner to its friends and allies. Being a member of NATO, Latvia has also made a pledge to protect the Alliance's common values – freedom and democracy.

I am convinced that NATO is not a relic of the past but a modern and strong defence organisation, capable of responding appropriately to any and all challenges.

Latvia is acutely aware that the strengthening of a country and collective defence means making contributions and, next year, Latvia will have reached two per cent of its GDP in its defence spending.

This year, the first Allied units from Canada, Spain, Poland, Slovenia, Italy, and Albania are expected to arrive in Latvia. I would like to extend my gratitude and appreciation to the Canadian government for taking on the role of a Framework Nation for a multinational battle group in Latvia. In hosting Allies, Latvia will be doing all to ensure the necessary conditions for them.

Next, I would like to extend our thanks to the Dutch, Polish, the United States, German, Spanish and Belgian contingents for carrying out the NATO Air Policing mission in the airspace over the Baltic States this year. And I also thank Slovakia for sending its troops to participate in exercises.

The United States' decision to enhance its forward presence in the Baltic Sea region, in Poland in particular, serves the interests of Latvia, Europe and trans-Atlantic security.

Ladies and gentlemen!

Over the past century, the destinies of Europe and the US have been closely intertwined. During the periods when we were pooling efforts to reinforce and protect the space of our shared values, this was to the benefit of stability and peace on our continent. For the moments when we turned our backs on one another, each side had a high price to pay. Therefore, our and the US interests lie in a strong alliance and close cooperation between the United States of America and Europe. Also in the future, our cooperation should be based on shared values, the protection of the principles of international law and order, and close relations between the Allies. The world must not return to policies which provide a basis for "spheres of influence" and the use of brute force. We are ready to work actively with the new U.S. Administration and the U.S. Congress so that NATO is more effective, to engage jointly in the combat of terrorism, and to cooperate on the required strategy and resources.

Excellencies! Ladies and Gentlemen!

In March this year, we are going to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community, the "Treaty of Rome".

This is not the first time that the European Union has had to face difficulties. Almost a decade ago, we experienced a deep economic downturn, and the present-day political upheavals have followed in its wake. Until now through negotiations and compromises, the European Union has always found ways to solve its problems. I believe that EU leaders should send a clear message to their citizens concerning security and welfare as its main priorities. Let's not bow our heads and shed tears for Europe and its future, let's fight for it!

Do not dream of a federal Europe, but reinforce what has been achieved over these years! I am convinced that shared interests of Latvia and the entire European Union lie in a strong and solid union of nation-states.

Latvia strongly advocates the need for seeking a common platform for further work and calls for avoiding a situation where Member States are divided into groups except in formats that are consistent with EU principles. This concerns to an equal extent the EU's capabilities of crisis prevention and our preparedness for countering hybrid threats.

Efforts must be stepped up to prevent the radicalisation of societies and protect human rights. To this end, the European Union's capacity for external action should be increased. The EU Global Strategy adopted in June 2016 will have a key role in Europe's external and security policy.

Ladies and gentlemen!

This year, the United Kingdom will launch negotiations on leaving the European Union. This is like the part of the story of Winnie the Pooh when Christopher Robin was going away *"Nobody knew why Christopher Robin was going; nobody knew where he was going; [...] but somehow or other everybody in the Forest felt that it was happening at last."*

Last week, British Prime Minister Theresa May outlined the UK's position and basic principles concerning the conditions for withdrawal. Latvia respects this position; nevertheless, it is clear that negotiations on the model of future economic relations are going to be tough. Our interests lie in building close relations between the European Union and the United Kingdom in the future on the basis of the rights and duties of both parties. We are deeply concerned about the fate of Latvian nationals in the UK and the fate of further cooperation in areas like the economy, foreign affairs, security and defence. Latvia highly values the UK's current contribution to strengthening of security in our region.

Cooperation and development of Nordic countries and Baltic States is vital for Latvia both in terms of security and in the broader context of the European Union. We are already witnessing practical cooperation in the energy, transport, and defence. We will continue close coordination on issues of importance to the European Union.

I am happy that a political dialogue with the Benelux and Visegrád states has gained strength in recent years.

Our strategic partner and ally in Europe is Germany, since we are connected not only by historical links but also by a close economic and political dialogue, shared interests and common perspectives of a number of current issues in the European and regional context.

Poland is our ally in security affairs and many European foreign policy issues; we have established good cooperation in protecting our common security interests. We shall also keep on this track this year!

Esteemed members of Parliament!

Practical support for Latvia's businesses will remain in the focus of the Foreign Service in 2017, especially the sectors of transport and logistics, the food industry, information and communication technologies, tourism and the export of higher education.

It is important that Latvian businesses aspiring to successfully compete with the countries in our region are able to offer quality products or services, of which we are proud; however, we must be aware that we are competing with our neighbours and therefore, a sustained effort should be made to exploit our comparative advantages. This is of special importance in the transport and logistics sectors. I wish to emphasise that the opening and developing of markets should be based on the identification of specific needs and interests of the business community.

It will not be possible to boost the growth of Latvia's economies only through efforts of the Foreign Service and experienced diplomats. Diplomats are representing our country beyond its borders. Nevertheless, its business and investment environment is shaped by decisions taken or not taken here, by reforms in this country, both by those that have been implemented and those which stopped half-way.

Latvia's competitiveness is a "mission impossible" unless we do our homework. In order to bring in investments, it is vital to actively pursue much-needed reforms in the area of insolvency, improve the judicial system and move ahead with putting e-governance in place. The quality of higher education and capacity for innovation also leave a huge impact.

The Foreign Service will do its part, by, amongst other things, working more intensively on the matters of foreign trade and mobilising investment. The attraction and retention of investments depend not only on the geopolitics, but also on the above-mentioned factors.

Our primary focus this year will be on traditional markets in the Baltic Sea region and the rapidly-growing export markets in North America, China, India, Japan, the Gulf States, and Southeast Asia.

Honoured Members of Parliament!

Latvia has always stood up for a balanced policy of the European Union vis-à-vis its neighbours. In 2017, Brussels will host the current Eastern Partnership Summit, where the European Union will once more confirm the importance of the Eastern Partnership in the EU's foreign policy and pledge support for the countries which have signed Association Agreements – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

The short-stay visa requirements for the entry of Georgian and Ukrainian citizens to the Schengen area should at last be lifted this year.

We see opportunities for building constructive relations with our neighbour Belarus, as well as Armenia, and Azerbaijan – with relations tailored to the interests and aspirations defined by these countries and the European Union principles. We strongly advocate territorial integrity of the Eastern Partnership countries and their right to decide their own destinies.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Russia is, and will remain our neighbour. We will not succeed in improving our bilateral relations if in the international politics Russia continues to exercise its power in violation of the principles of international law. In this regard, we very much regret the lack of progress in the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, since it prevents resolution of conflicts in the region and hinders the further development of relations. It is essential to foster dialogue with Russia's civil society and unveil the untruths in Russia's propaganda.

Latvia will also continue working together with Russia in fields of shared interest: we have completed the border demarcation and signed financial agreements on cross-border cooperation, and we are closely cooperating in the areas of border surveillance and customs. A meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission will be convened in the near future.

Dear Members of Parliament!

Our diaspora is found all over the world – approximately 370 thousand members of the Latvian diaspora live in more than 120 countries. People around the world form their first impressions of our country from Latvian nationals living abroad. Many in the diaspora maintain links with Latvia and have put down roots in their new host countries. Latvians abroad are actively contributing to the economic and cultural life of these countries. They are successful businessmen, working in medicine, in agriculture and in international organisations. They teach at schools and universities, excel in sports and convey the richness of their culture. Many Latvians who have left their country provide significant financial support for their families back home.

The Latvian diaspora and its organisations are a versatile and solid source of support for Latvia and support also for our national security. Strengthening the link between the Latvian state and the diaspora is of vital importance, and it is the government's job to see that this link is kept strong. I wish to thank our diaspora and all Latvian diaspora organisations for their ongoing work and activities. I call upon the diaspora to give its backing and promote Latvia's political and economic interests across the globe.

The centenary of Latvia's statehood is approaching. Whatever the distance that separates us from Latvia at any point in time, the celebrations of Latvia's centennial are hardly imaginable without our own presence and participation in those events. And each of us can bring a gift to our country – by doing tangible and practical things that make Latvia's businesses and economy more competitive and raise their profile internationally. In word and in deed, day after day, let us celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of our state – in Latvia and around the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

I would like to conclude by saying that an independent state is a huge privilege and responsibility, and it requires stamina and determination to preserve that state and make it better.

Many things that appeared to us self-evident and that we took for granted are now gone.

Our era imposes a special responsibility for decisions that have impact on every individual's daily life. It is the actions and decisions of each individual, of international organisations and politicians of nation-states that will determine what kind of world we are in today, and the one that we will be living in tomorrow and in years to come.

We must bear this in mind when we make decisions on domestic and foreign policy.

Thank you for your attention!

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