

Speech by Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs at annual Foreign Policy Debate in the Latvian Parliament (Saeima) on 26 January 2016

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News



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Madame Speaker, Madame Prime Minister, Members of the Presidium, Honourable Members of Parliament, Ministers, Excellencies,

I have the honour of talking to you at the foreign policy debate for the second time during the 12th Saeima, to look back at what has been accomplished last year and to outline the realities and challenges in the area of foreign policy that Latvia, Europe and the entire world have to face in 2016.

It is a well-established custom in Latvia to be critical of every incident and happening, and to look upon just about anything with a degree of scepticism and wariness. But I can say with full confidence that the phrase “Latvian Presidency” reached almost every Latvian home, while at the same time our combined efforts during the period of the Presidency and throughout 2015 have been highly rated both in Latvia and internationally. In 2015, all 28 member states for the first time drew the attention of their people to foreign policy, and specifically to development cooperation. Cooperation with Latvia’s non-governmental organisations and social partners had a major role to play in this regard.

Latvia’s first ever Presidency of the Council of the European Union proved the capacity of our country to act on an international scale, steer the European agenda and find the optimum middle ground among 28 Member States.

From the very first day of the Presidency, Latvia had to resolve a number of important matters:

- coordinating efforts to reach new solutions for the strengthening of the EU’s internal security as demanded by the

increased terrorist threat related to the tragic events in Paris and Copenhagen;

- seeking a common denominator among all Member States concerning the future of the Eastern Partnership and seek a balanced approach in the Member States policy in support of both southern and eastern neighbours;
- dealing with a dramatic migration crisis which continues to increase in a geometric progression;
- working on the establishment of the European Fund for Strategic Investment, an agreement on abolishing roaming charges for mobile communications as well as significant progress in the formation of a Digital Single Market and the Energy Union, which are also quite important for Latvia.

Our Presidency would be impossible to imagine without solidarity and effective cooperation between the Saeima, the Cabinet of Ministers, all ministries, the President's Chancery, non-governmental organisations, social partners, local authorities and our Latvian Foreign Service. Many thanks to you all!

Honourable Members of Parliament!

The foreign policy of any country, including Latvia, cannot be put into the frame of a calendar year. No doubt, many of the European and global challenges, crises and addressing their root causes will continue not only throughout this year but also beyond. And regrettably, it must be admitted, that the atmosphere in Europe, which not so long ago seemed so calm, even sleepy, has changed radically.

From the perspective of international and security policy, 2016 is going to be difficult, intense and restless, since the whirlpool of endless crises across the globe is a reality that we must deal with on an almost daily basis and the disastrous consequences are leaving a lasting impact on the common foreign and security policy of the European Union.

Terrorism and uncontrolled flows of migration in Europe, Russia's unpredictable and aggressive actions, tension in the east of Ukraine, hostilities in Syria and Libya, instability in the Middle East, recruitment of foreign fighters by various terrorist organisations and the increasing propaganda campaigns of hatred and violence – these are problems that require solutions across the globe, in Europe and in Latvia.

No doubt, the migration crisis and addressing its root causes is one of this year's major challenges in Europe and in the world. The upcoming referendum on Britain's membership and the future of the Schengen area will be a test for Europe's political and economic unity.

The leaders of the European Union and each Member State will have to exert maximum effort to seek appropriate, mutually acceptable long-term solutions. Otherwise we might indeed wake up one morning beside the ruins of what we once called the European Union.

Regrettably, this year too we shall encounter tension and conflicts of varying intensity in Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, Libya, Iraq and several African countries. The sharpening in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a cause for concern; the Middle East Peace Process has actually come to a halt.

The international coalition forces and separate countries are fighting the terrorist organisations – the so called Islamic State (Da'esh), Boko Haram, Al Qaeda and others – with varying success.

The low oil prices can leave a tangible impact on global economic growth and serve as a basis for new conflicts.

These are only a few factors that will influence the environment of international relations and the economic and security situation in the world, in Europe and in Latvia.

Honourable Members of Parliament!

The principle of “communicating vessels” also applies to international politics and no single country can exist in isolation from processes in the contemporary world. Latvia is no exception. The current history of our country teaches us that we must never stand alone. And we are not alone!

Latvia's decision taken more than twenty years ago on integration into the Euro-Atlantic space and becoming a full-fledged member of the European Union and NATO has proved correct and prescient. Thereby we have also undertaken definite commitments and duties that underlie the principles of our country's foreign policy.

Our interests lie in a stable, secure and competitive Latvia. Our interests lie in a united and strong European Union. And our interests lie in a powerful North Atlantic Treaty Organisation capable of effectively adapting to the new security environment in the world! To this end, Latvia's foreign policy this year will have to focus on several mutually complementary tasks:

firstly, to strengthen Latvia's external security by achieving a long-term presence of NATO forces in our region;

secondly, to facilitate the unity and effectiveness of the European Union thereby ensuring stability in the EU neighbourhood;

thirdly, to complete the process of accession to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development;

fourthly, to promote external economic relations and explore new markets.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

We must use clear language when speaking of Latvia's security. Recent years have brilliantly highlighted the fact that our eastern neighbour is a revisionist super-power prepared to use military force to satisfy its ambitions, changing the borders of independent states, as in the case of the illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea.

Therefore, it is in Latvia's interest to strengthen NATO's collective defence and deterrence policy. It is based on NATO response capabilities and military presence in our region. The independence of our country is ensured only by an effective and convincing deterrence policy. The Allied military presence is an integral part of any successful deterrence policy.

These questions will be reviewed at this year's NATO Summit in Warsaw, which is the key event in security policy, and Latvia's foreign and defence services are preparing for it.

The NATO Warsaw Summit should decide on the following matters:

firstly, an Allied presence in the Baltic States that is long-lasting and worth taking seriously. The Warsaw Summit should decide on the establishment of a more effective command system that could provide an immediate response to any provocation;

secondly, countering crises and further development of the strategy for the prevention of hybrid warfare. With Latvia's active engagement, the NATO strategy on hybrid warfare was produced and approved in early December 2015 at the level of foreign ministers. The strategy applies collective defence guarantees, including effective allied support for any member in any phase of hybrid warfare.

thirdly, stepping up NATO cooperation with Finland and Sweden. This not only fosters the security of NATO and these partner countries, but also improves the security climate in the Baltic Sea region. Therefore, Latvia will continue supporting both a more active political dialogue and NATO's closer practical cooperation with Finland and Sweden in joint military and crisis management exercises;

fourthly, NATO's “open door policy” which has been constantly supported by Latvia and which helped Latvia join NATO in 2004. This enhances peace and security in today's Europe. The decision on launching accession negotiations with Montenegro is proof not only to NATO's unique role in European security but also to the continuation and importance of the open door policy in our time.

Latvia will move ahead with the facilitation of the process of Georgia's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures by rendering both political and practical support.

Alongside preparations for the Warsaw Summit, Latvia must do its own homework on defence funding and domestic security.

I would like to firmly reiterate that the United States is the main strategic partner and an ally Latvia may rely on.

We are grateful to our U.S., Canadian and European allies, who take part in NATO exercises in our region and in the Baltic Air Policing Mission, thereby demonstrating their solidarity.

The past year demonstrates that the risks posed by international terrorism are present not only in the remote areas across the globe but also in Europe. Barbaric terrorist attacks in Paris and Copenhagen in 2015 are a reminder of the persisting presence of these risks. Latvia's national security interests call for involvement in a common counter-terrorism policy along with allies.

Due to contributions by Latvian experts, an agreement was achieved during Latvia's Presidency on the signing of the Additional Protocol to the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism (the "Riga Protocol"). The Additional Protocol was produced so as to facilitate the early prevention of terrorism by criminalizing participation in a terrorist group, travelling abroad for the purpose of committing terrorist offences, the reception of training for terrorism, and the organising or funding of travel for purposes of terrorism.

Honoured Members of Parliament!

Russia's aggression in Ukraine revealed challenges for which the international community was not prepared. This was information war, conducted parallel to Russia's military operation in Crimea and still ongoing in the east of Ukraine.

An information war cannot be easily won. Nevertheless, the response to this challenge calls for the involvement of the general public as a whole and this involvement is based on information literacy of our society: knowing the facts, being able to evaluate them critically, and discussing them with one another. We have long been sharing views on the role of the media in Latvia. The developments in the world and in Europe in the recent years demonstrate that the strengthening of an independent and quality media is the matter of both the maturity of our democracy and national security. This should be kept in focus when intensifying dialogue between policy makers and media professionals. And this is not conceivable without appropriate funding. I encourage seeking more actively the solutions for the media, especially public media, to address the broadest possible audiences, including young people and national minorities.

It is a pleasure that journalists and media professionals established the Baltic Centre of Media Excellence last year, which will have an essential role to play in increasing the quality of journalism in the Baltic States and the Eastern Partnership countries.

Latvia's contribution to NATO's strategic communications capabilities is the Riga-based NATO Centre of Excellence for Strategic Communications in Riga.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

The year 2016 will be a serious test for Europe. The idea once put forward of Europe whole and free, and of a safe European home, which, through integration processes, has resulted in the European Union is currently under serious threat. Migration, the single currency and free movement, structural problems, terrorism, and challenges in Europe's eastern and southern neighbourhood pose questions for Europe's future.

Over the past year, there has been much talk about the beginning of the end of the European Union, the clash of civilisations and the decline of Europe.

One must admit the fact that last year, on a number of occasions, Europe's response to ongoing global processes was delayed. The European Union's leadership role in global processes has also not been visible enough. And added to this, the European Union is experiencing a leadership crisis.

European citizens have a right and a reason to receive clear answers to certain questions, for instance, how to boost socio-economic development and global competitiveness of the European Union, how people in the European Union will benefit from the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, or TTIP, and what the future migration policy of the European Union look like.

The European Union is rooted in shared values and mutual trust reinforced by strong and capable institutions. Unfortunately, the array of substantial challenges has also given rise to the sense that all these things - confidence, values, and institutions - are also in a state of crisis. The administration and supervision of the Eurozone, migration, the negative rhetoric that European politicians direct at one another, and the lack of leadership both at the European and national level pose a threat to the European Union's existence.

The European Union can indeed recover if it becomes an effective implementer of a common policy, including the common foreign and security policy. And the European Union must be the champion of the space of European values forged over the centuries and based on democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Migration is vivid proof to the crisis in the European Union. The past year clearly highlighted the fact that the migration crisis in the European Union cannot be solved by any single EU Member State all by itself. Notwithstanding this, we are still not ready for concerted action.

This crisis has challenged the European Union's values. Until now, the European Union, European governments, and the people of Europe have demonstrated their goodwill, openness and solidarity toward asylum seekers from third countries.

We are an open society, but nevertheless we expect European values to be honoured. Violence and disrespect for women and the European Union values is unacceptable!

It is equally unacceptable that those who have been given a helping hand and provided with asylum press their own traditions and worldviews on others. If Europe's openness and centuries-old European values are not respected, we have to respond appropriately.

The migration crisis has also been conducive for the propagation of undisguised racism and xenophobia by radical right-wing political parties. For many politicians, this seems the easiest way of bringing up their political ratings. This path also can lead to the loss of Europe and the wish to return to a terrible past.

- The European Union, *first and foremost*, should provide a feasible and tangible long-term solution to address the root causes of migration, with a special focus on the stabilisation of political, economic and social conditions in regions neighbouring the European Union.

- the fight against criminal groups organising human smuggling should be fortified;

- A clear and effective return and readmission policy must also be implemented by the European Union, a mechanism for returning the migrants which do not qualify for the refugee status to the countries of their origin.

- All European Union Member States must reinforce the external borders of the European Union. Latvia will honour commitments undertaken so far within the European Union with respect to persons in need of international protection; however, hosting of additional refugees either in the European Union or Latvia is not possible while we see that these questions are not really being answered.

Honoured members of Parliament!

There is yet another issue vital for the existence of the European Union: that of the United Kingdom remaining a part of it. The United Kingdom is an important ally for Latvia in the areas of economy and security policy and so Latvia's interests lie in a strong United Kingdom in a unified and strong European Union.

Latvia will continue advocating the principle “united in diversity”, which respects the diverse cultures, historical experience and constitutional structures of the Member States. We have to find the way to observe the interests of various countries while at the same time building a stronger EU.

Return to robust economic growth in the European Union is also a prerequisite for Latvia’s economic growth.

I am gratified that, during the Latvian EU Presidency, an agreement was achieved on the European Fund for Strategic Investments, thereby unlocking investments of at least 315 billion euros. How we use this opportunity depends on us alone.

Latvia supports active work on the establishment of the Energy Union, which includes all five elements: energy security, solidarity and trust; a fully integrated internal energy market; energy efficiency; decarbonising the economy; research, innovation and competitiveness.

Our interests lie in further integration with the European energy and transport systems. It’s in our interests to develop the European Single Market. And our interests lie in the strengthening of our country’s European identity.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

This year, Latvia has the chairmanship of the Baltic Council of Ministers, and during this time we will be focusing a number of priorities related to the strengthening of security in the region and the development of the transport and energy infrastructure.

And while touching on Latvia’s cooperation with the countries in the Baltic Sea region, I would like to mention also that, this year, Latvia has taken over the coordination of the Baltic and Nordic cooperation in the NB8 format, with security, energy and strategic communication as its priorities. Through joint efforts, the Baltic States have also taken major steps toward the establishment of a free and functional gas and electricity market.

I have already said on earlier occasions that the Baltic States must become a country that promotes unity within the European Union both in words and deeds. I believe that until now the Baltic States have demonstrated a balanced approach and solidarity, and have been the voice of reason in Europe.

I am glad that the Baltic States, jointly and tenaciously, are working on the facilitation of the long-term allied military presence in the region and implementation of NATO’s Readiness Action Plan. And just as they do at NATO, so also must Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia have a common position on these matters in the European Union.

A common European Neighbourhood Policy based on an individualised approach and responding to the interests of each country is also important for Latvia. The Riga Eastern Partnership Summit confirmed yet again that the Eastern Partnership is a strategic and ambitious EU policy that will continue to develop and evolve.

To implement the decisions made at the Riga Summit, the Eastern Partnership must take many steps. The main priority is the work on the implementation of the Association Agreements with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova to ensure modernisation and economic development of these countries.

Last year the bilateral political dialogue and practical cooperation between Latvia and Ukraine increased in intensity and scale, and Latvia provided its support. Even while subjected to military aggression, Ukraine pursued its course towards the European Union and was able to keep up the work on much needed reforms.

I am happy that the political commitment pledged at the Riga Eastern Partnership Summit has been put into practice, namely, beginning the implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area between the European Union and Ukraine. The progress we expected to see on the path to visa liberalisation was also accomplished.

Let me stress yet again that Latvia will be unrelenting in its pursuit of a policy of non-recognition of the illegitimate and illegal annexation of Crimea. Crimea is Ukraine! Latvia’s support for Ukraine’s sovereignty, territorial integrity and the reform process will be unwavering.

This was a decisive year for Ukraine in undertaking reforms. Both the Ukrainian society and we as well are expecting a breakthrough in the reforms with respect to public administration, the fight against corruption, and economic recovery. Only a strong Ukraine will be able to address all challenges. We have offered substantial assistance for our friends and are prepared to help them also in future.

It is with deep concern that we are following recent developments in Moldova. The new government must be able to introduce the required reforms thereby bringing tangible benefits to its people. Our Moldovan colleagues know that in the process of implementing reforms, they can rely on support from Latvia.

Latvia is a reliable friend to Georgia and an ally in favour of Georgia's closer integration with the European Union. We welcome the conclusion of Georgia's visa liberalisation dialogue with the European Union which renders practical support for the Georgian people on the path to the European Union.

Armenia and Azerbaijan are important partners when we speak of continuing implementation of the Eastern Partnership policy. It is essential that work begins this year on a new EU-Armenia framework agreement. An accord must also be achieved on a framework for a new agreement with Azerbaijan.

Likewise, bilateral cooperation between the European Union and Belarus should be strengthened by supporting Belarus in its accession to the World Trade Organisation and cooperation with international finance institutions. That said, Latvia calls on Belarus to make further steps towards enhancing democracy and upholding human rights.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Evaluating the state of affairs in the neighbourhood, it must be noted that the conflict in Ukraine incited and caused by Russia and the illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea in 2014 had repercussions for Russia's relations with the European Union. In 2016 as well, whatever policy is pursued by Russia will continue to exercise its influence on the dynamic of Russia's relations with Latvia and the EU.

Although the Russian market is partly closed for our businesses, it is noteworthy that internationally, Latvia's total exports have increased. We have in fact succeeded in helping Latvian companies re-orient their business and enter new markets.

In the context of relations between the European Union and Central Asia, I would like to note that Latvia's foreign policy interests in Central Asia are directed toward strengthening regional security and stability and the development and modernisation of transport and transit links.

In 2016, Latvia's foreign policy vis à vis Central Asia will focus on sustaining an active dialogue between the countries and taking the current cooperation forward and the Latvian EU Presidency which brought forward the approval of the EU Strategy for Central Asia has helped in this regard.

Honourable Members of Parliament!

Latvia has committed itself to completing the process of accession to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) which will make Latvia more attractive for investors and foreign businesses, and raise the level of foreign direct investment.

Let's examine the reasons why joining this organisation are so important.

Firstly, the OECD membership has a positive impact on the international credit rating, which, in turn, has a positive influence on interest rates related to government and business financing. The costs of servicing the national debt are therefore reduced and businesses are given new prospects for development.

Secondly, Latvia will gain a higher profile in economic terms in countries with which the potential of business and trade cooperation has not yet been fully exploited. Being an OECD member will ensure greater confidence in Latvia's economic

potential and the security of investments.

Thirdly, OECD members have higher standards in regard to international business operations, financial transactions, corporate governance and the fight against corruption in international business transactions. That will no doubt stimulate the development of higher standards in Latvia while yielding concrete economic benefits.

Although the OECD membership talks have entered the concluding phase, Latvia is currently expected to demonstrate greater progress, especially in the areas concerning the fight against bribery in international business transactions and corporate governance of state-owned enterprises.

One of the missions of Latvia's foreign policy is to facilitate the external economic relations of our country and entry into new markets.

Over the past year, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has continued supporting Latvia's business people when they move to new export markets, with an emphasis placed on assisting the food industry go from the Russian market to new markets in Europe and Asia.

Joint efforts have resulted in 19 new markets for Latvia's farmers and food producers. The launch of the exports of Latvian dairy products to China deserves special mention.

We can already now say that the opening of new diplomatic missions in Asian countries has been worthwhile. Since the Latvian Embassy was opened in the United Arab Emirates, exports from Latvia to that country have tripled. In the weeks immediately following the posting of a diplomat to South Korea, Latvian companies signed their first contracts with South Korean partners in the high technologies sector. And Latvia's universities and the clean technologies cluster in Latvia are successfully raising their profile in the Indian market.

2016 will be a year of great opportunities in cooperation with People's Republic of China (PRC). The Latvian Foreign Service has been devoting increased attention to promoting relations with the People's Republic of China. Toward the end of last year, it was agreed that the next Summit of China and the Central and Eastern European countries ("16+1") will be held in Riga and that Latvia is to be the country coordinating the transport and logistics sector in this format. This means that the Chinese Prime Minister and representatives from several dozen leading Chinese companies will arrive in Latvia this autumn. An important condition for the success of cooperation with China is the development of joint offers representing entire sectors of the economy. This concerns not only the transport and logistic sectors but also infrastructure projects and manufacturers.

Honourable Members of Parliament!

This year, we expect to see progress in negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership Agreement (TTIP) between the United States and the European Union, an agreement which will enable Latvia to enhance its socio-economic security and will offer alternative export markets and sources of investment in today's insecure world.

We expect the TTIP to make the European Union's producers more competitive and to take into account Latvia's interests with respect to sensitive sectors, manufactured products and provision of services.

To sum up the above, the strengthening of trade links with the United States of America, further exploration of China's market and the development of the EU Single Market are the three main directions for our work this year on maximizing external trade opportunities.

Honourable Members of Parliament!

The best agents of Latvian companies and their best help in foreign markets are often Latvians themselves who are living abroad. This became apparent during the Second World Latvian Economics and Innovations Forum in Riga last July.

The forum highlighted the intellectual potential of Latvians living abroad, a potential that has not yet been fully utilised. Therefore,

I would like to offer gratitude to all Latvians abroad who maintain their connection with Latvia, keeping alive the Latvian language and traditions, and in providing essential economic and intellectual contribution for the benefit of our country.

Upon Latvia's accession to the European Union, the world opened up and many of those who lived in Latvia, for their own reasons, have taken advantage of the opportunity of free movement. More than 210,000 people have emigrated from Latvia over the past two decades. Latvian citizens live in more than 120 countries across the world. The Latvian diaspora – the people who left Latvia after World War II and the new wave of emigration after Latvia regained independence – is a vital part of our country, and its potential has not yet been fully explored.

To ensure that they do not lose their connection with Latvia, the diplomatic and consular service will continue promoting Latvian language and culture in the world and support seeking new opportunities in business and innovation.

Honourable Members of Parliament!

The founding fathers of our *Satversme* – the Constitution – have enshrined in this document a definite understanding of and attitude towards values which underlie the establishment of our state and constitute the identity of our nation. The state of Latvia has always honoured human dignity and the freedoms that are inherent in any democratic country today. These values are currently taken for granted in Latvia; however, they can be easily lost in a world where hatred and violence are on the rise. I call on you to continue upholding our values and interests to promote democracy, peace and security in a united Europe.

I would hope that today's debate on foreign policy and European affairs, which is taking place on the 95th anniversary of Latvia's recognition *de iure*, will be constructive and yield new recommendations to inspire the work of Latvia's Foreign Service in the years ahead.

Success to us all! Thank you for your attention!



[Annual Report on accomplishments and further work with respect to national foreign policy and the European Union \(2015-2016\)](https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/article/speech-latvian-foreign-minister-edgars-rinkevics-annual-foreign-policy-debate-latvian-parliament-saeima-26-january-2016) 

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