

Speech by Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs at a Discussion on Foreign Policy in the Latvian Parliament (Saeima), 22 January 2015

Published: 22.01.2015.

News



More photos: www.flickr.com

Mr President, Madame Speaker, Honourable Members of Parliament, Ministers, Excellencies,

I have the pleasure of opening the first debate on foreign policy in the 12th Saeima, and I hope that the discussions today will be interesting and bear fruit. I also hope that cooperation in foreign policy between the Latvian Parliament (the Saeima) and the Cabinet of Ministers, which is being led by Prime Minister Laimdota Straujuma, will be as successful and constructive as it was during the term of the previous Parliament.

To begin my report on the past year in the world (2014), from the perspective of Latvia's foreign policy, I would very much have wished to say that the world and Europe enjoyed peace, security and growth. Regrettably, the reality was quite to the contrary. I dare say that our country and its foreign service is facing an unprecedented challenge to national and European security.

We are encountering the most serious security crisis in Europe since the Cold War. The annexation of a part of the territory of Ukraine by Russia, its aggression and military activities in the east of Ukraine and the clear intent to revise the international order and the principles of international law are presenting a challenge to the entire world, including to the foreign policies of the European Union and Latvia.

Meanwhile, we are witnesses to Russia distancing itself from the international community, waging a massive propaganda campaign against the European Union and NATO, and wishing to see the world split into spheres of interests. This suggests parallels with grim pages of the 20th century history. I would like to hope that our century will show more wisdom than the previous one and avoid repeating mistakes that caused two enormous tragedies. This is our shared responsibility.

The attack on the main office of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in Paris has again confirmed the need for a strict counter-terrorism policy. This tragic event is evidence of threats posed to one of the fundamental values of European democracy – the freedom of speech and expression.

Tension is building up in the European Union's southern neighbourhood. The activities of the ISIL terrorist group in Syria and Iraq clearly demonstrate the necessity of combating international terrorism, and amending and supplementing legislation both in Europe and Latvia to prevent extremism and the participation of our citizens in groupings of this kind. Terrorism has become both an external and internal challenge.

What will Latvia's foreign policy address during the 12th Saeima, and in 2015 in particular?

Our diplomats and those who formulate our national foreign policy will have to handle four tasks:

First, strengthening the external security of the country in the context of the rapidly changing and dangerous geopolitical situation.

Secondly, actively representing Latvia's national interests in the European Union and effectively running Latvia's Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Thirdly, enhancing the political and economic competitiveness of Latvia both on a global and regional scale.

And a fourth priority is maintaining and strengthening a close connection with Latvia's diaspora.

Latvia's interests lie in the implementation of a coherent, active and principle-based EU Common Foreign And Security Policy.

Honourable Members of Parliament,

In view of the threat of instability in Europe, all efforts will be made in Latvia's diplomacy to reinforce domestic and external security, both through an enhanced presence of NATO Allies in the region, and also through exploring new export markets to promote the economic competitiveness of our country.

Russia's military activity was observed near Latvia's borders in previous years already, and grew at an alarming rate in 2014, with the increase of Russia's military activity in the Baltic Sea region. In 2014, more than 200 cases of interception were registered in the air, and 50 by sea, which surpasses the total number of incidents during the past decade. Such activities pose a threat to Latvia's security. Key decisions for Latvia's security and defence were made during the NATO Wales Summit; these decisions strengthened Allied security guarantees as well as the actual presence of Allies in the Baltic States and Poland.

At the same time, it is Latvia's own primary duty to invest in strengthening both homeland and external security. The Law on Defence Funding provides for spending 2% of GDP on Latvia's defence by 2020. Under the agreement adopted by NATO's member countries in Wales, 20% of this amount will be spent on defence investment and new equipment.

The past year has clearly proved that national capabilities should be enhanced not only to counter conventional military threats, but also a new emerging threat. So-called hybrid warfare has become reality in present-day Europe. In 2014, together with six other NATO Allies, Latvia has opened the NATO Centre of Excellence for Strategic Communications (StratCom) in Riga. Jointly with other EU member states, we shall work on the enhancement of the EU's capabilities for countering the impact of third country propaganda in the EU media space. Civilian and military cooperation should also be strengthened by utilising dual purpose resources in border defence. This means enhancement of the justice system and information space, as well as practical capacity building amongst the state border guard and security agencies.

In view of developments across the globe, near the EU's borders, and in the new hotspots with which we are familiar, the European Security Strategy is outdated. Its initial sentence "*Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free*" speaks for itself: the reality in 2015 is completely different from this statement made in 2003. Therefore, the revision of the European Security Strategy should begin as early as Latvia's EU Presidency. The European Union should invest much more in the

development of joint defence capabilities, boost its defence budgets, improve its cooperation with NATO, and modernise its defence industry.

Latvia will contribute to the strengthening of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the European Union by taking part in CSDP missions and operations in Afghanistan, Georgia, Somalia, and Mali. Latvia's participation in the EU civilian mission in Ukraine is also planned. Latvia will certainly be advocating closer cooperation under the CSDP with the most capable member states of the UN and NATO, and especially with the United States of America.

Honourable Members of Parliament,

Against a background of volatile security conditions, Latvia's principal task in its foreign policy in 2015 will be to successfully manage the first ever Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The Presidency will show our identity and ability as Europeans. I have no doubt that the preparations for the Presidency and the Presidency itself are making our public administration and society in Latvia as a whole more experienced and more confident. Following on from a year when Riga was the European Capital of Culture, the Presidency's public diplomacy and culture programme will once more highlight Latvia on the map of Europe.

In a close dialogue with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social partners at home, and with Italy and Luxembourg in the Presidency Trio, Latvia has defined three principal priorities for Europe during its presidency in the first semester of 2015.

The first priority of the Presidency is the enhancement of Europe's competitiveness. In practical terms this will mean hard work on the drafting of a new investment plan for the EU, the so-called "Juncker plan", the establishment of the Energy Union, and strengthening of the Banking Union to put Europe back on the path of long-term growth.

The second priority is the development of a Digital Agenda. This means the mainstreaming of the digital agenda in EU policies, increased data security, cybersecurity, and the promotion of the EU's Digital Single Market to increase the digital competitiveness of the European Union with respect to the US and Japan.

Thirdly, Latvia's EU Presidency will also turn attention to enhancing the EU's global and regional role. I wish to place a special emphasis on this priority due to its strong foreign policy dimension. The first two priorities, for their part, have been described in greater detail in the annual Foreign Policy Report.

Latvia's Presidency will focus on the strengthening of EU cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries. On 22 May, Riga will host the Eastern Partnership Summit. I am certain that this will prove to be an historic milestone, one of the most significant events of the Presidency, with a number of challenging tasks. I would like to highlight them.

First, the Riga Summit should send a signal that the European Union has clear interests in the strengthening and continuation of the Eastern Partnership.

Second, the Riga Summit will take stock of the fulfilment of objectives set by the Vilnius Summit and provide a preliminary assessment of implementation of the Association Agreements. An assistance programme should be prepared to support practical implementation of the Association Agreements.

Third, the process of visa liberalisation with the Eastern Partnership countries which comply with the criteria should be taken forward.

And fourth, the EU, while pursuing this initiative, should be looking at the individual interest of each EaP country and their readiness to cooperate with the EU, not merely applying the same approach to all six countries.

In 2015, as in the year gone by, the attention of Latvia's foreign policy will be focused on Ukraine. I would like to emphasise that Ukraine, through its presidential and parliamentary elections held last year, has clearly defined its choice. Ukraine has reinforced its course towards integration with the EU and created a solid foundation for continued reforms. It is vital that also in future, a unified and supportive EU policy be pursued in relation to Ukraine with the aim of providing support for the implementation of democratic reforms and also financial support to the recovery of the country. At the same time, success with reforms depends

greatly on Ukraine itself. Latvia will follow the policy of support for Ukraine both bilaterally and on an EU level.

However, the success of reforms in Ukraine and future development of the country are closely connected with its territorial integrity. I believe that compliance with the Minsk Agreements are the basis for stabilisation of the situation and these include establishing Ukrainian control over the Ukraine-Russia border; stopping support for separatists; withdrawal of Russia's military equipment and troops; the release of prisoners, the establishment of a line of demarcation between Ukrainian troops and separatists, and the implementation of constitutional reforms. Here I wish to see a more active diplomatic role in this regard, and we will be advocating this during our Presidency and afterwards.

Latvia will strongly support the efforts of the governments of Moldova and Georgia in enacting democratic reforms in their countries, in creating conditions for business development in line with European standards, as well as in strengthening the rule of law and European values and norms in public administration and society.

Latvia values the constructive position of Belarus in the context of the crisis in Ukraine, and maintains the view that constructive development is possible in relations between the EU and Belarus. Whether to go further with this cooperation is up to Belarus itself. We are open and ready to promote cooperation underpinned by mutual understanding, while not compromising fundamental European values. At the bilateral level, Latvia will continue active cooperation with Belarus in the sectors of transport, border security, education, science, and the environment. At the same time, human rights and the rule of law will remain an essential part of our dialogue.

Latvia stands for a flexible approach to relations with Armenia. Latvia respects Armenia's wish to be part of the Eurasian Union, and we are ready to promote cooperation between the EU and Armenia to the extent Armenia is ready for such cooperation.

We see Azerbaijan as an important cooperation partner for the European Union in the energy sector. At the same time, we are concerned about the situation with the media and political freedoms, and this issue will be on the agenda of the EU, and bilaterally.

We shall pay considerable attention to the EU's southern neighbourhood with its major challenges – security and compliance with international norms, migration risks and stability in general. We shall work jointly on the practical implementation of the EU strategy on mitigation of the threat of ISIL/foreign fighters as well as tackling migration-related issues at the European level.

Latvia will advocate the strengthening of the EU's presence in the Central Asian region. Latvia has provided a considerable contribution as a broker in the dialogue between the EU and Central Asian states, and during its presidency, it will turn attention to the issues of security education, energy and environment, and sustainable development. In pursuit of EU policy goals, Latvia intends to actively engage in the review of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, focusing on the practical needs and interests of the five Central Asian countries in advancing their dialogue with Europe.

Latvia will offer support for the continued EU enlargement process in accession negotiations with EU candidate countries in the Balkans. It is in Latvia's interests that EU values and norms are spread beyond the EU's borders thereby promoting peace and stability within the EU's own borders and its competitiveness on a global scale. Latvia will also seek to achieve progress with respect to Turkey's EU integration process.

In terms of EU policy, 2015 stands out as the European Year for Development. This year is of key importance for defining the new UN development goals and attracting sources of funding. From Latvia's perspective, much greater attention in the EU and UN frameworks should be paid to the matters of good governance, the rule of law, gender equality and sustainable economic growth. The national development cooperation policy should focus more on project development in the Eastern Partnership and Central Asian countries. It is positive that funding allocated in the national budget for Latvia's participation in development cooperation projects has been increasing in recent years; however, it is still insufficient for achieving the set goals.

Under the current geopolitical circumstances, the negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) assume a special significance for the Latvian Presidency. The U.S.-EU Free Trade Agreement will strengthen the transatlantic link and establish the world's largest free trade area. Latvia will actively support the European Commission and the European External

Action Service so that the negotiations may be finalised by the end of 2016 as decided by the European Council. High quality wording of the agreement should be formulated and this may serve as a model for the new generation of free trade agreements.

Latvia will actively seek to engage the general public in the negotiation process and promote maximum openness and transparency. We shall promote the maintenance of high standards in the area of food security and public health, as well as including a chapter on energy in the text of the agreement.

Honourable Members of Parliament,

Any Foreign Minister's report to the Saeima is hardly imaginable without a chapter addressing relations with Russia. We are interested in having a stable, democratic and prosperous Russia as our neighbour, a predictable and cooperation-oriented country, a constructive partner to the European Union and a responsible member of the international community. To this end, a year ago, I expressed my readiness to make all efforts so that relations with Russia would be based upon the principles of reciprocity and mutual respect.

Regrettably, reality fell short of our expectations. The past year was marked by Russia's annexation of Crimea, direct military interference in Ukraine and support to separatist groups in eastern Ukraine. These actions are directed not only against the sovereign state of Ukraine but also against Europe as a whole, and the international order.

A number of Russia's neighbours in Europe have felt the demonstrations of military muscle and efforts to interfere in the domestic affairs of others, as well as aggressive rhetoric and actions. Behind the smokescreen of the concept of the so-called Russian world, there are attempts to divide societies from the inside, while Russia's propaganda machine is gathering speed in an attempt to misinform the international community about the developments in Russia, Ukraine and elsewhere in the world.

The Russian Federation seeks to gain influence not only in relation to its 'compatriots' abroad but also on a wider scale. A free and independent media environment is being affected, and the generally accepted standards in this field are at risk. Propaganda divides societies and fosters intolerance. Propaganda creates common challenges both for Europeans and their transatlantic allies.

The only effective way to address challenges posed by propaganda from the Russian Federation is the enhancement of the quality of the media and reinforcement of an independent media environment. Jointly with our partners, a regional centre for the promotion of a free and independent media space and training of journalists could be established in Riga.

The assessment of the current situation clearly shows that EU solidarity, and action based on principles and coordinated action with transatlantic partners, can bring results. Revisionism in the international system has never been to anyone's benefit. Latvia will never support an illegal change of borders. Russia's annexation of Crimea and its aggression in Eastern Ukraine are unacceptable for Latvia. Depending on the circumstances and together with partners in Europe, we are ready to consider reviewing the sanctions imposed on Russia.

Russia's economic destabilisation is in no one's interest. Nevertheless, sanctions and international isolation was something that Russia's leadership chose on its own. It is not yet too late to change this; but that would require practical action on the part of Russia, with the aim of meeting the universally accepted legal principles and norms and the fulfilment of the Minsk Agreement. Should the actions of our eastern neighbour become constructive and aim for de-escalation of the conflict and restoration of peace, we are ready to support the reviewing of the sanctions policy in relations with Russia. However, if such actions on the part of Russia do not materialise, the regime of restrictive measures will continue, and in case of escalation of the conflict, they will be tightened.

Latvia will spare no effort to ensure a common and consistent EU position with regard to Russia in support of the international order and the security of the member states, including Latvia. And we will continue offering assistance to the Ukrainian people. At the same time, the EU-Russia dialogue on normalisation of the situation should continue.

Latvia and Russia are neighbours, and we cooperate in many areas; however, the Latvia-Russia relations in 2015 will be shaped to a great extent on the developments in eastern Ukraine as well as the overall climate of EU-Russia relations.

Honourable Members of Parliament,

Latvia's foreign policy in 2015 will continue promoting Latvia's competitiveness in the Baltic Sea region, in Europe and on a global scale. In 2014, Latvia successfully continued the process of accession to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The OECD highlighted, in particular, Latvia's progress in the areas of anti-corruption, tax administration and public administration.

Upon becoming a member of the OECD, Latvia, for the benefit of its competitiveness, will be able to access the organisation's know how and best practices and this will strengthen Latvia's economic sustainability and promote foreign economic activities.

Latvia's diplomatic service is developing in line with the interests of Latvia's businesses. Two new diplomatic missions were opened in 2014: in India (New Delhi) and the United Arab Emirates (Abu Dhabi). The necessary preparations will be made in 2015 in order to open, in 2016, Latvia's permanent representation to the OECD in Paris and an embassy in the Republic of Korea.

Russia's economic recession and the measures imposed in response to the EU's economic sanctions have caused a number of Latvia's companies, especially in the food sector, to explore new export markets for their products. In 2015, the Foreign Service will continue actively supporting Latvia's businesses in their activities in the markets of Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East and the Gulf States.

Honourable Members of Parliament,

Next year, the Foreign Service will continue its support for the Latvian diaspora – promoting the connection with Latvians residing abroad and their homeland and strengthening the Latvian language and culture beyond the borders of our country. It is of fundamental importance for Latvia's future to engage the diaspora in Latvia's policies, economy and social processes. According to Latvian Foreign Ministry estimates, 370,000 people who feel a close connection with Latvia are residing abroad. Approximately 1000 Latvian organisations and 100 Latvian schools operate outside of Latvia. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs actively cooperated with the diaspora in 2014. We offered assistance in the organisation of national and regional Latvian song and dance festivals. The first Latvian Youth Forum was also organised.

The ongoing education and cultural projects will be continued in 2015. The second World Latvian Economics and Innovation Forum will be organised jointly with the World Association of Free Latvians and it will generate new ideas for the future of Latvia.

Honourable Members of Parliament,

Latvia's Presidency of the Council of the EU coincides with a pivotal time for European history. War in eastern Europe, the threat to stability caused by migration, terrorism and an economic crisis in southern Europe, the lowered trust for the European idea in a number of EU member states and low economic growth across Europe – all these pose a challenge to Europe's unity. The EU's motto, "United in diversity", also applies to Latvia's businessmen, politicians, diplomats and civil servants in the first half of this year. Latvia is well prepared for its EU Presidency and can appropriately respond to the current and emerging challenges that are bound to come up during this time.

However, Latvia's foreign policy course will continue beyond the last month of the presidency. In 2015, in partnership with the government, the entire foreign service will consistently pursue the foreign policy goals that I outlined at the beginning of my speech.

Honourable Members of Parliament,

The past year's events clearly revealed that Latvia's strategic choice of becoming a member of the EU and NATO was the only right one to safeguard the future and security of our country. Latvia is a member of the community of euro-atlantic values – this is our bedrock. Our future is in a powerful European Union built on nations that have united around it.

The European motto, "United in diversity", is about us. This is our society here in Latvia. The key to success in Latvia's foreign policy is our people, and their ability to unite and stand together. Only while confidently standing by each other in unity shall we

achieve the goals of Latvia's foreign policy.

Success to us all! Thank you for your attention!

 [Annual Report by the Minister of Foreign Affairs on accomplishments and activities planned with respect to national foreign policy and the European Union \(2014 - 2015\)](https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/article/speech-latvian-foreign-minister-edgars-rinkevics-discussion-foreign-policy-latvian-parliament-saeima-22-january-2015) 

<https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/article/speech-latvian-foreign-minister-edgars-rinkevics-discussion-foreign-policy-latvian-parliament-saeima-22-january-2015>