

Speech by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia Mr. Edgars Rinkēvičs at the Foreign Policy Debate in the Saeima, 24 January 2014

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Mr President, Madam Speaker of the Parliament (Saeima), Madam Prime Minister, Members of the Saeima, Ministers, Excellencies,

It is my honour to open our annual debate on foreign policy and European Union issues - the last debate of the 11th Saeima and the last one in advance of the Latvia's Presidency of the Council of the European Union. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the Saeima, to Andris Bērziņš, the President of Latvia, to former Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis, to my colleagues in the Cabinet of Ministers and to Latvian diplomats for their constructive cooperation in defining and implementing Latvia's foreign policy, as well as advancing our interests, both within the European Union and beyond. Laimdota Straujuma's Cabinet will actively and constructively continue this work.

During the past year, our foreign policy has been a success. Latvia has become the 18th member of the Eurozone, thereby arriving at core of EU cooperation. The official negotiations on Latvia's accession to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have been launched. Substantial effort has been invested in promotion of Latvian exports through supporting our entrepreneurs both in their traditional markets and in new ones. Latvia continues to provide practical assistance and support for the stabilisation of security situations throughout the world, including in the framework of NATO and European Union operations. All these lines of work retain their importance this year.

Dear Members of the Saeima!

The world last year experienced events, which were complex and contradictory.

Instability and violence in North Africa and the civil war in Syria have held the world's attention in recent years.

Though the work of ridding Syria of chemical weapons was launched in 2013, violence and a humanitarian catastrophe in this country continue on an unprecedented scale. Conflicts and instability in the EU's southern neighbourhood have a direct impact also on EU member states. So Latvia has been supporting the European Union's active engagement in the neighbouring region to the south and in Africa. We are contributing to the European Union's efforts to stabilise Mali – Latvian soldiers have been sent to take part in the EU-led mission to train the Malian armed forces. The security of its external borders and migration are a major challenge for the European Union as a whole. While this primarily affects the Mediterranean region, we understand that it may also affect us. And, taking this into account, we support the determination of the Greek and the Italian EU Presidencies to concentrate on finding solutions to the problems of illegal migration.

Suspension of Iran's nuclear programme was a positive development in 2013. Latvia welcomes the understanding that was reached and hopes that it will be implemented in a logical manner, thus increasing security and stability in the region.

2014 will be an important year for Afghanistan and for further development of the whole region. Holding free and fair elections is an essential prerequisite for the political stability and development of Afghanistan. As they plan further support for Afghanistan, Allies, including Latvia, have made a clear commitment to continue their involvement, while the provision of assistance should be based on a clear set of conditions. We hope that the Afghan government will demonstrate a responsible attitude and that President Karzai will conclude bilateral security agreements with the USA and NATO in the nearest future, thus fulfilling important prerequisites for the further stabilisation of Afghanistan.

The past year proved that questions of cyber policy will be more and more significant both at a national level and in international cooperation. As threats to our critical infrastructure increase, Latvia must strengthen its capacity to protect itself against cyber-attacks, while at the same time safeguarding democratic freedoms and taking advantage of the opportunities offered by a free internet and modern technologies.

Our concerns are growing about the situation in Ukraine. These days, on the streets of Kiev, clashes between protesters and law enforcement authorities have resulted in bloodshed, and we have strongly condemned this. The Ukraine's political leadership should do all possible to resolve the political crisis in a peaceful manner, engaging all parties involved in dialogue. If the situation escalates, I would not rule out stronger signals from the European Union, and the application of appropriate sanctions.

These are but a few of the global challenges we face.

Dear Members of the Saeima!

What will be the focus of Latvia's foreign policy in 2014? Our key priorities remain the same. Of these, I have spoken in my address during the annual foreign policy debate in 2012, while outlining the main tasks to be performed during the 11th Saeima. Our foreign policy will be about contributing to the country's political development and strengthening economic competitiveness. It will be about reinforcing security and the transatlantic link. It will be about preparations for our Presidency of the EU Council. It will be about fostering cooperation with our closest neighbours and in the Baltic Sea region. And it will be about cooperation with, and support for, our compatriots living abroad.

Dear Members of the Saeima!

To a great extent, our economic development is being driven by the growth in exports. Building on success in 2012, our exports have continued to grow in 2013. We will be able to sustain this positive trend only by paying close attention to our ability to compete in world markets. In 2014, the Foreign Service will continue to make every effort to support our entrepreneurs. Our priorities will be the fostering bilateral economic contacts, protecting Latvian business interests abroad including with legal assistance, and conveying a positive view of Latvia in economic terms. This means using the potential of export markets we have already entered, as well as moving into new and emerging markets.

Analysis of our current export market structure shows that our 20 main export partners are countries in Europe and the USA – the markets where we already operate in. These comprise approximately 90% of our total exports. Only about 10% of Latvia's exports are going to markets, which have increasing influence on the global economies such as the ones in South East Asia, China, India, South Korea, the Gulf States and Latin America. At the same time, the Latvian export volumes to the growing markets are increasing rapidly. Over the past year, we have seen a 70% increase in exports to China and a 30% increase in exports to the Central Asian countries. This trend indicates clearly that these markets have a substantial potential. However, exploring this potential can be challenging, and Latvian companies require experience, preparedness and resources to respond to these challenges. One of the keys to achievement resides in the ability of Latvia's manufacturing and service sectors to present a common front in their offerings for these new markets.

Political support plays a crucial role in reaching new markets. Businesses must often be helped in explaining the specific character of these markets, as well as in establishing contacts. To this end, we will continue our work in creating the necessary political basis for the development of economic cooperation. In the interests of enhancing economic competitiveness, Latvia is this year opening an Embassy in India and an Embassy in United Arab Emirates.

Dear Members of the Saeima!

In the area of external security, we will be supporting more direct transatlantic links, by calling upon the U.S. to strengthen its presence in Europe, since this is a cornerstone of security for Europe as a whole. We will be supporting the conclusion of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) between the EU and the U.S., which will have enormous geopolitical significance. We will extend cooperation in the field of cyber-security as agreed by the Presidents of the Baltic States and the U.S. And we will continue supporting initiatives in the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance that unite partners and Allies in reaching shared goals.

For Latvia's security there can be no substitute for a united proactive NATO.

The United Kingdom will host a NATO Summit this coming September. Our priority at the summit will be the strengthening of the Alliance's collective security as well as the U.S. presence and involvement in Europe. As the engagement of the Alliance in

Afghanistan decreases, allied interoperability acquires a special role. Therefore, we will be backing practical measures: regular large-scale military exercises and crisis management exercises, the importance of which was demonstrated by the successful NATO Article V exercise, Steadfast Jazz, which took place in Latvia and Poland last year.

In turn, we will be seeking closer links with partners that strengthen the Alliance's capabilities – for instance with Finland and Sweden that are also vital for the security of Latvia and the Baltic Sea region as a whole. I believe that cooperation between NATO, Sweden and Finland should be moved to the next level. Therefore, it is essential that our partners are even more closely integrated into the Alliance's operations, crisis management and military exercises, rapid response forces and other initiatives facilitating interoperability.

In the enlargement debate, we will be calling for the continuance of the Open Door Policy based on three principles: 1) each candidate country is assessed on its individual merits, in terms implementation of reforms; 2) that enlargement enhances security of the Alliance; 3) and that no country outside NATO has the right to veto a decision on the Alliance's enlargement.

Latvia will continue to support enhancement of the security situation in Afghanistan – both through training of Afghanistan's national security forces as part of the upcoming NATO Training Mission, and by continuing to play a leading role in the development of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN). Not only is this work an investment by Latvia in NATO's most important operation but it is a benefit to the national economy since the goods produced by Latvian companies are being bought and our infrastructure is being utilised as part of this transit route. The NDN has the potential to become a commercially viable transport corridor joining Europe and Asia. Therefore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, hand-in-hand with foreign partners, line ministries and businesses, is exerting every effort to consolidate Latvia's positioning along these developing transit routes. Our international seminars have become valuable events on the annual agenda for development of the Northern Distribution Network. Taking into account the interest of partners, we will again this year be holding an international conference on this topic.

Latvia's military and civilian experts are already participating in EU operations and missions, and I foresee that in the future, the EU, together with Latvia, will be assuming an increasing role in addressing global crises. For the sake of our security, it is essential that the EU Common Security and Defence Policy is implemented in synergy with NATO's efforts, by devoting appropriate resources to defence and its capabilities, effectively utilising all existing instruments at the EU's disposal.

In June next year, during our Presidency of the EU Council, questions of European security will be discussed at the highest level. We will specially highlight the need to allocate appropriate resources to defence, the harmonisation of NATO and EU relations, the development of the EU's civilian and military capabilities, and cooperation with Eastern Partnership countries.

At the same time, the issue of data security has also been raised in relations with transatlantic partners in a manner that has diminished mutual trust. We believe that together we can find answers to security challenges, while respecting the privacy of EU citizens and the protection of their data. Allies must strengthen their mutual trust, since many items on the transatlantic agenda are addressed jointly.

Dear Colleagues!

During its Presidency of the Council of the European Union next year, Latvia will be responsible for political leadership and coordination. Even now our voice has more weight due to the approaching Presidency.

The year 2014 will be a time of great opportunities as well as challenges for Latvia's foreign policy and the diplomatic service. As we prepare for the first Presidency of the Council of the EU, clearly defining and advancing the EU's common interests is fundamental, and so is taking advantage of the possibility to strengthen Latvia's political and economic position in the European Union and the world.

We must perform this task at a complicated time in history. Latvia's citizens will go twice to the polls this year in elections for the European Parliament and the Saeima.

I would like to express my gratitude to all the political groups in the Saeima for the agreement that was recently reached on the

Latvian Presidency of the EU Council and its preparation. This demonstrates maturity and commitment by all our political forces to promote European policies and looking for the best way to ensure our country's interests. This agreement will provide continuity for Latvia's foreign policy throughout the 2014 election marathon and during the time of the 12th Saeima. I am ready for active and constructive cooperation to realise the stated objectives of this document.

Dear Colleagues!

In our domestic consultations in 2013, as well as in the last year's annual foreign policy debate in the Saeima, the EU's Eastern Partnership has been singled out as one of key priorities for the Latvian Presidency of the EU Council.

It is in our interests to have the widest possible area of cooperation, stability and growth in Europe. Developing cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries is beneficial also to Latvia's own economic welfare and provides us with an opportunity to develop new projects in transportation, energy, education and culture. For instance, Latvia's exports to Eastern Partnership countries have increased by 4.7 % over nine months in 2013, and to some countries such as Georgia by as much as 48%. Belarus and Ukraine hold a stable and permanent position among Latvia's 20 largest trading partners.

Belarus has traditionally been Latvia's second largest transit partner. New possibilities for the development of commercial routes may be offered by the so-called "Zubr" train which carries containers and will connect South Ukraine with the Baltic Sea. An increasing number of students from the Eastern Partnership countries choose Latvia as a place for their university studies. Our possibilities for sharing expertise and establishing a basis for closer economic and political cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries will increase this year, and the year after, within the framework of our development cooperation policy.

Already now, dozens of Latvian experts are working in the Eastern Partnership countries, sharing their experience and bolstering administrative capacity. Their contribution and assistance are being highly appreciated. The provision of assistance creates new opportunities for Latvian companies, non-governmental organisations, universities and colleges to forge closer relations with Eastern partners, and further enhance Latvia's image and reputation. Therefore it is especially important to step up the support we offer to the Eastern Partnership countries.

Last year's Vilnius Summit opened a new page in European Union relations with the Eastern Partnership countries. The Association Agreements with Moldova and Georgia were initialled and the Visa Facilitation Agreement was signed with Azerbaijan. Although the Association Agreement with Ukraine was not signed at the Summit, the door remains open for further cooperation between the European Union and Ukraine. This decision is up to Ukraine.

The European Union develops its relationships with the Eastern Partnership countries on a foundation of freedom of choice. No third country has - or ever will have - the right to influence their free choice. It is precisely for this reason that it's important to sign the already-initialled Association Agreements with Moldova and Georgia, which would offer these countries new development perspectives for their future.

This year we must do all we can to facilitate a decision on eliminating the visa requirement for short-term travel for citizens of the Republic of Moldova. Similar decisions should be examined with regard to other Eastern partnership countries as well. Eliminating the visa regime would provide citizens of these countries with the ability to travel freely, and the chance to get new knowledge and reinforce their belonging to Europe. I am convinced that this work will have the effect of creating even more favourable conditions for tourism in Latvia and for the development of our educational system.

As I mentioned, the door of the European Union remains open for Ukraine. I'm convinced that Ukraine's future will unfold in close cooperation with the European countries, to which Ukraine and its people have belonged for centuries. Therefore, I wish the Ukrainian government and its people to make a decision on their future that corresponds to the country's genuine long-term interests. The events of the past months in Kyiv and other cities are indicative of an ever-increasing maturity of the civil society and its desire to build a different future.

I call upon the Ukrainian government to allow its society a chance to be expressing opinions, and to make all efforts so that presidential elections at the beginning of 2015 are held in accordance with European democratic and election standards. The

current developments in Ukraine give rise to serious concerns about the government's willingness to build a democratic and modern Ukraine. Europe and also Latvia should not sit by and ignore a situation when the political rights of Ukrainians are being infringed.

Within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, Latvia wishes to continue building relations between the EU and Belarus. Increasing contacts in various fields are mutually beneficial. It's positive that Belarus wants to begin negotiations with the EU on visa facilitation. Latvia will provide all possible assistance toward a successful conclusion of such negotiations. At the same time, we consider that implementation of democratic reforms in Belarus, in particular, the release of political prisoners, would create new and strong impulses for the development of dialogue between Belarus and the European Union.

In our relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan, we will continue looking for ways, which could help these countries to find a model for dialogue with the European Union.

As Latvia prepares for its Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the following priorities in relations with Eastern Partnership countries are beginning to emerge.

First - promotion of economic contacts and prospective integration into the European Union's common economic area. I hope that at the Riga Summit in May 2015 we, together with our colleagues from the European Union and Eastern Partners, could jointly evaluate the early results of the Association agreements with Moldova and Georgia, drafting a plan for further activities towards a gradual integration of those countries with Europe.

Second - further expansion of a visa-free travel area. Significant progress should be achieved in the Eastern Partnership countries adoption of European Union standards so that alongside Moldova, visa-free travel to the European Union could also become a reality for other countries. I expect that during the Riga Summit we could sign a visa facilitation agreement with Belarus.

Third - the involvement of civil society. The events of the recent years clearly demonstrate the role of civil society as a catalyst in the Eastern Partnership countries. Latvia is planning to arrange a number of large scale events focusing on the establishment of closer cooperation amongst young people, entrepreneurs, policy experts, journalists and other segments of society from the European Union countries, as well as seeking ways to actively take part in the political life of the Eastern Partnership countries.

Dear Members of the Saeima!

Closer involvement of the European Union in the region of Central Asia and Afghanistan will be another important direction of effort during Latvia's Presidency. The security, stability, social and economic development of those countries, strengthening good governance, improving the business environment and a course towards more open economies correspond to the long-term interests of those countries and the European Union alike.

Over the recent years, Latvia has established broad and diverse bilateral contacts with Central Asian countries, and acquired experience and understanding of the region. Cooperation with Central Asian countries has brought economic benefits to Latvia. Exports to Central Asia increased by 30% in 2013. Kazakhstan is Latvia's third biggest transit partner after Russia and Belarus.

I wish to specially highlight the potential for developing transport and transit connections. Latvia is profiling itself as a transport artery between the Baltic Sea, Afghanistan and Central Asia with chance of reaching also to China, India and Pakistan. Latvia has gained considerable experience in cooperation with the region's countries while ensuring operation of the Northern Distribution Network. Since the launching of this project, more than 100,000 containers have moved across Latvia to Afghanistan or back toward Europe. It's important for this transport corridor to evolve into a commercial transport route.

Latvia is interested in contributing its bilateral experience to the relations of the European Union both toward dynamising economic contacts, advancing welfare and strengthening EU values in the region. We know by experience that support at the political level is vital for expanding cooperation in the region. To this end, the European Union should ensure, to maximum possible extent, a high-level political and security dialogue with the Central Asian countries.

The EU relations with any Central Asian state should be established on an individual basis depending on their free choice and

readiness to cooperate. At the same time, the dimension of regional cooperation should be strengthened. Challenges at the regional level cannot be addressed without such cooperation and, that's the case, in particular, with the situation in Afghanistan after the completion of the NATO's ISAF mission.

Our experience in deepening EU relations with Central Asia could be valuable given our background of practical cooperation. For instance, cooperation of Latvia and the region's countries in the sector of border security, customs and counter-narcotics could become elements of EU-Central Asian cooperation. The increasing number of Central Asian students in Latvia's universities indicates a potential in the field of education.

Latvian non-governmental organisations are also active. The "Marta" Resource Centre and the Portage Association in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are examples. They are helping women and children to deal with their problems, and are supporting the work of public administration. We will continue supporting these and similar projects as a part of our development cooperation policy.

With this in mind, we wish to highlight the following priorities in the Central Asian region during our Presidency of the EU Council: enhancing border security, fighting terrorism, forging economic links, cooperation of the region's countries with Afghanistan (in transport and transit), education, energy efficiency, and support for strengthening the rule of law and good governance. Together we ought to give backing for the aspiration of Central Asian countries to join the World Trade Organisation, providing our expertise for this purpose.

Dear Members of the Saeima!

Traditionally, a regional priority in our foreign policy is cooperation among the Baltic Sea States, and in a broader context the Baltic Sea Region. This also acquires special significance in the context of the European Union. The long-term stability and economic growth, both of Latvia and the countries of the region, can be achieved only by combining forces.

Latvia's accession to the Eurozone is a step of geopolitical significance and we also hope to welcome Lithuania to the Eurozone next year. However, energy security, diversification of supplies, and transport connections are no less important – this will further consolidate our position within the Euro-Atlantic area. Energy and transport are the fields where, only by joint efforts, can we raise the economic competitiveness and energy security of every individual country. Regrettably, political commitments and promises made up till now have not been put into effect and unreasonable competition hinders our integration into the EU's transport and energy structures.

Latvia, during its Chairmanship of the Baltic Council of Ministers and the Baltic Assembly over the past year, advanced the issues of energy and transport, as well as regional competitiveness. At the Baltic Council of Ministers, we reached an important political commitment on the implementation of the *Rail Baltica* project and going ahead with the Baltic Energy Market Interconnections Plan. This work should also be followed through at the practical level.

The European Union's energy policy targeting our region's problems occupies a major role in dealing with energy security and diversification of supplies in the region. We have successfully included these projects in the Baltic Energy Market Interconnections Plan has been put on the list of the Projects of Common Interest for Europe – and this means they will qualify for EU co-financing. This government has committed itself to begin the liberalisation of the natural gas market, in particular, to make legislative amendments by April 2014 and produce a roadmap for the opening of the gas market in line with EU demands, so that it could be put into practice no later than April 2017.

Latvia also consistently advances energy as its priority within the framework of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. In 2013, the European Commission and member states achieved an agreement on the priorities of the strategic action plan, and they also include energy projects important for Latvia. This year, our strategic focus will be placed on energy matters: Latvia and Denmark continue to share the functions of the main coordinator for implementing the energy priorities of the strategy. Questions of energy issues will be salient issues also during our Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region cooperation would be hard to imagine without Russia. Therefore we welcome the interest of our neighbouring state in cooperating within the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. Latvia's special interest here are

environmental and transportation sectors, including the development of infrastructure adjacent to the borders.

We all see benefits from cooperation in the region. A clean environment, business opportunities, people-to-people contacts are all a basis for stability and growth.

Dear Members of the Saeima!

As always, building our relations with our largest neighbour – Russia – is complicated. On the one hand, positive dynamics can be observed in our bilateral practical cooperation. Russia ranks second among Latvia's trade partners. Successful cooperation in the development of the Northern Distribution Network continues. Border demarcation works are in progress. The Intergovernmental Commission is working. The past year has also added impetus to our political dialogue.

At the same time, Russia continues to launch unjustified criticism and unfounded criticisms of the integration processes in Latvia's society and on issues of history, which we have consistently repudiated. These criticisms seem especially peculiar against the background of negative tendencies in Russia itself. Laws in clear contradiction to the international commitments of the Russian Federation, ignoring the principles of democracy and the rule of law, increasing inclinations toward xenophobia in Russia itself raise serious concern not only in Latvia, but in the European Union as a whole. We have voiced our concern both in a bilateral dialogue with Russia and in a number of international fora.

Latvia's approach to relations with Russia has already been outlined in my report to the Saeima in 2012 – "cooperation based on mutual advantage and respect". We are also ready to facilitate the European Union – Russia dialogue in matters representing mutual interest.

I believe that the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the EU could be a good stimulus to facilitate talks on the conclusion of the new European Union – Russia agreement. We are also ready to continue a dialogue in the context of Central Asia and Afghanistan, and on the issues of the Eastern Partnership, dispelling groundless myths often heard in Moscow. At the same time, our partner has to understand that pressure on the European Union's member states or its Eastern partners is unacceptable.

Dear Members of the Saeima!

Today's debate is an opportunity to address not only members of Parliament. I would like to take advantage of the occasion to turn to the part of our society with whom the work of the Foreign Service is directly connected – our compatriots living abroad.

We are doing, and will do, all it takes to help Latvian nationals abroad to retain their links with Latvia and their Latvian identity, and to be involved in the political and social life of our country.

Talking to our compatriots abroad, it becomes clear how much our practical support matters. By this I mean weekend schools, our diplomatic missions as venues for the diaspora members to gather, and the efficient provision of consular services to Latvia's citizens and non-citizens abroad. We are getting ready for an increase in the number of these tasks.

Amendments to the Citizenship Law, which came into force in October 2013, expand the community of citizens of Latvia by offering a number of people the opportunity of acquiring Latvian citizenship while retaining the citizenship of another country.

During the first three months, more than a thousand applications have been received. Interest in Latvian citizenship is expected to grow even higher this year. Hence, we will mobilise more human resources for that purpose. The number of employees will be increased in several Latvian diplomatic missions to ensure the possibility of Latvians abroad to have their applications for dual citizenship processed efficiently.

Support of this kind for Latvian nationals abroad is our immediate duty, while involvement and cooperation are no less important. Our compatriots abroad have a huge potential in the economy, culture, science and education.

I am aware that many wish to contribute their skills, knowledge and energy for the good of Latvia. In this respect, I would like to highlight the first World Latvian Economic and Innovation Forum held in Latvia last year. The event gave a strong stimulus to

seeking new forms of cooperation that will also benefit Latvia. We will continue working with Latvian organisations worldwide to build synergies among those who belong to Latvia, irrespective of where they live, turning that fact into a growth factor for Latvia.

Dear Members of the Saeima!

A decade has passed since Latvia became a member state of NATO and the EU. Our region is more secure than ever. Our duty is to ensure that the present level of security lasts for future generations of Latvian people.

It is our duty to make use of our voice and membership in those organisations, attending to the security and welfare of our people – and to stand up for an increase in the living standards of people in Latvia and the economic development of the country. I am confident that we can make that happen! I expect a constructive exchange of opinion on how to achieve that. Thank you for your attention.

<https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/article/speech-minister-foreign-affairs-republic-latvia-mr-edgars-rinkevics-foreign-policy-debate-saeima-24-january-2014>