

# Speech by Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs at the annual Foreign Policy Debate in the Latvian Parliament (Saeima), 23 January 2020

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News



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Madame Chair, Members of the Presidium of Parliament, Mr Prime Minister, Members of Parliament, Ministers, Excellencies,

“And the whole wide world / Is one big, heavy teardrop.” These lines by the Latvian poet, Jānis Poruks, aptly illustrate the current international situation.

Increasing tensions in the Middle East and elsewhere across the globe will also affect both the regional and global security climate and the foreign policy agenda of our country. From Latvia's perspective, a solution to the escalating contradictions, including the questions related to Iran, can be achieved only through political dialogue and diplomacy.

Developments in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Venezuela will be no less important. Although some degree of progress has been achieved in the Normandy format with the implementation of the Minsk agreements, the situation in Ukraine has not changed in any cardinal manner. Russia's aggressive policy in Ukraine continues.

We also cannot ignore the effects of climate change and the human factor in those changes. The melting ice in the Arctic, extreme pollution in seas and oceans, devastating fires which have been recurring year-after-year in Australia, and the rainforests of Africa and the Amazon – these have all brought about irreversible losses in their wake and impact every living thing on our planet.

To reduce the destructive consequences of man-made pollution on our environment, loud slogans or resolutions voiced and

adopted by politicians and diplomats are not enough. The only solution is solidarity and a common understanding of the leaders and communities of all countries on the need to safeguard our planet from extinction. With this in mind, the European Commission's proposals for the European Green Deal to achieve a real climate neutrality are worth supporting.

The increasing involvement of China in global processes creates both opportunities and challenges. China is investing intensively in Europe's critical infrastructure, gaining control over companies and increasing its presence in Europe's neighbourhood, the Arctic and Africa. China is simultaneously a partner and rival to Europe.

"World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it." These words from the Declaration by Robert Schuman, "The Father of Europe", should be at the core of the work of any politician and diplomat as we mark the Schuman Declaration's seventieth anniversary in 2020.

Regardless of how dramatic the past year might seem, it is exactly those aspirations and efforts made to preserve the international order, security and peace that will be of special need in the year ahead for regional and global players, including the European Union, the United States of America, China, India, and Russia.

Dear colleagues,

A year ago on this same date, the Saeima approved the government of Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš. One of the key words in the Cabinet declaration setting out the new government's intended activities is "security". And the word was not chosen at random. Security is especially relevant when thinking about Latvia's socio-economic and financial stability, not to mention military security, and the internal and external aspects of security.

The goal of Latvia's foreign policy remains unchanged: to strengthen Latvia's security and welfare by promoting stability, security and predictability of regions important to Europe and in its geographical proximity.

Latvia's foreign policy doctrine is based on the following elements:

First, to actively shape the European Union as a geopolitical player which can influence both global and regional processes. The European Union should become a powerhouse of values, climate action and security. We must be able to project stability in our neighbourhood. The European Union must continue to strengthen its security capacity.

Second, the United States of America remains our strategic Ally in political, economic and social matters alike. Security in Europe, the Baltic region and Latvia is not possible without the U.S. presence. We will make every effort to strengthen the transatlantic link with the U.S. and Canada. We will support initiatives that support cooperation with our North American Allies and Europe; we see great potential in, for instance, the Three Seas Initiative.

Third, Latvia strongly advocates compliance with international law and abiding by the principles of the rule of law in international relations.

Fourth, we stand up for all-embracing political and economic cooperation in the Nordic and Baltic region.

Fifth, we promote expanding the space of stability and security into Europe's eastern and southern neighbourhood. We support the enlargement of both the European Union and NATO, provided that all criteria have been met considering that this would be of benefit both to us and to the candidate countries.

Finally, we are prepared for cooperation with countries with which we have major differences of opinion because we believe that an open and honest dialogue based on mutual respect is the basis for building relations. This does not mean compromising on matters of principle.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Latvia's active membership in international organisations, especially the United Nations, the European Union, NATO, and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is one of the instruments for strengthening the sovereignty, rule of law, security and augmenting the economic growth of our country.

Our strategic partner, the United States of America, is providing invaluable and indispensable support for our defence. So do our Allies from other member states of NATO and the European Union, especially Canada, as well as Spain, Poland, Italy, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Albania, and Montenegro.

Since Latvia restored its independence, the practical engagement of the U.S. in the strengthening of security in our region has never been so deep and strongly felt as at present. Let me take this opportunity to thank our friends and Allies for the strengthening of Latvia's security!

Esteemed Members of Parliament,

There is no doubt that after Brexit, both the European Union and the United Kingdom will have to undergo institutional and political transformation; that said, the factor must not affect the further unity of the European Union on pivotal issues.

Latvia will be supporting animated efforts by the European Union to reach an agreement on *future relationship* with the United Kingdom, since it is important for Latvia to forge close relations with the United Kingdom in view of our security and economic interests and the sizeable community of Latvian nationals living and working there.

Whatever someone would like to think, after Brexit, the EU will not become a historical artefact. It will not be displayed alongside other exhibits in the House of European History in Brussels centre, quoting a now legendary British politician who said, "I was the future once". Therefore, we must invest much effort in shaping Europe's future.

Here I pin high hopes on the organisation of a conference on the future of Europe. In our discussions, let us not forget Schuman's words, "Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements...."!

Ladies and gentlemen,

Latvia has been member of the European Union for more than fifteen years. The time has come when we are experienced and able enough not only to pursue the European Union's policies but also to influence them in line with Latvia's interests. Latvia is a leader in several areas of countering disinformation and of cybersecurity.

With the new European Commission at the helm, new political priorities have been defined: a European Green Deal, an economy that works for people, a Europe fit for a digital age, and a stronger Europe in the world.

Latvia supports the enlargement of the European Union, which corresponds to Latvia's long-term interests and guarantees the strengthening of democracy and the rule of law, security and stability in our neighbourhood. Of course, the European Union has its borders. It is not without its limits. The European Union's enlargement policy must be open to the countries that meet the enlargement criteria, especially North Macedonia and Albania.

Latvia will continue supporting our friends from the Eastern Partnership countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Latvia will continue advocating for the resolution of frozen conflicts and honouring the principle of territorial integrity of states. Latvia will also firmly and consistently pursue the policy of non-recognition of the illegal annexation of Crimea.

The governments of the European Union Member States and of the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries must realise that the European Union is about fundamental values – freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. It is also about human rights standards, a comprehension of what is true democracy and a free civic society. In other words, Europeans must act as Europeans.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As soon as possible, I would like to see the day when Latvia pays more into the European Union's common budget than receives from it. The main task at this point is to achieve favourable conditions for us under the European Union's next Multiannual Financial Framework.

The budget will be influenced by the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union and by the new priorities. At the same time, it is already clear today that during the next budgetary period, Latvia will receive more than it contributes.

Alongside Latvia's economic growth and changes to the structure of the European Union's budget, the way Latvian institutions, local governments, businesses and the general public perceive the utilisation of European Union funds should also change. Latvia must be able to build its capacity of attracting funds from the European Union's new programmes.

I urge all sectors to get involved and actively debate the directions of the further development of Latvia in connection with the priorities formulated by the new European Commission. In the future, we must be more creative and active in order to mobilise and make use of the European Union's funding.

Looking ahead already to the next seven years, we must be able to prepare projects with a high value added and which are competitive when compared to other projects in terms of attracting funds.

There are many creative people and excellent ideas that are unquestionably at a high level by both European and global standards. Already in Latvia at the present time, goods and services in information technologies stand out as one of the fastest-growing segments in our overall exports.

Latvia has many excellent start-ups. We have got what it takes to become a leader in the introduction of 5G technologies. And this must be turned to our advantage, since 5G is about global competition on the scale of the European Union as well as a global scale.

Members of Parliament,

A year ago, I said from this same podium on this same stage that the fight against financial crime and the compliance with international sanctions is a generally accepted norm in the Western financial world. If a country fails to comply, market mechanisms or other countries distance themselves from that country. The fight against financial crime is vital not only because the law prescribes it, but first and foremost because combatting financial crime is the right thing to be doing.

Last year, Latvia covered much ground concerning the fight against money laundering and terrorist financing. The past year was the year of concrete action. Latvia acted expeditiously and professionally in revising and adapting legislation and putting the sanctions coordination policy in order.

The evaluation report by Moneyval published yesterday gave a positive rating to our work. And with this work still underway, we hope that what we have achieved so far will also be reflected and duly evaluated in the future.

An attitude of intolerance towards money laundering is vital. Sufficient effort must be made to detect and curb such money flows as much as possible. At the same time, we want to avoid getting ourselves into situations where there is an overreaction so that

honest business suffers.

In this respect, Latvia must continue working to create all possible preconditions so that the state together with the private sector find specific solutions and risk management becomes more proportionate.

Yet another valuable lesson can be drawn from our current experience and the upheavals in the financial sector in 2018. If we want to be perceived as adults instead of teenagers who clean their room only after their parents have yelled at them the third time, we should act realizing that we cannot expect others to tidy up after us.

Members of the Saeima,

Latvia's experience demonstrates that growth and gains in prosperity go hand in hand with being open to the world, the presence of reliable allies and the ability to take responsible decisions with regard to cultivating the attractiveness of Latvia as a trade partner and as a location for investment.

We cannot afford drifting in windless waters, to get stuck in the doldrums, or behind a screen of grey haze. We must make every effort for Latvia to be a strong and reliable partner in both business and trade as well as in the arena of international relations. The greatest responsibility lies jointly with the Government, the Saeima and with each individual.

This year, together with our European Union partners we will continue working on the signing of new free trade agreements, including with Australia and New Zealand, we are looking to the completion of an agreement with MERCOSUR, or the South American trade bloc. We are interested in the resumption of free trade negotiations between the European Union and India.

Members of the Latvian diaspora located in various parts of the world play a major role in promoting Latvia's economic relations by helping Latvian businesses to identify opportunities and partners thereby applying their professional knowledge and contacts. This is a resource that we must be sure we look to in the future as well!

The diaspora policy has evolved into an independent policy area. Our cooperation in sustaining Latvian language and culture and strengthening the connection with Latvia for children and young people is important as ever. It will continue. However, our capacity to build dynamic cooperation in business, trade, science, and sports are becoming increasingly important, and we must be able to attract expertise in the health, finance, economic and other sectors that Latvia needs.

Esteemed members of Parliament,

Latvia maintains a two-track policy in its relations with Russia – dialogue and deterrence.

We cannot ignore the concentration of Russian troops in Kaliningrad and Russia's Western Military District. This is an explicit demonstration of Russia's military force.

This is the time when historical events and commemoration days are of special importance in contemporary policy and diplomacy.

We pay homage to the millions of victims who perished during World War II. We applaud the contribution of Allied soldiers in bringing about the total defeat of Nazi Germany under Hitler.

This year marks 75 years since the end of World War II in Europe and the Far East. We understand that there would have been no free Latvia under the Third Reich.

At the same time, we condemn recent attempts by Russian officials to use propaganda as they endeavour to exonerate Stalin's aggressive pre-war diplomacy. The signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which resulted in dividing Europe into spheres of influence, the invasion of Poland, the occupation of the Baltic States, and the Winter War against Finland, are the direct

outcomes of that kind of foreign policy.

The 16 January resolution of the Saeima on the 80th anniversary of the occupation of the Republic of Latvia clearly defines Latvia's position that distortions of the history of the Second World War are unacceptable and unseemly.

This aspect requires a consistent approach by the Latvian Foreign Service in explaining the historical topics and shaping an objective historical memory. Therefore, a close and concerted action and sending of a common message by the Baltic States, Poland and other Allies on the strengthening of Europe's historical memory is both of strategic and of symbolic importance.

While Russia will continue rewriting history, continue celebrating the occupation of sovereign states and continue exonerating the actions of totalitarian regimes, while also continuing its aggression against Ukraine and Georgia, any kind of security space stretching "from Lisbon to Vladivostok" is not conceivable.

Members of Parliament,

This year we mark the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the United Nations. Although Latvia could not be among the states who joined the organisation in 1945, the United Nations (UN) was the first international organisation that Latvia acceded to immediately after regaining its independence.

In the UN and other international organisations, Latvia has consistently stood up for the compliance with international law and the territorial integrity of states. Although the UN and its bodies have been duly criticised for failure to ensure peace and human rights across the globe, the organisation remains and safeguard of international law. Therefore, Latvia recognised the compulsory jurisdiction of the UN's International Court of Justice.

In view of the current security challenges, multilateral cooperation or multilateralism, based on rules and international law, form the grounds of the international order.

In the interests of its national security and to increase its influence and visibility, Latvia has presented its candidacy for a seat as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the term of 2026–2027.

For small countries, membership of the UN Security Council brings the opportunity for taking part in resolving the most acute security issues and being more visible globally. At the same time, this membership symbolises the state's maturity and ability to assume responsibility for processes on a global scale.

The campaign for the seat at the UN will become an asset by raising Latvia's profile and promoting our economic sectors globally.

For instance, this candidacy can practically benefit Latvian businesses in finding contacts and promoting their products and services. To prepare for the campaign and work on the UN Security Council, the Government shall formulate the core messages and priorities of the candidacy campaign.

In this context, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is drafting Latvia's development cooperation policy guidelines for the coming period. Development cooperation instruments ensure Latvia's engagement and visibility beyond traditional focus regions.

Financing allocated for development cooperation should be increased. It is a practical tool in foreign policy, whereby Latvia supports positive change and development.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On the eve of the 99th anniversary of the international de iure recognition of the Republic of Latvia, speaking both on behalf of

the Latvian Foreign Service and personally, I would like to thank all our partners in the Saeima, our colleagues in the Government, central and local authorities, and civil society organisations for their cooperation.

Special thanks go to diplomats, consular officers and the Foreign Service staff for their contribution as they represent and protect Latvia worldwide.

We have an interesting year rich in challenges ahead of us. Let us work together for the benefit of our country and nation.

Thank you for your attention!

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