



LATVIJAS VALSTS PREZIDENTS

Speech of President of Latvia Raimonds Vējonis at the Riga Conference

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my privilege and pleasure to welcome you all to Latvia and to this 11th Riga Conference. Your presence here and your willingness to invest your time, knowledge and experience in exploring the security challenges we face is of the utmost importance. This is especially so now, when we are facing a new set of circumstances.

During the past decade, the world has become a much more dangerous place. We are faced with many different and simultaneous challenges. We no longer live in the safe, comfortable, ordered world, which we thought that we had attained with the fall of communism. In Europe, we are faced with a migration crisis, which is difficult to deal with. Terrorism has grown to levels not seen in decades. Just beyond Europe's borders, we are witnesses to bloodshed in a number of countries with Syria being the most appalling example. Further afield the potential for conflict in the South China Sea and North Korea's nuclear programme are only two examples of potentially catastrophic dangers.

On top of this, we are seeing a weakening of democratic institutions and a rise in populism mirrored by a decline in trust of politicians and the political establishment. To our east, Russia is steadily posing an increasing challenge. It is a country, which sees the West and our values as its adversary. The conflict in Ukraine continues.

All of this forces us to remember why peace in Europe has largely been maintained for over 70 years. Firstly, there are the rules and conventions of international relations, including the respect for international law, sovereignty and the territorial integrity of other states. But more directly, the EU and NATO have been the foundations of peace and stability in Europe.

In the case of the EU, we have grown complacent. The generations, which had first-hand experience of what world war means are no longer with us. We have started to think of war as something that happens elsewhere and with which we engage only via our television screens or by sending a small warrior class to participate. We have forgotten that one of the reasons Europeans came together in tighter cooperation was to avoid a repeat of the horrific conflicts of the 20th Century.

As for NATO, the principle of peace through security has been a theme shared by the Allies throughout NATO's 67 years. This guiding principle has kept the strongest Alliance in the world's history united for a common purpose. During the first two decades after the fall of communism, NATO struggled to find a role. But the Alliance has been suddenly revitalised by the actions of Russia. Russia, has undertaken a huge military build-up over recent years and it has recently turned to nuclear sabre-rattling. Combat operations are exercised next to NATO's borders. We have already seen in Georgia and Ukraine how such exercises can turn into aggression, occupation and annexation. Russia may have no immediate intention to use military force against NATO member states, but the regional capability is undeniable.

This underlines the importance of maintaining a well-functioning EU and a strong NATO dedicated to the preservation of peace through security. While we must seek to bring peace and stability to other partners and friends, being part of the EU and NATO must be seen to matter. Europe must pull its weight and maintain its technological capability to keep up with modern military challenges.

As President of Latvia and former Minister of Defence, I have witnessed the support that was given to the Baltic States by our Allies over the past few years. Reassurance and the Enhanced Forward Presence are of vital importance. In this dangerous world where peace is under threat once again, we must stick with the core values which have kept us safe over many decades. These are the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. These are the cornerstones of EU and NATO policy. They are the principles upon which free societies are built and they form the basis of preserving peace now and in the future.

Many challenges can only be overcome through cooperation: the upholding of the rules and conventions of international relations, the fight against terrorism, the protection of our borders and economic growth. Let us work to maintain the foundations of our peaceful and prosperous societies. I wish you a very successful and interesting conference. You will always be welcome in Latvia!

I will now give the floor to the Minister of Defence Mr. Raimonds Bergmanis.