

Address given by Guntis Ulmanis on Latvia's integration in Europe (Rome, 29 April 1998)

Caption: On 29 April 1998, at the Institute for Foreign Affairs in Rome, Guntis Ulmanis, President of the Republic of Latvia, delivers an address in which he emphasises the importance of his country's accession to the European Union.

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**Address by Mr. Guntis Ulmanis, President of the Republic of Latvia, at the Foreign Policy Institute of Italy
Integration of Latvia into Europe (Rome, 29th April 1998)**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am happy to have the opportunity to address such a distinguished audience at the Foreign Policy Institute in Rome.

This opportunity is particularly valuable because Baltic and the Mediterranean are often described as two interior European seas and it would be useful to discuss the integration processes in our two regions. I am sure that the discussion will reveal many similarities and lead us to the conclusion that in the European context they should be seen as complementary regions. If there is a competition between them, it is certainly only a positive and stimulating competition which would serve the interests of all member states.

This belief accompanies me during this visit and grows stronger as days go by.

Today we often talk about united Europe and the unique opportunity we all have to build a united, undivided continent.

United Europe is the greatest asset of this century. It has been the leitmotif of the political activities and will remain such also at the beginning of the next century. This asset means prosperity, secure society and state, peaceful and friendly relations between neighbours. To sustain it, we are required to learn and acquire new knowledge. It has required subtle perception and understanding.

Central and Eastern European countries are acquiring the experience that the Western countries have accumulated over the decades since the Second World War. We were denied that period of time. I feel that the Western countries, in their turn, would try to understand the processes going on in our countries and societies. United Europe thus is a two direction exchange. It is largely linked with the already started enlargement of the European Union and NATO. The policy of opening and perfecting of European organisations has started. The ability of each applicant country to develop domestic and foreign policy in conformity with the interests of the new Europe is of equal importance.

I would like to discuss now how I understand and see our integration into Europe.

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Let me start by briefly reminding you of the history of Latvia. I believe it partly explains why the European integration is our priority and why we are often even impatient to achieve it.

The independent state of Latvia after the First World War existed for twenty years. At the end of nineteen thirties, two totalitarian powers of the continent decided the fate of Latvia as well as many other states. It was an imperial agreement as a result of which Latvia was incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940 by force. Only a year later the troops of the Nazi Germany entered Latvia. The war ended, but Latvia and her neighbours remained in the zone of Soviet occupation. We have witnessed two foreign occupations in this century.

This century has harshly marked our historical memory. The establishment of independence in 1918 and its loss in 1940, deportations and foreign occupation. Against their will, Latvians have often fought under foreign flags in foreign troops and on both sides of the front-line; Latvians have, regretfully, collaborated with criminal regimes and also actively resisted them.

We are impatient to be integrated into Europe. Our historical memory is one of the reasons. Latvia as a small country wants a strong and integrated Europe which would hold in regard the interests of all nations. Between the wars we were an independent part of Europe. Europe withdrew and we were left in the Soviet zone. We were expelled from Europe and now we are coming back to where we belong

historically.

After the war ideas were initiated in Western Europe that later resulted in treaties on close and multilateral co-operation. The other part of Europe - including Latvia - was excluded from this democratic development.

We must acquire this experience in a very short time. We are pressed for time to learn what the Western Europe slowly learnt over the whole after-war period.

We restored our independence seven years ago. It has been our challenge over these years to consolidate our state in all its aspects. At the same time it is also our duty to take an increasingly active part in the international dialogue - in the economic as well as the political one. At first glance these seem contradictory tasks. This is, however, a typical trait of this century and we are committed to extension of our international dialogue both in politics and economy. We would welcome suggestions and friendly criticism from our European neighbours even if we initially find the criticism difficult to understand.

People in Latvia still have much to learn, we are well aware of it and are ready to learn persistently.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Integration of Latvia into Europe first of all means consolidation of an inclusive society in Latvia. There is a clear political will in Latvia to consolidate inclusive society in which any loyal individual feels he or she belongs to. We have had difficult and long debates on this subject in Latvia and we have reached a broad understanding and gained support for our policy.

Paralelly we have had a difficult and long dialogue with European countries on how to develop the society in Latvia. It has been a valuable dialogue and the permanent contacts with OSCE and the Council of Europe have been of particular importance. I think we have made a good use of the opportunities provided by OSCE. Our comments and evaluation of the activities of OSCE have also influenced the understanding of this organisation about its work in Latvia.

These international organisations have recognised several times that there are no violations of human rights in Latvia. However, this dialogue is of great importance not only to receive positive evaluation. This dialogue will continue since it enables European states to understand our society better.

In the Soviet times a distorted demographic situation was developed in our state, since the Soviet ideology supported a mass-scale influx of people into Latvia from other places. This ideology was aimed at erasing our national identity and culture. Latvians almost became a minority in their own land. Still, we do not blame any nationality since it was the Soviet ideology which took decisions for individuals and nations.

Now the Latvian language is again being used in all spheres of life. Anyone who cannot speak it yet, is given an opportunity to learn it. With international support we have developed a Latvian Language Training Programme and it works excellently. It starts serving as a model also for other countries.

This spring we are changing the legal framework of Latvia which grants to all non-citizens the rights to apply for citizenship. I feel, however, that some people view our situation in a biased way and exaggerate the legal aspect of this issue.

It is important for us to consolidate a cohesive society on the basis of shared ideas and principles. The shared values which form the basis of any cohesive society, are the most important part of integration process.

The society of Latvia, having left the Soviet system of values behind, consolidates democratic and European values. I would like to mention the most important ones. The understanding of Latvia as a sovereign country in a united Europe. The democratic division of power and responsibility and freedom of each individual. The idea of united Europe the importance of which in everyday life is on the increase, yet we have to promote it

still more actively. The importance of the Latvian language and culture and the rights and opportunities of minorities.

In Latvia the state subsidises education in Latvian and Russian. Parallely education can be obtained in seven other minority languages. Several dozens of cultural societies are in operation in Latvia. Conflicts due to ethnic discords are out of the question in Latvia. There have never been any.

I have been following for years how difficult this process is in many European countries and what grave turns ethnic conflicts may take. We should all draw the lessons from this reality.

Ladies and gentlemen, Latvia's integration into Europe means creation of a strong economic structure in Latvia. Our policy in this respect depends on our dialogue with the European Union and the World Trade Organisation. Our economy as well as administration system have been put in place and we are looking forward to a positive evaluation from the European Commission this coming autumn.

Latvia is ready to join the World Trade Organisation. Different positions of the USA and the European Commission on access to audio-visual services is the only thing that blocks our accession to the World Trade Organisation.

Let me mention a few figures that describe our achievements over the last seven years since restoration of our independence. I shall start with what we have already managed to forget. We have fully forgotten the ineffective Soviet economic structure and the first crisis in the development process. We have carried out an extensive reform.

The economic system has been stabilised. Inflation in Latvia is seven per cent and the GDP growth has reached seven per cent. Western banks have established their presence here.

Western investments flow into small and medium--size companies. This is an evidence of our integration into the European Union.

We are learning much from Italy which is famous for the strength of its small and medium-size companies. I admire Italy for the commitment of its government to work out the concept of fast growth of the entire region. Latvia also needs such knowledge.

I shall meet Italian businessmen during this trip. I will inform them of sectors where they could get successfully involved in Latvia, for example, textile, pharmaceutical and information sectors.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Latvia's integration into Europe means the development of modern military force which would be ready to meet the security challenges of this age. Latvia has discarded the Soviet military legacy and bases her military force on the experience of Western countries. Latvia inherited an inefficient Soviet military infrastructure and in these years it has undergone thorough transformation. In a close dialogue with NATO and other countries we acquire the understanding of security in conformity with the trends of the turn of the centuries.

I am happy that Latvia has concluded an agreement on co-operation in the military field with Italy. This agreement provides a framework for a concrete exchange of experience.

The Baltic region, which for more than 40 years was an obvious watershed between the Eastern and Western blocks, is now becoming a region which reveals the trends of European co-operation better than other regions. The Baltic Sea Region today is a part of the integrated Euroatlantic area in the aspects of security, stability and economic co-operation.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Latvia's integration into Europe means a good co-operation in the Baltic region. Latvia has diverse and close links with the other two Baltic States and with all countries of the Baltic Sea region.

I think that one of the key elements, that affects the new situation and quality in the region, is not only the return of the three Baltic States to the world political map, which is already a historical fact, but also the peaceful, stable and convincing integration of these three states into Euroatlantic organisations.

I think it would not be an exaggeration to say that the most radical changes which took place after the end of the Cold War, have affected the geopolitical configuration of the Baltic region.

The unity of the Baltic States is also a deeply emotional issue for us since it concerns the political identity of our states. The Baltic co-operation will always be a permanent dimension in this identity. Although all three states are very individual, we have a similar historical experience and common political goals.

In 1920s and 30s our states discussed the model of the Baltic unity. The diplomatic and political efforts were, however, insufficient then. Today our co-operation is much closer.

In the few years the three Baltic States have done the work that required decades for other European countries. This refers to the dialogue in the economic, political and military field. The three Baltic States continue the practical co-operation which is gradually turning the region into an integrated economic, information and security area. I am confident that this is also dictated by the general logic of the European integration.

Our countries took an active part in the work of the Council of the Baltic Sea States when it was established several years ago. The creation of such form and framework of co-operation was a correct and timely response to the developments in Europe in early 90s. The Baltic States which had restored their independence, joined it without hesitation. This has contributed to the stability and security in the entire region.

The Baltic Sea region consists of very different countries. Therefore it is exciting to follow the development of the identity of the co-operation in this region. Already now this is a region with the most rapidly developing economy, a region where new trade links are being established and cross-boarder contacts among people expand.

It consists of small and large European states, of the NATO members and neutral states. The role of Russia is very important there and the presence of the EU is strongly felt. The Baltic Sea region is a microcosm of Europe. It is an example of - and I should like to underline it - positive and peaceful co-operation. However, I would like to stress the inclusiveness of co-operation in the Baltics. This is a trait of the new Europe.

I do not agree to the sceptics who oppose the Southern and the Northern regions of Europe to each other. I think that the Mediterranean countries have their own experience and it is a unique experience. Good co-operation in the Mediterranean - as well as in the Baltic region - serves the interests of entire Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I described several aspects of our integration into Europe. Our political will and readiness to acquire the experience of our partners, is the most important among them.

It is equally important for the united Europe that Western countries display a wish to develop a true understanding of the Central and Eastern European countries. Each of us has our own vision of the united Europe of the future. The strength of its unity will depend on our ability to know our neighbours and understand the logic of their development. This is one of the features of this decade. We have regained many neighbours. Thus, already for seven years in Latvia we have been calling Portugal our neighbour.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to address you and I welcome your questions and comments.

Thank you!