

Address given by Valdis Birkavs on Latvia's accession to the EU (22 May 1997)

Caption: On 22 May 1997, at the Pro Baltica Forum, Valdis Birkavs, Latvian Foreign Minister, delivers an address in which he emphasises the importance of European integration for his country.

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First of all, let me touch upon the issue - why Europe and the European Union. Affiliation to one or another unity can be determined through common values. The set of values Latvia has taken as the basis at the moment of restoration of its state independence is equivalent to the values recognised in Western Europe. Testimony to the fact that Latvia is on the right path in its state-building process can be found in the Copenhagen criteria - democracy, judicial state, functioning market economy - that is the scale of values at repeated implementation of which we are working. Culture, social self-confidence, principles of the state foundation in Western European interpretation are not unfamiliar for Latvia. Presently we are continuing the implementation of the aims set forwards by the government of Latvia during the first period of independence. Through our affiliation to the European Union we can observe restoration and strengthening of the already mentioned values.

Latvia has the opportunity to evaluate the result of the integration performed by the EU during forty years. The adopted conclusions arise confidence the social relations strengthened in the result of integration in a certain period of time could create equal results in Latvia as well. The first step for implementation of the integration values in Latvia is connected with the harmonisation of legislation which ensures a deepened attraction to the internal market space.

Common definition of the basic values, evaluation of the performed integration and prospects of the further development are the common denominators which determine the direction of Latvia towards the EU. Briefly I would like to touch upon the issues what the integration into the EU factually means to Latvia. Firstly, that is equal participation in a political and economic unity. In order to check the veracity of this statement, we can look for an answer in the integration results of the small European states. Secondly, political co-operation within the EU is at the initial stage of its development and using this period Latvia gains the opportunity to participate in a new stage of integration. It could be stated that within the political dialogue currently we are at the level of acquaintance or foundation of trust. We do not want to be strangers in this collaboration form, but equal partners. Thirdly, in the result of integration the state economy - industry, services - should develop at a faster pace. In order to implement that, it is necessary to create an equal legal basis - respectively, harmonised legislation, correspondent to the European business standards. Know-how, investments and technology ensuring an industry of a good quality and equal competition opportunities both in the West and the East are necessary for economic development.

What are the integration consequences to be expected? Considering this aspect I would like to point out two matters. As it was already mentioned, membership in the EU will ensure the economic development of the state. But paralelly we have to be ready to involve in the EU competition system. Comprehending the significance of this issue Latvia must be ready to exist in the circumstances of the EU competition. Another consequence which has to be mentioned and reckoned with regarding the integration is connected with national identity. In this issue as well Latvia must be ready to assess the potential advantages and losses.

Presently it is difficult to give an exceedingly high estimation to the decisions which will mark this year. Assessing the situation and prospects, I would like to touch briefly upon the issues which are essential from the point of view of the foreign policy of Latvia particularly regarding the integration aspect.

The Inter-Governmental Conference will close in June and its results will influence the EU enlargement process. It is necessary to ensure that the reforms achieved within the Inter-Governmental Conference in prospect would give the opportunity to access the EU for all associated states, not only for a limited range.

Latvia fully comprehends the complex character of the enlargement process and the time factor necessary for its realisation. We see the necessity to outline the beginning of the EU enlargement at a united point. The further definition of negotiations can include different mechanisms, but it is important to preserve unremitting co-operation which is necessary to maintain the pace of reforms and rearrangements precisely defining the result - membership in the EU.

Presently a certain tactic of waiting regarding the foundation of relations between the EU and the associated

states can be observed, in the basis of which lays the preparation of the opinion and its official presentation in July of this year. It should be stressed that the opinion is not only an important document in the internal circulation between the EU member states and institutions, but it is of a great significance for Latvia as well. We consider this a new accounting point which will allow to mobilise the capacities of domestic policy and administration in order to continue the further integration. We will be able to assess the factual results of the presently assumed pace of reforms approximately in a year's time. That is the time which we consider as an opportunity to continue the initiated reforms and prove our ability to further improve the state development model corresponding to the EU demands.

In continuation I would like to mention several aspects connected with the relations of the EU and Russia. Creating new relations with Russia in new Europe, Latvia can become a factor of co-operation and foundation of good neighbour relations. In the aspect of foundation of relations between Russia and the EU the factor of regional collaboration and development should be taken into account. The decisions adopted on the EU enlargement will be a certain challenge for the regional co-operation. The determined prospect of the EU member state status will introduce firm preconditions for political and economic co-operation between the existing EU member states, associated states and Russia.