

Address by H.E. Valdis Zatlers, President of Latvia, at the General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly

24.09.2009

Mr. President,

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen!

I wish to begin by congratulating you, Mr. Treki, on assuming the post of President of the current session of the General Assembly. I pledge you Latvia's full support.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of a unique peaceful demonstration - the *Baltic Way*. On August 23 1989 more than a million people joined their hands in a 600 kilometre long human chain across the three Baltic countries. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This event was dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact between the Stalinist Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. This pact was another cornerstone leading to the World War II and occupation of the three Baltic States.

The Baltic Way served as a powerful symbol of the drive for democracy and freedom of our three States. The importance of the Baltic Way was so substantial that UNESCO added it to the Memory of the World Register. The message of the Baltic Way is very clear: if people and countries truly commit to a common goal, and if they join their efforts, even the most difficult challenge can be met.

If we look at the world of today, we can see that never before has international cooperation been so important. Never before have we faced such a multitude of simultaneous critical challenges of global significance. Many phrases have been coined to describe the most severe problems. "3E crisis" (energy, economy, environment). "3F crisis" (finance, food, fuel). No matter whichever name we use, we must remember that these global issues require urgent and concerted action at the global level.

Mr. President,

Since we met here last year the financial crisis has turned into a *global economic crisis*. It has struck the world with its full strength. Consequences are felt by every state and by every economy. They have an effect on the international policy. It makes us to reconsider internal policies. Along with other countries Latvia has undertaken necessary adjustments to the downturn. We have learned our lessons. I am confident that our economy, as well as confident that the whole global economic system will come out of the crisis stronger than before.

We should use the crisis as a new momentum for looking beyond our individual gains. Therefore we should use the crisis to look at how we can promote an open international trade system. We hope for prompt conclusion of the long overdue Doha Development Agenda round talks.

Development is hard in the times of crisis. Developing countries are particularly severely affected by its negative effects. We are well aware of the risk of jeopardising what has been done in achieving the *Millennium Development Goals*. We must not give up. Latvia honours its commitments towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

Mr. President,

Climate change is a global challenge that needs to be tackled at the global level.

The UN Summit on Climate Change demonstrated that it is important to reach comprehensive and fair agreement on future global climate policy in Copenhagen conference. This agreement should follow the principle of common but differentiated responsibility. Every country should contribute according to its capabilities but the political will of every nation is what matters most.

Mr. President,

Stability and security situation in a number of regions in the world is of particular concern to the global community. One of them is definitely Afghanistan. Holding the presidential elections in the fragile security situation was a significant achievement by the Afghan people.

It is crucial to pursue balanced international involvement in Afghanistan. This involvement should encompass both—civilian surge and military efforts. We must continue assistance to *Afghanistan and other countries in the region* in order to prevent the threat of festering terrorism. It is important to understand that, the value of local knowledge of situation and regional involvement cannot be overestimated.

We stay committed to rebuilding process of Afghanistan, paying special attention to upgrading infrastructure and strengthening the Afghan economy. Latvia has contributed both in military and civil assistance to the development of Afghanistan.

Mr. President,

Another issue that remains on the topical international agenda is peace and stability in the *Middle East*. The two-state idea will come to reality only when the Israeli Government sincerely works to make it a reality. It will become a sustainable reality only when the Palestinian leaders settle their own differences in the interests of their people.

This year Latvia provided a rehabilitation program for eighteen Palestinian boys and girls. They came to Latvia for the rehabilitation program for traumatized children from the Gaza strip. These children came to overcome the psychological impact of the conflict they had experienced earlier this year.

Mr. President,

Latvia reiterates its firm support to the security and stability of Georgia. It must be based on full respect for the principles of independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity recognised by international law. The security situation in and around *Georgia* is still very fragile. We regret that the UN Security Council failed to agree on continuation of the United Nations Observer Mission

in Georgia (UNOMIG). Unfortunately despite all the efforts by the international community the OSCE was forced to close its mission in Georgia.

This year we have lost two important international instruments for promoting stability and peaceful conflict resolution in Georgia. Latvia strongly believes that the international community should continue to look for a solution. We should work to grant a full and effective UN and OSCE presence in Georgia, including Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Meanwhile it is ever more important to strengthen the only remaining international mission– the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia. It has convincingly proved its pivotal role in stabilization of the situation on the ground.

I would also like to stress the importance of the UNGA resolution on status of internally displaced persons and refugees from the Georgian regions of Abkhazia South Ossetia. It is an important show of commitment to fundamental humanitarian principles.

Mr. President,

Choosing leadership is the right and the responsibility of the people. Recently we have witnessed the post- electoral crisis in Iran. We are concerned about the deteriorating human rights situation and the violent crackdowns. If the Iranian government seeks recognition as representing its people, it should respect human rights. If the Iranian government seeks the respect of the international community, it should comply with the relevant Security Council resolutions. By doing so Iran could become a genuine contributor to peace and stability in the whole region.

Mr. President,

Latvia has been steadfast in the global efforts of fighting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. We are sure that the 2010 NPT Review Conference will be an important milestone in this process. Latvia is convinced that it will promote the aims of non-proliferation, disarmament and use of nuclear energy ultimately for peaceful purposes.

Mr. President,

This fall we celebrate the *60th anniversary of the four Geneva Conventions*. The character of armed conflict is constantly changing. New challenges, such as terrorism, arise. Still, the Geneva Conventions remain the bedrock of international humanitarian law. Unfortunately, the political will to fully implement the Conventions remains insufficient. Violations of the provisions of these Conventions, as well as norms of human rights law still occur.

Therefore Latvia strongly supports the *International Criminal Court*. It is a mechanism designed to fight impunity and promote compliance with norms of international law. Latvia commends the work of the Court. Latvia invites all States to full cooperation with it. At the World Summit of 2005 the concept of the *Responsibility to protect* was agreed upon. Latvia supports this concept. It is important to work towards its implementation. It would help us to create a world order where inactivity in the face of mass atrocities becomes a thing of the past.

Mr. President,

Three years ago General Assembly decided to establish the Human Rights Council. The Human Rights Council has already achieved some results. The Universal Periodic Review mechanism is

one of its most notable successes. However, we believe that this process can be further improved to avoid abuse of shortcomings in methodology and practice. The Human Rights Council will undergo a review in 2011. We believe that the Council can become even more credible and effective body for the promotion and protection of human rights.

Latvia has a long-standing commitment and experience with promoting human rights. We are ready to share our experience in this area with the international community. Therefore Latvia has put forward its candidacy for the Human Rights Council for the year 2014.

Latvia has always supported the strengthening of the United Nations. The *reform of the Security Council*, aimed at enhancing the effectiveness and legitimacy of its work, is an important part of the overall reform of the UN. The composition of the Security Council must reflect the realities and dynamics of today's world. Latvia welcomes the beginning of intergovernmental negotiations on Security Council reform and emphasizes the importance of continued progress in this area.

We note with concern that in the time of global recession the *UN budget* is increasing considerably. It is important to prioritize activities and to continue the UN reform. We would also like to see more transparency and budgetary discipline in the process of budget planning and implementation.

Mr. President,

Latvia is a candidate in the next year's elections to the Economic and Social Council. We are willing to share our experience in addressing global challenges. Sustainable development, poverty eradication, implementation of good governance and the rule of law, fundamental freedoms and environmental stability.

Latvia is already building up its expertise on the Functional commissions and activities related to the mandate of ECOSOC. Latvia is an active participant of the UN Forum on Forests, the Commission on Science and Technology for Development, Statistical Commission, and Commission on Sustainable Development.

The UN is the only truly universal forum for dialogue and action. All states, big and small, have the responsibility to contribute to a fruitful work of the United Nations.

Mr. President,

Let me assure you that Latvia is ready to work closely with you and all member states to make this 64th session of the General Assembly a successful one.

Thank you, Mr. President.

Address by H.E. Valdis Zatlers, President of Latvia, at the Baltic Sea Action Summit, Helsinki

10.02.2010

Madam President,

Your majesty,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Every morning I am greeted not only by my family members. When I look out of my bedroom window I am greeted by the sea, our sea, the Baltic Sea. And it is so since my childhood.

It seems to be located in a perfect place - in between countries that are doing well by world standards and pride themselves in their environmental records. Still, the Baltic Sea is among the most polluted seas in the world. And it is a shame.

It does not have to be this way. To be successful we need two important things: willingness to work together and commitment to practical and measurable results.

The institutional progress over the last couple of years clearly demonstrates that we do have the required willingness of joint effort.

It has already been slightly over two years since the Baltic Sea Action Plan was adopted by HELCOM indicating the actions required for restoring our sea. During the recent EU Swedish Presidency our region has been placed high on the European Union's agenda by adoption of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. The Strategy incorporates the already existing plans, like the Baltic Sea Action Plan and opens up new opportunities to address specific needs and challenges of the region.

Today we are here together - Heads of States and Governments, business leaders, and representatives of communities. Now is the time to take stock of our very practical commitments, of the actions we are ready to take to clean up our sea.

Therefore, I would like to tell you what are the most important commitments by Latvia .

First, I would like to stress that the priorities of the Baltic Sea Action Plan have already been included into Latvia's Environmental Policy Guidelines.

Second, Latvia is seriously concerned about eutrophication of the Baltic Sea. This challenge cannot be solved in the sea alone. Therefore, we have already passed regulations aimed at substitution of polyphosphates in detergents. As from June 1, 2010 all washing powders and liquids with over 0.5% level of phosphates will be banned from the Latvian market.

Third, we have elaborated river basin management plans to make sure that our surface waters are not contributing to eutrophication of the Baltic Sea.

Fourth, we are strongly committed to increase cross-sectoral cooperation and coordination both nationally and regionally. Effective cooperation with our neighbouring countries in river basin management is of key importance.

Fifth, we cannot overrate the importance of cooperation in research of marine environment. This is where our scientific activities in the EU BONUS program fit in.

These are most current commitments that Latvia as a state has made. More commitments are made by the Latvian private sector. Starting from projects to fight eutrophication to efforts of raising public awareness. Therefore I am grateful to the representatives of the Latvian business community that have contributed to this common goal.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am certain that the commitments that we will have pledged today - governmental, municipal, private, and scientific - will lead to a substantially improved state of our sea. I am certain that it is in our power to be proud, not to be ashamed, before our children. I am certain that already in our generation we will be able to live by one of the cleanest seas in the world.

I trust you.

Thank you.

Address by H.E. Valdis Zatlers, President of Latvia, at the opening of the conference “The Latvian Declaration of Independence of May 4, 1990: International and Domestic Aspects”

03.05.2010

Mr Īvāns, Mr Landsbergs, Mr rector, ladies and gentlemen: Twenty years have passed since May 4, 1990. That is almost as long as the period of Latvia's independence prior to World War I. It is a period equal to one generation.

Students who were born after the restoration of Latvia's independence will become graduates this year. The first free generation of a free and independent Latvia has grown up. What can we tell these young people to inspire them to live and work in Latvia?

Well, we can say that during these twenty years, we have managed to achieve a surprising amount. For the second time in one century, the people of Latvia won their country's independence. We joined NATO – the world's most important collective defence organisation. We joined the European Union – an alliance of the world's most economically developed countries. We have become fully integrated into various institutions of international co-operation. Latvia holds democratic parliamentary elections, we have a free press and other media, citizens enjoy the right to join political parties and non-governmental organisations, our courts are independent, and we have implemented high standards of human rights.

In a relatively brief period of time, Latvia has moved from the totalitarian Soviet system to a Western-type democracy. This process has been accompanied by fundamental reforms in politics, the economy, education and the social sphere. We have reinstated private property and created a functioning market economy. The positions of the Latvian language as the only state language in Latvia are becoming very much stronger. There is great autonomy for ethnic minorities and their culture. There are minority schools and cultural organisations.

Ladies and gentlemen:

At the same time, however, we cannot fail to take note of the darker sides of our rapid development. The gap between the rich and the poor has increased substantially. Many people choose to leave the land of their birth in place of work. There is a deep chasm of distrust between the government and the people – distrust that is increased more and more by ongoing suspicions that political and, sometimes, judicial processes in this country are led by the economic interests of certain individuals. That is precisely why we must not yield before the temptation of memories and nostalgia.

We all know that in the Bible, Moses led his people through the desert for four full decades. It was directly during the beginning of that process that the most difficult time occurred. People forgot their values. They began to worship the golden idol. They complained and whinged about difficulties. They remembered how stable life was before they set out into the desert.

Perhaps it is time for us now that we are halfway down the road, to declare to admit that our point of reference should not be 1990 or the Latvia of the 1930s. Instead let us look forward to Latvia in the year 2030. Here is the question that we must answer: what kind of country will Latvia be 40 years after the restoration of its independence?

I don't think that we need to spend too much time on determining who was to blame for what, or why our successes over the past 20 years have been incomplete. We cannot return to the beginning and start everything from scratch. The achievements of the past which are the object of our pride cannot insure us against mistakes and failures in the future, and they give us no reason to rest on our laurels. Our achievements set the bar higher, showing what we can achieve if we really want to.

There are those in Latvia today who say that we need a new and major goal. We are told that our aforementioned accession to the European Union and NATO is an example of proper national goals. Today, however, it may prove that this has been an incomplete model of strategic aims. The euphoria which occurred after we joined the EU in 2004 has been quite costly. Such ideas create the illusion that after two or three years of tense work, specific goals have been achieved and now we can relax and take it easy. That is not what usually happens.

It is the duty of politicians to mark out their visions as to how the country is to develop. It is important for politicians to offer solutions, as opposed to whingeing about a lack of vision. It is clear to us that the challenges which Latvia will face over the next 20 years will be just as significant as those which our country had to address during the last two decades. Yes, they are of a different nature, but if we consider our challenges and assess the mistakes that we have made in the past, we will be able to define quite clearly the things that we will have to do so that we can be proud of this country after 20 and, yes, after 50 years.

An election year is a very appropriate time for the people of Latvia to have an outstanding opportunity to demand specific solutions and long-term positions on the part of political parties which are preparing to seek election. Politicians must specify their political plans, and they must propose solutions to problems while competing for voter support.

Ladies and gentlemen:

On the eve of May 4, I see four major challenges for the next 20 years. I believe that these are issues with respect to which political parties must respond during the election campaign. It is their mission now, during the election year, and in the future, to identify the things that must be done in response to the challenges that I will now describe. This work must be done on the basis of the experience and recommendations of experts, specialists and public activists.

First of all, we must strengthen the foundations of our state. The people of Latvia are the cornerstone of Latvia. They are citizens who are born here, are educated here, and then are forced to emigrate from their motherland in substantial numbers. The Latvian state cannot exist without the people of Latvia.

During the first twenty years of independence after World War I, the population of Latvia increased by one-quarter. Here is a comparison: Between 1990 and the present day, the population has shrunk by nearly one-fifth. In pre-war Latvia, families with three or more children were compensation for the losses that were caused by war, deportations and migration. During the first 20 years of our restored independence, the fertility rate has been nearly halved in comparison to data from the late 1980s. The current birth rate, when joined together with major emigration, can no longer ensure complete regeneration of the population.

In March of this year, a survey was conducted on the subject of how many children an ideal family has. Sadly, the most common answer was fewer than two. Only one-sixth of respondents thought that the best option would be three children. The point is that when people say how many children they might want, their goal is below the level that is necessary for population regeneration.

The situation in Latvia's countryside is even worse. Demographic forecasts indicate that the number of children who are of preschool age in many Latvia's regions may well decline by 40 or 50% during the next eight to 15 years.

Never before have demographic processes so threatened the long term future of the nation and its people. We must understand that the need to work intensively and the uncertainties that exist about family budgets come up against the motivation of people in Latvia to raise two or more children. There must be fundamental changes to the country's social policies – a far greater range of solutions than just the so-called mommy wages. We also must create circumstances that will encourage those who have left the country to return home and apply their experience and knowledge here, not elsewhere.

We need a carefully considered strategy to revive the countryside. We must address the centripetal nature of our population. The experience of Scandinavian countries shows that targeted and long-term policies can put an end to negative demographic trends. Such policies can encourage families to have at least two children, and they can stop people from moving to cities from the countryside. Ireland, in turn, has shown that it is possible to halt the rapid outflow of people from the country and even to achieve their return over the course of time.

A major task for the next 20 years in Latvia is to create a situation in which families both can and wish to raise two or more children. The first step would be to finally create long-term demographic policies and then see these not at as a formality, but instead as a process which requires concrete forms of state and local government support for young families and for the raising of children.

The second of the four challenges is this: We must finally learn to run our country in an effective and an innovative way. Comparisons to the 1930s are pointless here. The economic structure of the world has changed beyond all recognition. Twenty years from now, the Latvian economy must be sustainable. It must be based not on borrowed money and imports, but instead of substantial exports.

The hopes that related to the development of a financial economy have been dashed. We need an economy that is based on manufacturing and services. Here I am not referring to the traditional understanding of the 20th century. Instead I speak of energy efficiency and high standards of innovation.

The economy will inevitably shift to products and services which reduce carbon emissions and provide high added value right here in Latvia. There is no doubt that the so-called public services industries – health care, education and environmental services – will continue to be a fundamental source of employment and jobs in our country.

Sometimes Latvians engage in self-pity and claim that we have nothing much at all. The truth is that Latvia is in a comparatively good situation. Our energy system is one of the greenest in Europe. This means that each household and each company in Latvia consumes more environmentally friendly energy than is the case in our neighbouring countries. We have major supplies of biomass. Right now we produce 30% of our consumed power with biomass, but we can do better than that. We can create many jobs in the “green economy.” This clearly shows that we belong to Europe and, specifically, to the economic positions that exist in the Nordic region.

This year, for the third year, the Great Cleanup here in Latvia showed very clearly how much the people of Latvia want to live in a clean, orderly and green country. Last week was a week of creativity. We see clearly that innovations are not the special job or privilege for a small group of specialists. No, the idea of ingenuity as something that promotes competition must be seen in a broader sense.

Innovation allows us to answer any question and do any piece of work while, at the same time, looking for more effective solutions so as to save time, materials and labour resources.

Ambition, responsibility, the readiness and ability to risk, to learn from our mistakes, and then to be courageous in making another attempt – these are characteristics which we have had, do have and will always have. These characteristics are not a rare raw metal. They represent our primary economic capital. And yet if our natural and competitive advantages are to be brought fully to bear, we really must have a long-term, active and clear set of economic policies in this country – ones which bring sectors of the economy together, ones which are supported by business and are understood by society.

The next two decades must be a period of active external economic policies and initiative. As I mentioned before, much has been achieved over the past 20 years in foreign affairs. We have joined NATO and the European Union. We must continue to make use of these achievements in pursuit of Latvia’s long term goals. Of fundamental importance in ensuring Latvia’s foreign policy successes has been our strategic partnership with the United States of America. This partnership must become stronger. It is in Latvia’s long-term interests, too, to create relations with Russia and other partners to the East that are based on mutual respect, understanding and advantage. We have been successful in pursuing our foreign policy goals, but at the same time, insufficient attention has been devoted to identifying, implementing and defending Latvia’s external economic interests. We must all work together in the next several years to achieve

fundamental changes in economic policy. This will ensure sustainable economic growth and allow us to be proud of Latvia's products that are recognised at the international level.

Ladies and gentlemen:

Here is the third thing: We must finally learn to govern this country in a sensible way.

A British journalist recently expressed amazement to me about the fact that in Latvia, where the population is 20 or 30 times smaller than that in larger countries, there is such massive lack of trust in the people's representatives. After all, he said, we all know one another. Yes, that is true.

But the distrust has not always been there. A bit less than 20 years ago, people came together to make barricades of rocks, motor vehicles and their own bodies to protect the Council Ministers and the Supreme Council. Politicians expressed the will of the people. They were our heroes.

During the past year, we have seen very different "barricades" at the Cabinet of Ministers and Parliament. Very different rocks were put to use – this time they were thrown at windows. The level of public trust in Parliament, the government and the system of political parties is two times lower than in our neighbouring countries. The people of Latvia do not want to join political parties, and apathy on voting day is on the rise. For comparison's sake, I can tell you that turnout for the election of Latvia's Constitutional Council after World War I was 85% of the citizenry.

A public opinion survey taken in March showed that nearly 50% of the people of Latvia feel that there are justifications for failing to pay some of their taxes. That is no joke. We have been very successful in creating the institutions of a nation state, but we have lost the trust of the people in those institutions. I believe that there are two ways of addressing this matter.

First of all, all institutions must work more effectively so that people can see the positive results of their work and their decisions. Latvia, like many other countries, has increased national debt and undertaken obligations to improve the productivity of the public sector and the system of national governance to a very considerable degree. Ours is an age of technologies and a global economy, and it is clear that the pace of change will not be slower. Countries will continue to compete over which ones have the best indicators about efficiency in governance.

The second thing is that the people of Latvia must be far more active in the governance of their country. This is not just an opportunity. It is also a right and an obligation for a civically educated citizen who receives support and encouragement from the state to become a civic activist. Here we see the difference between a citizen and a well-paid migrant who is not integrated into the local society and does not take part in its political processes. The educated citizen can take active decisions on matters that are of importance to him and the rest of society. If we believe that the benefit of the past 20 years of independence has been a nation state, then let us understand that the survival of the nation state will be possible only if we learn to run the country more sensibly.

Finally, the fourth challenge which we face: We must learn to identify and make use of the opportunities that co-operation affords. During the last 20 years, we have not been able to bring

together the different social and ethnic groups which live in our country. We had an opportunity to do much, much more.

Age discrimination in the job market is the most visible form of discrimination in our country. What is more, this problem exists against the background of a rapidly aging society. People still separate themselves between Latvian speakers and Russian speakers. There is still no unified understanding that the nation state of Latvia will exist forever and that those citizens whose native language is not Latvian are and will be our compatriots. They are and will be people whom the country needs.

We constantly set European records in the area of income inequality. In addition to all that I have mentioned here, there is also a survey to show that the people of Latvia are two times more suspicious than are the residents of our neighbouring countries. Perhaps our experience with the Soviet era and then the jungle of capitalism taught us not to trust anyone outside of our range of relatives and friends. Our numbers are too few, however, for us to afford to split up and then split up again. The next 20 years must be a period of greater mutual partnership and support. No longer must we push each other aside and build walls among ourselves. We must be able to consolidate the nation in political, cultural, ethnic, geographic and other terms, irrespective of whether people are here or there. That is my deepest belief and hope.

People often ask me to define Latvia's goal. Our goal is a nation state that is sensibly governed, green, innovative and internationally active. It is a country with a demographically restored, civically responsible and consolidated nation.

We want to establish such a country. We can establish such a country. We will succeed. We will have such a country!