

**The President of Latvia H.E. Raimonds Vējonis speech
At Rikskonferensen in Sälen
2016 January 10**

Challenges and Opportunities for a Secure Baltic Sea Region

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon.

It is a great honour for me to be invited to speak to you at this distinguished security conference. It is an opportunity for Swedish political parties and experts to have informal discussions on defence and security issues. Therefore, I am especially pleased for the possibility to present Latvia's point of view at this debate. Close cooperation and partnerships around the Baltic Sea give us this great opportunity to exchange our views – both formally and informally.

We live in a time of change and uncertainty. Although the international organisations and structures which have kept Europe at peace since the end of the Cold War are looking fragile, they continue to function reasonably well. Our task is to make sure that they continue to do so. Latvia, along with most of Europe, has suffered an economic downturn. While this has generated a new basis for development and strengthened our resilience, Europe's recovery is still weak.

At the same time we are faced with a number of quite new complex challenges. Instability around Europe's southern rim has generated widespread conflicts from which we cannot isolate ourselves. This, in turn, has increased the threat of extremism and terrorism in our own societies. In addition, Europe has experienced an unprecedented flood of refugees which has hit Sweden particularly hard. It has put a question mark over some of the basic assumptions here in Sweden.

In Latvia too, the question of refugees is a painful one even though it has not yet affected us so directly. People are afraid of what they do not know or understand. In addition, the radicalization of societies in Europe and the distrust of the conventional political class and its representatives are long term problems which will stay with us for some time.

Europe's unity, values and life-style are being tested by those who seek to impose their will through fear, violence and suppression of free choice. They resort to violence because they cannot succeed in open, tolerant and democratic societies. But we, for our part, need to understand that we must keep our unity and show solidarity. Without strong unity we cannot expect our partners to take account of our own fears and concerns.

Swedish neutrality and non-alignment has served your country well. You have avoided the horrific casualties, military and civilian, that Europe's 20th century civil wars brought about. In Latvia's case we were not so lucky. Being located at one of the crossroads of northern Europe, in 1938 neutral Latvia spent 27% of our national budget on defence. Still it did not prevent our occupation and involvement in the Second World War.

Since the end of the Cold War the Baltic Sea region has been viewed as one of the most stable, peaceful and prosperous regions. We view the integration of the Baltic States into the European and Transatlantic structures as our best contribution to regional security. NATO and the EU are proving their ability to adapt to the new security environment by developing tools and capacities for countering a wide range of threats. However, the challenge posed by Russia is particularly serious.

In recent years Latvians along with our Baltic friends were thought to be russophobic. Our partners felt that we were exaggerating the threat from Russia. Yet after the Bronze soldier events in Tallinn in 2007 and the Russian-Georgian war of 2008, societies on both sides of the Baltic Sea became uneasy. In addition to all the traditional methods of soft, economic and hard power, Russia has also developed new generation, asymmetric or non-linear capabilities, which we call hybrid warfare. These include the weaponisation of information, energy, money, and corrupt practices which is a way of attacking democratic societies from within. The aim is to blur the line between war and peace; internal disorder and external aggression; conventional and nuclear conflict.

Latvia is certainly vulnerable to these asymmetric challenges. It is relatively easy to spread propaganda and disinformation, mistrust, lies and misperceptions. But Russia's hard power challenge is the most serious of all. Almost two years ago Russia brutally violated international law, European security principles and its own international commitments by the illegal annexation of Crimea and aggression in Eastern Ukraine. Russia seeks to revise the existing order based on the Helsinki Act, the Paris Charter and other documents. The biggest obstacle to these attempts is Europe's unity and solidarity. That is why Russia spares no effort to split the EU and NATO, supporting radical parties and movements in Europe, applying energy dependence as a political tool and conducting targeted information war. As a consequence we have come to change from partnership and cooperation with Russia to deterrence and defence.

The Kaliningrad region has become a military stronghold. Snap exercises are used to increase unpredictability, decrease transparency and could be used to launch actual military operations. Russia has embarked on an extensive series of reforms and modernization of the armed forces at the expense of health, education and investment in infrastructure. By the scale and nature of the Russian military exercises we can clearly see that they include the whole Baltic Sea region or what we could term the Northeast European theatre of operations. We should be quite clear about this – if Russia were to go to war against NATO, 21st century military logic dictates that the whole of the Northeast European theatre along with Sweden and Finland would be involved. The range and power of anti-access/area denial weapons, such as the air defence systems S400 and the new S500 as well as missiles such as the Iskander M and Kaliber, mean that regional involvement is inevitable. When we add to this Russia's nuclear blackmail, then the scope of the threat becomes even more clear.

It has been suggested that the Baltic States are indefensible against the size of forces Russia is able to gather at short notice. But West Berlin was also indefensible during the Cold War with a garrison of only three lightly armed brigades. Yet after the Berlin airlift the Soviet Union never again challenged Berlin because they knew it

would lead to major war. In our own region, the strategically important area of north Norway was regularly reinforced by the Allied Command Mobile Force, a militarily weak but politically important formation.

We in Latvia have learnt our lesson from the mistakes at the beginning of the Second World War. For 11 years we are happy to have been part of the strongest ever military alliance and are particularly pleased to that the United States is our strategic partner. Consolidation of the Trans-Atlantic link is more important than ever. We are stronger, safer, and more prosperous when we stand together. At the same time, in NATO the consensus principle is applied whenever it comes to decision making. It is noteworthy that after the Baltic States were occupied by the USSR in 1940 (in the same week that Paris fell to Hitler) the United States never recognized the Soviet annexation. This allowed us to keep the dream of a free Latvia alive for half a century.

Russia's military capabilities have been considerably improved and we have seen the results in Ukraine and Syria. In the case of Ukraine, the litmus test is the full implementation of the Minsk agreements. We see that the Kremlin wants to buy time in meeting its obligations and hoping that Ukraine will fail on its way towards establishing a truly developed, democratic European country. In the meantime, Russia has shifted the focus of its activities to the Middle East. All of this increases the risk of miscalculation and conflict.

Here in Sweden, we have seen gradual but substantial changes to how Russia is perceived. We in Latvia have watched with interest as the debate has developed and we are following closely discussions about the possibility of Sweden and Finland joining NATO, a subject which only 10 years ago would have been seen as taboo. The support for joining NATO has considerably grown both among political elites and society in general.

At the same time the Swedish government has already developed a policy of increased defence expenditure and military cooperation with the US and Nordic partners. The recent joint article by your foreign and defence ministers understandably stressed that Sweden does not wish to make the security situation in the Baltic region worse. The report published by Thomas Bertelman in October of last year seemed to suggest that NATO membership was a very viable option. The follow-up report by Krister Bringens is not, of course, about NATO membership but will undoubtedly refer to NATO.

It is not for us to suggest which course Sweden should choose. However, let me assure you that NATO along with our partners in the region are interested in exploiting already existing risk reduction, incident resolution and transparency mechanisms as well as developing and adopting new ones if necessary. That is a good way to increase mutual trust. However, it can be achieved only if it is duly reciprocated. Unfortunately, so far Russia has not shown much interest in ensuring transparency and reducing tensions. Instead we see power projection and sabre rattling.

In view of the fact that these are long-term threats, Latvia has been advocating for closer NATO cooperation with Sweden and Finland as we strongly believe that this

will lead to improved regional security. Therefore, we were among the most eager supporters of the Enhanced Opportunities Partnership initiative endorsed by the NATO summit in Wales. This partnership, which provides a good basis for deepening our cooperation, is natural for a number of reasons:

- we are democracies based on identical values and principles;
- there is a convergence in understanding of the complexity and the causes of the security problems we are facing, and
- we share a similar approach to what should be done to preserve peace and stability in Europe.

We appreciate the efforts made by Sweden and Finland in strengthening regional security arrangements. Participation in NATO meetings and exercises is important for interoperability and coordination. A great step forward was the signing of host nation support agreements by Sweden and Finland allowing assistance from NATO in emergency situations. From our perspective it is important that the Agreement enables joint training exercises, which lead to the strengthening of military interoperability with NATO. This cooperation is taking place as we prepare for the upcoming NATO Summit in Warsaw.

Here we will be pursuing two parallel tracks – reassurance and deterrence on the one hand, and engagement on the other. Dialogue is not a policy itself: it is merely an instrument for achieving results. At the same time, we must improve our resilience, internal security and social cohesion. We must balance deterrence with defence. Strong defence requires substantial investment and this has to be viewed in the context of economic regeneration. But for deterrence to work it must be credible: politically, militarily and operationally.

We know that many of you in Sweden feel that strengthening defence will be seen as a provocation by Russia. We recognize that it is important to consider whether an increasing NATO military presence on the eastern flank would provoke Russia's aggressive counteractions. However, after 50 years of Soviet occupation we believe that we know Russia and Russians better than most other Europeans. It is weakness which provokes aggression. To us it is clear that Russia respects power and will exploit weakness. That is why it is very much in Sweden's interests to help strengthen regional defence.

A persistent NATO military presence in the front line states sends a powerful message of deterrence. Taking a responsible attitude to defense and ensuring proper deterrence cannot be viewed as aggressive activities. Russia's aggressive policy has strengthened our belief that only a firm stance in holding to our principles and defending our values really matters. One of the most important of these is the right of every nation to decide freely its foreign and security policy. No nation is entitled to solve its own problems at the expense of the sovereignty of other nations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are one region, interdependent, intertwined and connected by our mentality and mindset. Our culture, traditions and lifestyle are similar. The new security challenges suggest that we must deepen our cooperation in security matters. I am pleased that cooperation in the security domain also continues in NB8 format, which we will be

proud to chair in 2016. We want to see close cooperation between the Nordic and the Baltic States, not just in security but in a broader context. Recently the NB8 ministers of defence, meeting here in Stockholm, agreed on how to enhance Nordic-Baltic defence cooperation. In the NB8 format the joint Nordic-Baltic defence sector capacity-building Assistance Programme has now been established and activities are up and running. This programme is at the forefront of NATO's capacity building activities.

We also have positive experience of cooperation between the Nordic and Baltic countries on international operations. But on a bilateral level, we would welcome deeper cooperation with Sweden in military, intelligence, national-guard, cyber security and civil defence areas. Many of you may know that the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga was established last year. Already a number of countries have sent their experts to join the Centre and to contribute to our common goals. The invitation to join extends not only to all Allies, but also to our closest partners, including Sweden.

Finally, we must remember that Russia will always be our regional neighbour. There will be a Russia after Putin and we should be thinking now about ways in which we can ensure that the next Russia will be a democratic, predictable and peaceful one; one that we can genuinely call a partner. In the meantime our aim must be that the North-East European theatre of operations is seen as an uncontested region. I think that I do not have to remind this audience of the old Roman saying: Si vis pacem, para bellum - If you want peace, prepare for war.

Thank you very much for your attention.