



Valsts kanceleja

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**Speech by Prime Minister of the Republic of Latvia
Laimdota Straujuma
at the Plenary Session of the European Parliament
January 14, 2015, in Strasbourg**

Mr President,
Mr President of the Commission,
Honourable Members of the Parliament,
Honourable Vice Presidents,
Honourable Commissioners,

I am very honoured to be here today in Strasbourg and to introduce the European Parliament to the priorities of Latvia's Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Today will mark 25 years since Latvia regained its independence, getting rid of the shackles of the Soviet totalitarian regime. Ten years have passed since Latvia joined the European Union, and a year since the membership in the euro area. It is not only a great honour but also a great responsibility to assume duties of the presidency of the Council of the European Union.

We acutely realized how great this responsibility is on January 7 that badly shocked us. Therefore, I would like to start my speech by expressing solidarity and deepest sympathy for France and French people. The attack in France is an attack on freedom of expression and European values.

On Sunday I participated in a march in Paris. People of all nationalities, religions and cultures in France and worldwide rallied unitedly into the streets to demonstrate loudly – in the democratic world we stand up for values, for freedom of self-expression, peaceful coexistence of different cultures and religions.

Therefore I use this representative forum of European nations to call on everyone to show even greater respect towards other cultures and a new level of trust between the nations. In times of tension when terrorism would like to impose increasing escalation, even wider clashes among religions, and would push us to violence, we have to become even more humane. We have to continue to take interest in other cultures so that it is not possible to blur our minds with demagoguery or interpretation of twisted facts.

The European Union has to be prepared to defend itself, its citizens and values. We all, all the EU institutions and all Member States should join forces to ensure adequate response of the European Union to the challenge thrown to the European model of cohabitation, and thus – to all

of us.

On May 2-4, a large-scale forum dedicated to the World Press Freedom Day will be held in Rīga, providing an opportunity to exchange views on the currently topical issues.

We have to activate all the mechanisms at the disposal of the European Union developed for the fight against terrorism. Particular attention should be given to the forthcoming European Internal Security Strategy.

In order to have a complete range of our instruments, it is important that we together ensure efficient exchange of information among the services involved.

We highly appreciate the fact that the discussion on the Passenger Name Record is resumed. It is in the right place and at the right time. Here we speak about a limited amount of data, making it possible to keep track of movements of certain individuals. I am aware that this issue is not unambiguous. Therefore I wish to assure that regardless of the progress in the discussions on the development of the Passenger Name Record, Latvia's Presidency will continue to carry forward the data protection package as one of the key elements in the context of the digital priority.

I am convinced that the European Parliament will be a close partner of the Council and the Commission, because we will be able to provide a strong response of the European Union only through joint effort.

I believe that Europe will be able to show unity and overcome this threat. I believe that we will not fall into the trap and will not allow terrorism to destroy our faith in each other, to set one another against the people of different origins or religions in the European community.

Together we will be able to defend European values. The future of Europe depends on it.

Honourable Members of the Parliament,

Latvia assumes the presidency in difficult and challenging times.

The beginning of Latvia's Presidency coincides with successful completion of institutional transition in the European Union. We highly appreciate the achievements of the Italian Presidency and the European Parliament, and we will continue to improve the cooperation among all institutions of the European Union.

The impact of the financial crisis can still be felt in the European Union. The Member States and institutions of the European Union have worked hard to restore confidence in financial markets. The Member States continue structural reforms. Europe is slowly but gradually returning to economic growth. This year, economic growth is expected in all Member States of the European Union. The European Union still remains the world's largest economy with strong positions in high-tech field. The total budget deficit continues to decline in the euro area countries. However, this is also a good time to create a system that is resistant to potential future challenges.

The euro area is expanding through accession of new Member States. I would like to congratulate our neighbouring country Lithuania on the accession to the euro area, becoming its 19th Member State.

The citizens of the European Union enjoy the level of freedom and well-being that is denied for the people in many other countries of the world.

I am convinced that by taking determined action, with confidence in the European values and willingness to work together, the European Union is able to face the challenges, to overcome difficulties and move forward.

In these uneasy times for the European continent, it is important to remember that the European Union has brought peace and confidence to its citizens. All too often we take it for granted.

Honourable Members of the Parliament,

The citizens of the European Union are interested in concrete results, which improve their daily lives. We can achieve it through joint effort of the Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission.

Last year a great contribution was made by the European Union institutions to formulating their priorities for a new institutional cycle.

We want to work on their implementation, while paying attention to new challenges.

Latvia's Presidency has outlined three clear priority directions:

- competitive European Union;
- digital European Union;
- engaged European Union at the global level.

Dear Member of the Parliament,

First, we wish to strengthen Europe's competitiveness and promote economic growth.

The structural reforms, fiscal responsibility and investment are those "three whales" guiding growth of the European Union over the next years. Growth that creates jobs but does not impose new debt on future generations.

We welcome the investment plan proposed by the President of the European Commission. We are ready to work actively to ensure that the Strategic Investment Fund starts operating in June. The Commission's proposal was issued yesterday. We look forward to a good cooperation with the Member States and the European Parliament to ensure a smooth legislative process. Creating an attractive investment environment is our joint responsibility.

Europe has long felt the need for the Energy Union. We need the energy policy that is based on solidarity, trust and security, a better integrated energy infrastructure and more efficient governance. The establishment of the Energy Union will be one of the priority issues during Latvia's Presidency.

We will also continue work on improving the Single Market; we will provide the coordination of the European Semester's processes within the framework of the Council. During Latvia's Presidency, we will review the strategy "Europe 2020". We will encourage work on industrial competitiveness. We will work on strengthening the Economic and Monetary Union. We will give particular attention to better regulation.

Second, we want to make Europe more digitalized.

We wish to take full advantage of the digital potential of Europe and work on developing an

effective Digital Single Market. Online consumers need to have equal access to goods and services at the best price, irrespective of whether they live in Brussels, Bratislava, Rīga or Rome. The security and trust in digital environment should also be promoted.

This will help create jobs and promote growth as well as transform Europe into the world's leading knowledge-based economy.

We intend to work on the strategy of the Digital Single Market, and soon expect a concrete proposal from the Commission. The Digital Agenda Assembly in Rīga will be a great opportunity for policy-makers and business to meet.

The key elements of the single digital market are the data protection and balanced reforms in the telecommunications market. Also the cybersecurity and consumer rights will be the focus of our attention.

Third, we want to see more engaged and globally responsible European Union.

We will support the High Representative and the European External Action Service, by strengthening the unity of the European Union and promoting regional stability and peace.

The neighbours of Europe will be the priority of our Presidency. We will support the revision of the European Neighbourhood Policy. It is only natural that our main focus is basically on the East; however we will work as seriously on the issues, which are important to our neighbours in the South. The challenges posed by migration are on our agenda.

We cannot avoid the talks on the unprecedented events related to our Eastern neighbour. Russia's aggression against Ukraine is a threat to the European foundations of peace and justice. It is out of the question that the European Union will recognize the right of the strongest that violates territorial integrity of the countries.

Strength of the European Union lies in coherence in action. In this regard, I would like to thank the Member States and institutions of the European Union for the ability to maintain the unity when the decisions regarding the European Union's response to the events in Ukraine and Russia's aggression had to be made. It is a surprise for many in the world. Latvia's Presidency will work actively to preserve this European Union's unity also in the future.

The Eastern Partnership Summit will be held in May 2015, in Rīga. The Rīga Summit will be the opportunity to assess the progress made since the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius. It should serve as a clear signal that the European Union supports the Eastern Partnership countries.

We also have to look more broadly in relation to the Central Asia Region where the presence and involvement of the European Union does not reach its full potential. We will work to revise the European Union's Central Asia Strategy.

Strengthening of the international role of the European Union also includes global aspects.

We will help encourage negotiations on trade agreements with the United States, Canada and Japan. The ambitious trade and investment partnership would not only provide the benefit of more than 100 billion euro and economic incentives for the EU, but would also bring geopolitical benefits.

The year 2015 is the European Year for Development. We will focus on the EU's contribution to

the UN Summit on sustainable development and poverty reduction targets after 2015.

Latvia's Presidency will work towards making the Common Security and Defence Policy that meets the global challenges.

Honourable Members of the Parliament,

Latvia's Presidency aims at building a competitive, digital and globally strong Europe.

Our objective is to defend the European values, a space of freedom, security, justice and mutual tolerance, characterising Europe in the world.

It is important for us to work in close cooperation with you. This is the main reason for my visit today – to strengthen our cooperation and to develop a coherent agenda of the Council and the Parliament.

Latvia's Presidency is pragmatic and resolute.

A millstone that we have chosen for the logo of our Presidency was once an essential element of innovation. It brought about extensive changes for households across Europe.

For me, the millstone means prosperity, stability and energy. I would like to see that Latvia's Presidency would associate with these values. We wish to strengthen the European Union's progress towards development, to strengthen confidence in the European idea and inspire us towards smart and forward-looking growth. To Europe that is close to the people.

Thank you!