

**Opening Address by Ināra Mūrniece, Speaker of the Saeima, at the conference
“60 Years of the European Project” Saeima, 03.04.2017**

Excellences, parliamentarians, dear guests,
Madame Head of the Representation of the European Commission,
Director Sprūds, thank you for your kind introduction!

It is a great honour for our parliament to host this conference on the 60th anniversary of the European project. Today, all eyes are on Europe. We are celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome - yet one member is leaving the EU family. What does this mean for the Union's future? Now more than ever, it is essential to come together to discuss the European project.

Today's Europe is a unique peace project. Latvians see the success of this project also in security and freedom. Because on 25th March, Latvia not only celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome. We also commemorated the most tragic day of Soviet occupation – the brutal mass deportations of 1949. Thousands of Latvians, including my own family, were sent to Siberia. Those, who survived, know more than anyone - we can never take for granted peace, freedom and democracy. These fundamental values are at the heart of the European Union.

But we must stand up for our values. Unfortunately, today the power in our immediate neighbourhood is violating international rules and challenging our values. Hybrid warfare and interference in democratic elections are just a few examples. Despite this, some tend to be blind. When today populist leaders glorify the Kremlin's dictator as “*representing a future vision of Europe*”, one may cry for Europe to wake up from its slumber.

Why is populism gaining influence? Why are people so critical of Europe today? They want to see the EU provide solutions - improved competitiveness, stronger cohesion, security, addressing the migrant crisis, combatting unemployment and fighting terrorism. [Sometimes the EU's response is so delayed that it seems our grandchildren will already be grandparents by the time a solution comes]. People want solutions now!

It is not as if nothing has been done. The EU has managed to solve the acute migration crisis. We have been able to work together with partners.

Maintaining security and peace. Staying firm and united against Russia's aggression in Ukraine. An important step is ratification of the CETA trade deal with Canada, ensuring prospects for trade and investments.

The good news is that the latest opinion polls show increasing support for the EU. Also recent elections show that there are many people who believe in Europe. But our voices, who believe in Europe, should be louder.

Jobs and growth

When Latvia joined the EU, the European economy was flourishing. A strong Single Market and open trade are essential for Latvia to ensure upwards convergence and cohesion.

Structural divergences and regional inequalities create risks not only for completing the Economic and Monetary Union but they also undermine the overall idea of European unity.

Unfortunately, today global competition and new technologies have left many people in Europe uncertain as to their future. The promise of prosperity for everyone has been lost. Jobs in traditional sectors are disappearing or transforming. This so-called 21st century industrial

revolution is moving too fast to follow. People are losing their patience. This is fertile soil for populism.

However, I want to remind you that the Latvian people have experienced massive changes over the last 27 years. We survived the transition from the Soviet to a market economy. We survived the major economic crisis of 2008 and succeeded in joining the Eurozone and most recently the OECD. We know what is fiscal discipline and structural reforms. And if today you ask Latvian business people, they say that nothing better than the EU has ever been invented. They benefit from free movement of goods and services, and the single currency.

This is why we believe that the EU is able to address today's challenges. We believe in economic and social progress through the Single Market. Where will jobs come from? From structural reforms, more investments and innovation! This is clearly stated in the Rome Declaration – we will work for “a strong, connected and developing Single Market [...] for growth, cohesion, competitiveness, innovation and exchange”.

The Digital Single Market will be another accelerator. Latvia is on its path to become a Data Driven Nation. Further integration into the internal energy market will ensure that energy is secure and affordable. The Baltic States have achieved a lot having moved from an isolated “energy island” to a free energy market with a diversified energy supply.

Another point I want to make is trade. We should continue to ensure free trade, whilst also protecting our values and standards. I am proud that just last month Latvia was the first Member State to ratify the CETA trade deal with Canada. Our business people see opportunities in open trade as they seek alternative markets to Russia. I would like to encourage other EU

parliaments to follow our lead and ratify the CETA as soon as possible. We believe that instead of protectionism, trade and investments can enhance our economic prosperity.

Security

Yet economic prosperity alone is not enough. We also need security. Today the world is changing so rapidly – the migration crisis, terrorist and military threats and cyberattacks. The Kremlin's supported pro-Russian separatists are still fighting in Eastern Ukraine.

Security challenges demand a complex approach. We need to prevent and deter. I am glad that the *EU Global Strategy* builds on very realistic assessments. It will help to build resilience, strengthen strategic communications and cybersecurity.

The Transatlantic bond remains the cornerstone of European security. The EU and NATO should complement each other. Latvia is a member of both organizations, and we see the benefits of them working together.

I am glad that the *EU Global Strategy* is strongly committed to enhance the resilience also of our eastern neighbours. The EU can make a difference!

Recently the eight Baltic and Nordic speakers of parliaments visited Georgia and the EU Monitoring Mission there. As we stood by the barbed wire fence on the border with breakaway regions - I can assure you that the EU is doing a tremendous job in protecting peace in Europe.

Commission's White Paper/ EU future

To conclude, I would like to say a few words about the Commission's White Paper on the Future of Europe.

We will analyse the Commission's five scenarios for the future of the EU from the Latvian perspective. But what I see - the future cooperation areas are as important for Latvia as for the whole EU. We hope that the important upcoming elections in France and Germany will go well, and Europe can move forward.

One should note that Latvia is already in the core – the Schengen Area and the Eurozone. We must remain in the core. The multi-speed model of cooperation in the EU could be acceptable if it is in line with the existing treaties and remains open to other member states.

The European project has always developed gradually and inclusively – be it the Single Market, Monetary Union or the Schengen Area. Therefore, it is essential to maintain solidarity among Member States.

Speaking of Brexit, now we must minimize the insecurity of our citizens and businesses which could be affected by Brexit. The UK is Latvia's close partner, and we want to maintain good relations in future. We now need to move forward. We must stick together in difficult times.

Now – as we are here in Riga, I think it is appropriate to recall our famous saying that “Riga will never be completed”. The same can be said for the European project – it is a work in progress, a living organism that keeps growing, adapting and listening to our people's real needs.

Thank you. I look forward to a lively discussion today.