

Keynote speech of the Speaker of the Saeima H.E. Ms Ināra Mūrniece at the 35th Annual Awards Banquet of the Baltic American Freedom League

Dear President Pavlovskis,
Dear Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian, (American) friends,

It is my great honour to be invited to the 35th Annual Awards Banquet of the Baltic American Freedom League. I am happy to discuss the Baltic security on behalf of the Latvian Parliament. Today security is our central issue in the Baltic cooperation.

But first, let me thank the Baltic American Freedom League for your tremendous work. You came together with the aim of liberating the Baltic States from the Soviet rule. You supported this process with money, publicity and lobbying efforts. You consistently reminded the US policymakers about the occupied Baltics and stood up for the principle of non-recognition.

Together we succeeded, and the dream of freedom came true. Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania reclaimed their place on the world map. Your “Baltic lobby” in the US was important later on as well; it helped us build and develop our new democracies. You helped to bring us into NATO.

I also want to thank you for backing us today. More than ever, the Baltic solidarity and cooperation matters.

I am glad that the Baltic States once again stand united in the US – just as in the “good old days”. When the Baltic States work together, we are three times stronger.

We need one Baltic voice! We cannot afford to act alone. It is because we live in a dangerous and unpredictable world. Russia poses increasing threats to our Transatlantic Community. Russia violates international rules. Hybrid warfare and interference with democratic elections has become part of our lives. Let us be clear – the Kremlin’s aim is to split transatlantic unity.

Since Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, the Baltic States are often referred to as the emerging frontline states.

The Kremlin continues its military build-up with offensive scenarios. Intensive military manoeuvres along our borders – like “Zapad 2017” (or “West 2017” in Russian) – deteriorates European strategic security environment. We take it seriously.

The only way to deter Russia is to be strong and united.

The three Baltic States are working very hard to strengthen our self-defence. Latvia’s defence budget in 2016 increased by more than 40%. We will spend 2% of GDP for defence by 2018.

But let us be clear: we cannot deter Russia alone. We need our Allies. We need the US leadership in our region. Here, one common Baltic voice is necessary to reinforce our message in Washington.

We successfully represented our Baltic region as a group in the last two NATO Summits. We increasingly work together in the US. The first round of high-level meetings between

the three Baltic parliamentary delegations, three Presidents, three Foreign ministers and the new US Administration reassured us about the US unwavering support for Baltic security.

But let us look at our future tasks.

First of all, we should continue to urge the US to maintain persistent military presence in the Baltic region.

This is exactly what I did this week in my meetings at the US Congress. I received from Speaker Paul Ryan a very strong and reassuring message about the US commitment to the Baltic security, including continuous US military presence in our region. It means a lot to hear and witness that the US stands by us.

At the Congress, I was also assured that Latvia is perceived as a friend and a partner. Indeed, we are not freeloaders. We contribute to our security. Our troops have stood shoulder to shoulder with US soldiers in fighting terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan. Latvia continues supporting counter-terrorism operations within the Global Coalition against ISIL. We know what solidarity means. We have paid for it with the blood of our soldiers.

Today we need the solidarity of our allies. We welcome the NATO Warsaw Summit decision to enhance the Allied presence in our region. This is an expression of solidarity and a signal of deterrence to Russia.

We expect a Canada-led NATO battle group to be deployed in Latvia by June and fully operational by the autumn. We are working to ensure all the necessary host-nation support. We have excellent cooperation with Canada as a framework nation of the battle group on its deployment.

The NATO Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic States and Poland altogether involves the three Baltic States and 17 of our NATO allies. We are 20 NATO Member States together. This is a very clear signal of deterrence.

To achieve credible deterrence, however, the US military footprint remains irreplaceable. Security in our region is greatly strengthened due to the United States Congress support for the European Deterrence Initiative and direct support for the Baltic States through Foreign Military Financing. I am happy to note that Speaker Ryan sent promising signals regarding continuous US support through the European Deterrence Initiative.

What we need is to continue advocating for our common interests. You – the Baltic American Freedom League – are our “eyes and ears” in contacts with members of the Congress. Your active support is much needed.

Dear friends,

The credibility of NATO in our Region depends on more than the willingness of our allies to protect us. We need the Baltic States’ own efforts. We need to cooperate and engage in smart use of resources.

We have to keep in mind that Baltic cooperation means working hard together. It is not only about signing of joint declarations. It is about building railroads together, about implementing common energy projects. Defence, security, joint procurements, coordinated border protection is about sharing responsibilities and a common political will. We still have a lot of work to do in this area.

Finally, let me say a couple of words on Russia's "info-war" or propaganda. It is no secret that the Kremlin employs a wide range of tools: TV stations, pseudo-news agencies and multimedia services, and Internet trolls.

Moreover, the Kremlin seeks to create and maintain the perception that the Baltic States as former soviet republics have failed in choosing the European and Transatlantic Community. These hybrid warfare activities can influence some people in Europe or the USA, who are not well aware of the real situation in our countries. Such people sometime do not know whom to believe.

To face the Kremlin's propaganda, knowledge and critical thinking is the best medicine. We need strategic communication. We need to tell our own story.

We need to work with the US policy makers, with the Congress. Many members of the US Congress belong to a new generation, and they may not know much about the Cold War, the history of Eastern Europe or the Baltic States. Sometimes they even tend to mistake the Baltics for the Balkans. We need to explain and educate them. And here I want to ask for your help.

We should encourage high-level US officials to visit the Baltic States and to see Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius, to see our countries with their own eyes.

Moreover, we need to do our homework to increase our resilience. The best resilience is a strong democratic system, the rule of law, efficient economy and good governance. This is exactly what the European Union is developing. We are glad that the new US administration recognizes the EU as a strong and important partner.

We need to tell the world our Baltic story. The joint centenary celebrations of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Finland will provide such an opportunity. We are closely cooperating to make the most of these celebrations and turn them into an unforgettable showcase of our history and our region.

The Latvian centenary celebration programme includes 112 events taking place abroad and representing Latvia in 70 countries. We will focus on Latvia as a cultural superpower and on our contribution to the world. I know that you – our compatriots in the US – will take an active part in this programme.

In conclusion, let me wish you all success in your important activities. The Baltic countries are free nations. They are unique liberal democracies and possess vibrant economies. They will remain in the free and democratic world despite all the challenges.