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Opening remarks Interparliamentary Conference for CFSP/CSDP

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The English poet John Donne once wrote that no man is an island. And while the European Union may consist of countries that include islands, and some that are in fact islands, the European Union cannot be one, think like one, or act like one.

We live in a globalized world where interconnectedness can be either a challenge or an opportunity, but one thing it cannot be, is denied.

One of the main goals of the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the EU is to work together with our fellow member states in reinforcing the role of the EU in the global arena. I can only agree with High Representative Mogherini that the EU is a global superpower. But any commitment to a global community begins in our own back yard. This is why a renewed emphasis and comprehensive review of the European Neighbourhood Policy is so essential.

To be a real global player, the European Union must look in all directions, because we have neighbours everywhere. Any comprehensive and relevant Common Foreign and Security Policy, or Common Security and Defence Policy, must address all four directions – north, south, east and west.

For now, the EU's northern neighbourhood seems the most remote, but as the climate changes and ice melts, the rich resources of this largely untapped region of the Arctic will play an increasingly significant role in our foreign, defence and security policies. It's only a matter of time.

To the West we have a Transatlantic partnership, namely the United States and Canada. Thanks to NATO, many of us already have strong security ties with these countries, but this year we have a golden opportunity to establish a new cornerstone of cooperation in this transcontinental relationship: the foundation for a new dimension of cooperation based on trade.

However, our biggest challenges remain the east and the south. In both cases we are faced with a radically changed and destabilized security environment that is shaking the very foundations of world order.

Russia's underlying responsibility for supporting the aggression in Ukraine is an established fact. It has been repeatedly noted by the EU, NATO, OSCE and other sources.

And yet, Russia's ongoing involvement in the conflict in Ukraine does not diminish the strategic importance the Eastern Partnership. To the contrary, this policy in support of security, stability, the rule of law and democracy in the EU's eastern neighbourhood is now an essential element of Europe's security strategy. It is more important than ever.



The Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga on May 21-22 will provide us with an opportunity to review and renew our commitment to the Eastern Partnership countries. Just as the needs and circumstances of each of these countries differ, so too should be the EU's approach to each. Our policies and programs must be individualized and tailored to achieve real, sustainable results.

We need to move forward on the implementation of Association agreements with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. We need palpable progress in visa liberalization with all partner countries, including Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan, if they so choose.

Most of all, we need to stop blaming ourselves for Russia's refusal to admit that the Eastern Partnership threatens no one. It can bring benefits to many, including Russia itself. Russia too needs peaceful, prosperous neighbours and there is no reason why good relations with the EU precludes good relations with Russia as well.

At the same time, and of equal importance, is the European Union's Southern Neighbourhood. Apart from the enormous humanitarian crisis in this region, terrorism, extremism, and conflict in this region pose a direct threat to all EU Member States. Illegal migration and human trafficking, serious problems in and of themselves, have been enhanced by the return to Europe of experienced terrorists and extremists. This alarming turn of events impacts all our countries and endangers the security of all our citizens.

The EU's Neighbourhood Policy must be capable of providing effective, united and sustainable support to its neighbours on the Mediterranean. We have the means to assist in the development democratic systems of governance, active civil societies and a wide spectrum of people-to-people contacts.

Here I would like to underline the importance of the Union for the Mediterranean in complementing bilateral relations between the EU and its southern partners. Latvia considers the Union for the Mediterranean and the Anna Lindh Foundation as important pillars of this cooperation.

Another way in which the Latvian Presidency is seeking to enhance the global role of the EU is by refocusing our attention on Central Asia. This region is not only geopolitically important, but also has a huge economic potential in its role as a bridge between Europe and Asia.

Our activities in this regard take two dimension; first, through deepening the EU's practical cooperation with Central Asia, and second, by stimulating a strategic debate on the future of EU-Central Asian relations. Our focus will be on security, education, energy and transport, as well as support to civil society.

If the EU truly wishes to be a global player, our visibility in Central Asia is crucial. Among other things, we hope that our efforts will lead to a renewal of the post of EU Special Representative to this region.

At a national level we all agree that foreign policy is simply an extension of our domestic policies. This applies to the EU as a whole, especially when it comes to security. The unresolved conflicts on our borders are already undermining security within our borders. And the threat comes not only from bombs and bullets, but from the growing weaponization of information. Those who wish to undermine our stability, resolve, and unity are waging a sophisticated battle for the hearts and minds of our citizens.



That is why we welcome the conclusions of the January 29 Foreign Affairs Council meeting in Brussels, which tasked the High Representative to further improve our strategic communication in support of EU policies. We need to develop a dedicated communication team that can counter propaganda and provide our citizens with the truth.

One of the highest priorities facing the EU today is the development of a new European Security Strategy. In our view, one of the main guiding principles in June's Defence European Council decision should be strengthened cooperation between the EU and NATO. Given that 22 of the European Union's 28 Member states are also NATO members, it would be imprudent not to use this resource to improve and enhance coordination of EU and NATO activities.

I might add that the parliamentary dimension of EU-NATO cooperation offers another opportunity for constructive engagement. Many of us participating in this Interparliamentary Conference today are also members of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, which is marking its 60th anniversary in Paris this July. We have an insight into both EU and NATO affairs and are perfectly positioned to promote enhanced cooperation in a very practical way.

Together, the EU and NATO are much better equipped to create synergies for countering hybrid threats, terrorism and information warfare.

It should also be noted that while NATO's Strategic Communications Excellence Center here in Riga is focused on the military aspects of information warfare, similar disinformation attacks are being launched at the European Union's economic, political and social interests. If foreign policy is indeed an extension of domestic policy, then one way to divide and undermine the EU's foreign policy is to destabilize our domestic policies. A truly smart defence will recognize the importance of NATO and EU cooperation in strategic communications.

Another target of disinformation are transatlantic trade agreements between the EU and its North American partners, Canada and the US. The Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with Canada has been finalized and just needs to be ratified. We can only hope that this example will pave the way for the finalization of TTIP – the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership between the United States and Europe. Such an historic agreement between the world's two most important economic powers will give a strong boost to our economies, create jobs on both sides of the Atlantic, and strengthen our joint geopolitical responsibilities in the world.

In conclusion, I'd like to talk about the importance of unity. Regardless of the challenges we face, be they military, economic or political, our best hope of meeting those challenges is through a unified and consistent application of our policies.

Which raises this existential question: Can 28 democracies that believe in the rule of law defeat tyrants, terrorists and separatists who recognize no law, except that of the jungle? If we wish to protect the safety of our citizens and preserve our democratic values in the process, we can only do so by making use of our combined strengths and resources.

The future of our countries and the European Union as a whole, depends upon on our ability to overcome differences and work together for the common good.

I know that we can, and I am convinced that we will.

I look forward to fruitful and constructive discussions here in Riga, as we work to build a stronger, safer and more secure Europe.

