

**Speech by Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs at the annual Foreign Policy Debate
in the Latvian Parliament (*Saeima*), 27 January 2022**

Mr President,
Madame Speaker,
Members of the Presidium,
Mr Prime Minister,
Members of Parliament,
Excellencies,
and all those following us online,

The international security situation is dangerously fragile. The distrust and the “gap in values” between countries have grown huge. International developments are influenced by geopolitical rivalry, the confrontation of democracy and authoritarianism, an increasing inequality and polarisation. Threat and intimidation are currently ruling a part of the world.

The illegitimate Belarusian regime, with the help of an artificial migration flow, is pushing on with its hybrid attack on the eastern border of the European Union and NATO. Russia pursues a confrontational and revisionist foreign policy, which, together with the buildup of forces near the Ukrainian border, is causing an unprecedented threat of military escalation for the entire region.

The romantic post-Cold-War era has come to an end. A renaissance of authoritarian regimes can be observed today in many places across the globe. The fight for democratic values and the rule of law has been resumed. Latvia, just like other Baltic States, are in the most stable situation institutionally. There is no better alternative to our membership of the European Union and NATO. However, security is a process not a final goal, where we can relax upon achieving it.

The historical experience of Latvia and a broader region is a cause of anxiety for many minds and hearts. We often hear people ask – will we not be betrayed, will our fate not be decided by great powers? I am sure there will not be another Munich or Yalta. We will not be betrayed. We will not be betrayed if we do not betray ourselves. If we stay faithful to our country and its values, our allies and friends. We will not be betrayed if we ourselves take care of our own security.

Therefore, it is of paramount importance for Latvia to resolutely remain part of the community of democratic states, to cherish and foster fundamental values and reject the division of the world and Europe into spheres of influence. Neither neutrality nor indecision are options for us at the moment.

Very soon, in February, Russia and Belarus are geared up to hold a joint exercise of their troops near the western and southern borders of Belarus. We are also experiencing an

especially hostile rhetoric and activities by the Russian and Belarusian regimes, including a substantial buildup of forces near the borders of Ukraine and cyber-attacks on both neighbouring countries and the member states of the European Union and NATO. This is only adding to the further deterioration of security situation in our region.

“(.) I am convinced that there is nothing they [Russians] admire so much as strength, and there is nothing for which they have less respect than for weakness, especially military weakness. For that reason, the old doctrine of the balance of power is unsound.” These words spoken by Winston Churchill in Fulton, Missouri, are just as applicable today as they were in 1946.

It is because of that, if an incursion is launched in Ukraine, Latvia will firmly support an immediate imposition of new sanctions on Russia. At this point already, support is being provided for the Ukrainian armed forces. For the sake of security and defence of the Baltic region as a whole, we are working, already at this point, on the expansion and strengthening of the presence of NATO forces in the region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This year, the top priority and task of Latvia’s Foreign Service in its work is security and the independence, territorial integrity and economic development of our country.

In December, Riga hosted an important meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs. It was in Riga that work began on the development of NATO’s Strategic Concept. It is symbolic that the process was launched in NATO’s northeastern flank – in Riga, Latvia and will be concluded in the southeast of the NATO area – in Madrid, Spain, where the Allied heads of the state will gather for their summit this coming summer.

NATO’s purpose – the protection of the territory, people and values of the Alliance – remains unchanged. NATO will be an effective Alliance if the Allies are confident that acting together is the most effective way to ensure the security of every one of us and the implementation of the our common core task. This can be most effectively achieved through deterrence policy.

For several years, the NATO enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup stationed in Latvia has been ensuring an effective NATO’s deterrence policy in the country together with our National Armed Forces and the National Guard. The presence of the NATO battlegroup in Latvia is a clear acknowledgement of Allied solidarity, resolve and ability to protect Latvia’s people and territory against any possible aggression.

NATO Allies, on the basis of the overall risk assessment, are sending additional troops and equipment to the Alliance’s eastern flank. The Canadian-led multinational troops in Latvia together represent one third of the Alliance’s member countries. They are prepared to respond in an effective and consistent manner to any type of threat. I would like to thank Canada, the Czech Republic, Albania, Iceland, Italy, Montenegro, Poland, Slovakia,

Slovenia, and Spain for the significant contributions they are making to the security of Latvia and the whole region.

Nevertheless, we must ourselves reinforce our border, protect our cyber space and information space. Those are the immediate tasks that Latvia must accomplish by itself. With this in mind, we must increase our defence spending to 2.5 percent of our GDP. Internal and external security are inseparable. In the years just ahead, funding for domestic security must be increased – for the law enforcement system, the protection of national borders, and national security authorities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The regimes of authoritarian and totalitarian countries, as they seek to hush up, justify and exonerate the actions that leaders have perpetrated against their own citizens, and against other sovereign countries have made it a practice to do so under the pretext of dealing with threats to their sovereignty. Everybody knows what happens next. Opponents are being eliminated using stories concocted about an imagined threat to security like the activities of foreign agents or terrorists. For example, in 2021, the governing regimes in Russia and Belarus have systematically continued their repressions against representatives of the political opposition and civil society both within their own countries and abroad.

The aggressive rhetoric cannot hide the truth – it was not Georgia that attacked Russia in 2008, and it was not Ukraine that invaded Russia in 2014. It was the other way round. It is not NATO that is planting thousands of troops and armoured vehicles near the Russian border. It is Russia, which is staging this massive military exercise.

Ukraine does not threaten Russia. Ukraine wants a peaceful, democratic and European future for its people. Latvia stands firm in its support for Ukraine and will continue to do so. We are doing that because Ukraine has the right to be independent, because peace in Ukraine means peace in Europe, and Europe's first defensive line begins in Ukraine.

The decision of Belarus, on 23 May last year, to force a civil commercial aircraft to make a landing in Minsk and the arrest of the journalist, Raman Pratasevich, and Sofia Sapega, are a glaring example of the regime's arbitrary actions. The atrocities of Belarusian security forces against members of the Belarusian opposition, citizens of Belarus, continue. Russia has been acting in a similar manner in recent years and going so far as to eliminate individuals inconvenient for the regime even beyond the borders of Russia.

Alexei Navalny's case is not the case of the Russian citizen, Alexei Navalny. It is a case about the principles of the rule of law, human rights and the use of internationally prohibited toxic chemical substances against citizens who maintain views distinct from those of the state. Alexei Navalny should be a free man; civil society must be allowed to operate freely.

The liquidation of a human rights organisation, Memorial, established by the Nobel Peace Prize holder, Andrei Sakharov, and charges against it are politically motivated. Regrettably, the persecution of Memorial, just like Navalny's case, is not a one-off occurrence. It fits within the campaign mounted by Russian authorities and targeting freedom of speech in Russia, sustaining pressure and repression against civil society, civil society organisations, independent media and political opposition which voice differing opinions.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will continue standing up for civil society in Russia and Belarus by coordinating support for those affected by human rights violations, strengthening media freedom, and promoting democratic change in those countries. Let me offer special thanks to Latvia's civil society organisations dedicated to helping civil society and people of those countries. Thank you for the job you've been doing!

Esteemed members of the Saeima,

Russia is an authoritarian country with a revisionist policy. Russia's political and military leadership live in the USSR-inspired sentiments and see the world through that prism. Russia's goal is to restore a model of the empire within its historical borders. –Russia seeks to challenge the lifestyle of democratic countries, questioning in particular the international standards of human rights and the notion of the rule of law.

The strained relationship between countries in the Euro-Atlantic area and Russia has existed for more than a decade; however, since the illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea and destabilisation in Eastern Ukraine, the tension has become dangerously high. Regrettably, the events of recent weeks concerning the Russia-Ukraine border are adding to a further escalation of that tension, which could result in hostile action against Ukraine by Russia or its mercenary fighters.

Russia is Latvia's largest neighbour and at the same time the one that poses the greatest political challenge. We are under no illusions about this. We know our neighbour and we have witnessed Russia's behaviour for centuries. It has been particularly violent during the 20th century.

Latvia's history provides clear evidence of its belonging to Europe, and of European values held over many centuries. The collapse of the Soviet Union has been one of the most positive events in the 20th century that has also enabled many nations captured by the Bolsheviks and confined to "the prison of peoples" regain their freedom and return to the community of European countries.

More and more, the world is taking notice of Russia's attempts to revise the historical role of the Soviet Union, diverting attention away from crimes and abuses it perpetrated. For us, it is quite clear when looking at the events of 1918, 1940 and 1991 that this is not just about history and the facts of history. Attempts are also present to revise the principles underlying global geopolitics after the Cold War and to return to the pre-war principles of

the division of spheres of influence. Historical references and analogies are being used to justify present-day ambitions.

In the case of Latvia, those attempts on the part of the Kremlin to rewrite our history can be regarded nothing less than attempts to question the sovereign choice of the Latvian people and Latvia's enduring presence in Europe and the transatlantic community.

The Latvian Foreign Ministry has expended time and energy to explain and present Latvia's history, its past and present, to our allies, and to members of our diaspora, for whom a shared historical consciousness and the sense of identity is vital for maintaining a link with Latvia. The Foreign Ministry will also be devoting due attention abroad to explaining what has happened in Latvia given its relevance and significance in terms of history and culture as well as in terms of realpolitik.

Regrettably, nothing indicates that Russia is going to change its behaviour in the coming years. Russia's political and military leadership continue fighting their imaginary ghosts. Russia consistently pursues a confrontational foreign policy. The past year has brought a vivid illustration of Russia's hostile actions not only in its neighbouring countries but also in more remote regions – the Balkans, the Middle East, Africa, North America, and South America.

All these years, Latvia has advocated a realistic approach in relations with Russia on both regional and global scale. While demonstrating a firm stance on principles-based matters and expressing a clear opinion on them it is equally important to keep the communication channels open in both bilateral relations and international organisations. Those are issues on which cooperation is possible given mutual interest. In other words, a well-devised cooperation strategy with Russia is not only possible but necessary.

International arms control, global climate change, international trade, Iran's nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament issue – those are but a few of the topics we should cooperate upon. We are also prepared to continue cooperation to address problems essential for our region in the format of the Council of the Baltic Sea States.

Dear participants,

In the contemporary world, cyber-attacks, hybrid threat, climate change, economic insecurity and disinformation, various side effects to the development of new technologies are some of the manifestations of the threats to global security.

China, too, is not only a region in Asia-Pacific but a global factor to be reckoned with. China is further reinforcing its self-sufficiency and applying various economic instruments, it often does so in pursuit of its own narrow geopolitical aims. The European Union and Latvia will continue to actively advocate for upholding human rights in China.

The past year has highlighted the desire of both China and Russia, in pursuit of their national interests and geopolitical goals, to influence separate Member States of the

European Union. Latvia has been consistently following and will continue to follow the 'One China' policy. We are prepared to develop constructive relations with China; that said, we find unacceptable China's pressure on one of the European Union's Member States – Lithuania. The European Union must more actively support its Member State.

Members of Parliament, Excellencies,

Accession to new international organisations has always played a prominent role in Latvia's foreign policy. Behind the façade of those institutions, it is important to keep an eye on the main goals of our country's membership. In Latvia's foreign policy, values do not have a poetic or metaphorical meaning. Belonging to the community of democratic values, loyalty to the principles of international law and membership in international organisations have a clear and direct impact on the security and sovereignty of our state as a whole.

The United Nations has come to the fore of Latvia's foreign policy agenda. This process has been facilitated by Latvia standing as candidate for a seat of non-permanent member in the United Nations Security Council for the term of 2026–2027 and the candidacies of Latvia's representatives being nominated as candidates for posts in UN bodies. It is especially gratifying that a lawyer from Latvia, Dr. Mārtiņš Pāparinskis, has been elected to the International Law Commission. This is a great success by Latvian diplomacy that will make it possible to contribute to the strengthening of the rule of law on a global scale.

The goal defined by Latvia for its membership of the United Nations is the strengthening of international legal order governed by international law instead of the policy of force and interests of great powers.

The Council of Europe as the most important regional human rights organisations has always held an essential place in the process of restoration of Latvia's independence, its strengthening, and the foreign policy of the country in general. In the nearest two years, Latvia is facing new tasks – to prepare to the full extent for its second presidency of the Council of Europe. This presents the opportunity for Latvia to promote its national interests. This is also the reform of the Council of Europe aimed at the strengthening of compliance with human rights in Europe, and the obligation of the countries to respect their international commitments and implement the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The European Union must be a strong, values-based union of national states upholding high standards for the rule of law, human rights and democracy. It is in Latvia's interests to maintain the current institutional balance so as to ensure the unique identity of the European Union as a union of national states.

We often hear from the European Union's capitals that the European Union must be an influential global player. If we want to be one, we must finally act like a leader both in the

Western Balkans and in the east and south of Europe. This must be realised in Berlin and Madrid, in Paris and Riga, as well as in Brussels and Rome.

The opinion is just taking shape in a discussion on the European Union's strategic autonomy. Latvia stands up for putting in place an open strategic autonomy, namely, one that renders the European Union less susceptible to the influence of third countries. At the same time, we also want the EU to remain open to like-minded partners – the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom, Japan, South Korea, Israel, and Australia.

It is essential for Latvia that a strong regulatory framework be established at the European Union level in the field of cyber security in order to reinforce the level of cyber security of every Member State and the European Union in general. The European Union should also build a dialogue with private technology companies. We must intensify a dialogue between the European Union and the United States of America. We must support the development of the European Union's Eastern Partnership in the digital sector and in strengthening their resilience to disinformation and hybrid threats.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

2021 saw the beginning of a new stage in the relations between the European Union and the United Kingdom. Latvia regards the United Kingdom as one of its key partners globally, which is reaffirmed by a declaration on bilateral cooperation between Latvia and the United Kingdom signed last year. We are committing ourselves to promote an active bilateral political dialogue, expand regional cooperation and further joint activities in the areas of security and defence.

Latvia firmly supports an individual approach to each Eastern Partnership country. Latvia advocates the deepening of the European Union's relations with Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. Latvia believes that the European Union should offer a long-term cooperation perspective to those countries supporting their gradual integration with the European Union's internal market. The European Union must also support the strengthening of the security and defence sectors of those three countries. They must be assisted with building resilience to various instruments of pressure wielded by Russia.

Increasing instability in Afghanistan in 2021 and the domestic political crisis in Kazakhstan at the beginning of this year reaffirmed the importance of the central Asian region in the context of the European Union's foreign policy and security interests. The European Union must continue active engagement in the entire Central Asian region. And Latvia will also provide its contribution at the regional level.

Latvia's position concerning the commissioning of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline remains firm: it is a project of a geopolitical character, which presents security threats to the European Union due to the promotion of its energy dependence on one supplier. Latvia will follow how the requirements of the European Union's Gas Directive are being applied in the context of Nord Stream 2. The rapid increase in energy prices in Europe reaffirms

that Latvia and other Baltic States must complete, as soon as possible, the initiated projects that promote their energy independence and diversify energy supply sources.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Regardless of the global pandemic and security challenges in our region, several positive developments have also taken place in the past year. This concerns Latvia's direction in foreign economic policy, foreign trade, mobilisations of investments, and Latvia's financial sector.

In 2022, Latvia will host the Three Seas Initiative Summit and Business Forum. The Three Seas Initiative was established in order to develop important infrastructure projects and reduce connectivity gaps in the energy, transport and digital communication sectors on the north-south axis of the European Union. For the first time, the Three Seas Initiative Parliamentary and Civil Society Forums will be held alongside the summit in Latvia with the aim of raising the profile of the initiative and enhancing its sustainable development.

In association with the Ministry of Economics, the Investment and Development Agency of Latvia, and other ministries, support will be provided to Latvia's companies with a high export capacity in the sectors of high value added. It is vital that we ensure support for increasingly broader export opportunities for traditional sectors of Latvia's economy such as transport and logistics, tourism, the timber industry, heavy engineering, food production, and pharmaceuticals, including with regard to entering new markets and mobilisation of investments, based on the interests of Latvian businesses and society.

A financial sector with a good reputation and ability to finance economic challenges is important to Latvia. In the financial sector, we must not discuss just the efforts for the prevention of money laundering. Much has been accomplished indeed to fight illicit funds in order to restore and highlight our country's good reputation. This is also appreciated by our international partners. At this point, we must learn to successfully manage those risks, to communicate and clarify. Nevertheless, we must be prepared that in the case the geopolitical situation deteriorates, companies and the financial sector must themselves be the first to understand and apply any new sanctions if they happen to be imposed.

Dear participants,

Let me thank our Latvian diaspora and diaspora organisations for their contribution to the representation and protection of Latvia's interests and its name worldwide. We continue to offer targeted support for the strengthening of the Latvian language and culture. We are building an increasingly active cooperation in economy and development of innovations, and we seek new opportunities for attracting talents to Latvia. A Forum of Latvians Working for International Organisations has been scheduled this year. The event will make it possible to mobilise the involvement of the Latvian diaspora in preparations for Latvia's candidacy for a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. The "soft

power” of the Latvian diaspora’s diplomatic work is a priceless contribution to our country’s economy and its security interests.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On several occasions today, I have referred to the values and principles of the Latvian State, principles that also characterise any free, independent and democratic country. Latvia is a parliamentary democracy, and our Parliament, the Saeima, is celebrating its centenary this year. I would like to offer my thanks to members of the Saeima for their contribution to the parliamentary diplomacy efforts. In the contemporary geopolitical climate, I wish the Saeima to hold up the banner of democratic values in the international arena, and to hold it firmly.

Since the restoration of its independence, the choices our country has made in foreign policy and its strategic choices have been the right ones. Multilateral diplomacy based on international law, membership of international organisations, support for democratic values and international rule of law have become an integral part of Latvia’s foreign policy doctrine. This strategic choice made by Latvia in its foreign policy protects us up to this day.

The chief values of the Latvian Foreign Service are integrity, cooperation and courage. Those values are the solemn responsibility of any Latvian diplomat. January is the month when we mark the international de jure recognition of Latvia – the month of Latvian diplomacy. Therefore, I wish to thank every Latvian diplomat and staff member of the Foreign Service for their professional performance, resolve and teamwork invested by each and every one of them at their workplace and the time they gave in service to their country and around the world in 2021.

I wish that integrity, cooperation and courage be values which unite all of us this year and in the future – and that these values may unite us with Latvia’s friends and allies across the globe.

Thank you for your attention!