



Check against delivery

Europe Lecture 2014 – Dr. Vīķe-Freiberga, October 28th, The Hague

May I say how happy and glad I am to be here among you and to be participating in a yearly event called the Europe Lecture. The very fact that The Hague and the Netherlands has gone to the trouble of instituting such a tradition is something that I find *très sympathique*. I am truly delighted to be here and honored to be among you on this occasion.

The topic for this year's European lecture is European security and this turns out to be singularly appropriate for the year 2014, which has seen a number of unexpected developments. These have not exactly been conducive to an increased sense of security among a great many Europeans, particularly those living on the Eastern margins of the European continent. But the year 2014 also marks the centenary and bi-centenary of memorable historical events, which have been commemorated in various ways. I'd like to start by referring to them briefly, because I think that the historical perspective is always useful to gain a clearer understanding of the present situation and its prospects for the future. Granted that humans don't really learn from history, granted that an extrapolation from past data is always a risky undertaking, particularly so in history and politics, I do believe that a glance back in history can help a good deal to better understand the present.

1814: the Congress of Vienna. On this bicentenary year of this event, books have appeared that have presented that Congress, its results and its agreements as having been led by true statesmen and successful architects of security, whose wise decisions then supposedly instituted a period of 100 years peace and stability. I beg to differ with this over-generous assessment, not just because before the congress was over, Napoleon had come back with his 100 days, and bloodshed continued until that phase of history only terminated at the battle of Waterloo. The Vienna Congress may have been a great victory for the established order in a number of countries, yet by 1848 there was a revolutionary movement in many parts of Europe, which was not exactly peaceful. The war between Russia and Turkey happened during that supposedly peaceful century. Great-Britain was involved in the Crimean war, which caused even more loss of lives off the battlefield than on it, so that the genteel Florence Nightingale felt compelled to go to Crimea to help, became the Lady of the Lamp, nursing sick and wounded soldiers and creating



nursing as a profession through her example. There was the 1905 war between the Japanese and the Russians, just after the turn of the 20th century; there was the bloody 1905 Revolution in the Tsarist Empire. The whole century between 1814 and 1914 truly was not the stable and peaceful century that we like to imagine. And did I forget to mention 1870 and the war between France and Germany? The Congress of Vienna may have been a great victory for some of the great European powers, but the seeming peace and stability it instituted only masked the fires of enmity and conflict, of revolt and revolution that kept flaring up periodically across the whole continent.

Other interesting books have come out recently, which talk about the leaders of 1914, just a hundred years ago, as sleepwalkers blindly stumbling into the First World War, as opposed to the great statesmen of the Congress of Vienna, who had been true architects of a peaceful future. Here again, this contrast may be a bit harsh on the former, even though there is a great deal of truth in that assessment. It does seem as if the nations of Europe stumbled into the Great War almost without being aware of all the consequences of their actions. I certainly doubt whether any among them could foresee in 1914 the number of lives that the war would cost nor anticipate the dramatic changes that it would bring to the political configuration of the European continent. Who would have anticipated the disappearance of three major, powerful empires: the Austro-Hungarian empire, the Tsarist empire and the Ottoman Empire? Not that Empires or imperialism as such were wiped off the face of the earth. Great-Britain still survived as a vast colonial empire and in fact solidified its positions, France also went on to expand its influence, including gaining Morocco as its protectorate and the Netherlands was still in possession of its East Indies territories. Europe was still a continent of global powers, but it was also a hotbed of extremist ideas and revolutionary ideologies, which appealed to broad masses of its populations. The deep sense of *revanchisme* and the bitterness in Germany might well be attributed to the very harsh conditions and penalties imposed on Prussia as a loser at the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Yet elsewhere as well the Twenties and the Thirties of the 20th century were a period when the intellectuals as well as the proletariat all across Europe were seduced by extremist ideologies, communism or socialism on the one hand, and Nazism or Fascism on the other. It is a truly sobering experience to read through the publications of those two decades in Europe and to find so many names, otherwise known and respected for their intellectual or artistic achievements, who had nothing but admiration (if not blind adoration) for the inhumanly repressive regimes that both Stalin and Hitler were then putting in place. Just think, for instance, of the great French poet Aragon and the marvelous poetry the man has written, and try and



reconcile this with his apparently sincere admiration of the beauties and the benefits that communism would bring to the world, even while news of Stalin's bloody purges and mass deportations were beginning to filter across the tightly guarded borders of the USSR. Political naïveté in its most extreme forms seems to have been the order of the day, paired with a remarkable degree of political cynicism. Totalitarianism and the glorification strength and power were the common denominator of these two ideologies that seemed so seductive to so many well-educated and presumably well-intentioned Europeans of the day.

The Second World War turned out to be as bad as the first in terms of loss of lives of soldiers on the battlefield, but it was unprecedented in the number of civilian lives lost. No previous period in European history, even that of the Black Death, had seen such vast millions being killed, either by deliberated genocide, through aerial bombardments of cities, and the inevitable loss of civilian lives as armies moved back and forth along moving front lines, as they did in my own country, Latvia. We were invaded from the East and from the West in turn, and suffered two different occupations, with foreign armies marching back and forth across our territory.

At the end of that war in 1945, however, a half century of true peace and stability was introduced in at least one half of the continent, along with the privileges of freedom, democracy and growing prosperity, but the rest of Europe remained very much behind the Iron Curtain, which was not just a metaphor for radically different ideologies, but a cruelly real physical barrier. The Berlin wall was very much a physical wall. Every outer border of every communist country, whether parts of the Soviet Union or of any of the satellite countries like Czechoslovakia, was enclosed by barbed wire, minefields, watchtowers, armed soldiers and guard dogs. Everywhere you had strict surveillance and merciless punishment for anybody bold enough and courageous enough to try and escape what was supposed to be a workers' paradise.

Meanwhile, Western Europe, the Netherlands included, lived happily ever after for the next 50 years, almost like in the fairy tales. They had recovered their sovereignty after being freed from foreign occupation. They recovered from the war, they produced, they traded, they prospered, but, most of all, they seemed to finally have drawn the right conclusions from the devastation brought on by the last World wars. A quiet, but truly revolutionary idea was born in the minds of two remarkable people – Jean Monnet and Robert Schumann - who saw that what had been going on in Europe for centuries was maybe not the best way for nations to live together. The idea they got might well have come from the first lines of a fable by the French fabulist La



Fontaine: *“L’aigle et le hibou leurs querelles cessèrent, et firent tant qu’ils s’embrassèrent”*. At that point the German eagle and the French owl actually did just that: Instead of three major wars in less than a century over resource-rich territories such as the Ruhrgebiet, or the Saarland, instead of slaying generation after generation of each other’s young men, devastating their civilian populations and desolating their countryside, why not actually pool those resources, share in the ensuing economic growth and mutually benefit from it? As you well know, Italy then wished to join as well as a partner, and so did the Benelux countries.

All this happened so quietly and so gradually, without great noise or fanfare, that the thing did not exactly attract the most tremendous notice, let alone excitement, across the ocean in the United States or Canada, or for that matter – elsewhere in the world. Indeed, it seems that for several decades many Europeans themselves did not even realize just how lucky they had been to have had men of such vision guiding their fates. Instead of the jingoistic patriotism of the pre-war years and the perfervid calls to arms, the aim now was to persuade one’s contemporaries of the wisdom of collaboration, of cooperation, of reaching decisions through discussion, debate, argument, even quarrels, but not by armed conquest.

And as you well know, that initial core of collaborating countries gradually became a focus that attracted others like iron filings to the poles of a magnet. The initial six became twelve and then fifteen. Then came the historic breakthrough that many had hoped for, but few had expected: first the fall of the Berlin wall and then – after the unsuccessful putsch of August 1991 - the collapse of a Soviet Union that for so long had seemed invincible. All of a sudden, independent countries reappeared on the map, which for so long had been only satellites, pale shadows of themselves, submitted to the political will and military might of the central power in the Kremlin. Countries like Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which literally had been erased from world maps after their illegal annexation by the USSR, shook of their shackles and re-declared their independence. Until then, you literally needed a magnifying glass to see the little dotted lines that barely hinted at their existence as separate entities within the huge territories of the Soviet Union, which – quite incorrectly, by the way – the world had got in the bad habit of referring to as “Russia”.

Friends in Sweden have admitted to me that, in their youth, when they took their geography lessons in school, they had maps of Europe where, by a strange coincidence, the legends were not at the bottom, as is usually done, but right on top to where the Baltic countries were



geographically located. A curious gesture - appeasement at the cost of objectivity – born of an excessive fear of offending an extremely large and powerful neighbor, with whom profitable business relations should be maintained at all costs. Several generations of Swedish youth thus grew up with only the vaguest understanding of what had been happening and continued to happen across the Baltic Sea, just 150 kilometers away from their island of Gotland.

I remember, during my years as a Canadian university professor, when I regularly attended Social science congresses in Sweden, taking a day off for a boat ride on the Baltic Sea. When people on the boat asked me where I was from and I said: “I’m from across the ocean”, they knew all about hockey and all about Canada. But when I pointed out that I had actually been born there, across the sea from them, they would inevitably comment: “Oh, so you are a Russian?” When I would protest: “No, I was born in Latvia”, they would say: “That couldn’t be, for that is Russia there, on the other side”. That gave me a truly chilling feeling: not only had my native country been wiped off the map, but the very existence of the Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian people was being denied by their closest neighbors in the West.

Nevertheless, when the time came for the so-called Singing revolutions in the Baltic countries, the people of Sweden became quite active and vocal in support for their strivings for independence. The challenge then was to spread this recognition all across Europe. When the Soviet Union finally did implode and collapse, the first task of the formerly captive nations was to remind the world that they did live and breathe as separate entities and that their countries were back on the map as independent nations. The very simple fact of their existence being acknowledged was already an achievement and meant a great deal for the people concerned. The next step was to receive recognition for their legitimacy and only then could the hard work of reintegrating the free world really begin.

With the fall of the Iron Curtain, the last vestiges of the Second World War were finally being erased from the face of Europe. Not just a part of it, but the whole continent could now look forward to following the path so successfully traced by the West half a century before. Becoming part of the European Union then seemed a logical next step and one country after another knocked on the door at Brussels, expressing its readiness to start accession talks and - fortunately for them – getting a response. After decades of isolation, oppression and totalitarian rule, there was a keen desire to rejoin a community of nations to which we felt we legitimately belonged. There was both a popular and a political will to revive democratic constitutions,



develop functioning democratic governments, and take all the painful steps necessary to switch from a centralized command economy to the competitive environment of free markets. The new candidate countries were ready to do what it takes to adopt the *acquis communautaire* in as brief a time as possible, even if it had taken Western Europe decades to develop it. It took a great deal of effort and good will on the part of the populations, there inevitably was a social cost to it, yet the results were felt to be worth the effort.

For the first time in the history of the European continent, so many countries freely decided to join forces, not one of them being submitted to it by force. There was no invasion from Western Europe to the East. The United State of America was absolutely not involved in the process. Brussels did not impose anything on us, but only asked that we accept what was already there. Not that there was a hundred percent enthusiasm for the process, either from the old countries or the new. In every single country of the European Union, you were sure to find people to say it was a bad idea for any one of dozens of different reasons. In Malta, for instance, several referenda ended up in a negative vote. Do you know why? It was mainly because of songbirds! The Maltese considered it as a sacred right, and a cultural inheritance to hunt the little birds that migrated south from northern Europe in the fall and then back again in the spring. Yet the European Union had a long list of birds that should not be hunted. The Maltese were split right down the middle on the question, and I think it's not before the third referendum that they finally agreed that the gains and advantages of joining the European Union outweighed the loss of their ancient tradition of hunting songbirds...

In Latvia as well there were those who wondered whether we should jump into the embrace of another union, having but recently escaped from the forced embrace of one. Fortunately, the majority of Latvians were able to see the obvious, glaring differences between the Soviet Union and the European Union, between being crushed by military force and having the privilege of making a free choice.

For the countries, like Latvia, which had common borders with the new Russian Federation, the implicit assumption was that the people of Russia should be rather happy than otherwise about having neighbors who were working hard at consolidating their new-found democracies. While Russia was much too large to contemplate joining a group of smaller countries, it certainly had nothing to fear from the European Union. Unfortunately, it seemed that Russia had so closely identified itself with the now-defunct Soviet Union, that it saw its demise as a catastrophe, rather



than an opportunity to create something much better. In this, it was unwittingly encouraged by those in the Western world, who had grown rather fond of the divisions of a bipolar world. When the Russian Federation started making claims to major rights of influence over the fates of its neighbors, many in the West sagely nodded their heads in assent, taking for granted some mysterious God-given right by Russia to possess and maintain huge tracts of the Euro-Asian continent as their privileged “sphere of influence”.

Curiously enough, very few countries (like Belarus) were ready to openly and willingly acknowledge their wish to remain under some other country’s sphere of influence. Typically, it is something that is imposed by more powerful countries on a smaller and weaker neighbor and that is readily acknowledged by those who themselves live far enough away to feel safe about their own security. The principle is the same as in the myths and legends about a virgin, like Andromeda, being fed to a dragon, in order to keep it from endangering the rest of the population. The “sphere of influence” countries would then be used as sacrificial victims to be offered on the altar of one’s own peace and prosperity.

It seems that the leaders of the Russian Federation most definitely see the world as constituting a zero-sum game: if a reunited Europe was getting bigger and stronger, then inevitably Russia should be shrinking – if not in size, then in influence and importance. The strength of the EU came to be seen as a blow to their pride and an insult to their ambitions to greatness. This meant that no other country bordering with Russia should be allowed even closer collaboration with the EU, even if it had no obvious prospects of ever becoming another member. That is why Russia reacted so dramatically when Ukraine (after long years of hesitation and considerable reservations) reached the point of signing a simple Association agreement with Europe. President Yanukovich, who was not exactly a Europhile, nor exactly the most exemplary democrat in the world, had actually submitted to popular and political pressure in his country and was just about to go to Vilnius – since Lithuania was presiding the European Union at the time – to sign an agreement that had taken a long time to prepare. Just the night before, he was summoned to Moscow by President Putin and the next day he announced that he had changed his mind and would not fly to Vilnius after all. That is when the crowds in Kiev started congregating on the *Maidan* in protest, precipitating the events that we have seen in 2014.

The Crimea has been invaded and annexed by the Russian Federation in a *blitzkrieg* so swift and so successful, that it brings back nasty memories of analogous events in 1938-39. No war has



been officially declared against Ukraine, but a grotesque charade is being played out, where men and heavy military equipment are regularly being shipped into Eastern Ukraine, even as the world passively looks on and Russia pretends that it has nothing to do with the “rebels” who have suddenly sprung up to demand “protection” against supposedly unbearable “oppression by fascist Ukrainian nationalists”. The sovereignty of Ukraine has been attacked through military intervention, its territorial integrity has been destroyed and the very capacity of the country to survive has been put under threat.

When Ukraine joined a nuclear-free zone and gave up its nuclear arms in 1994, a Memorandum of Security Assurances, guaranteeing its territorial integrity and sovereignty, was co-signed in Budapest by none other than the Russian Federation for one, but also by United Kingdom and the United States of America. The Russian Federation thus stands in serious breach of this international agreement.

Throughout this sad year 2014, President Putin and his closest associates have been resorting to a public rhetoric that seems increasingly aggressive – harking back to the worst periods of the Cold War or even the time of Stalinism. Far from recognizing its own transgressions, the Russian Federation has been systematically denying reality and turning everything upside down, by claiming instead that it is the one being attacked.

So far, the European Union has reacted with protest and disapproval, as well as with limited economic sanctions. The winter is coming to a continent heavily dependent on Russia for its energy and who knows how things will develop within the next months. To my humble understanding, Europe is now faced with very serious decisions, which will have a lasting impact on its own security as well as that of its Eastern neighbors. Can the Union afford to close its eyes to the misfortunes of others and continue worrying about its own internal problems, or will it take serious steps to at least think more seriously about its own security?

Quite obviously, the economic situation in the EU has experienced serious problems ever since 2008 and 2009. Growth has slowed down, there are serious job losses and many countries are accumulating enormous foreign debts. What started as a financial crisis turned into a serious economic crisis, and by now one might as easily talk about a crisis of Capitalism, such as it has developed at the beginning of this new millennium. There seems to be a great deal about capitalism that should be seriously overhauled. The financial system needs be seriously



overhauled, starting with a closer supervision of private banks and their liberties to gamble with the savings of their depositors. Labor laws, which protect those who have jobs, but do not allow the young to enter the job market, need to be seriously reexamined. And, while we are at it, maybe democracy, as we now practice it, could do with some overhauling as well, since citizens seem to become more and more skeptical about what is known as “the European project”...

Ten years ago, when Latvia joined the EU, most of us were quite enthusiastic about our prospects. We have lately had some setbacks and continue to face serious challenges. Some soul-searching and reevaluation of our tactics and strategies seems definitely called for. For all of that, I think that Europeans tend to be much too self-critical, self-centered and self-examining to realize the great potential, resources and assets that they still have at their command. Those assets and those resources are still there. The unprecedented peace, stability, security and prosperity, that Western and Northern Europeans have enjoyed since the end of the last World War should continue reigning over the whole of the continent. It should be guarded and cherished and remain as the inheritance of your children and grandchildren as you have received it from your parents and grandparents. There is no guarantee that any system, no matter how perfect, and how satisfactory, is simply going to continue, all on its own, without us having to worry about it. Changing circumstances create the need for serious adjustments, including the need to change habits to which we have become attached. But it can be done. It has been done. The new member-countries have shown how quickly social and economic change can be brought about, if only there is serious will about it. As Shakespeare said: *If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly*. Since 2004, 13 countries have done just that. I think the rest of Europe can also do whatever needs to be done and do it quickly enough to produce results.

Peace and security are precious resources. We have to make sure that we guard them from threats. One way to do it, is to make sure that we do not neglect our national and collective defenses. It may be a sad state of affairs, this need to spend our money on defense, when we would rather spend it on more enjoyable things. But those who are not ready to defend themselves lay themselves at risk of losing everything they hold dear. My native country had hoped to remain safe after the First World War, by declaring itself neutral, standing aside and wishing to be left alone. It didn't work. Belgium had declared itself to be neutral. It did not prevent it from being invaded. There is no guarantee that larger countries will be spared such a fate just because of their size, for there is always someone larger than you. One always has to be



ready to defend one's principles, one's territory, one's sovereignty, one's democracy. One has to work for it, and – if need arises - one has to fight for it.

The EU has found out to its cost that economic prosperity cannot keep growing exponentially forever and ever. Economies, like everything in nature, move in cycles, which means that they have their downs as well as their ups. Yet the resources that Europe possesses – social as well as economical - are so remarkably, almost scandalously, superior to those of so many other countries in the world, that I don't think Europeans should indulge in self-pity and in moaning and groaning about the bitterness of their fate. When I look back in history, I do not see any other period of European history where people have been freer, actually free to choose their individual path in life, and where countries have had more opportunity to achieve growth and development. Obviously, nothing will be achieved by simply sitting back and doing nothing. Hard work will be required in most people's lives, but never so hard as it was, right here in Europe, just as few generations ago.

If you are not students of history, I would encourage you to become so. It truly does put things in perspective. For me, at my age, one doesn't even need to read history books. The pages of my life are sufficiently thick that I remember the war and the years of its aftermath. I saw tanks being hit by planes across the river and going up in smoke. I saw a whole city on the horizon, burning throughout the night. I saw planes flying so low in the daytime that I could see the face of the pilots. For months I sat in cellars every night, with planes droning overhead and bombs coming down. As you sit there, hearing the whine of the bomb keep rising in pitch as it falls, each whizzing bomb feels like it is aiming nowhere else but directly at the top of your head. You breathe a sigh of relief when it doesn't, but by then the next one is already coming down. I saw a Germany destroyed, devastated, humiliated by the war they had started and lost. I spent part of my childhood in refugee camps, at first in barracks that had been used to hold prisoners of war in Germany. Those were nowhere like the accommodations at the *Hotel des Indes*, which I have been privileged to have here in the Hague. Things do change... There were seven millions of us refugees from communism in Europe those days. Europe could not absorb them and so sent them away, to any country that would take them. Now Europe is receiving new refugees and it still has the problem of working out how to absorb them.

My message to my own people and to all Europeans is: please remember and count your blessings. That is the first thing you ought to do. But secondly, do not despair and do not



complain, even when things seem to go wrong. Your ancestors, most of them, were surely worse off than you are. Many people elsewhere in the world are begging and knocking on the door of Europe, some risking their lives for the hope of having the privilege to live here. Meanwhile, you have the privilege of playing your own role in making Europe what it can be and what it should be in the future. You may have to debate or even quarrel with your neighbor about what exactly should be done, how and when, but you do have that chance. In spite of what has been happening in Ukraine this year, let us hope that the rest of our continent can remain at peace and we will continue to settle our differences without weapons in hand, but simply through recourse to dialogue, power of persuasion, force of argument, and clarity of logic.

Ladies and gentlemen, I think Europe has a chance, but we are the ones who have to make sure that it gets it.

Check against delivery

Europe Lecture 2014 – Dr. Viķe-Freiberga, October 28th, The Hague