

RIGA - At the opening of the annual foreign and security policy forum 'Riga Conference' on Sept. 14, Latvian President Andris Berzins said that Latvia wishes to join the eurozone, as well as become a full-fledged member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). "We are looking for an opportunity to join the European single currency, as well as become a member of the OECD," Berzins emphasized.

"No doubt, the world surrounding us is constantly changing. To our surprise, it is changing faster and greater than we could expect or wished to. Increasingly, there is more that happens, there is more information, there is more knowledge and we become smarter. Yet - there are more questions than answers," the president said in his opening address.

The 2-day Conference took place at the House of the Blackheads in Riga's Old Town, and was attended by top-level politicians, businesspeople and academicians.

"The subjects selected for the panels are very topical: the necessity to rearrange global finances and particularly its mental state, transformations in global polarity, diplomacy of power versus diplomacy of common sense, a tendency of self-isolation and consequent risk of denial of fundamental liberties, new global challenges and failed responses, new encouraging opportunities and inevitable self-deception. These are just some points put on the table for the day and night debates of the conference," the president added.

He said that Latvia, too, is not sidelined and as an open society actively contributes to building a world that is free, stable and democratic. "We build on our strength and we don't stall on our weaknesses. Latvia is proud of its achievements. We are a responsible and reliable partner in NATO and the European Union. During the past two decades we built a cohesive society, restructured the economy and decisively came back from the recent setback of financial turmoil," Berzins added.

The Baltic and Nordic countries must not talk about strengthening mutual cooperation, but closer integration, Latvian Defense Minister Artis Pabriks (Unity) said at a discussion about NATO after the Chicago Summits at the Conference on Sept. 15. "We must talk about the Baltic-Nordic region within NATO borders," the defense minister said, adding that these plans are restricted due to the fact that not all Nordic countries are NATO members.

Both Norwegian Defense Minister Espen Barth Eide and NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow agreed that closer cooperation between the Baltic and Nordic countries within NATO is necessary. Eide and Vershbow said enhanced Baltic-Nordic cooperation within the alliance would be a good, smart defense initiative, which would achieve an effective result with limited financial resources.

The Latvian defense minister emphasized that "we cannot make NATO more capable without improving cooperation in the region." At the same time, Pabriks said that there is still much work to do in strengthening cooperation between the Baltic and Nordic countries.

During a discussion session titled 'Is the Euro the Problem or the Answer?' on Friday, Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves said that the economic crisis first affected those countries who were outside of the eurozone, especially smaller countries.

"We [eurozone] are in better condition than other countries," the Estonian president said, expressing satisfaction that the Estonian people also understand this, as more than half of the country's population support eurozone membership.

Ilves was optimistic about the future development of events within the eurozone, emphasizing that "we must have a more optimistic point of view about our chances than we do at the moment."

Former Danish Foreign Minister Uffe Ellemann-Jensen, who is currently the chairman of the Baltic Development Forum, had a similar point of view, emphasizing that the first to be affected by the crisis are those outside the eurozone. According to Jensen, a relatively small debt crisis has grown into a European identity crisis, from which he sees closer cooperation as a way out.

Lithuanian Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius also pointed out that the key to overcoming the crisis is closer integration. He reiterated that Europe has overcome crisis after crisis, and each one of them has led to closer integration.

Latvian Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis (Unity) emphasized that this is not eurozone crisis, as it is a debt and economic crisis that has hit separate countries. According to the Latvian prime minister, the main medium- and long-term problems of the eurozone was the fact that countries did not comply with the Maastricht criteria, thus it is important to implement a control mechanism for the criteria.

During the discussion called 'Will Global Economic Restructuring Bring the West Back to the Game?', Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics said that the economic crisis has not dramatically affected the European Union's role around the world. "The EU is still very attractive, and there are countries who wish to become members," Rinkevics explained.

At the same time, he warned that if political and economic problems within the EU and the region are not solved, the bloc's attractiveness could become a challenge.

During the discussion, Croatian Foreign Minister Vesna Pusic also pointed out that the EU has not lost its attractiveness, and it is only expanding into its geographical borders. Pusic said that both the EU and Croatia have changed a lot since 2001, when Zagreb began accession talks. She said that back then, much attention was paid to common EU values, but now everything concentrates around the European Central Bank.

The Croatian foreign minister emphasized that there has been a change in the perception of the road the EU must take. She said that the EU does not have to become a federation, but that a balance must be found between competition and cooperation, and that EU policies, including foreign policy, must be based on common values.

Original article on the Baltic Times [webpage](#) .