

Ambassador Vos,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am deeply honoured to be here tonight, addressing an organisation and its members who have done that much to develop ties between Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the United States. Thank you for this honour.

It is no accident that only the U.S. has given birth to a private foundation devoted, initially to assisting and later to fostering co-operation between the three Baltic countries and the country of origin of so many people. Yes, there are government sponsored organisations elsewhere with similar goals and objectives, but the privately run and sponsored USBF is unique.

Yet it should be no surprise. The United States was one of those countries that took a principled stand on the occupation and forcible annexation of our countries; Americans understood the value of freedom and even more they understood how precious a gift it is.

Throughout the Cold War it was U.S. leadership in non-recognition policy that kept alive the hope of Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians that they were not forgotten. Through the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe, where I had the privilege to work for almost a decade, the U.S. showed it had not forgotten us. And I think it needs to be kept in mind that we remember those people who helped us.

The U.S. has also been the country that accepted so many of our parents and us as well, when we fled from communist and Nazi terror; and allowed us to prosper. I look at my own family, who arrived here in the 1950s almost penniless and fifteen years later could send their sons to Columbia and Princeton. It is the same spirit, that anyone who learns the language and accepts the rules of the game, and by dint of hard work and perseverance can become anything he or she wants, that underlies the success of the Baltic countries today.

That success, I am convinced, is miraculous. Fifteen years ago when I arrived here in Washington to take up the post of ambassador, we still had Russian troops based in our countries; we were poor, with 50 years of stultifying and stupefying occupation and terror behind us. The standard image of our countries was of grey people, with grey lives living in grey apartment blocks. Our GDP per capita in Estonia at least in 1992, the first full year of re-established Estonian independence was 702 dollars placing us among the poor developing nations. Last year GDP per capita in my country reached 20,300 dollars, surpassing Portugal, a country that was already a member of both NATO and the EEC when we were still occupied. Nor is this a result of resource-generated income. It is the result of hard, dogged work.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

The Baltic States are no longer transitional economies, they are no longer “new democracies”, Seventeen years after the end of the World War II and the re-establishment of liberal democracy in the countries of Western Europe, no one still talked about new democracies. Especially because neither they nor we were new democracies, but rather restored democracies. Nor are we, having achieved or surpassed the economic levels of countries today

that were in the EU and NATO back when we were still captive nations with command economies, transitional economies. These terms are outdated and should be scrapped, at least when we talk about Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

This is all more true, because looking at the broader U.S.-European, that is to say trans-Atlantic relationship today, then it is clear that the Baltic countries are among the most committed allies in the NATO alliance. We have soldiers in Iraq and in Estonian case, the most dangerous part of Afghanistan, Helmand Province. We are in Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina. We may be small but looking at our populations and what our representation is, we punch way above our weight.

Why is that? Why are we doing those things? For me, it is clear: we do what we do because we share those core values of liberty, freedom of speech and expression, the rule of law and respect for human rights. We know that policies of convenience, of expedience and turning a blind eye to a lack of democracy, to the mere appearance of rule of law and disregard for human rights among the countries of the West led to the loss of our independence sixty-eight years ago.

This is why the Baltic countries stood firm in supporting the Membership Action Plan for Ukraine and Georgia at the NATO summit in Bucharest at the beginning of this month. It is why we three are among the strongest supporters of a vigorous neighbourhood policy in the European Union.

Today, we in the Baltic countries, as in the United States, know that liberty and democracy and the prosperity that stems from them, cannot be taken for granted. We live in a new era, when the Manichean battle of ideologies that characterised the Cold War has been superseded by competition between democratic market economies and authoritarian capitalism, often to the advantage, at least in short-run, of the latter. The battle for and the use of resource wealth for foreign policy ends recalls a long gone mercantile era. For which we have yet to find an adequate intellectual framework or a policy response. Terrorism, the spread of anti-western ideologies with respect neither for human rights nor rule of law remain a challenge for Western democracies.

These are our new challenges. Today, with the Baltic countries' independence restored, with our commitment to democracy and defence of liberty and rule of law at the core of our being, I am proud that our four countries, small and large stand together in NATO and throughout the world. For us, that's no small accomplishment.

Thank you.