

Honorable President Andris Bērziņš,
Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends,

I hope you will forgive me if during the first evening of this memorable, yet official state visit I digress from politics and the economy, and shall instead speak about the deeper roots that connect Estonia and Latvia. These roots are like a network, the individual threads of which are fragile, yet which together form a solid bond.

Livonia, one of our oldest administrative-territorial formations, has entwined the fate of Estonia and Latvia for 800 years. My own historical home in Mulgimaa is only five kilometers from the Latvian border as the crow flies. The word Mulk comes from Latvian. The economic success of my home, as well as that of neighboring farmsteads derived from Riga. Riga was our capital to which we sent flax, the source of our wealth at the time.

In 1925 the first democratic head of the Latvian state, Janis Čakste – whose grave, upon which I have just laid a wreath, was a symbol of silent, yet visible resistance during the years of occupation – demonstrated how thoroughly we are connected by saying: "There is no separate Estonian people, there is no separate Latvian people; instead, there is a joint Estonian-Latvian people." I am not able to be quite as categorical, but I dare say that Estonians and Latvians are relatives through the Livonians.

We both rough our sleighs in summer and mend our carts in the winter – metaphors for prudence that only we in northern Europe understand. We are all pragmatic and fairly industrious. But relatives, as it happens, are also different. One of these differences was described by Rein Sepp, an Estonian translator from the northern Latvian village of Ipiki or Ööbiku, who passed on to our generations world-renowned texts right at the heart of cultural history ranging from the Niebelungenlied to the Poetic Edda. The following sentence is his: "When you come across an Estonian in the street, then before he looks you in the eye, he glances down towards the ground, whereas the Latvian first looks up to heaven."

People, both similar and different, create the network that connects Estonia and Latvia. They include artists and politicians, entrepreneurs and sailors, and the likes of the later head of the Estonian government in exile, Tõnis Kint, who in November 1918 studied at the Riga

Polytechnic Institute. At this time the university corporation Vironia unanimously decided to join the Estonian army. The Estonian War of Independence soon brought Tõnis Kint back to Riga – on an Estonian armored train in defense of Latvia. Both countries' freedom was important to him. When talking about the present, let us look around ourselves and we will see, for instance, the current Parliamentary Secretary of the Latvian Ministry of Defense, Veiko Spolitis, and the promoter of Livonian culture, Valts Ernštreits. They both studied at Tartu University twenty years ago. They are Latvian patriots, yet they understand and speak Estonian.

This, of course, brings to mind the fact that since 2010 we have a joint translation prize, which will hopefully further encourage translations from one language to the other, and thus bring our cultures even closer. An up-to-date Estonian-Latvian and Latvian-Estonian dictionary is also being compiled. Nevertheless, the Livonian language remains a historical link between our nations. It deserves wider acknowledgment and attentive study.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Kristjan Jaak Peterson, a man born in Riga, who laid the foundations of Estonian poetry, is famous for walking from Tartu to Riga. In 1925 the Estonian Head of State, Jüri Jaakson took a train to Riga on his first state visit. Today, I also arrived by train to Riga's central station directly from Tallinn. The journey between the two capitals took five and a half hours. With an ordinary train it would have lasted three hours longer.

The solution to this situation must be Rail Baltic, connecting Helsinki with Poland via Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and then on to the rest of Europe. Rail Baltic is the most important project in our co-operation, and it has the support of the European Commission. As we have always been people of the sea, we are used to directing our gaze towards the horizon, thinking big, and being bold, inventive, and responsible towards ourselves and our companions.

Responsibility is characteristic of Estonian-Latvian relations, an area in which we do not have any problems, and it is characteristic of our countries' actions during the recent economic crisis. I would like to give recognition to Latvian governments both past and present and, of course, to the Latvian people for their understanding of numerous tough decisions.

The sentence published in the newspaper Bribwà Seme to welcome Estonian armored trains to

Riga in October 1919 – "By supporting us you also support yourselves" – is as true today as it was back then. Estonia is a firm supporter of Latvia joining the eurozone and we are prepared to share our experience in fulfilling the Maastricht criteria. We believe in Latvia because Latvia is important for us. We are important trading partners and investors for each other. Furthermore, from the perspective of Estonians and Latvians both our countries are major economic powers.

Our officials and government ministers meet more often in Brussels than in Riga or Tallinn. On the one hand, this makes sense and seems to be the right thing to do for two European Union partners. I, however, would like to encourage our officials to meet more often in Tallinn or Riga, or why not, for that matter, in Valga-Valka. Our finance ministries and central banks have set a good example of the potential gains that can derive from co-operation generated by joint interests – or, if you will, special interests.

On top of this, if we consider the Baltic-Nordic dimension, we shall see a region in Europe where it is good to live and one that should rightly be influential, successful, transparent, innovative, supportive of civil society, and secure. The last one of them, security, also means that we must be smart and responsible in developing our nations' defenses.

President Bērziņš,

I thank you for the invitation to visit Riga, which as the capital of Livonia has influenced the economic and cultural life of at least half of Estonia. This is the same Riga where my great-uncle, Hans Rebane, worked as the last pre-war Estonian ambassador, and the very Riga where today I personally, along with many other Estonians, have lots of friends and good companions.

Now, however, it is time to raise our glasses in honor of everything that connects Estonia and Latvia, and that connects us all.

Long live Latvia!