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OFFICE OF EDUCATION AND THE SUCCESSOR GENERATIONS

REMARKS BY HER EXCELLENCY, PRESIDENT VAIRA VIKE-FREIBERGA
TO THE ATLANTIC COUNCIL OF THE UNITED STATES

YOUNG ATLANTICIST SERIES: A YOUNG ATLANTICIST DISCUSSION WITH LATVIAN
PRESIDENT VAIRA VIKE-FREIBERGA

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MR. KEMPE: Welcome. First of all, welcome to President Vaira Vike-Freiberga. But welcome also to all of you to the inaugural webcast under the auspices of the Atlantic Council's Young Atlanticist Program. This program aims to bring together youth from the United States, Europe and from elsewhere around the world for discussions on values and issues that we think bind us all. As I keep telling people around the Atlantic Council, if Europe and the United States can get together, we won't solve all the problems of the world, but we can be sure that none of the problems are going to be solved if we don't get together.

While this webcast is a new wrinkle in the program, The Atlantic Council has quite a long history of this sort of work through academic associates that we now have at 300 U.S.-colleges and universities and the network of the Youth Atlantic Treaty Association around all of Europe and NATO countries and some partner countries. We have run numerous conferences, an essay contest, and many other activities and we are now truly excited to move in this new digital age and direction; harnessing technology to bring together students and young professionals here, but also to bring together a wider community of Atlanticists.

So I want to welcome not only the students and young professionals here, but also the schools across the country viewing us remotely through the web. We're looking forward to getting the questions of those who are in touch with us via the web, the e-mail address is webcast@acus.org. And I want to encourage all of you who are tuned in to visit our website frequently, as our Young Atlanticist program will continue developing in new areas. It's going to be one of the areas that we build out in the coming days.

So it is an honor to have you with us here today, Your Excellency. I have found you to be not only one of the most inspiring heads of state of our day, but also one with

some of the deepest character and, as so often, character grows out of not the easiest experiences.

Some of my friends like to compare you to Margaret Thatcher. But I don't think that goes nearly far enough, because the obstacles Thatcher had to overcome weren't nearly what you had to overcome in your youth. You were born in 1937 in Riga just as Europe descended into a bloody and traumatic conflict. You spent a great deal of your youth in refugee camps in Europe, and after shuttling across Europe, you spoke of your time moving from Riga in the following way: "We were put in a camp that was a huge barrack with snow seeping in and the people just lined up in three-tiered wooden bunks, no warm food, and then we were put in an unheated train, and it happened to be a cold wave. It was January and went down to minus thirty, and we traveled for six days." This is what you call a character-building moment. Eventually your family moved to Morocco, and then, when you were sixteen you and your family moved to Canada. Your first job was as a bank teller and eventually as a professor of psychology in Montreal.

I say this all to this crowd just to show that it is amazing, what different strokes of fate can do in terms of leading a career and building a life. Even in your adopted country you did never let go of your home country of Latvia. Even as the Soviet Union tightened its grip, you worked hard to keep native traditions and language alive, not only as a psychology professor, but also one specializing in Latvian identity - organizing conferences and summer camps so that Latvian émigrés could learn Latvian culture and language.

In 1989 the world changed as the Iron Curtain came down and in 1991 Latvia again became an independent nation. You, like many other Latvian émigrés, returned. In your case, five decades later. You became head of the New Latvian Institute which was established to promote Latvian culture, language and arts. Then in 1999, the Latvian parliament deadlocked in trying to choose a new president for the country. The call came to your office and you agreed to run. Although many were surprised when you won, it is now hard to imagine anyone better suited.

You promoted not only Latvia, but have been one of the most effective representatives that the newly freed countries of central Europe could have had. A tireless advocate for Latvia joining both NATO and the European Union, doing much to lead Latvia in that direction and you convinced others that countries in the Baltic would bring real value to those institutions, as Latvia has done. And the crowning moment of course, in policy terms, was hosting the NATO Riga Summit in the summer of 2006 - the first of the new members to have that honor.

So that is a long introduction, but I thought it was necessary - especially for this audience - so that they really grip the entire sweep of this history. I can hardly imagine a more central player in the transition in Europe from the Cold War to 'Europe Whole and Free' than our guest today or a better person to launch this series. So thank you very much and I turn the floor over to you.

H.E. PRESIDENT VIKE-FREIBERGA: Thank you very much. Thank you to the Atlantic Council for inviting me and thank you all for coming here to participate. As a professor of longstanding, and from my previous incarnation, I find it a particular delight in talking to young people. I don't know if you've noticed among the professors who teach you, but there is no better elixir of youth than being in contact with young people. It certainly keeps you on your toes and you have to be ready to answer questions as I will be in a moment, when we start the discussion.

I thank you for that introduction. It is, I suppose, an unusual story, both for my country and for myself personally. In many ways, my fate and all the events of my life are but one example of what the twentieth century has meant for such a large part of Europe. The United States has been involved in what is happening in Europe, also, for the past century. After all, there are all these rows upon rows of white crosses in the fields of Flanders of Canadian and American soldiers and also from Italy and elsewhere. When Europe had to fight against tyranny it would count on help from the North American continent. And this is something that occasionally gets forgotten, but needs to be reminded regularly. I for my part have done so. I think Europeans have to realize how close they are linked to the North American continent. And Americans of course, will surely remember from your schooldays that when America was fighting for its independence General Lafayette had a rather important role to play in that process. All of us – and by this I mean the different countries in Europe and in North America – have come a long way, both in the preceding century and the ones before that.

In my travels across Europe since becoming president of Latvia, I have been struck by the checkered career, you might say, of the European continent. Not only its diversity, which is maybe difficult to comprehend for somebody who has spent all of their life in America, a country where you can drive not only hundreds of miles in your car, but even thousands and still be there in the same country, and basically, when you arrive in the next town, you will be assured that you have the same sort of inn awaiting you to spend the night and the same sorts of restaurants. Europe is so different in that sense that you drive for a few hundred kilometers and you arrive in a country where the language is different and the customs are different and the history is so very different from one country to the next.

And yet, today, the amazing thing is that it is after all, for the first time in our history, Europe is in large part a group of now the European Union, of twenty-seven countries, where the borders are being actually erased between them, even as Europe is maintaining the national identity and the specific character of each of the countries. Each of the countries is very attached to its own specific heritage, they hold their language dear. Latvia for instance is the only place in the world where the Latvian language survives, except, of course, for some Latvian exile communities, who have been so remarkable in maintaining their faith in the Latvian culture – including fourth and fifth generations of Latvians, for instance in Brazil. And of course, as time goes on, the same will be the case here in America. That attachment to one's roots, to one's past, is one of the great strengths of Europe, because it gives it color and it is its spirit, it is its soul, you might say. But the wonderful thing about the European Second World War, is that it was

able to overcome its past and to do what the American states did after the Civil War, and that is to put aside even deep and profound differences that existed in their opinions, their convictions and their allegiances, to put those aside in the name of a common future, that would be better than any one they ever had before.

Now, I'm sure that you are aware of the very gradual growth of what is now the European Union, from the very modest beginnings of the Coal and Steel Union between the six founding nations, among which the reconciliation between Germany and France, as age-old enemies and particularly as very strong enemies in the last three wars - the Second World War, the First World War and the disastrous 1870 war from France. All that was put behind them and they decided: We have to have a different vision of the future. And in that, I think there was a precedent and the precedent was the United States of America: You went through here a very bloody Civil War, and the differences between North and South were very profound, very fundamental. They touched on both economics and in values, human values and attitudes to life. And yet America was able to hammer itself together and add states afterward to the Commonwealth and establish practically the largest area of peace, stability, and democracy that the world had seen until that time.

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, Europe has now basically followed the same path. But not by imitating America, but by taking its own path and doing it its own way. After the Second World War then, the first step was the reconciliation with Germany and the former enemy. And that was done in those countries that had remained on this side, on the western side of the Iron Curtain. When I say that Europe was building a different continent, that it was doing something that had never been done before, there is one important caveat that we have to mention right away: This was only the case for Western Europe. Because Eastern Europe, all the part that had been left in Soviet power at the fall of Nazi German power, all that part had been left behind an Iron Curtain, literally. That metaphor of Mr. Churchill's, I think, was only too true, because what it meant was: Barbed wire, physical barriers, people in Berlin trying to reach over into the Western Zone, being shot regularly as they tried to cross the barrier into the Western Zone, or to circumvent it; decades of tyranny – brutal tyranny – until the death of Stalin in 1954, particularly brutal in Baltic countries, which were occupied first in 1940 and then again at the end of the war in 1945. So all that part of Europe was cut off from the rest of the world, and here in America where so many refugees have come from Europe in that time, you had groups reminding you of this fact.

And in many ways, I think, North America was more aware of what half of Europe was suffering by being cut off from the rest of the world than those people Western Europe, because they did not have the refugees, or at least not in those numbers as America and Canada and Australia, countries who took in such large numbers of Eastern and Central European refugees. That was a grim period for those countries and of course the Cold War was a grim period for everybody. Your parents, no doubt, remember the days in the fifties when people in America were actually spending money and their savings to build atomic shelters and stock food and water in them. There was a time when an atomic war seemed almost imminent. I can remember that period, having come to

Canada in 1954 - that period of tension in the late fifties and early sixties. The Cold War, at that time, was very much at risk of becoming a hot one. The Cuban missile crisis was another moment in that period.

But for those countries behind the Iron Curtain, it was, what is known in communist countries is known as a period of stagnation. The first period, the period at the end of Stalin's life was a period of bloody terror. There is no other word to describe it. After Stalin's death, and the renouncing of the personality cult and of the excesses of the Stalinist period, things became slightly better. In other words, the repressions were less random, less strangling and fewer millions of people were touched. But the totalitarian system and system of gulag camps and deportations and mass arrests, that didn't stop until the very end, until the fall of the Soviet Union. So this is an experience, not just of the countries annexed to the Soviet Union, like the Baltic countries, but also something the so-called satellite countries went through – an experience of half a century of living in a totalitarian ideology where there is one-party-rule. That one-party rule is equivalent to a theocracy. There is Marxism and Leninism as an ideology. It's a fundamentalist approach. There is a truth, a received truth which has been transmitted from the central committee in the Kremlin, spread across all the vast lands that fall under the dominion of that ideology. You had a repressive system, KGB and other various names that it has gone by over the decades, a very strong and powerful repressive system, ensuring that deviation from this totalitarian ideology is not tolerated in any shape or form. And of course there is a controlled central economy which, in spite of its inefficiency of its visible failings, is imposed on ideological grounds.

We may question here, for this audience and for those interested in transatlantic, would be interested in hearing various experts tell you what were the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet empire. What were the reasons for the countries submitted to this satellite condition and imposed communist rule? How did it collapse? It is a long story, but when it did, half of Europe which had been under tyranny was able to join the rest of Europe. What we have since that time is that a Europe which most countries joined as part of the European Union with three notable exceptions, but most democratic countries have joined the European Union as a guarantee of democratic development, as a guarantee of a common market which the United States has been able to show advantages of since the nineteenth century and a union of nations where – freely – each and every member applied for membership, went through a process of adjusting their legislation with that of the rest of the Union and where, in due course, admitted by the others who voted on it either in parliament or by referendum. The biggest enlargement so far was the ten new countries, eight of them which were former communist countries, in May 1st 2004. Latvia was in that number. Curiously, the countries that were cut off from the rest of Europe, but also with North America, were most strongly friends and supporters of America. Why? For the simple reason that America, throughout those years, had taken a strong stand against the communist tyranny. America had always taken an uncompromising stand against the illegal annexation of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, against the imposition of the communist way of life on nations that had not been able to take a choice on their fate.

This is why America had been our friend and our partner and this is why, since regaining our independence in 1991, we have been and we will be strong friends and partners of North America. And it is not just, I think, the former exiles like myself, it is the population of all those countries who appreciate the values that America stands for. They appreciate the fact that America has the power to defend these democratic values even though they are, of course, aware that America is not paradise on earth. There is always a snake in paradise; there are always weaknesses in any institution, any country or any system that human beings have been able to create on this earth. We are not blind to the sorts of things that are sometimes surprising in the choice of positions America has taken, we differ in certain respects, but I think what we have in common is overwhelmingly so much more than what ever could be at the point of differences between the two.

MR. KEMPE: Thank you very much, thank you very much Madam President [applause]. I think the nice thing is that you've spoken from the heart you've relayed the history... I cut my teeth in journalism. I was working for Newsweek and my boss at Newsweek was running off to the Middle East, to cover peace in the Middle-East and he said to me, this was in August of 1980, "but I'm afraid you must go to this Polish shipyard where there's this labor unrest." So we're still working on peace in the Middle-East but in your part of the world I think we've seen the most incredible string of advance in history in our time. In your opening statement you did not talk much about Russia, but good heavens, the first questions that we're getting in say a lot about Russia and have a lot to do with Russia, so I think we'll jump back and forth between the audience here and the webcast audience. So I think we'll start with the webcast questions and whenever anyone here wants to ask a question I ask you to go to the microphone, you might even end up building a queue and part of the reason for that is, if this technology works in its magical way we'll turn the camera and there's half a chance that we'll get the questioners on screen, or maybe even a larger percentage than that.

Here's the first question, and I think it really is touching -in fact let me put two questions together. One from Julia Bellet from Hood College in Frederick Maryland and another one from Nat Skinner form the Monterey Institute for International Studies. They're both related. The one is: "Has Latvia's admission into the EU given Latvia some protection from Russia's pressure, that is, Russia's ability to influence events in Latvia." That comes from Julia Bellet. The second one, from Nat Skinner, (related to the recent news from Estonia) "What impact on Russian relations will the recent events involving Estonia and the re-location of the Red Army Monument have on Latvia and the Baltic states?"

H.E. PRESIDENT VIKE-FREIBERGA: Maybe, to try and answer both questions in a way together, you have to remember that when the Soviet Union collapsed, it split up from the 15 so-called republics that it had been into, first of all, the Russian Federation of which President Yeltsin, who recently passed away, was the first president and the three Baltic countries Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania regained their independence which they had of course already acquired by fighting for it in 1918. Many of the other countries which Russia occasionally refers to as the 'near abroad' many of them had had brief

periods of independence at the collapse of the tsarist empire, like Ukraine, Armenia or Georgia but then the Bolsheviks conquered them and they were integrated into the Soviet Union. As soon as the Soviet Union collapsed, these countries declared their independence whereas we renewed ours and there has remained, I think, a source of some tension between the powers that be in the Russian Federation and also a certain part of the population who, to some extent, regret the demise of the Soviet Union. One of the reasons they regret it, is that it was larger, it covered a larger territory, many of the countries now independent were part of it and they were ruled from Moscow. So think for many Russians this was a very satisfying state of affairs. It was a testimony to the grandeur of Russia which, in spite of the 1917 Revolution, they saw as a continuation of the grandeur of the Russian Empire which existed in tsarist times. For countries such as Latvia, who had been neutral between the First World War and the Second World War, and suffered grievously as a consequence of that neutrality, our first concern was to ensure that our sovereignty would be protected. And to that effect, we applied to NATO. It was not an easy path, because when I took office in 1999 as President of Latvia, there was no consensus about the need to enlarge NATO any further than having accepted, let's say Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic in it. There were also doubts about whether the Baltic countries should be admitted – since they had been incorporated in the Soviet Union maybe the Russian Federation wouldn't be happy about it. We felt that it was very important for us to join NATO for our security.

Joining the EU was something different. We wanted to be part of that family of nations that had basically created a common market, a common system of supranational governments and common system - what the French call the “Acquis Communautaire”, a common system of laws and regulations that ensure that the same democratic principles values and the same principles of governance apply all across the board. And for us, that was equally important. I remember being asked as a newly elected president: “Which is more important for Latvia, NATO or the European Union?” And I said: “It's like asking which arm do you think is more important, the right or the left? Which one would you cut off first?” I said, “we need them both, just as you need both your arms to function”, so that both of them were important to us – but NATO rather for security and the European Union you might say, for the better running of daily life.

MR. KEMPE: Just a quick follow-up for me, since this asked about the protection from Russia's pressure, part of the question is - is that happening, but does one need to be protected from Russia's pressure? I guess this does get partly to the second question, “what impact on Russian relations will the recent events in Estonia have on Latvia and other Baltic states?” But since you mentioned Boris Yeltsin, perhaps you touch on that as well: He did recently pass away, so what do you think about him and how do you think Russia has changed since his time?

H.E. PRESIDENT VIKE-FREIBERGA: When Boris Yeltsin came to Latvia last year to accept the highest award of the Latvian state for giving the ceasefire order, he received it, on our part, as thanks for his courageous stand at the collapse of the Soviet Union when he as president of the newly created Russian Federation said that he fully supported the three Baltic states in becoming independent and that if Russian troops would try to

enforce these three countries remaining under the Russian Federation's in the same union, that he would go down there and ask them to shoot at him, as Russia's president, because he absolutely acknowledged their right to independence. That was a courageous stand to take at the time. I think Yeltsin also has to be remembered for his desire for a great Russian Federation that would be a democratic state, that would not be a copy of the Soviet Union in diminished size but that would be radically different in politics, in structure by being a democracy. In that, of course, in the later years of his presidency the reigns of power slipped from his hands and were taken over by an entourage whose interests were frequently economic rather than democratic. Of course, you might say that the last years of his presidency were a disappointment but I think what we remember and should remember with gratitude are the very important steps that he took at the very beginning of his presidency.

MR. KEMPE: Thank you. (to audience) If you could identify yourself - in the case of young professionals, who you're working for, and for students please, where you are going to school and what you are studying.

LARISSA ROMANENKO: My name is Larissa Romanenko and I just graduated from Pepperdine University graduate program in public policy. I'm from the Republic of Georgia originally, and your speech was very touching for me, thank you very much. You mentioned the countries that are successors of the Soviet Union, that are striving to go back and that is definitely the case for a lot of them, although not in Georgia so much. Georgia has become different in her path that she has chosen and Latvia has become, for us, an example of how to strive toward independence, toward democratic values, towards the North Atlantic Alliance and European Union. How would you assess the, Russian attitude towards Georgia and her negative acceptance of Georgia joining NATO? How would you assess Georgia's chance of joining the association and gaining security from Russia's aggression on its borders? Thank you very much.

H.E. PRESIDENT VIKE-FREIBERGA: The case of Georgia, of course, is a very important example of how the splitting up of the Soviet Union did not go without complications. I think here in the case of Georgia one has these enclaves, where one has seen very clearly encouragement on the part of Russia for these enclaves not to be included into the Republic of Georgia that became independent after the collapse of the Soviet Union. We were told in Latvia, as we started our path, both towards the European Union and NATO by many people who should know better that we should forget about these strivings because they would make Russia unhappy and I always answered: "What on earth were they trying to say by that kind of question?" Was it to mean that entire nations had been put onto this earth for no other purpose then to make Russia happy? Surely, if Russia wanted to be happy it was up to Russia's citizens to ensure their own happiness, to ensure their own statehood and its success, economic and otherwise. Whereas any independent country has the absolute right, the inherent absolute right to choose its own course, Georgia or any other and this has to be respected. It doesn't matter if the neighbor the country has is large or small, powerful or not. I think this is an essential element of international relations that the country's wishes for charting its own course and its own future must be respected, regardless of its past.

MR. KEMPE: Thank you. I think we'll take one more question from the room here and then we have a lot of questions coming in, so let's try to move quickly through the questions.

DARIA KARETNIKOV: My name is Daria Karetnikov, I'm from the University of Maryland, studying public policy. My question relates again to the recent events in Tallinn in Estonia generally. My general question is, do you think it's possible that, since there is tension between the Estonian and the Russian population and the Latvian population in the country, is the stability strong enough to prevent a situation from happening, like what we're seeing now in Tallinn?

H.E. PRESIDENT VIKE-FREIBERGA: Well, we cannot be sure of anything, I think that's the number on point to remember, I think. I always say that we have to be very vigilant about our democracy which, after all, we only acquired in 1991 after half a century's interruption. This is a democracy in which we have inherited, as in the case of Estonia, whole sections of the population who arrived in our country during a period of foreign occupation having been forcibly annexed into the Soviet Union. The whole country functioned as a part of the Soviet Union and in our case was submitted to a deliberate process of Russification. In other words, we had a series of mass deportation at the end of the war, and forced collectivization, many individual farmers were deported and those who remained were forced into collected farms. This agricultural production was industrialized. A tiny country like Latvia was heavily industrialized, way beyond what would have been rational in terms of geographic location and human resources and therefore factories were built thousands and thousands of workers were imported from the Soviet Union, not just from the Russian part but many others.

This is what Russia now refers to as the Russian-speaking population for instance of Latvia or Estonia which is a bit of a misnomer because in Soviet times, 99.9 % of the population was Russian-speaking. Everybody in Latvia had to learn Russian which is not the case anymore. Since our independence youngsters aren't bothered to learn Russian. But what we have in Estonia and Latvia is a certain part of the population which, in spite of sixteen years of independence have not bothered to learn the local language, so I think in that sense you could call them Russian-speaking because they have refused to learn the language. But in Latvia that number is decreasing. As the years go by, as youngsters go to school, we are hoping to integrate them into society and to make them feel as part of Latvia rather than as part of Russia. But of course, this is a choice they have to make. We still have a substantial number of non-citizens who as permanent residents have not bothered to take out citizenship. We have liberalized our citizenship laws as far as is absolutely possible. I, as president, have been vigorously encouraging them to take out citizenship, to make the choice: "Do you want to be Latvian, do you want to live in Latvia, do you want to make your future in this country which is part of the European Union or do you long for the former times of the Soviet Union, do you have, say, emotional or family ties to those times, or to Russia or any other part of the Soviet Union?" In that case you are free, there is no Iron Curtain anymore. You have a free choice.

In the case of what has happened in Estonia, there were decisions that were taken by the government that were controversial, that were sensitive, but I don't think this is an excuse for attacking the Estonian embassy or having the ambassador of Estonia physically attacked. We have international conventions, we have the Vienna conventions which are being violated and I think the Russian government has to see that the international conventions that protect diplomats abroad must be maintained and it's no good saying that they were provoked into it by the actions in Estonia. There is no excuse for violence against an ambassador or an embassy.

MR. KEMPE: It's interesting that you speak as you do about Estonia. Many of the questions coming in over webcast are about Estonia and Latvia's reaction to it, so quite interesting that it has really hit a chord also in the United States and of course the students and the classes that we're dealing are generally people who are engaged in these sorts of studies and intellectually captivated by issues concerning Russia and the transatlantic relationship. We seem to have a very active group from the University of Oregon sending in a lot of questions from one of my favorite parts of the country, but let me pick out one: Craig Parsons from the University of Oregon asks about Latvia's position toward the Turkish membership in the European Union: What are your major concerns, if any, about Turkey joining the EU, and what about other countries, and particularly Ukraine?

H.E. PRESIDENT VIKE-FREIBERGA: With respect to Turkey, Latvia has taken what you might call a liberal attitude. We benefited from EU-membership. We found that jumping through all the hoops of reforms that were required to make us eligible for membership was good for the country. It's not a choice that we regret. Therefore, Turkey's determination, at least that of its leaders, to join the European Union, in our minds, should not be discouraged out of hand but the Copenhagen Criteria that govern new membership cannot be relaxed in any candidate country's case including Turkey. To us, the issue is, is Turkey ready - are the Turkish people ready - to carry out all those reforms that the European Union has required of its aspiring members and its new members once they have joined? One of these conditions is a separation of church and state. Now, there are countries in this world, particularly in Muslim countries, where it is considered that the values they stand for - that the Islamic values - can only be defended in a system where the state actually accepts them as a state religion. It has been the case for centuries. America, I think, started out with a strong link between faith and civic values. Europe was of course, for many centuries, a bastion of Christianity. But it is since the French Revolution that Europe has increasingly accepted the separation of church and state as a pre-requisite for democracy. In Turkey, since Ataturk, this has been an issue. Ataturk cut the Gordian knot and said: "We want to create a Muslim state that is a secular one, a modern one and a democratic one." I think Turkey has to see now, are they going to follow the path Ataturk set out for them or are they going to change?

Ukraine is a country for which we in Latvia feel a great deal of sympathy, because we feel that they have such a similar history to ours. They too declared their independence at the collapse of the tsarist Empire but, unfortunately, they lost it very

quickly, whereas we were able to have at least an interwar period of independence in our case. We would very much like to see Ukraine carry out the sorts of reforms that the three Baltic countries went through. And reforms are not always easy nor are they always popular. It takes a certain amount of sacrifice. There are certain parts of the population that suffer more than others costs more than others in terms of what it costs for social security, for old age pensions who had to continue to live on their pensions which I personally would have preferred to be much higher. But I think the general course has been set and our people have been ready to follow it. What is lacking in Ukraine right at the moment is an ability of the leaders of that country to come together on that course. We seem to be finding a push-me pull-you situation where half the country is pushing one way and the other half is pulling the other way and it's up to the leaders of that country to find a way to come to an agreement where they can find some sort of compromise and to decide, how are we going to carry it out? We are ready to share our experience, we are ready to encourage them by saying: "We went through it and we think it's the right way to be going" but of course it's up to them. They have to decide.

MR. KEMPE: The question from Brent Nelson from Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina: "What would you like to see result from a current discussion under the German presidency, concerning the stalled Constitutional Treaty?"

H.E. PRESIDENT VIKE-FREIBERGA: We would very much like to see progress on that and certainly the European Union cannot remain in that so-called 'period of reflection' that we have been giving ourselves about the constitutional treaty. That's a polite way of saying, "we are a bit in an impasse and we don't know what to do about it." We have set great hopes on the German presidency to move that agenda-item forward and they have done so.

Of course we couldn't expect everything to be resolved within these six months. The European Union will need to address the question of the constitution treaty for the simple reason that it needs to give itself instruments of governance that can operate with a Europe of 27 or more countries, 29 and 30... without being paralyzed every time one of these countries proposes a veto. It could lead to paralysis. So one of the elements of the constitutional treaty is to diminish the number of issues on which a veto can be presented by any one country. We have to come to an agreement or else we do not wish to have a union which is as effective as, for example, the United States of America. In spite of my personal conviction that it's the strength of Europe to have this diversity, we must also be able to come to an agreement.

MR. KEMPE: So you put your support in the direction in which America is now leading things.

H.E. PRESIDENT VIKE-FREIBERGA: I think that we must face up to it and find a way out of the impasse.

MR. KEMPE: There's a question from the room here.

POLINA ZAJKOVA: My name Polina Zajkova and I'm a student at Johns Hopkins SAIS. I'm from Belarus and I wanted to ask what you think about the future of Baltic and Latvian-Belarusian relations, and what are the chances of Belarus, let's say over two decades, getting into the EU?

H.E. PRESIDENT VIKE-FREIBERGA: Certainly, in the question of membership into the EU the very first step is that political decision by the leaders of a country to orient themselves towards the values and the principles by which the European Union is run. The second is the support of the population in the regard and the willingness of the population to accept the steps one has to go through. In the case of Belarus, the country, under the leadership of President Lukashenko has very firmly, actually refused anything of the kind and in fact I think one of the sad things is that there were requests on the part of the European Union and other international bodies to ensure that the presidential elections and the parliamentary elections would be carried out according to elementary principles of free and open elections. It's not really a great deal to ask. It's actually, I would say, relatively easy. I think that President Lukashenko during the last presidential elections was a very popular man and it's a pity really that the government saw fit to interfere in electoral process. I think that by leaving the choice open, Belarus could have the same leader it has today without the problem of having that leadership being second placed by elections that simply do not comply with international standards of democracy. But the positions taken by President Lukashenko are, of course, not of the kind that makes Belarus a country that the European Union can very easily collaborate with, unfortunately. They are a neighbor of ours and we would very much like to have better relations with Belarus. But again, it's really up to the leadership to take a stance.

MR. KEMPE: It sounds like an appeal to him: "Take a risk, put yourself in front of free elections and join the club."

H.E. PRESIDENT VIKE-FREIBERGA: It would be an elementary first step.

MR. KEMPE: The question of Olga Kovarzina from The Monterrey Institute for International Studies Center for Nonproliferation Studies: What were the reasons behind the Latvian decision to join the Coalition of the Willing in 2003 and how much tangible support was Latvia able to offer? In the view of all the challenges that have emerged as a result of the Iraq War, strategic and humanitarian, are there any regrets for having supported it?

H.E. PRESIDENT VIKE-FREIBERGA: Latvia did not take that decision as a single solitary country, but actually together with other countries eastern and central European countries that were either recent members or aspiring members of NATO. The reason we did so was that we were asking for admission to the alliance in view of having our sovereignty, our security protected. We felt that being in such a position and with the United States of America as a very important pillar of the NATO-alliance, we trusted the American government in the way they had formulated the situation. We wanted to show our willingness to participate in a common project concerning the security of not just our own country and our own personal security, but security worldwide; the fight against

terrorism, the fight against rogues regimes which weren't only a threat to their own population but to the countries surrounding them. It was our expression willingness to give our own sort of contribution to common security, worldwide, in a sense – in particular to the United States as an important partner in NATO, even though the operation itself was not started as a NATO-operation. We have been present in Iraq all this time in the peace-building effort and it is of course very disappointing to see that this country which was rid of a very bloody tyrant and has not been able to take advantage of the situation, has not been able heal a very deep, profound rift in ideology, in religion, in emotional commitments within the different sectors of that society, that there is so much violence in it, that this violence is also being fostered by countries outside the Iraqi border. It's very much a sad situation.

MR. KEMPE: And regrets?

H.E. PRESIDENT VIKE-FREIBERGA: We took that decision in full understanding of the information available to us at the time and we were fully convinced that any country freed from a dictator would take advantage as we did and take the opportunity to build a democratic state and we could not foresee the developments that happened later, so we do not have any regrets in that sense.

STEPHANIE MILBERGS: My name is Stephanie Milbergs, I work at the World Bank. My question is: "With the recent signing of the Latvian-Russian border agreement will there be any improvement on relations between the two countries or will it not do anything at all?"

MR. KEMPE: Hold on to that question because we will take one more here, one from the webcast, and these will be our last questions.

JESSE NOLTON: Good afternoon, my name is Jesse Nolton. I'm a recent graduate of George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs and I lived in Latvia during the late part of 2002 and all of 2003. My question is: What is being done to protect the Latvian national identity now that you are a member of the EU and NATO? I understand that many Latvians, once they graduate the university are searching other EU countries for work. What's being done to help Latvians to stay in Latvia for work as opposed to going abroad?

MR. KEMPE: So we'll take these as the two questions.

Let me add a different twist to the first question: You have the border question but let me also ask another central question which is about Russian energy policy and how it is affecting Latvia as well. So, two questions dealing with Russia - there is a lot of interest from people asking questions about the relations between Latvia and Russia- but since energy is so key to that I thought I would add that. We have about five minutes left so you have ample time to answer both of these questions in the greatest depth that you'd like to.

H.E. PRESIDENT VIKE-FREIBERGA: Latvia has recently signed a border treaty with Russia which draws the border somewhat differently from what it was in our 1920 peace treaty with what was at that time also, for a brief period, Russia rather than the Soviet Union. In 1946 Stalin re-drew the border and cut away six counties and Latvia. Latvia accepted that situation in 1991 but we had formalized another border treaty. It has now been signed by both prime ministers in Moscow. Now both parliaments, the Latvian and the Russian, are in a process of ratifying that treaty. So it remains to be ratified and the Latvian parliament has given every indication of going on and ratifying it.

We will see what will happen in Russia. We would like to see to it as a sign of improved relations but of course it remains to be seen whether it is so. We also have a number of treaties, for instance on the protection of investments, on the elimination of double-taxation, a whole series of practical treaties regarding our commercial and trade relations that are also waiting to be signed. We are waiting for the good will of the Russian Federation and we hope that in due course this will move ahead.

About identity: Well, our Latvian identity has been under siege ever since, in 1199, Pope Innocent III declared that having a war on the pagans living in north-eastern Europe would give as much merit to the crusaders as going to the holy land and trying to re-conquer the tomb of Christ. So ever since 1199 and Pope Innocent III, Latvian identity has been, in one way or another, under attack, under siege and somehow or another Latvians have managed to survive all that, including the Soviet period for heaven's sakes. It would seem to me absolutely inconceivable that now that we have finally achieved sovereignty and independence – the ability for economic growth - that all of the sudden we would just freely give up on our identity because we don't care about it anymore. But there is a possible risk. It could be that people say, "all right, the world is open. I'm going to go where I can get a better salary and who cares about being Latvian or this that or the other." As it is, I think half the world is running around in the same t-shirt and the same jeans and the same running shoes and you might say: "Who cares about identity?" But those who do care and think that there is something spiritual in your heritage, in your language, in the traditions that you are worth preserving, I would like to think that they continue to do so as generations before have done so.

MR. KEMPE: The one question on energy was from Natalie McVeigh at Hood College in Frederick, Maryland. She asked about Russian energy policy, specifically on the Ingalina power-plant – is this a concern or a threat to Latvia? Is there a quick answer to that?

H.E. PRESIDENT VIKE-FREIBERGA: First of all, we are dependent on the Russian Federation for a large part of our energy in our country. They are a major supplier of energy. Only hydroelectric power is something we can generate ourselves and we've been buying it from Lithuania, from Ingalina which will be closed down in 2009 because it is a Chernobyl-type of reactor. The three Baltic countries are ready to build a new nuclear plant in order to become energy independent, at least for electricity. But for oil and for gas we are dependent on Russia and we would like to see the European Union thinking of a common energy policy of making Europe less dependent on any one

supplier, Russia or any other for that matter. That it would diversify its sources, that it would be more energy efficient, to look at alternative sources of energy that also have the double effect of lowering CO2-emissions in the world, of helping with climate change. But we must have – I and many countries feel that we must have – a unified energy policy, that we must collaborate with other countries in the world because it could become a tool of political pressure. We have seen it happen already and this is something that becomes a danger to countries' sovereignty.

MR. KEMPE: And then finally, Madam President, I will end with my own question: What do you do for an encore? You were talked about in terms of UN Secretary General, as a candidate at that time, some have talked about you as a future president of the European Commission, but what do you want?

H.E. PRESIDENT VIKE-FREIBERGA: I want to live (laughs). You know, there is life after presidency as I've been told by many former presidents (laughs).

MR. KEMPE: (laughs) But many of them seem to have a hard time letting go. Bill Clinton still seems to be trying to make his way back into the White House.

H.E. PRESIDENT VIKE-FREIBERGA: I hope and am open to interesting suggestions.

MR. KEMPE: Well I'm sure there are so many questions that we couldn't get to, a lot of fascinating questions came in that we just didn't have time to get to, but Madam President, I think you lived up to my billing of you as inspirational. You were also candid and open with the questions. Thank you so much for taking the time.

H.E. PRESIDENT VIKE-FREIBERGA: Thank you for inviting me (applause).