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U.S.–Baltic Relations: Celebrating 85 Years of Friendship

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It is great to be here celebrating the 85th anniversary of U.S. diplomatic relations with Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. This is the 85th anniversary of unbroken diplomatic relations, and as everyone in this room knows, behind that sentence is nearly 100 years of struggle and pain and liberation. That is because the Baltic States did not have an easy 20th century. They were the victims of the two great evils of the last century—Nazism and Communism.

The Baltic States in the 20th Century

The lessons that the Baltic States teach us are not merely of national resistance to oppression, but they teach us more importantly of the link between national interests and universal values, which is an important lesson.

The 20th century began well for the Baltic States. On July 28, 1922, we recognized their independence and sovereignty. There followed a hopeful decade and a half of progress and consolidation, followed by a terrible set of crimes and oppression. Hitler and Stalin tore apart the newly free nations of Eastern Europe, and the fault was theirs. But in the West, some of the responsibility was ours, for we did not do what we should have, which was to defend all of Europe, having emerged from the First World War free but fragile.

Not all democratic powers understood that freedom was indivisible, and some believed that the Baltic States were just too far away and belonged to that gray category of far-away nations. At the end of World War II we allowed ourselves—the Americans and we in the

Talking Points

- The lessons that the Baltic States teach us are not merely of national resistance to oppression, but they teach us more importantly of the link between national interests and universal values.
- Estonia's new nickname, "E-stonia," is rooted in their modernized economy and future aspirations. Estonia's economy is considered one of the most liberal in the world.
- In Latvia, the International Monetary Fund has noticed that its economic performance has been among the best of the EU accession countries. Its per capita GDP has doubled compared to 1995.
- The Baltic States and people should know that as they build their strong institutions at home, and as they finish the job of transformation and fight corruption that they will never be left alone again.

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West allowed ourselves—to accept promises that we knew or should have known would never be kept, and thus too, we were compromised.

“Yalta ended Fascism but not oppression,” said President George W. Bush in Riga in 2004. And yet if we did not do what we might have, neither did we abandon our ideals and neither did we abandon the Baltic States. We did keep faith with the principle, and we promised that we would not recognize their forcible incorporation into the Soviet Union—and we did not.

From Sumner Wells’s declaration of July 23, 1940, that we would not recognize the occupation, the United States acted with a consistency and a tenacity of which we can all be proud. We housed the exiled Baltic diplomatic delegations. We accredited their diplomats. We flew their flags in the State Department’s Hall of Flags. We never recognized in deed or word or symbol the illegal occupation of their lands.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and the Voice of America kept alive the dream and the words of truth from abroad. We helped, as best we could, the self-liberation of these countries.

Promises Kept

I remember those days. I remember when Lithuanian leaders fled the violence and siege of the TV station and the parliament and fled across the border to Warsaw, where they sought shelter and help from the Americans, fearing that the Soviet tanks would crush their country again. I remember when they were free at last. The people of the Baltics looked west to see what the countries of the established democracies would do, and we debated whether or not our promise this time of a Europe whole and free meant them, too. It is with pride and pleasure that I recall that, thanks to people like Kim Holmes and others, Democrats and Republicans, President George H. W. Bush, President Bill Clinton, and now President George W. Bush, we decided that Europe whole, free, and at peace meant everyone, and it meant them, too. They joined NATO, [having been] invited in at the Prague Summit in 2002. We kept our promise late, but we kept it.

We gave them time and invited them to join the Western institutions. They had to do the work of

making a success of their new freedom. We did our part, but they did theirs, and theirs was the harder road. And they succeeded. They used well the days they had.

Estonia’s new nickname, “E-stonia,” is rooted in their modernized economy and future aspirations. Estonia’s economy is considered one of the most liberal in the world. I think The Heritage Foundation ranked it as slightly above the United States and below the U.K.

In Latvia, the International Monetary Fund has noticed that its economic performance has been among the best of the EU accession countries. Its per capita GDP (gross domestic product) has doubled compared to 1995. Its GDP was in the lower double digits last year. Lithuania also has been driving ahead successfully, incorporating the lessons of post-communist economic transformation.

These countries, building on their internal success, have earned standing in NATO, the EU, the World Trade Organization, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, where they are leaders and active formulators of policy. They have not forgotten from whence they came, and they have not taken freedom for granted. They have learned the hard way that freedom is universal, and so they have helped expand the frontiers of freedom in Europe, whether in Belarus or Ukraine or support for Georgia or by sending their soldiers to the hard fights in Iraq and Afghanistan. They have repaid our trust in them and support for them many times over, and we are grateful and thankful for this.

They learned, as I said, that national interests must be linked with universal values if they are to be sustainable. The Baltic States and people should know that as they build their strong institutions at home, and as they finish the job of transformation and fight corruption—for corruption and dirty money know no nationality—as they do all these things and contribute to freedom abroad, that they will never be left alone again. Whether threatened by old, new, or virtual threats, they will not be left alone.

Russia and the Baltic States

Their democratic ideals and their democratic success is not a threat to anyone, least of all their

great neighbor Russia. The Russians sometimes say that we are trying to surround them, encircle them. But is it not in the best interest of Russia to be “surrounded” by peaceful, prospering democracies? Doesn’t Russian history suggest that threats from the West do not come from democracies but from dictatorships and nationalist dictatorships?

The European Union is many things, but a threatening, rapidly nationalistic super-state it is not. And although I admire the progress of the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian militaries, I do not think we shall soon see the Lithuanian cavalry galloping through Smolensk headed east.

There are deep and difficult issues in Russia’s relations with the Baltic states. Some of them are rooted in different views of history. We all followed with great concern the bitterness with which the war memorial in Estonia played a part. There are many Russians, including many Russians in Estonia, some of them citizens of Estonia, who have strong feelings and believe that the Soviet Army victory over Hitler is a victory to be honored. Those feelings, let us be fair and honest, do have some validity. The Soviet Army did defeat Hitler. Not on its own, but it did. And their courage and tenacity is worth remembering and respecting. And those feelings must be taken into account.

I also hope that Russia and the Russian government will come to understand the feelings of the Baltics as well, which are obviously no less valid and

rooted in a very different memory of what happened in 1940 and 1944 and after. But these differences should be discussed in an honest and civilized way. Threats, attacks, and sanctions should have no place. I hope that a generation that grows up in freedom will find a way to address these issues in a different language.

Eyes on the Prize

The past is not forgotten, but it need not determine the future. We must keep our eye on the future, on the possibility of a united Europe with the Baltics embedded in it without an asterisk by their name, without brackets around them—and a united Europe working with Russia in common purpose as much as we can.

I hope in 15 years we will see that Europe and that Russian relationship with such a Europe coming into being when we celebrate the 100th anniversary of Baltic–U.S. relations. In the meantime, I will close by saying that we are proud to call these countries our friends and proud that they have learned that national values and universal values are one.

This is the higher realism. This is the American realism. And we have learned it in part from our Baltic friends and are grateful to them as well.

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