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**Saeimas priekšsēdētājas Solvitas Āboltiņas uzruna
Eiropas Savienības nacionālo parlamentu priekšsēdētāju sanāksmē
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**Speech by Ms Solvita ĀBOLTIŅA, Speaker of the Saeima of the
Republic of Latvia
Conference of speakers of European Union Parliaments, Vilnius
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Excellencies!

Dear Colleagues!

Ladies and Gentlemen!

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my good colleague Loreta and her team for organizing our Speaker's Conference so well. I would also like to congratulate our Lithuanian colleagues for the many successes during the Summit of Eastern Partnership held here in Vilnius back in November. Now we are in the post Vilnius and pre Riga Summit period, preparing for the next Eastern Partnership Summit in May of 2015 in Riga.

Dear Colleagues!

Almost a quarter of a century has passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 - and also when Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians formed a human chain spreading 600 kilometers from Tallinn, through Riga to Vilnius. The Baltic people stood hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart for freedom. However, our freedom did not come for another two years.

These events greatly influenced the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. For us World War II ended only in 1991. Without these events and the dissolving of the Soviet Union many of us would not be sitting here today - and certainly not in Vilnius!

Robert Schumann - One of Europe's architects said, -

“We must make Europe not only in the interest of the free countries, but also to be able to welcome the people of the East who, freed from the subjection that they have suffered until now, will ask to join us and request our moral support.”

Robert Schumann said these words just after the events in Hungary in 1956. These words applied to many of the countries represented in this room. They applied to Czechoslovakia in 1968, to Poland in the 1980's, to the Baltic countries in 1991 and they hold true today in Ukraine and elsewhere.

During the dark days of Soviet occupation, the only light we had, was the light of Europe and our hope of regaining our place among free European nations.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Next month we will celebrate our tenth year as members to the European Union. Ten years is not a long period and certainly we cannot say we are new members anymore. However, ten years are a long enough period to be able to reflect on our integration process into European Union

structures and now pass on our know-how and experience to aspiring countries. Even in some cases we do not share common borders with Eastern Partnership countries, however, we will be safer with more democracy beyond our borders. For the European Union to be strong, safe and secure, we have to recognize how important all our neighbors are, whether they are to the south or the east.

The Eastern Partnership will be an important priority during our Presidency of Council of the European Union. It is increasingly important to maintain focus on Eastern Partnership throughout 2014. That is why I have made a personal effort in engaging our Eastern Partnership neighbours. Therefore please let me express my gratitude to all my colleagues from Nordic and Baltic countries, who supported my initiative to hold the next NB8 meeting in Moldova.

Nevertheless, we must not pay less attention to other friends from Eastern Partnership countries, showing solidarity in their democratisation efforts. Last week I was in Georgia and I am pleased to see our colleague David Usupashvili here today. During the visit we discussed the aspirations of Georgia and how it is important to move forward and to have clarity during the process. I was deeply moved when I heard the words - "We feel safer having you as our friends here!"

As parliamentarians we must engage our colleagues and share our experience - developing political and non-governmental institutions to facilitate democracy in the decision making process. I believe we have an obligation to assist our partners on their path to good governance.

Part of us share common experience by being forced to live in the Soviet Union. That is why we can say, we know our Eastern partners well, however, we know their people better. Today they can see how far Poland or the Baltic Countries have come. They also want to live in safe, aspiring democracies, striving for prosperity for the people of their countries. The people see that we have made great strides over the ten years of being member states of the European Union. They rightly tell themselves, - if they can do it, so can we. I believe they can and we are here to help!

Latvia believes every country has a right to choose the path of its foreign policy. At the same time, Latvia remains a firm supporter to strengthen relations between EU and all Eastern Partnership countries. We have to recognize the fact that the political situations are different in each country. That is why there should be a different approach for each, whilst not losing sight of our common values. We must be ready to engage at a concrete level when the need and opportunities arise.

I would like to point out the most important steps forward, firstly, the signing of the political part of the EU – Ukraine Association Agreement, in light of the situation in Ukraine. Secondly, it is of key importance that EU should be proactive as regards to the Association Agreements with Georgia and Moldova. And last but not least - the visa liberalization as the most powerful instrument to ensure tangible benefits for the citizens of the Eastern Partnership countries. The people to people aspect should not be underestimated - visa liberalization will facilitate student, business and working visits whilst strengthening society.

Dear Colleagues!

For some of our Eastern Partnership countries internal struggles still remain and dealing with the Soviet legacy is often difficult. Being hostage to history has no place in a modern Europe. The way forward is not to threaten or induce revenge through political trials, but conciliation. We have learned from our own painful past, it is difficult, even impossible to move ahead or even live forward looking without reconciliation. Each person benefits from a just court. Open and true justice is a benefit to all of society. These are real benefits of European values, which are an added value to quality of life.

However, in my opinion, the greatest threat to progress, for our Eastern Partnership neighbors are not their internal challenges, but external.

Recent political events show that we cannot be indifferent to what is occurring around us. The aggression of the Russian Federation toward Ukraine was unthinkable only a short time ago. The decision by the Russian Federation to sanction the use of armed forces in the territory of Ukraine is a gross violation of international law and direct interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state.

For over two decades many lived in false hope, naivety or just plain wishful thinking. We thought the Cold War was over and Russia is a developing democracy... Europe does not need a new Cold War, we do not need to build walls, but we also cannot be careless. We do not seek any conflict with Russia, but the revision of international law and security system they have undertaken demands our reaction.

At this point, I would like to underline that it is just as unacceptable to use soft power for political influence. We are too dependent on energy supplies, which are often used for political influence. For example, taking Moldova as a hostage for energy supplies from Russia, or by issuing arbitrary and dubious health warnings and banning the import of many products – such as Moldovan and Georgian wine or Lithuanian dairy products.

In today's discussion I cannot avoid the fact that Russia is also engaging in an informational, public relations and propaganda war based on confrontation which is being implemented, conducted and executed.

Russia is clearly demonstrating its geopolitical interests in the region. It is a real test case for European foreign policy. The EU's response should be united, decisive and clear.

In conclusion,

The words of Robert Schumann which I quoted earlier are applicable today, but we have to make them our words!

It is my firm belief, we the representatives of the European Union national parliaments have to stand together with our European Eastern Partnership countries. Their freedom is also our freedom! Their security is our security!

Thank you for your attention!

