

Latvia national day

Latvia-Japan: a new level of cooperation

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It is a great honor for me to address the readers of The Japan Times and the people of Japan on this very special occasion of the 91st anniversary of the Proclamation of Independence on Nov. 18, 1918.



On behalf of the people of Latvia and President H.E. Valdis Zatlers, allow me to express our deepest respect to Their Imperial Majesties Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama and the people of Japan. The historic visit by the Emperor and Empress to Latvia in 2007 remains bright in the memories of our people.

This year, the three Baltic States, especially Latvia, made headlines in international and Japanese media as an illustration of the negative effects of the global crisis. A recession always follows periods of rapid economic growth. Latvia was indeed such a case for our GDP increased sixfold in the period between 1995 and 2008, recording double-digit growth in 2005, 2006 and 2007.

Now we are facing grave challenges with tough tasks such as salary cuts, the need for international loans and increasing unemployment, but we are certain that Latvia will come out of recession successfully in the next few years.

To explain this certainty in a few words, our location gives us a unique advantage in the international market. Latvia is located in the northern part of Europe just below Finland, and in the middle of the three Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. We are at the historical trading crossroads connecting Scandinavia, Western Europe and CIS markets.

Our people's intrinsic characteristics are attention to detail, patience and diligence. Will for independence, freedom, change and prosperity are our values. Geographically, we are one of the closest countries to Japan within the European Union and we also consider ourselves to be close to Japan in our mentality. If any of you visit Latvia, we are very confident that you will feel comfortable and at home in our country.

2009 was a remarkable year in tourism for Latvia, despite numerous obstacles such as the spread of the new

type of influenza and the recession. Together with our Japanese partners, we were able to operate our first-ever direct charter flights from Tokyo to Riga, the capital of Latvia, carrying Japanese tourists to all three Baltic States, and to the Russian cities St. Petersburg and Moscow. We hope that such charter flights will continue in the next years and finally link our countries by direct flights on a regular basis.

Latvia is known to be one of the greenest countries in Europe, with its abundant nature and diverse landscapes; but we are also a country with deep historical roots and rich culture. Riga, which celebrated its 800th anniversary eight years ago, is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site. It is famous not only for its historical aspects but also for its wide collection of modern and unique art nouveau architecture, which is said to be one of the largest in the world. Once every five years, Riga becomes a place where Latvians from all over the nation gather together to sing and dance in the UNESCO-listed "Latvia Song and Dance Festival." Choirs consisting of 30,000 singers join together on the final stage to sing well-known

Latvian songs to unite the public.

Three and a half years have passed since the opening of our embassy in Tokyo. As the first ambassador to Japan, I feel that our countries are getting closer and closer every year. Visits by VIPs and high-level officials, increases in business exchanges, numbers of tourists and grass-roots-level contacts between the two countries are all proof of the above-mentioned.

We welcome our Japanese partners, friends and those interested to be even more active in approaching our country. I am certain that you will find our embassy a good partner in introducing your business to Latvia, and if not for business, you will find our country an interesting destination to visit for personal leisure. The Latvia Investment and Development Agency, and the Latvia Tourism Promotion Board have offices in Tokyo to provide their services to Japanese customers.

In closing, let me express my gratitude to The Japan Times for granting us this opportunity to publish this article, and congratulations to all Latvians living in Japan and abroad on this very special day.