

Welcome Speech
H.E. Mr Edgars Rinkēvičs, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Latvia
The Fifth ASEM Education Ministers' Meeting, 27 April 2015, Riga, Latvia

Excellencies,

Dear Ministers,

Distinguished Participants,

I'm particularly honoured to welcome you in Riga at the opening of the Fifth ASEM Ministers' of Education Meeting in Riga.

ASEM is about connecting countries, regions and people. When ASEM started in 1996, all members agreed to work together to create a new Asia-Europe partnership, to build a greater understanding between the people of the two regions, and to establish a strengthened dialogue among equals. This has been achieved through ASEM cooperation on three pillars – the political pillar, the economic pillar and the social, cultural and educational pillar. Since its establishment nearly two decades ago, hundreds of ASEM meetings have taken place ranging from the level of expert to head of state and government as well as meetings that have included teachers, researchers, students and civil society. The ASEM meetings have been promoting mutual understanding, and facilitating the exchange of views and practical cooperation, thus bridging the two regions.

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I myself have been part of the ASEM process since the ASEM Summit in Laos in 2012.

At the ministerial level, regular ASEM Education Ministers' Meetings take place and there are also meetings of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Transport, Culture, Labour, Health, Finance and Economics. ASEM has grown from an initial six partners to fifty-three and new partners are willing to join. Thus ASEM has increasing significance not only in regional, but also in the global context.

As ASEM approaches its twentieth anniversary, we are looking more attentively at ways to connect Europe and Asia. The concept of connectivity has become central in the ASEM discussions and was also underscored during the ASEM Summit in Milan in 2014. There are various ideas, how and where to take ASEM in its thirtieth decade, including, for example, China's initiative to organise the ASEM Industry Dialogue on Connectivity and the symposium on international cooperation for establishing an effective Eurasian inter-modal transport and logistics network which Korea has been planning.

However, connectivity is not only about links for transport and infrastructure – it is also about establishing strong networks between institutions and fields of education, science and technology, culture as well as people-to-people contacts. Here the Asia-Europe Foundation plays an important role. The Foundation

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is the only institution established by ASEM that promotes civil society cooperation and the engagement of our societies in interregional projects.

On the 1st of January, Latvia began its Presidency of the Council of the European Union. During our Presidency, we have been focusing on three priorities – *Competitive Europe, Digital Europe* and *Engaged Europe*. All of them are clearly relevant to the growing cooperation between Europe and Asia and have relevance to the ASEM process. We have become part of the process, attributing great deal of efforts to connecting Europe and Asia.

Last year Latvia hosted the ASEF Board of Governors Meeting in Riga, where the Riga Document on closer synergies between ASEF activities and ASEM process was approved by the ASEF Governors. It will be delivered to the ASEM Foreign Ministers in their meeting in Luxemburg this November. Latvia is committed to developing its cooperation with ASEF and to enhancing the role of ASEF in the ASEM process. Right after the Meeting of Ministers of Education, Latvia has organised the Meeting of ASEM Ministers of Transport, which will take place this Wednesday and Thursday, bringing not only ASEM Transport Ministers, but also various business leaders and representatives to Riga to participate in the business session.

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Distinguished Guests,

Allow me to particularly highlight the importance of education both for the Latvian EU Presidency's agenda, and in the Europe - Asia cooperation.

The history of education spans thousands of years. Today education serves both as a tool for development of human capital and as a platform for people-to-people contacts, bringing us together and simultaneously promoting economic growth and social well-being.

During our Presidency, we are focusing also on strengthening the role of education and training. The potential of new digital technologies and innovation in education is high on the Latvian Presidency's agenda and we are paying particular attention to the role of early childhood education and primary education in fostering creativity, innovation and digital skills. The Presidency intends to further support the internationalization of higher education.

This corresponds also to the four priorities of the ASEM education process, namely:

- the cooperation in ensuring quality assurance and recognition of qualifications between governments and institutions of higher education;

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- engaging business and industry in education;
- creating balanced mobility;
- and lifelong learning including technical and vocational education and training.

Also at the last ASEM Summit in Milan in 2014, the role of education was highlighted as a key enabling factor in promoting sustainable and inclusive development, innovation and reduction of poverty.

With today's meeting, we can say that we have reached another milestone in fostering closer cooperation between Europe and Asia.

I hope that as people who believe in the power of education you will feel at home in our national library which symbolises admiration for good writing and the value of intensive study.

I would like to express my appreciation to the organising team from the Latvian Ministry of Education and the Secretariat of the Presidency of the EU Council and I wish all of you very fruitful discussions.