

FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF THE U.S.-BALTIC CHARTER OF PARTNERSHIP

Statement by James Rubin

January 16 marks the first anniversary of the U.S.-Baltic Charter of Partnership, a year that has seen remarkable progress in achieving the Charter's goal of promoting the integration of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania into the European and transatlantic communities. Latvia has been accepted into the World Trade Organization. Formal negotiations on European Union accession are now underway with Estonia. Latvia and Lithuania have an EU commitment for eventual membership but have not yet advanced to the formal negotiation phase. Estonia and Latvia passed citizenship and naturalization laws that comply with Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe standards, and the last Russian military facility in the Baltic states closed as previously agreed. Our governments have worked together to attract significant new investments into the region, especially in Lithuania's energy sector. We have completed baseline military studies of all three countries which are already being used to develop efficient, modern, interoperable armed forces. Lithuania hosted an exercise in which thousands of U.S. and regional forces participated.

In the coming year we will continue to work with the Baltic countries to advance our common agenda. Working through the defense and economic bilateral working groups as well as international organizations, we will focus on increasing economic investment in the region, promoting the full integration of minorities, and building on the solid start we have jointly made on environmental, health, crime, civil society, and other issues. We will host the second annual meeting of the Baltic Partnership Commission in Washington this May, where we will be seeking new avenues of cooperation.

The Baltic Charter underscores, in President Clinton's words, that "NATO's door is and will remain open to every partner nation, and America is determined to create the conditions under which Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania can one day walk through that door." The United States renews its commitment to work with the NATO allies to develop for April's Washington NATO Summit new ways to assist all partners aspiring to NATO membership, including the Baltic countries, to strengthen their candidacies.