

Distinguished guests, dear friends of Japan,

Thank you very much for joining us today. On February 23rd, His Majesty Emperor Naruhito will celebrate his 66th birthday. It is a profound honor and a great pleasure to celebrate this auspicious occasion with all of you here today.

Upon being appointed as Ambassador, each of us is granted an audience with His Majesty at the Imperial Palace to receive his gracious words. During my audience, His Majesty expressed his sincere hope for the further development of the friendly relations between Japan and Latvia.

When I arrived in Riga and presented my Credentials to the President in October 2024, I had the privilege of conveying His Majesty's warm message directly to him.

And the past year of 2025 was exceptionally fruitful for the development of Japan-Latvia relations. As Ambassador, it is a distinct privilege to have witnessed such a transformative year.

In May, President Rinkēvičs visited Japan. On that landmark occasion, our two nations announced the elevation of our relationship to a 'Strategic Partnership.' Under this new framework, Japan and Latvia will further advance our cooperation across a wide range of fields.

In September, during Foreign Minister Braže's visit to Japan, concrete steps were outlined in the field of security and economic cooperation. In addition, numerous government delegations and business missions visited Japan throughout the year, deepening ties with their Japanese counterparts.

The President's visit to Japan was scheduled to align with his participation in the Latvia National Day event at the Osaka Expo on May 20. The cultural performance presented there, titled "ECHO," was absolutely magnificent. It was a comprehensive art event that multi-dimensionally expressed Latvian culture, creativity, and technology through music, dance, and performance. With its refined aesthetics and quiet strength, it earned high acclaim as one of the most 'echoing' performances of the Expo. I had the honor of

attending this performance alongside the President and was deeply moved by its artistry.

The Baltic Pavilion, a joint project between Latvia and Lithuania, was also a resounding success, attracting a total of approximately 900,000 visitors during the Expo. On this occasion, I would like to offer my heartfelt congratulations on the success of the pavilion and pay tribute to the exceptional leadership of Director of the Expo pavilion, Lāsma Līdaka.

To understand what contributed to this success, Hiyori, a Japanese student who interned at our Embassy, conducted research. According to her findings, a 'soothing experience engaging the five senses' and 'comfortable seating and accessibility' were key factors. A 'welcoming atmosphere' was, of course, another essential element. Latvian guides proficient in Japanese ensured smooth communication with the visitors. They are all dedicated, talented young guides filled with love for Japan.

Among them was Artūrs, a popular Latvian influencer and creator known for his deep passion for Japanese culture. Based primarily on X (Twitter) and YouTube, he has built a massive following by sharing his unique, humorous perspectives on life in Japan and the intricacies of the Japanese language.

My dear friend since junior high school, Junko, is a huge fan of Latvia. Not because of me, but because of Artūrs. She was eager to visit the Baltic Pavilion to meet him, but as the Expo drew to a close, the Pavilion's popularity reached such heights that when she finally arrived, she told me, 'I couldn't even get in line.' Poor Junko! She became a victim of the Baltic Pavilion's immense popularity.

Speaking of the Baltic Pavilion's success, I must share a heartwarming story with you. What kind of story, you may ask? Let me tell you. Honestly, I cannot keep it to myself.

At the entrance of the pavilion, plush toys of 'Barabi-chan'—the pavilion's mascot—and 'Myaku-Myaku'—the official Expo mascot—were placed side by side. However, in mid-May, this Myaku-Myaku was taken away by two visitors. As news of the incident spread, many people stepped forward, saying 'Barabi-chan must be lonely;

she needs a friend.' They began bringing their own Myaku-Myaku dolls they had purchased or even sending them by mail.

It wasn't just dolls; the pavilion received handmade Myaku-Myakus, balloons, and even a miniature shrine with the message 'Praying for Myaku-Myaku's safe return.' When President Rinkēvičs and I visited the pavilion, we were greeted—quite literally—by a 'mountain of Myaku-Myakus.'

In the end, as many as 140 Myaku-Myaku dolls were gathered. The Baltic Pavilion donated all of them to the Women's and Children's Hospital in Osaka, bringing smiles to children who were unable to visit the Expo themselves.

EXPO 2025 Osaka delivered remarkable results. It is estimated to have generated an operating surplus of approximately 37 billion yen, with an economic ripple effect totaling 3.6 trillion yen. However, beyond these figures, the fact that the Expo provided a precious opportunity for the Japanese people to be captivated by the charms of Latvia, the countless warm interactions born between the Baltic Pavilion and Japanese visitors, and the way the circle of goodwill continued to expand—all of these are truly priceless.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Every year, on the occasion of the New Year, His Majesty the Emperor releases his thoughts and reflections through the Imperial Household Agency. In his message for 2026, His Majesty stated as follows:

*I am deeply saddened by the fact that many lives continue to be lost in various parts of the world due to ongoing wars and conflicts. In our pursuit of a peaceful world, I feel more than ever the importance of people striving for mutual understanding through continued dialogue and working together in cooperation.*

In Europe, four full years are about to pass since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and an immense number of lives have already been lost. According to the UN Human Rights Monitoring

Mission in Ukraine, the year 2025 was the deadliest for civilians in Ukraine since 2022. It is a truly heart-wrenching situation.

In the face of such adversity, we stand with Ukraine. Japan and Latvia stand together as partners sharing fundamental values. Our commitment to achieving a just and lasting peace remains unwavering, and we will continue to walk hand-in-hand to ensure a future where security and dignity are restored to all.

Dear friends of Japan,

His Majesty concluded his New Year's thoughts with these words:

*It is my sincere hope that the new year will be a propitious one, in which people in our country and across the globe can move forward with hope.*

Our hope lies in our partnership—especially the bonds being nurtured by the young people of Japan and Latvia. It lives in the young Latvian guides who warmly welcomed visitors at the Baltic Pavilion. It lives in the Japanese students who chose Latvia as their destination to study abroad. And it surely lives in the hearts of the children at the hospital, who, as they held the gifted Myaku-Myaku dolls close, must have let their imaginations travel to Latvia, a beautiful country they have yet to see. May the smiles of these children and the passion of our youth be the light that guides our two nations toward a future of peace and prosperity.

Distinguished guests, dear friends of Japan,

I spoke too long. Please forgive my enthusiasm; I could not help but share my excitement for the success of the Baltic Pavilion at the Osaka Expo. To showcase the best of Japan, we have invited several companies to present clues to new discoveries at their booths today. I hope you enjoy exploring what they have to offer. Once again, thank you very much for joining us to celebrate this special occasion.