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Latvia Takes EU Helm, Ready to Talk Upping Defense of Russia Borders

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A view over the Ratslaukums, or Town Hall Square, in Riga.

BRUSSELS — Latvia took over the six-month rotating presidency of the European Union on Thursday, pledging to launch a 315 billion euro ($380 billion) investment plan for the bloc and hoping to start a review of Europe's border defense.

Latvia, which became an EU member in 2004 and adopted the euro a year ago, has said the investment plan unveiled by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker a month ago is a main focus.

"Launching it in the first half of the next year will be our key priority. I would want to say that it will be either success or failure of our presidency to launch this plan," Latvian Prime Minister Laimdota Straujuma said in recent days.

Latvia also believes the European Union should retain its firm line towards Russia and says it is time for the bloc to review its security stance, last drawn up in 2003 at a time when the Cold War appeared ended and East-West tension over.

Russia's role in the Ukraine crisis, which included the annexation of Crimea, has awoken fears in the Baltics, which have sizable ethnic Russian minorities, that they could be next.

Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics said he did not want Latvia's presidency to be seen as anti-Russian, but that Europe's current strategy based on stable and peaceful eastern borders was outdated.

"So in this I believe that we have to look at our border security, not only from the point of view of police and law enforcement, but also from defense point of view. We have to speak about bolstering EU defense and so on," he told Reuters.

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