

Welcome address by H. E. Mr. Valdas Adamkus, President of the Republic of Lithuania, to the Participants of the Conference "Building a Wider Europe"

White Hall, Presidential Palace, Vilnius, November 29, 2002

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you in Lithuania. We are truly honored with this opportunity to extend our hospitality and appreciation to you, our friends and supporters from all over Europe.

In particular, I would like to thank the Bertelsmann Foundation and you, Professor Doctor Weidenfeld, for the decision to have this important conference here in Vilnius. Already it is more than a decade that we have worked together and pursued our shared goals successfully.

I do remember the important conferences in Berlin, in Warsaw, and the seminars that were arranged, with your help, in Lithuania. I also hope that our cooperation will continue, since the ongoing European integration process offers more and more new challenging topics for our discussion.

This particular conference, starting tonight, is indeed timely and welcome. It takes place at a time of crucial importance to Lithuania and, at the precise moment when the decisions that will have a profound impact on the future architecture of Europe are being made.

Just a few days ago, Lithuania was invited to join the North Atlantic Alliance. We also enjoyed the official visit by the President of the United States George W. Bush, who underlined the point that Lithuania now is part of a wide union and never again will have to stand alone.

In a very short time, we expect another invitation to be issued in Copenhagen, an invitation which will offer us membership in the European Union.

Thus, this conference provides us with a unique opportunity to evaluate these transformations, as well as to draw guidelines for Europe's further development.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Confidence is a great value. As long as we are confident in our goals, no one can stop us. I have no doubts that today Lithuania, and other candidate countries, are sure of the road they have chosen. Moreover, the recent and forthcoming decisions about enlargement of the Transatlantic Alliance and of the European Union have reinforced our confidence and resolve.

In tomorrow's discussions, you will consider possible ways for developing closer ties between formerly divided and antagonistic regions. Yet, in this context, I want to point out the unique, unprecedented setting in which now all these processes are taking place. Our continent is finally free of dividing lines. What we do have, however, are underutilized opportunities. And we continue discovering, as part of European integration process, these new opportunities.

Let me give you a few examples. A decade ago hardly anyone would have believed that Lithuania and Poland could become such close friends and strategic partners. Who could have believed that all countries, which had just liberated from the communist oppression, would make such great strides in social and economic fields?

Above all, who could have believed that Russia would become part of our democratic European vision.

All these opportunities had been here for years, but who had the vision and courage to find them? Enlargement of both the European Union and NATO helped us to open our eyes. And the more we consider the idea of a Wider Europe, the more it seems realistic.

The ability to put visions in practice is a great quality that is absolutely needed in the twenty-first century Europe.

I am proud that this quality is part of Lithuania's national character. Over a decade ago, we were told that our hopes about independence were over-optimistic.

Some years ago, we were told exactly the same about our aspirations to join the European Union and NATO. However, optimism and determination has never abandoned us and encouraged us to reach for the impossible.

This relationship between vision and implementation is indeed crucial to our life's philosophy. This conference is going straight to the heart of this. Let us put it this way: Is a Wider Europe something inconceivable, something that only a few optimists are persistently trying to impose on our agendas?

I don't think so.

Kaliningrad is just a case in point. The vision of Lithuania - and, I sincerely believe, also of the European Union - is to have Russia in Europe. Kaliningrad has become a litmus test of our ability to put this vision in practice.

I am confident that this project will work out. Because if it doesn't, we all will lose. During this decade, Lithuania has been closely involved in developing new models of partnership in the Baltic Sea region. And tonight I very am glad to have among us the Russian representatives dealing directly with the Kaliningrad issue.

I take this as a sign of ever-growing commitment of Russia and of willingness to solve this issue on the terms acceptable to all parties.

Recently, Lithuania has increased its links with Ukraine, because our vision of a wider Europe would be incomplete without this great country. We have started to build joint institutions to encourage the Ukrainian transition by sharing our knowledge, our experience, and values that are common to all Europeans.

Lithuania also looks forward to increasing cooperation with other regions. Our experience should provide a significant contribution to the common goals of the Euro-Atlantic community.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am convinced that tomorrow you will address all these topics in greater detail. It is important that we exchange and debate ideas, it is imperative that we build a shared vision.

May I wish you, constructive and fruitful discussions in this complicated and challenging endeavor.

Thank you.