

International Conference "Building Wider Europe"

The opening speech by **H. E. Mr. Antanas Valionis**,
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania
Vilnius, Presidential Palace, 30th November 2002

Excellencies, Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first extend my sincere gratitude to Professor "Weidenfeld, a co-organizer of this event. I am pleased that the teams of Lithuania's Foreign Ministry and the Bertelsmann Foundation have co-operated fruitfully and enabled us to meet here today.

Dear colleagues,

We have gathered here in Vilnius, a city of tolerance and open-mindedness, at a particular moment. A new, wider Europe is about to come to life. A week ago in Prague we saw emerging the contours of " a Europe whole, free and at peace". Visiting Vilnius just a week ago, American President Bush repeated the same notion.

NATO's historic decision in Prague recognized Lithuania's readiness to make its political and practical contribution to strengthening security in the Euro-Atlantic area. In this context, I am proud that the Vilnius process, launched by the NATO candidates in 2000 in this city, proved to be a success. The Vilnius Group has contributed to promoting solidarity, openness and co-operation among NATO candidates. Even before that, Lithuania's experience of promoting good neighborhood in the region was recognized in the Vilnius Conference of 1997, which brought together ten Presidents and Russia's Prime Minister.

The Council of Europe Committee of Ministers session in Vilnius this May, which adopted a declaration on regional co-operation, once again proved Lithuania's attempts in promoting regional cooperation.

Now we are looking forward to clear messages from the Copenhagen EU Summit, which -I am sure - will be the greatest step in the unification history of our continent.

What is next? What would happen after this double enlargement of NATO and the EU? Have we already extended the spirit of openness to the East? On the contrary, we still need to support democratic and economic reforms in the countries east from us, thereby ensuring, in the long run, their European choice. At the same time, we need to facilitate trade and promote investment, to ensure stable trade regimes and thus to reduce the gap between the living standards. The challenges of today - trans-national organized crime, nuclear power risks, illegal migration and human trafficking - cannot be tackled by a single state.

However, what does that bring to my country? After the ratification of the EU and NATO entry treaties, Lithuania will become the eastern border of the enlarged Union and the Alliance. We take it seriously, but we more willingly think of "friendly borders" rather than of "frozen front-lines". These borders should protect us from illegal trafficking, criminality. But they should also remain open to good relations, mutual understanding, and cooperation.

Over the past years, the Baltic Sea region has been an example of successful cooperation between East and West, between the EU, NATO and a new Russia. Lithuania's strategic partnership with Poland ensured a successful juncture between the Baltic region and Central Europe.

With the knowledge of language and - what is even more important - the mentality of the West and the East, such countries as Lithuania can be of real value, as those two parts of Europe come closer. Small democracies like my nation can play a highly visible role, especially in alliance with other democracies.

Let me present specific examples.

For several years now, Lithuanian institutions have been implementing projects aimed at the promotion of democracy and free-market in the Kaliningrad Region, Ukraine and Belarus. We plan to expand these activities, giving priority to sharing our knowledge and expertise with partners in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Administrative capacities, environment, regional and cross-border co-operation, contacts between NGOs and people-to-people contacts were the areas where we have achieved significant success. Together with our Russian colleagues, we have managed to establish joint institutions. The Lithuanian experience in co-operation with the Kaliningrad region, combined with the Polish one, provided a significant input for the elaboration of the EU strategy towards this region, especially on the "Northern Dimension".

Currently we have to finalize the transit regime. We work closely together with our neighbors and the EU on these issues, seeking optimal solutions in accordance with the Schengen *acquis*. This will be a testing ground for good relations in the region. Although not identically, but well-functioning Finnish-Russian Schengen border proved not to slow-down bilateral contacts and trade flow. I am sure that soon we shall resolve the transit issue. But a lot remains to be done: the process of ratification of the already concluded border agreement has been long overdue. We still need to agree on readmission treaties with Russia and Belarus. We also need to agree on EU regulations on Facilitated Transit Documents and on the finance and guarantees.

Resolution of the transit question will permit us to liberate our energies for concentrating on economic co-operation, the dialogue between civil societies, and cultural ties. Let me be crystal-clear: with the enlargement of the EU, we shall continue to regard Kaliningrad region as a window of opportunity for the whole of Russia.

Sometimes we feel from our colleagues in Moscow an unreasonable fear of "loosing" this region. There is a fear that if the region becomes more prosperous and more open, it could start drifting apart. But there is no viable alternative to economic development, investment, and openness. Opportunities are here and should not be missed.

It is hard to imagine an emerging wider Europe without Russia. Now, as the Baltic States are completing their entry into the EU and NATO, I hope that our bilateral ties with Russia will gain a new, more favorable momentum. Our economic ties are expanding, cultural and academic cooperation is improving. Big Russian companies are getting more actively involved in the Lithuanian energy sector. In general, the Baltic Sea region will become the focus of EU's relationship with Russia.

With our neighbor Belarus we share the longest border and a long period of common history. We expect that Belarus will play by the rules of a democratic, civil society. We are ready, if requested, to provide further advice in this regard. Lithuania consistently speaks up for pragmatic ties with Belarus, for engagement of this country into the processes of regional co-operation. I am convinced that a democratic Belarus and its future integration into the family of European democracies should be a priority of all of us. Yet it is up to Belarus itself to make the choices. It is through Belarus that major routes of cargo and energy resources extend. All this creates an especially favorable potential for economic cooperation and implementation of joint projects.

We are determined to foster closer links with Ukraine. Even if there are many questions to answer today, this country has a European vocation. It is too important to be left aside. With this in mind, Lithuania initiated closer contacts on different levels with Ukraine by setting up joint institutions, which could be useful for Ukraine's inclusion into regional and Euro-Atlantic integration. A close and interactive dialogue with Ukraine should also facilitate Ukraine's transition to an open and democratic system.

This summer, in Riga, Polish President Kwasniewski proposed to encourage cooperation between the Vilnius Group and the Visegrad countries. This proposal, which does not mean an artificial grouping, could provide a space for self-expression and initiative for Central Europeans to advance security, democracy and prosperity. It could help us to learn from the experience of NATO's most recent members - Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary.

Distinguished guests.

I shall conclude my remarks by telling you that we are honored by the fact that this gathering brought together high representatives from a variety of countries of a widening Europe. This, I am convinced, will ensure a high quality of speeches and debates.

I wish you all stimulating deliberations and a pleasant stay in Vilnius.

Thank you.