

## **LITHUANIA AS A CENTRE OF REGIONAL COOPERATION\***

**President Valdas Adamkus**

Six years ago, when I took the oath of the President before the high Seimas for the first time, I pledged to pursue an open active foreign policy and develop friendly relations with neighbouring countries on the basis of mutual respect and understanding. Also I pledged to take efforts to ensure rapid accession of Lithuania to the European Union and NATO, and to raise the awareness of our people of the significance of our integration process.

Joint efforts of our political parties and the people produced positive results. 2004 is the year of a crucial breakthrough for Lithuania and a particularly important time for our internal and external policy, the future of our state and well being and security of its people.

Lithuania's accession to the European Union and NATO is a significant accomplishment of all Lithuanian people and the recognition of our democracy and economic achievements. It is a unique period in our historical, social and economic development, which opens up new possibilities for our country to promote, together with other nations, common values as well as to strengthen and enhance the area of security, stability and co-operation.

Our membership of the European Union and NATO provides far-reaching guidelines for Lithuania's development. Lithuania has joined European Union with a vision of becoming an active member of the European family of nations, acting in solidarity with all of them. Today we have a possibility to work, create, trade and travel within a united Europe free of internal borders.

I am committed to take every effort to translate our membership in the transatlantic community into a long-term partnership, which brings

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\* This article was prepared on the basis of the speech, which was delivered by H. E. Mr. Valdas Adamkus, the President of the Republic of Lithuania, during the meeting of the heads of foreign diplomatic missions in Lithuania on 14<sup>th</sup> of July 2004.

benefits to all and is based on equality and the democratic values of respect for man, freedom of expression and the rule of law, and which rests on the solidarity of nations who respect and foster each others culture, language and sovereign interests.

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Our integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures takes root in our centuries-long aspiration to anchor our country in Europe and establish European values in our internal and external policy as well as to share our accomplishments and experience with neighbours.

Development of good neighbour relations is one of the key goals of Lithuania's foreign policy. Our experience during the short period of independence has shown that the search for common interests and good relations with neighbours can be an effective tool in solving even the most complicated problems and in building the atmosphere of friendship and confidence within the region.

Now, when Lithuania has become part of the mainstream of European affairs, it will be able to develop with greater vigour neighbourly relations and co-operation within the region, and take part in the formation and implementation of the Union's neighbourhood policy.

We take interest in further enlargement of the European Union and NATO. We will continue to support nations, which aspire to European integration. Their success and democratic transformation will contribute to our success. This is the foundation of Europe's success now and in the future. This is also a guarantee that the door of the European Union and NATO will remain open to any nation, which has chosen the road to democracy and market economy.

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Lithuania's accession to the European Union and NATO has transformed into a new quality our country's engagement in regional and international political affairs.

It may seem that with accession to the European Union and NATO Lithuania has reached its key foreign policy goals. However, many important

tasks are ahead of us and to complete them we will need to make full use of possibilities which integration offers to us.

First, we should get firmly anchored in the European Union and NATO, deliver our obligations and contribute actively to the joint efforts of these organisations to build well being and security.

Second, we will seek to expand the Baltic regions' engagement with the neighbours in the North, the South and the East and contribute actively to the development of new formats of regional co-operation, which would bridge the Nordic countries and the Central and Eastern European nations. In this context, Lithuania's favourable geographical location and its experience of co-operation with neighbours and within the region will be a great asset.

Lithuania's strategic partnership with Poland and its partnership with Ukraine as well as the Nordic-Baltic sextet could also be expanded to include new areas of co-operation and new partners and to develop a proactive co-operation area.

I have a vision of Lithuania as a centre of regional co-operation, which is connected to Europe through transport, energy and infrastructure network.

Third, Lithuania will seek to strengthen its role in the region through the quality of its membership of the European Union and NATO and assistance to the Eastern European nations. Democratic Ukraine and its membership of the European Union and NATO is a strategic interest of Lithuania. We also hope that Belarus and Moldova will link their future with European co-operation.

Fourth, we are convinced that transatlantic partnership, which is indivisible and which rests on shared values, should be further developed and reinforced. Europe needs America, just like America needs Europe. This is well reflected in our economic relations and our common fight against new challenges. Lithuania takes a key interest in the development of a strong vital transatlantic co-operation and in NATO's adaptation to contemporary needs.

Fifth, development of friendly neighbour relations with Russia and close co-operation with the Kaliningrad region is yet another priority of our foreign policy. Lithuania is committed to take an active part in the EU-Russia and NATO-Russia dialogue. The growing trade between the European Union and Russia and expanding co-operation in the sectors of energy and economy makes all parties, in particular Lithuania, interested in the success of this

open dialogue of equal partners. I am convinced that closer partnership of Russia with the Western nations would open up new business opportunities and new possibilities for human contacts.

Sixth, with the accession to the European Union Lithuania has acquired broader possibilities for co-operation. The network of Union's partnership and free trade agreements allows Lithuania to broaden not only political but also commercial relations with faraway regions, where our country has been underrepresented until now.

On the other hand, Lithuania can offer its valuable experience of strengthening democracy and market economy and of developing co-operation with Euro-Atlantic structures. Our participation together with partners in a variety of projects which are carried out in the Caucasus and the Balkans is just one case in point.

Finally, it is important to add weight to our policy of aid and development assistance. I believe that our growing economy and improving social situation will allow for that.

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In less than a few years Lithuania will be in the first group of the new EU member states to join the euro zone and, we hope, the Schengen area, too. This will ensure a truly free movement and better business opportunities. These two factors coupled with the lowest tax rates in the euro zone and interconnected transport and energy systems, which Lithuania is determined to achieve, make an attractive vision of a dynamically developing region, which not only Lithuania but also the European Union needs.