

## **LITHUANIA, A MEETING PLACE OF EUROPE\***

**Lithuanian Foreign Minister Antanas Valionis**

2004 was a historic year for Lithuania. For the first time, Lithuania celebrated the National Day as a full-fledged member of the European Union and NATO. However, Euro-Atlantic integration has brought us to a world that still remains rather unfamiliar to us. It seems that everything is important and everything has to be achieved immediately.

It is not easy to distinguish new priorities in this context. The transformed realities have somewhat discouraged our political ambitions. It is still hard to believe that Lithuania as a member of both the European Union and NATO could aspire to a more significant role in the region, Europe and the world.

I believe that this will soon be in the past. Lithuania is growing. Lithuania is rapidly consolidating by understanding more clearly its geopolitical situation, its “permanent interests”. The firmer our grip on these interests, and the clearer our understanding, the stronger our policy will be, which will now be developed not just for the next decade but for the next twenty or thirty years.

What would these permanent interests of Lithuania be? Lithuania emerged from the aspiration of its people to belong in Europe, to be part of the integrated area of shared values. This aim has not changed much over the centuries. It remains important at the present as well. We already belong to the European Union and NATO.

However, have European values been firmly established in Lithuania?

It is not just the events of the recent years that make us ask this question. It is constantly being raised by Lithuanians who contrast the living standards

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\* This article was prepared on the basis of the speech, which was delivered by Lithuanian Foreign Minister H. E. Mr. Antanas Valionis during the meeting of the heads of the diplomatic missions of the Republic of Lithuania on 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2004.

here and in Europe. It is raised by political scientists who observe the social and political processes in Lithuania.

It seems that there is still not enough Europe in Lithuania. There is not enough of it in our minds and in our daily activities. We are still saying: “they, the European Union” or “they, NATO”. Although both the European Union and NATO – are us.

This ambiguity is characteristic not only of Lithuania. Let’s look at our closest neighbours – some of them do not even belong to the Euro-Atlantic structures. There is not enough Europe beyond Lithuania’s borders. Therefore, the existential puzzle of Lithuania has not yet been resolved either.

On the other hand, it is not enough to merely belong to Europe. We may recall the past when Lithuania was part of Europe but not quite as Lithuania.

At times, we may still hear admonishments: you came, joined, so you better keep quiet, settle down and let the more experienced speak.

Lithuania must preserve its identity in Europe. It must earn the respect and recognition of partners; our national values must be respected and our national interests must be heeded.

In this sense, there is not enough Lithuania in Europe yet. There is a lack of policies which would make others regard our state with respect and turn to it for its opinion or advice. There is a lack of understanding that events taking place in Lithuania or nearby have an impact on the entire continent.

This understanding can be created only by us – through our own activities, our own ideas and initiatives.

All of this defines the key long-term goals of Lithuania:

First – to create Europe in Lithuania, to raise the level of welfare, and to entrench European values in both domestic and foreign policies.

Second – to expand the boundaries of Europe and surround Lithuania with free, democratic, European states on all sides.

Third – to strengthen the international authority of Lithuania and increase its economic, political and cultural influence.

Interim president Artūras Paulauskas has proposed a concept that combines these three aims – the idea of the regional centre. Lithuania would aim to strengthen its role in the region through the quality of EU and NATO membership and the active development of neighbourly relations. Lithuania would become a certain centre of gravity in the region, and Vilnius would be the capital of the region.

This idea has been received equivocally. Some have discerned links with the history of our state; others desiderated a stronger European or transatlantic emphasis.

We still have a long way to go before we fully comprehend the needs and the tasks of our state. However, at the moment, the concept of the regional centre is likely the only one that links our Euro-Atlantic present with the future of the state and provides our policies with ambition and solidity.

What is required for Lithuania to become the regional centre?

First – internal resources. A stable political system, competitive economy, social cohesion and professional institutions are required. Membership in the European Union and NATO will help to resolve these issues faster and more successfully. Our goal is that Lithuania becomes a strong state that creates its own future and the future of Europe.

Second – recognition. Partners and, first of all, regional partners must acknowledge the significance of Lithuania and seek co-operation with our state. Lithuania must become a kind of symbol of the European Union and NATO which other states would aim to measure up to. We must act constructively and far-sightedly, suggest concrete solutions to our partners, and follow European values in our actions. We must form active policies in the region, the European Union and NATO.

Third – influence. Lithuania must create an open economy, expand trade and increase investment in neighbouring countries. We must also promote our culture more so that others can admire it and become motivated to learn the Lithuanian language, thereby absorbing the European values and European heritage.

Fourth – geographic space. Lithuania has so far usually been seen as part of the tiny Baltic region. Having once separated Northern and Central Europe, we have not yet acquired a wider geographic identity. Therefore, we

must expand the Baltic region's interaction with the northern, southern and eastern neighbours, so that through closer relations the strategic significance of Lithuania will increase as well.

Fifth – infrastructure. We need highways running from border to border. Our capacities for cargo and transit must be expanded. A centre is primarily the point of crossing – a meeting place. Lithuania must become a place where roads from the North and the South, the East and the West meet. In this regard, I feel that the most neglected link is between Vilnius and Warsaw.

Sixth – international environment. We need harmonious relations between the USA and the European Union, which would give Lithuania the opportunity to become a beacon of Western values in the presence of another civilisation, another culture. Lithuania needs a strong European Union and a strong NATO because this would increase its own authority. Whereas the democratic development of Russia and its tighter partnership with the Western world would provide Lithuania with new opportunities to increase its influence in the region and in Europe.

The building of a regional centre raises the following short-term goals for the diplomatic service of Lithuania:

First – to use all the opportunities accorded by membership in the EU and NATO to strengthen the Lithuanian state, society, economy and culture. Joining the Euro and the Schengen agreement, the introduction and implementation of European standards in the area of border control, competition and public administration, the implementation of NATO standards in the national defence system – all of this strengthens our state, reduces its vulnerability and opens new opportunities for development. We must constantly remind other Lithuanian institutions about these opportunities, encourage them to join European co-operation as soon as possible and help them, as much as possible, in taking the first steps.

Second – we must integrate smoothly into the European Union and NATO policy-making. The rules of the game must be used actively and skilfully in defending the interests of Lithuania. Over the last ten years, we have proved more than once that Lithuanians are tough, but good, negotiators. We must preserve this standard.

Third – we must expand Lithuania’s trade with the neighbouring countries and increase the volume of Lithuanian investment there. For this purpose, we must use the support of the European Union and NATO, as well as all available international instruments. Free trade agreements with Eastern European countries, their integration to the four freedoms area, their membership in the global trade system – these are just few examples of how we could approach this task.

Fourth – we must strengthen cultural relations with our neighbours and channel resources of the state and the European Union to cultural exchange programmes and international studies in Lithuanian universities. Lithuania must have a stronger presence in the neighbouring countries, while Lithuania and the region must have a stronger presence in the world. Communities of expatriates could also be involved in this activity. Lithuanian schools, Lithuanian organisations and Lithuanian charitable work abroad could embody Lithuania, Europe and the region.

Fifth – we must initiate and establish new forms of regional co-operation, encompassing Northern, Central and Eastern European countries. This would redefine the identity of the region and enable escaping the geographical framework imposed during the interwar period. In this regard, the geographical position of Lithuania is particularly advantageous, while the accumulated experience in neighbourly and regional co-operation is very useful. The strategic partnership with Poland, the Nordic-Baltic cooperation, the institutional partnership of Lithuania and Ukraine – all of these could be further developed by including new areas and new partners and forming a co-operation area interlinked with mutual relations.

Sixth – we must actively support the policy of the expansion of the European Union and NATO. It is the only way for our neighbours that remain outside the European Union and NATO to join Europe and become established in it. Our interest is Ukraine’s membership in the European Union and NATO. Our hope is that Belarus will return to the path of democracy and tie its future to the Euro-Atlantic structures. Our aim is the organic integration of the Kaliningrad region into Europe, as well as its – and Russia’s – openness to Euro-Atlantic co-operation. We must turn the European Neighbourhood Policy into an effective instrument for the integration of these countries into Europe. We must also strengthen

Lithuania's support for the spread of European vales in the region and in the world. In this area, our development and assistance policy still does not perform the role it could.

Seventh – we must connect Lithuania to Europe and the capitals of the states in the region. Lithuania has almost completed its homework. It is time that we turn to our neighbours and, first of all, to our strategic partner Poland with concrete proposals. Private resources, European and international funds, and budgetary subsidies could be made available. What particular projects could we place on the negotiation table? We should also discuss the conditions of transit through Lithuania, and constantly alert Lithuanian institutions to the issues of logistics, including the development of seaports. The diversity of the supply of energy resources is a separate topic which must be included into the agendas of the European Union, NATO and other international structures.

Eighth – we must promote transatlantic relations. There is nothing and, in the nearest future, there probably will not be anything that can replace the transatlantic partnership. Our capacity to defend against terrorism, prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction and meet other contemporary challenges is limited without the USA. However, the United States also depend on support of the European states. Lithuania must strengthen transatlantic co-operation and support the adjustment of NATO to contemporary needs. In this area, we must build up not only the administrative and military but also the intellectual capacity of Lithuania.

Ninth – it is important to promote dialogue between the European Union and NATO and Russia, and take an active part in it. This dialogue is useful for Lithuania, but it must be transparent and guided by shared values. In this area, we must continue the pragmatic neighbourhood policy.

Tenth – we must strengthen Lithuania's authority through representation in international organisations and participation in international programmes and peacekeeping operations. We hope that Lithuania will be elected to the UN Economic and Social Committee and, in 2014-2015, to the UN Security Council, and will preside over the OSCE in 2010-2011. These activities, as well as adherence to international norms and their protection, increase Lithuania's trustworthiness and open opportunities for new initiatives.

These ten points underline what is most important for our state at this stage of development. The more successful we are in their implementation, the more Europe there will be in Lithuania and the more Lithuania in Europe, and the more advantageous will be the entwinement of Euro-Atlantic and national interests.