

Remarks of Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis at Annual Meeting of the Romanian Diplomacy 2023 “Romania’s Resolute Foreign Policy: tackling challenges and maximizing opportunities”

Plenary session: “From the Baltic to the Black Sea: enhancing security and connectivity”

Bucharest, 29 August 2023

Dear Minister, Luminita,

Excellencies,

Colleagues,

It is not by coincidence that today I am here in Bucharest speaking to you at the start of what is likely to be a very consequential political season.

The start of a season is the time to think strategically about your goals, on how to achieve them, and who will be your key partners along the way.

This is where Romania and Lithuania, together with the wider Bucharest 8 group, are bound to be together. First and foremost, in helping Ukraine achieve victory and move significantly towards becoming our common Ally in NATO. But also on many other fronts, like making NATO’s eastern flank more secure, championing European integration, and making sure that Ukraine and Moldova start their EU accession negotiations before the year is out.

On all these fronts we will need courage. We will need to face our own fears and convince others to confront theirs. We will need to be resolute, to say the least.

And “resolute” is a very accurate description of how we in Lithuania see Romania’s foreign policy. We consider you a key pillar in helping Ukraine achieve victory against Russia’s aggression. Your efforts are indispensable in helping an impressive share of Ukraine’s grain reach the world markets. We recognise your leadership in guiding Moldova on its European path. We see your dedication to region’s connectivity in steering the Three Seas Initiative. We appreciate you as an active and reliable partner in EU and NATO, and a fellow believer in strengthening the Trans-Atlantic link.

In Ukraine, we should not let our rhetoric run too far ahead from our real deeds. We should not feel entitled to judge the speed of Ukraine’s progress without enough self-reflection on whether we ourselves have done enough. The fear of escalation has so far prevented us from giving Ukraine types and quantities of weapons that would allow to actually win the war. Starting with helmets back in the winter of 2022 and all the way to HIMARS, Leopards, Patriots and F-16s – we were constantly hesitating and kept losing time.

This has already cost way too many Ukrainian lives. So, our first goal of this political year should be getting rid of this vicious reactive paradigm. We must plan for victory – not a war for as long as it takes. And by victory, I mean Ukraine regaining control of its internationally recognised borders, including Crimea, and being free to choose its own path.

History of my country, just as Romania’s, proves that if back in the nineties we would have been afraid of moving towards freedom, democracy and the rules-based order, the Soviet empire might still be controlling half of Europe.

Because if we are afraid to stand for Ukraine, we might be afraid to stand for Lithuania, Romania or anywhere else. We have to make sure that Europe and the international community have sufficient will and deterrent capacity to prevent further aggression and push the aggressor back. Otherwise, Putin and others of his ilk will have an upper hand.

In addition to helping Ukraine achieving the victory, we should all work for making sure this victory is sustainable and lasting. Credible security guarantees to Ukraine will have to be at the heart of it. And as our countries know so well, only NATO membership can provide Ukraine with security guarantees and a credible deterrent to avert future aggression by expansionist Russia.

At the Vilnius NATO Summit we might have not won the day on this issue but created a strategic opportunity. We committed ourselves to Ukrainian membership in NATO. Building on the Bucharest decision of 2008 and the Vilnius promise of 2023, we have to use these few short months before the Washington summit to push the Alliance to deliver on our commitments.

As Bucharest 8, we have been quite successful at that in the run-up to the Vilnius summit. We should start planning a new united push right now and persevere until the very last minute of the Washington summit.

Ukraine's ultimate victory can only be anchored in a fully democratic system. The successful EU enlargements in 2004, 2007 and 2013 prove that the most effective way to expand the space of peace, stability and prosperity in Europe has been and will continue to be the European integration.

But here again we will be facing fears that the EU with Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia onboard can somehow become unrecognisable with its institutions failing to cope. Fears not unlike these that still prevent Romania from joining Schengen where it fully belongs.

It will be our task to confront these fears head on. Both Ukraine and Moldova made impressive gains in implementing reforms and fully deserve a positive political message on the start of the membership negotiations by the end of this year.

Finally, next season we will have to continue our efforts to strengthen NATO's eastern flank. At the Vilnius Summit we approved new regional defence plans and laid foundations to strengthen our air defences. Finland's participation as a NATO Ally and hopefully swift accession by Sweden also add to our common security.

But with volatility in Russia only about to increase, neither the Baltic nor the Black Sea regions are where they need to be in terms of deterring the threat. Plans do not deter by their mere existence. Generation of sufficient forces by Allies, significantly more troops stationed along NATO's eastern borders even during peacetime and restarting the defence industry is what is needed to make a real impact. As frontline states, it will be our mission to call spade a spade and keep reminding the price of inaction.

Dear colleagues,

As much as I would like to, it is difficult to end on a lighter note. While the hot war is raging in Ukraine, the contours of a new cold war are taking shape. The rules-based international order is increasingly questioned, new alternative orders are being created as we speak.

As we chart our foreign policy in these choppy waters, it is our moral and historical obligation to make sure that when the Iron Curtain falls again it would not leave those who want to live in freedom on the other side, like it did almost 80 years ago.

Thank you.