

**Statement by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, Gabrielius  
Landsbergis,  
at the Annual Meeting of the Heads of Diplomatic Missions, Representations to International  
Organisations and Consular Offices  
of the Republic of Lithuania**

**7 November 2023, Vilnius**

Dear colleagues,

A year ago, we met against the backdrop of dramatic events as Russia initiated a brutal war against Ukraine. Yet that was also a moment of unprecedented Western unity. Even before then, reflecting on the hijacking of the Ryanair plane, the onslaught of hybrid migration, and China's campaign of economic coercion, one crisis appeared to follow another. Each seemed like a new, terrifying, unheard-of challenge that could not get any worse. And each paled in comparison to the new crisis that followed.

Today, **we are living in the times of numerous parallel crises**. There is the war in Ukraine, unrest in the Middle East, and tensions in both the South Caucasus and the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, we confront global challenges, including climate change, food security, and migration. The world is engulfed by a poly-crisis.

Crises emerge in different regions, for different reasons, and are sparked by different actors. But we cannot say that they are not related.

**They are all useful to those who benefit from chaos** and dismantling of the conventional rules-based order.

And they all require additional attention from countries and alliances that benefit from the rules-based order.

As the world continues to heat up, with the international system increasingly fragmented, many wonder whether we will be able to manage them all amidst the distractions on multiple fronts. How many wars can we effectively fight? Will we be forced to choose? And if so, which ones will we choose? These discussions are already occurring among the politicians of our strategic partners and resonating within Western societies.

The outcome of these deliberations will directly affect our interests, and perhaps even our survival, as we are well aware that in a period of interconnected conflicts, **a display of weakness in one crisis triggers a chain reaction in another part of the world**.

Lithuania has been protected by Article 5 of the NATO Treaty for almost 20 years. Its protection is increasingly taking on a concrete form — from the defence plans approved at the Vilnius Summit to the growing number of allies stationed in our country and Germany's decision to permanently deploy a brigade here.

We are firmly established in the EU and have no doubt about our place at the core of European integration. However, we also recognise the vital need to further expand the space of security and stability to Ukraine, Moldova, and the South Caucasus.

However, we are living in unstable times, when no one can predict how things will turn out. Tense times call for maximum clarity of our priorities, and the foundation of the Lithuanian Maslow's pyramid remains the same — our security and defence interests.

The future path of our state can be an ongoing success story, where we remain within the stability zone created by transatlantic security guarantees, consistently invest in defence, witness a greater presence of allies, strengthen and diversify our economy, and reduce dependencies. This way, we make ourselves immune to the designs of imperialists and usurpers.

But there are worse scenarios that could undermine the very foundations upon which we have been relying until now. A negative turn in Ukraine's defence against Russia's aggression, the impact on the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, a large-scale crisis in the Indo-Pacific, or the escalation of conflict in the Middle East — the list goes on. Today, all these scenarios no longer seem unrealistic; on the contrary, they are increasingly plausible.

Because of our size and geographic location, **we do not have the luxury of preparing for the best case scenario.** Diplomacy is the first line of defence, so part of our duty is to be a bit paranoid: to hope for the best but to be prepared for the worst.

The coming year will not be any easier, particularly as it will be influenced by election cycles not only in EU institutions and the United States but also in Lithuania.

So what should we focus on?

**Ukraine.** Someday, when historians look back on these times, Russia's aggression and the West's reaction to it may be that pivotal moment that shaped the course of global events for decades to come. However, this is not the time for determinism. **This is not history yet — it is our present, which we have the opportunity and duty to shape.**

We are seeing signs of fatigue in Western societies. How new crises and conflicts are starting to push Ukraine off the list of political priorities. We cannot give in to this. Putting a stop to Russia's aggression in Ukraine and ensuring Ukraine's ultimate victory is the key message that we have to keep repeating to our allies. With clear arguments on why this victory is crucial for everyone and outlining how we can achieve it.

The West definitely has the resources to ensure Ukraine's victory. The only thing lacking is the will and courage to acknowledge that this is not just Russia's war against Ukraine; rather, it is a battle against the Western world and democracy that Putin is waging alongside accomplices who seek global instability.

Ukraine's victory is an existential issue not only for Lithuania, but for the West as well, even though some do not dare to admit it yet. This is why **undiminished support for Ukraine's war effort and its integration into NATO and the EU is our overriding objective and highest priority in the short term.** If we fail to achieve victory in Ukraine, we will not be able to stop fires from starting elsewhere. Our behaviour in the face of aggression will be the yardstick by which our adversaries judge the value of our words.

**Security and defence.** Important decisions were made at the Vilnius NATO Summit, with the regional defence plans committing to defend every inch of Alliance territory from Day 1. Now the real implementation of these decisions needs to be ensured.

Together with our like-minded partners, we have brought Ukraine closer to NATO both politically and institutionally, and have overcome the taboo of Ukraine's potential NATO membership that has emerged since Russia invaded Ukraine, clearly establishing Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO in the future. These are important results, yet they are an interim stop rather than a final destination. Our direct goal is to create political conditions conducive to Ukraine being invited to join NATO as soon as possible.

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion, the EU has shown unbelievable leadership in consolidating military support to Ukraine from the Member States, which collectively almost matches the support provided by the United States. In the near future, the EU and its Member States may have to shoulder an even greater share of the responsibility. Together, we will have to do everything in our power to ensure that the political will of EU leaders to support Ukraine remains sustainable, despite the worsening economic conditions or emerging signs of fatigue. **Fatigue in the struggle for survival is tantamount to extinction.**

Russia's debilitating war against Ukraine and NATO's ongoing force generation process have also exposed a dramatic shortfall in the military capabilities of most of the Allies. The only way forward is for Europeans to commit to a significant increase in defence spending and to find new instruments and mechanisms to reinforce the defence industry and its turnover.

The **transatlantic partnership** will remain an essential pillar of our security, and strengthening our strategic partnership with the United States will remain an essential task of our diplomatic service. At the beginning of next year, we plan to present the Lithuania-US strategic partnership guidelines. Despite the changes dictated by political cycles, we need to maintain a permanent US military presence in Lithuania and the Baltic region. In the context of the US domestic debates, we need to make sure that the importance of US leadership and Europe's determination to take greater responsibility for its own security are heard not only in Washington, but in the rest of the United States as well.

**The Indo-Pacific.** While we see US leadership in Ukraine, the United States sees China as the only competitor willing and able to change the current rules-based order. Alliances are strong when they benefit all participants, so it is only natural that we must not only expect benefits for ourselves, but also answer the question of how we ourselves can be useful.

Lithuania's successful resistance to Chinese economic and political coercion and the support of the United States have undoubtedly allowed our relationship with the United States to gain new momentum. That is why we need to ensure that our first incremental steps in the Indo-Pacific are sustainable and lasting. We have approved Lithuania's Indo-Pacific Strategy, opened and reinforced embassies, and diversified our economic ties. Our shared — albeit not always pleasant — experiences have brought us closer to the countries of the region. Now we need to make this process irreversible through the establishment of Lithuanian business in the Indo-Pacific markets, networking with academia and experts, and active diplomacy in the region. Many of these processes are already under way without the help of the state, but it is our responsibility to encourage and strengthen them.

The **Nordic-Baltic countries** is a format based on common values during the times when such formats are becoming an increasingly rare species. The changed geopolitical context in the region's neighbourhood, Finland's current and Sweden's forthcoming NATO membership are all catalysts for the *Nordic-Baltic Eight* to further strengthen its voice in international formats. It is no coincidence that the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs is a guest at this year's meeting of ambassadors.

Next year, presiding over the *Baltic Council of Ministers*, we will continue our work on the development of infrastructure projects, including preparations for synchronisation of the electricity network in the beginning of 2025, protection of the external border, and the uniform application of sanctions against Russia and Belarus.

**Poland** is going through a post-election period. However, our countries will remain united on key issues. This is driven not by political opinions, but by a common perception of threats etched into our DNA by history and geography. We will therefore continue to work together in mobilising a response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, ensuring the necessary attention to the defence of NATO's eastern flank, and completing our energy independence.

**Germany's** historic decision to permanently deploy a heavy brigade in Lithuania will become not only a fundamental change in increasing our security, but also an opportunity to reach a new qualitative level of partnership with Germany. We need to seize this opportunity in expanding economic ties, transport connections and cooperation in education, as well as looking for new niches in foreign policy.

In recent years, Lithuania's strategic partnership with **France** has gained further momentum — the Season of Lithuania in France will be held in 2024, and we are looking for even more active cooperation in the field of defence with France's involvement in NATO's rotational air defence.

We need to inspire the **European Union** to expand. To convince it that, just like two decades ago, they must put aside the fears and take advantage of the strategic opportunities offered by enlargement. The expansion to the East is a success story that we can repeat. The alternative scenario is a dangerous one — a war-torn Ukraine left alone, and a Europe that tried to become geopolitical missing its greatest geopolitical opportunity. We are looking for a decision on the opening of negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova later this year. Of course, we have to prepare for EU expansion ourselves, so we are assessing the impact of EU expansion on Lithuania, and at some point we will have to come back to institutional issues.

The **Eastern Partnership** is likely to undergo a transformation. Its fundamental objective — the integration of the Eastern Partners into the EU — has not yet been achieved, so it is premature to declare an end to the policy. It remains relevant to promote the processes of expansion and to keep the countries in the South Caucasus closer to the EU (and thus closer to Ukraine). At the same time, it is a platform that we hope Belarus will return to one day, when a transformation occurs. In **Moldova**, it is critical to maintain the direction of the country in the context of the upcoming elections. There are no easy solutions in the case of **Georgia**, but not granting EU candidate status would create an even greater risk. In a difficult situation, **Armenia** is taking steps in our direction. Today, we do not know whether the country, which has been moving in the other direction for so long, will find the strength to withstand the unprecedented pressure from Moscow. However, this is also a test for Europe, to see whether it can act geopolitically when the window of opportunity opens, and whether it has the ambition to defend democracy and the Westward direction of the South Caucasus beyond mere declarations.

**The rules-based international order.** Russia and China are putting in more and more effort for their alternative world order, which is based on the supremacy of force rather than the law, to be reflected in the agendas of international organisations, and are trying to weaken the formats not favourable to them or create alternative formats of “multilateralism”. The isolation of Russia and Belarus in international organisations is still too feeble, and even some countries close to us sometimes appear to be yearning a return to a habitual coexistence. We must stress that a return to “business as usual” in relations with Russia and Belarus is a path to the destruction — not strengthening — of the rules-based world. Rules only work if there is accountability for breaking them.

It is in the interest of smaller countries to preserve multilateralism. But **for multilateralism to protect us, it must be effective, and not just a cover for empty promises.** We cannot reconcile ourselves to further atrophy of the security architecture. It is not enough to regret or protest about it – we need to work to change it, and this is where I expect your involvement. As much as we may want to stay in our comfort zone, we need to propose solutions that today may challenge the established consensus. It may make us stand out from the crowd, but we must call spade a spade.

Of particular concern is the situation in the OSCE, which is almost paralysed by Russia’s actions and is heading towards total ineffectiveness. Next year, we will be chairing the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, and the effective contribution of this organisation in supporting Ukraine will be at the heart of our priorities.

After each major shock, multilateralism undergoes fundamental reforms, and we need to be part of the discussion on what kind of Europe we will live in after the war. The security architecture that was created after World War II is facing existential challenges, as a state that was entrusted with a special responsibility for international peace and security is interested not in peace, but in the implementation of its own imperialist plans. We need to consider a new security architecture “in defence from Russia” and a long-term strategy to contain Russia.

**Strengthening the forces of democracy.** Democracy in the world is facing existential problems. The growing non-democratic forces are attempting to compromise the long-standing rules of the game and to render ineffective the institutions that enforce those rules. Lithuania has a reputation as a haven for democratic forces. In today’s world of black-and-white narratives, the continued support for democratic forces in Belarus and Russia is a challenging but important mission that we must persist in as our contribution to the hope for a different Belarus and a different Russia.

### **How do we know that the Lithuanian diplomatic service is ready for these upcoming challenges?**

Most diplomats choose this service for their entire career path. What keeps us in the service is a sense of the meaning and significance of our work. Every day, we are used to directing our efforts outwards — from rallying together allies and the like-minded to defending the values that matter to us.

But the ability to work with our partners or rebuff our opponents is only half the battle. For the words “motivation” and “focus” not to merely become buzzwords, the leaders’ attention should be directed inwards. And each and every one of you here is a leader — a role model shaping future generations of diplomats.

We have to ask ourselves whether we and our teams belong to the same era and share the same values as the state and society we represent. Staying connected is critical for diplomats. Staying connected

with the capital and the priorities of the country is undoubtedly one of the most important tasks of a diplomat, but it is equally important to feel the pulse of the times and to create, maintain, and nurture relationships with each of our teammates.

As sad as it may be, we often come to appreciate and notice our colleagues in times of crisis, experiencing the wonderful feeling of someone not letting us down or doing more than you, as a leader, could have ever thought or expected. However, you don't have to wait for a crisis to say "thank you".

We have invested significantly in Lithuania's future diplomatic service, not only through legislative changes and substantial financial injections but also, just as importantly, through developing common value-based understanding on what it should be. And every one of you here is an ambassador not only for Lithuania, but for every person who is part of your team.

Dear colleagues,

In conclusion, I would like to express my gratitude to you, and everyone working in the diplomatic service, for another year full of challenges. Thank you for going an extra mile for Lithuania. For risking your own safety for that of Lithuanian citizens in the world's most dangerous places. For not being afraid to break the ice and the deafening silence when it comes to defending Lithuania's interests. Thank you for keeping your moral compass pointed in the right direction, despite the storms.