

Opening Address by H.E. Kęstutis Budrys,
Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania,
at the 18th Snow Meeting

2025-01-17, Valdovų Rūmai, Vilnius

Dear participants of the Snow Meeting,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is both an honor and a pleasure to welcome you to the 18th Snow Meeting here in Lithuania.

Unlike the snow that has become a rare sight in the streets of Vilnius, the Snow Meeting has endured, proving its relevance and importance year after year. This gathering thrives because of you—your ideas, your collaboration, and your shared commitment to addressing the critical challenges of our time. Without collective thinking, we would not have collective defense.

We meet today in Vilnius with a clear purpose: to seek wise solutions for the pressing realities we face. It's no easy task. In today's geopolitical climate, there are no simple answers, no cheap solutions, and no easy choices.

Here in this part of Europe, much of our focus is naturally on Russia and the security threats it poses. Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty stand at the heart of Europe's existential concerns. Failing to protect them properly today risks opening the door to even greater Russian aggression in the future. And by "properly," I mean what has been evident for decades: anchoring Ukraine firmly within European and transatlantic security structures.

In a few weeks, we will mark three years since Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine began. To be blunt, this is also a solemn commemoration of our failure to bring this war to an end by helping Ukraine prevail.

What went wrong?

We missed critical opportunities to stop Russia when we could have. From the indecision at the Bucharest Summit in 2008 to our inadequate responses to the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014, the signs were clear. Yet, when Russia launched its full-scale assault in 2022, we were still unprepared. Today, the situation remains dire: Iranian drones and North Korean troops aid Russia's war machine, China quietly supports its aggression, and Russia evades sanctions through shadow fleets.

Russia, together with its allies among the world's autocracies, is relentlessly dismantling the Euro-Atlantic security order to suit its ambitions. We cannot let this continue. The era of passive "sit-and-wait" strategies is over. The time for enjoying the dividends of peace has passed.

And I mean that.

Europe must act.

A strong Europe does not emerge from wishful thinking. It requires decisions and actions. This is not just rhetoric—it's a call to act decisively and immediately. As a demonstration of the urgency, I will have to leave this meeting shortly to attend a State Security Council session called by our President. Critical issues demand our attention, and delay is not an option.

Decisions and actions—these must be the pillars of our new strategic culture today.

Preparing white papers or drafting legislation is no longer enough; what matters now is implementation. Too often, we have faltered, whether in meeting defense spending commitments or delivering the military support Ukraine desperately needs.

This very palace, once the seat of a powerful kingdom, is a stark reminder of the costs of inaction. Its foundations are the only original part remaining. The rest had to be rebuilt—brick by brick—after Lithuania regained its independence following centuries of occupation.

So, where do decisions and actions matter most?

One, national security and defense. Despite years of promises, the 2% defense spending goal remains unmet by a third of Allies. NATO's Wales Pledge was clear: "to move towards the 2% guideline within a decade." Yet we continue to fall short. This unrealized commitment may soon have serious consequences. And it has only one solution: decision and action.

Two, NATO defense capabilities. While NATO's decisions on the Eastern Flank have been timely, their implementation is slow. Air defense in the Baltics is still insufficient, and military mobility and critical infrastructure remain vulnerable. Lithuania and Germany are making a fantastic progress to scale up the Enhanced Forward Presence, but much more is needed across the entire Flank.

Three, Baltic Sea security. Sabotage activities in the Baltic Sea have increased alarmingly. NATO must prioritize this region by regrouping its standing maritime forces and considering a dedicated maritime group for permanent deployment. The risks are too significant to ignore.

Four, European defense production. With NATO's Defense Industrial Pledge in place and the EU's focus on defense, we have the tools to boost production. But these efforts will require decisions and action. Lithuania is ready to do its part.

Five, strategic independence. Europe should break free from legal and other arrangements that limit defense and create risky dependencies in key sectors. The NATO-Russia Founding Act must be abandoned. Purchases of Russian oil and gas must stop. Europe should diversify critical mineral supplies and prioritize technological innovation. And all this must be achieved while upholding fundamental human rights and freedoms. The Council of Europe's Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, opened for signature in Vilnius last September, is a step forward in this regard.

Six, rebuilding a secure environment. Russia's aggression has eroded the principles of shared security and peaceful cooperation. These principles can only be restored if Ukraine wins this war and Russia loses. Ukraine's defenders have shown extraordinary resilience, but they cannot sustain the fight alone.

I will not repeat the familiar mantras of what needs to be done to help Ukraine. We all know what Ukraine needs most: a steady and reliable military supplies, protection of its skies and seas, significant investment in its defense industries, and measures to cripple Russia's ability to sustain this war. Let us also remember: helping Ukraine is far cheaper than the cost of a wider conflict, where we would also be served on the plate.

Finally, we must be clear about our goals. Are we aiming to end the *war* or to end the *aggression*? That one-word difference carries enormous political and security implications for Ukraine and the future of Europe.

The current landscape for peace talks is bleak. Putin is not just defying the rules-based international order; he is emboldening other dictators and gaining their support—from North Korea to Iran to the Sahel. This growing circle of autocracies doesn't flock to Russia for its appeal or principles—they align with strength.

Right now, Russia is gaining ground. But change that trajectory, and the alliance of dictators will crumble. Here, Europe's role is pivotal. If we act decisively, we can reverse the current trends. And it is not just about Ukraine. Moldova is grappling with Gazprom's blatant disruption of gas supplies, despite long-term contracts still in force. Armenia has just taken a bold step toward European integration and needs our support. The democratic forces in Belarus and Georgia count on us. Even Syria may be at a turning point, with expectations of a future free of Russian military presence.

Europe's borders are alive with hope and democratic aspirations. And yes, our proactive efforts to practically support these hopes and aspirations will also strengthen Ukraine.

This is work that needs close cooperation between Europeans, transatlantic allies, Indo-Pacific partners, and all democracies.

In this spirit, let us get down to business, folks.

I wish you all productive discussions.

Thank you.