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The Emerging Baltics—The Role of Lithuania

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THE EMERGING BALTICS – THE ROLE OF LITHUANIA

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This paper is a slightly revised version of remarks presented at the University of Missouri-St. Louis on April 25, 2003.

**Remarks by Vygaudas Ušackas**  
**Ambassador of Lithuania to the United States of America**  
**University of Missouri-St. Louis**  
**25 April 2003**

**THE EMERGING BALTICS -- THE ROLE OF LITHUANIA**

Thank you very much for having me here today.

Before I start, let me recognize the attendance of a man, a good friend of mine, who has taken a very special and long-term interest in Lithuania and the other two Baltic countries, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Mr. John Shimkus from Illinois. Congressman Shimkus has long been a supporter and spokesman for the Baltics, serving as Co-chairman of the Baltic Caucus in the House, a bipartisan working group with an interest in enhancing strong U.S.-Baltic relations. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Congressman for his devotion in promoting our countries and our accomplishments.

I have to admit, however, that our friendship with Congressman Shimkus goes beyond the common interest in foreign policy. He makes no secret about his commitment to physical fitness and love for the game of basketball. We initiated a good tradition, that is, a basketball tournament between Lithuanian and U.S. legislators and diplomats. I call it "basketball diplomacy."

Nevertheless, I would like to talk today not about basketball (which we call sometimes religion No. 1 in Lithuania), but about the emerging Baltics, the emerging Europe and the role of Lithuania in that process. It is quite a test to discuss an issue in the making. But I'm pleased to take up this challenge with you. And that is because I hope to hear your ideas as well. I expect a good and open exchange of views during this meeting.

Nowadays, good news seems a rarity, and even when it is present, it often fails to make headlines. The Baltic Sea region is the latest example of a region's successful transformation into a zone of increasingly close security cooperation, economic growth and optimism. The year 2002 will be remembered in the history of Lithuania as well as

other nations from Central and Eastern Europe as the year of historical accomplishments. Not only that our country's economy expanded considerably--in fact, by almost seven percent, but that we also came to the threshold of full-fledged memberships in the European Union and NATO. As it is well known, EU and NATO leaders invited Lithuania along with other Central and Eastern European countries to join these two organizations at the end of last year. Ten days ago, on April 16, Lithuania signed the historic EU Accession Treaty in Athens. The aspiration of the Lithuanian nation to come back to the European family, which has been cherished since restoration of our independence in 1990, is now being almost translated into reality. Provided that Lithuanian citizens vote in favor of the country's membership in the European Union in the national mandatory referendum on May 10-11, 2003 and that the EU countries ratify the accession of new countries in the parliaments, Lithuania will become a full-fledged member of the EU on May 1, 2004.

Likewise, Lithuania's accession to NATO has also entered the final stage. Today's discussion is timely and significant, because right now the U.S. Congress is in the midst of debate on NATO growth ratification. It is not surprising that we, the ambassadors of seven countries invited to join NATO, follow this debate very attentively. In a way, the membership in NATO for us means the end of old era and the beginning of new one. It is proof that the dividing lines in Europe have been erased, and that we are making not one, but seven steps toward the implementation of the vision of Europe whole, free and prosperous.

I have to confess that I was waiting for the opening of the debate on the ratification of NATO expansion with some cautiousness. Although we have witnessed positive developments towards the enlargement of NATO over the last two years, although the NATO Summit in Prague demonstrated unprecedented unity to extend the area of stability and security further East, and although U.S. President George W. Bush asserted to the Lithuanian people in Vilnius right after Prague that "the long night of fear, uncertainty and loneliness is over,"-- yet his earlier message delivered through the Lithuanian President in the White House on January 17, 2002 to all candidate countries-- "Nothing should be taken for granted" --reminded us that the membership in NATO is a moving target and that the U.S. Senate will make an ultimate decision based on our

readiness to undertake serious commitments and solemn responsibilities of the membership. I would like to believe that the fact that debates in the U.S. Congress on NATO enlargement and contribution of new members to the trans-Atlantic security proceed on a highly positive note is a reflection of our practical efforts to become a trustworthy and competent ally.

So, with the protocols of NATO invitees' accession to the alliance expected to go to the U.S. Senate plenary at the beginning of next month, let me share with you a few thoughts on how we got where we are today; what else is needed to ensure the creation of a Europe whole and free; and what is the role of Lithuania in the new Europe.

\* \* \*

First and foremost, today's achievements were made due to the hard and consistent work of our people. We have made extraordinary progress in a relatively short period of time. I happen to think that Lithuania and our Baltic neighbors, Latvia and Estonia, should be considered among the great success stories of the post-communist world. If 15 years ago people used to stand in long lines for basic groceries, today they shop at "super" and other kind of "hyper" markets and are tempted with something that they never heard of in the Soviet Union--discounts and sales. What we have seen over the last decade is the extraordinary desire of the peoples of Lithuania and the other two Baltic countries to transform their societies and to regain their rightful place in the so-called "West", where the rule of law, individual freedom and democracy replaced coercion, a totalitarian regime and one party monopoly. Our restored democracies have demonstrated eagerness to embrace the West as the model for their development. If you come to Lithuania today, you will find a country that is pro-Western, open and tolerant – and trying to make up for the time lost. You will find an economy that is among the fastest growing in Northern and Central Europe and is increasingly oriented to trade with the West. You will find young people who have eagerly embraced the West as a model and magnet, who are going to school at western universities but who, I hope, will be coming home to help rebuild their country. Above all, you will find a quiet determination of a country to fight for values, and to fight for freedom--as is evidenced by deployment of

our forces next to Americans in Kosovo, Afghanistan and now in Iraq as well. Of course, there are still many things to improve and too many people who have deserved a better life. However, the trend is clear and I am confident that sooner rather than later our people will enjoy the same standards of living as Western democracies.

Hence, the goals we had declared upon regaining our independence have been almost accomplished. What's next?

Some international relations prophets predict that we ought to become a "boring Northern European country", implying that after successful achievement of our foreign policy goals we will lose the dynamism and the determination to participate in international politics.

However, the membership in the EU and NATO is the beginning of a new promising path, not the end. Now we have a historical chance to seize new openings and opportunities and to expand our role in an enlarged Euro-Atlantic area.

What might be Lithuania's role in the new Europe and in the context of our relationships with the United States? How can we contribute to promoting Euro-Atlantic security?

Lithuania and the other Baltic countries have a great story of promotion and defense of our shared values. We cherish them. For more than 40 years after the end of the Second World War Lithuania, along with the other Baltic States, was outside the area of stability and security in Europe, which was created under the leadership of the United States of America within the North Atlantic Alliance and the evolutionary process of economic integration expressed through European Union. Separated from the West by the Iron Curtain, the Lithuanian people have nevertheless retained their commitment and belief in the common values of free nations--democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law. Because of our beliefs, we have never refrained from the desire to rejoin one day the community of like-minded nations. Our experience shows that the course of nations' history does not only depend on the might of armies, but on the character of men and women. As U.S. President George W. Bush put it during his visit to Vilnius, "Lithuanians have known cruel oppression and withstood it. You were held by an empire and you outlived it. And because you have paid its cost you know the value of human freedom."

September 11<sup>th</sup> of 2001 made us all reassess the importance of shared values. To my favorite “founding father” – Thomas Jefferson, the United States was great island of freedom in the midst of a world of tyranny. He blessed the Almighty Being for the fact that America was “separated by a wide ocean from the nations of Europe”, and he hoped to keep it that way. But September 11 changed this conventional wisdom. The United States itself became the battlefield. The beacon of freedom and democracy was attacked. However, it was not only an attack against the United States, it was also an attack against our shared values of democracy and liberty. Because of our own history, we know that when democracies fail to act, they have to pay a high price. That is why Lithuania stands together with other freedom-loving nations to face the threat posed by the nexus of terrorism and dictators with weapons of mass destruction.

Lithuania is ready to share the burden of responsibility for peace and security in the trans-Atlantic area. In fact, already today Lithuania and other invited countries contribute actively, in political, economic and military terms, to the implementation of NATO’s policies. Over one thousand Lithuanian troops have been part of the NATO operations in Croatia, Bosnia, Albania, and Kosovo. Moreover, Lithuania has also contributed, together with the United States, European and other allies, through political and other measures, to the efforts of the international coalition to disarm Iraq. As part of the U.S.-led anti-terror coalition, Lithuania offered over-flight rights, sent a liaison officer to CENTCOM, deployed up to 20 medical and cargo handlers in Kuwait, and allocated financial humanitarian assistance to Iraqis. Lithuania is also considering making additional contributions to build a stable and prosperous future for Iraq by sending its peacekeeping forces. In fact, as we did by sending our troops to Afghanistan. Lithuania is part of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, where we have 40 professionally-trained troops. They have been taking part in a special reconnaissance operation in Afghanistan since November 2002.

Another way in which Lithuania contributes to promotion of Euro-Atlantic security is by helping to stabilize its immediate neighborhood. When I think about NATO and EU enlargement I ask myself--have we already exhausted the spirit of openness to the East? Quite the contrary. We still need to support democratic and economic reforms in the countries East from us, thereby ensuring, in the long run, their European choice.



We see our role as an informal guide for our Eastern neighbors in the democratic transformation process. We share our experience in political and economic transition to democracy and a functioning free-market economy with interested partners in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and such regions as the Trans-Caucasus or Central Asia.

We welcome enhanced cooperation between Russia and NATO. We all have a common responsibility to work towards expanding relations with Russia. Lithuania succeeded in expanding cooperation with the Kaliningrad region of Russia, and we have shown a strong political will to maintain a cooperative and friendly border with Kaliningrad. Furthermore, we have a common interest with Russia in regional economic growth and prosperity. New opportunities of cooperation with Russia will develop when Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia join NATO and the EU. It is in Russia's best interest to cooperate with an enlarged NATO as the stronghold of stability on Russia's western borders.

Recently, Lithuania has stepped up its relations with Ukraine, an important partner to Europe. We have initiated the establishment of joint institutions at all levels of government, similar to those that we enjoy with Poland. These institutions should contribute to other efforts, provided by Poland, the EU and the United States to facilitate Ukraine's pro-western choice in times of turbulent developments of a country in transition. This initiative should also help expand cooperation between the Baltic and the Black Sea regions, as it helped to expand cooperation between Lithuania and Poland. Lithuania is ready to share with our partners in Ukraine our experience in public administration as Ukraine prepares itself for a long and difficult road toward European integration.

In pursuit of critical dialogue with Belarus, Lithuania is interested in maturing seeds of democracy over there as it will contribute to the democratization of this country and to stability and security in Europe and the region. Lithuania develops pragmatic relations with Belarus in order to address a number of issues, which are urgent both to Lithuania and other European countries, such as illegal migration, economic cooperation and environmental protection.

Dear friends,

As we obtain our strategic political goals--memberships in NATO and the EU, new windows of opportunities will open for investment, trade and tourism between Lithuania and the United States. In fact, we already have a good record of cooperation in this area. With over \$300 million in investment, the United States is the fifth largest foreign investor in Lithuania. An increasing number of American firms--from Mars/Masterfoods to Coca-Cola, from Kraft Foods and Altria (formerly Philip Morris) to Motorola--are establishing themselves in Lithuania as the springboard to the opening markets of the European Union and recovering Russia. A well-educated labor force, good infrastructure and pro-American people make Lithuania an attractive place for trade and joint business between Lithuania and the U.S.A.

Membership in the EU and NATO will provide new impetus for strengthening the economic relationship between our two countries: First, NATO and EU memberships give Lithuania added security and stability. Second, the synchronization of Lithuania's policies and laws with those of the EU will mean greater stability and predictability. Third, manufacturers will have broader possibilities to operate in the EU markets, entering the single market with lesser costs and offering their products to millions of consumers in an enlarged EU. Lithuania's proximity to the vast CIS market, including its wealth of natural resources, is also an advantage. In sum, Lithuania is becoming a member of a half billion consumer market of a united Europe and is a natural springboard for business to expand into the vast Russian market--this all is of a huge importance for potential investors and business partners from the U.S. I hope that growing economic ties between our countries will also give an additional impetus for cooperation in the area of tourism. Lithuania is not only one of the Europe's best kept travel secrets, but it can also offer to American tourists a calendar full of special events and music festivals. For instance, this year in conjunction with 750 anniversary of Lithuanian Statehood, a magnificent National Music Festival will be held in Vilnius on 3-6 July of 2003. This wonderful festival is very important in the Baltic Music Calendar. I invite you to Vilnius. Lithuania is a friendly place for Americans -- it is even more secure after joining NATO and merging with EU.

\* \* \*

Let me summarize what I have just said. Lithuania is very close to achieving its major foreign policy goals of EU and NATO membership--this will be an act of restoration of historical justice and a significant boost in terms of "catching up" with the rest of the Europe after 50 years of occupation. Our membership in these organizations will solidify Lithuania's role in promoting Euro-Atlantic security and stability. Lithuania will be what it has been up to now -- a trustworthy and reliable ally that you can count on. Lithuania will continue to promote stability and democracy beyond our borders and to expand new windows of opportunities for economic cooperation with our friend and ally--the United States of America.

Thank you.

# APPENDIX