

## **GEOPOLITICAL FUTURE AND LITHUANIA'S FOREIGN POLICY**

*Speech by Gabrielius Landsbergis, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, at the annual meeting of Lithuanian Ambassadors on 29th of August*

### **A Year of Unprecedented Challenges**

When the former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was asked by a younger colleague what the biggest difficulties used to be, he replied: 'Events, my dear boy, events.' Events that just happen, even though they may be unwelcome or unsolicited.

Sometimes I know exactly what Mr. Macmillan had in mind.

We have devoted a great deal of time and energy to dealing with crises that over the past year were successively created by authoritarian regimes with the intention of dragging us into them. Each new crisis would emerge as a terrifying and unprecedented ordeal which at the time seemed to be beyond anything imaginable yet it would pale in comparison to a new wave that followed.

In those times we would often find ourselves plunged into new and unexplored territories of political exercise. They challenged and, of course, solidified our values. It forced us to acquire new skills, to develop and revitalise those we had forgotten. In order to save ourselves from being swallowed up by the waves of each crisis, we had to get our creative juices flowing and waste no time. I am extremely grateful to you for your concerted effort in facing and dealing with those challenges.

First, the Belarusian authorities decided to hijack a Ryanair plane and arrest two young activists whose fortunes, sadly, were permanently shattered. The employment of civil aviation authorities for illicit political interests of the regime seemed as a blatant act of aggression.

In preparation of our response to the hijacking, we not only had to urgently accredit a representative to the International Civil Aviation Organisation and press for an accurate and politically unvarnished report on the hijacking, but we also had to act swiftly and decisively in the capitals of democratic countries in order to ensure that the accurate version of the events would not be obscured by disinformation and to mobilise support for swift and decisive sanctions against the Lukashenko's regime.

This was immediately followed by a hybrid migrant attack on Lithuania — later on Poland and Latvia — organised by Minsk. When hundreds of illegal migrants, purposely brought from the Middle East by organised networks of smugglers and airline flights, were crossing the Lithuanian border every day, the act of weaponizing migrant flows was perceived by us as an unprecedented challenge and an almost unsustainable burden on public authorities.

What transpired first after Minsk had begun sending migrant flows to its border was a diplomatic battle over the narrative: will the major European capitals and Brussels perceive it as a refugee crisis that Europe had already witnessed or as a hybrid attack provoked by the influx of migrants? You obviously know how much extensive diplomatic effort was required to make our partners recognise that what was unfolding at the Lithuanian borders was not a continuation of the 2015 refugee crisis but an act of hybrid aggression by the Lukashenko's regime. At the same time, we had to urgently liaise and join forces with the Iraqi government in order to stop flights carrying migrants from the country and negotiate the deportation of Iraqi citizens. The fact that we managed to repatriate more Iraqi migrants than any other EU country is first and foremost a testament to our proactive diplomacy.

Before the challenge of the hybrid migrant attack could be contained, China unleashed an economic coercion campaign against Lithuania because we dared to stand in solidarity with the aspirations of

Taiwanese people to live in freedom and democracy. Lithuanian goods could not enter the Chinese market: at one point Lithuania was even removed from the world's country list stored on the database of China Customs Register. The secondary sanctions package aimed at companies that have relations with Lithuania even attempted to exclude Lithuania from global production and value chains.

Having faced unprecedented economic pressure from China, we have become acutely aware of the importance of acting in a concerted way to preserve the rules-based international order and to prevent any form of coercion, be it military or economic. China's economic coercive measures against the EU as a whole and its single market have been countered by our diplomacy. The EU's firm and principled stance helped to bring up the issue of China's economic blackmail against Lithuania at the highest level during the EU-China Summit. China was taken to court by the European Commission at the World Trade Organisation over such kind of economic coercion.

We started diversifying our trade, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, even before the attack from China because we suspected that undemocratic regimes would sooner or later use our dependencies against us. The programme had to be implemented much more swiftly with the onset of economic onslaught. Proactive economic diplomacy and the expansion of the network of diplomatic missions have paid off: total exports of Lithuanian products to ten countries in the Indo-Pacific region are already more than 4 times higher than the volume of exports to China in the first half of 2021.

However, Russia's horrific war against Ukraine broke out in February and, half a year later, we are still grappling with the realities of it.

This war presented us with a completely new set of challenges: on the one hand, we had to concentrate all our efforts on helping Ukraine to stand up to Moscow's aggression, and on the other hand, we had to ensure Lithuania's security in the face of a growing geopolitical threat.

Nowadays, Lithuania is among the leading countries consolidating international support for the ongoing battle in Ukraine. This is an expression of the moral stance of our country where both the authorities and civil society work in unison.

We were and still remain the architects of the EU sanctions policy towards Russia. We were the first to take Russia to the International Criminal Court due to its crimes against humanity in Ukraine, we have also joined Ukraine's case against Russia at the International Court of Justice, and we will continue to be involved in the European Court of Human Rights. We are constantly engaged with our partners, and will continue to do our utmost, making it clear to them that there cannot and must not be any weariness on the issue of support to Ukraine.

We have also responded to Ukraine's request for help in exporting Ukrainian grain to world markets. Our extensive, though often invisible, diplomatic activity has contributed in part to the unblocking of Ukraine's Black Sea ports and the resumption of grain exports via Odessa.

A declaration of crucial importance for our security was adopted at the NATO Summit in Madrid. It took a while to convince the Allies that our previous reports weren't exaggerated: the reality turned out to be much worse. The US commitment to an enhanced rotational presence in the Baltics was also secured. We still, however, have a long way to go to ensure that a full-fledged German brigade is deployed in Lithuania by mid-2026.

### **Current Situation and a Look Into the Future**

This brings me to the most important point of my reflections: the present. I invite you to take an open and realistic, responsible and strategic look into the future — what lies ahead in the coming months, years or decades.

The phrase that comes to mind first: *a la guerre comme a la guerre*, all is fair in love and war.

It goes without saying that our situation, that of Europe and that of the free world as a whole, is serious and grave at the moment. Yes, we are at war. We are defending our country in Ukraine; this is not simply a solemn rhetorical statement but a reflection of our reality, a highly important yet very fragile reality. If we cannot defend the European security architecture in Ukraine, the front line could very soon move here to the streets of Vilnius. In Ukraine, we are also helping to defend the prerequisites for the existence of the free world, therefore, all our efforts and ideas must be channelled in that direction. We don't have the luxury of being preoccupied with trivial matters.

I do not envision any immediate resolution in the short term, nor any prospects of good outcomes. Next year is likely to be even more challenging, and I say this to you with full responsibility.

There are many, especially in the West, who believe in normalisation: the challenges that have emerged will either subside, come to an end or recede into the background and we will go back to *business as usual*. It's only human nature. Having encountered and dealt with a raging pandemic, Lukashenko's hybrid migrant attack and China's economic coercion, we thought and believed that we would overcome these challenges — surely, they would come to an end and we would be able to return to the way things were and the normal course of our lives would resume. Now I no longer believe that.

We often say that we have found ourselves in the aftermath of 1939: the territory of the Second World War. These analogies are not mere metaphors. There was no return to the interwar period after the Second World War but a completely new strategic reality came into force and the creation of a new global order began. We are still living in that order, so to speak. The United Nations, NATO and even the European Union are, to a large extent, nothing more than a response to the realities of the Second World War and the new geopolitical landscape that followed it.

I am very much afraid that in the same way there will be no return to the pre-pandemic or pre-Russian war days and that we may longingly look back on them as a lost, short-lived, relatively peaceful golden age.

The world has changed irreversibly: the sooner we come to realise this and begin to act in these new circumstances, the better we will be able to fulfil our mission: to defend and strengthen Lithuania's statehood. The role of diplomacy has never been more important since 1990, when Lithuania's fragile independence had to be consolidated. Now we need to defend, protect and strengthen the independent democratic state of Lithuania and prepare it for the challenges ahead.

I wish to briefly touch upon a few topics.

First of all — although I am not a prophet — I would like to take a look at the geopolitical perspective: What lies ahead of us in terms of geopolitics?

It is almost certain that the major authoritarian powers — China and Russia — will unite in their efforts to challenge the rule-based international order and throw down the gauntlet to the Western security architecture. It is also certain that other authoritarian regimes — in one geopolitical configuration or another — will cluster around these anti-leaders. The total aggressiveness towards the West, which is already reaching Orwellian proportions, will intensify.

Democracy will continue to decline: it will further deteriorate in places where the situation is particularly serious. The state of democracy and human rights can be expected to collapse in countries with existing authoritarian tendencies. Those EU and NATO allies who are currently flirting with the idea of authoritarianism are likely to steer towards that direction even faster. At the same time, of

course, they will be keen to maximise their own leverage to undermine the ability of the two alliances of the free world to act cohesively and decisively.

Our experience suggests that authoritarian regimes can easily weaponize anything: from civil aviation authorities to grain exports, from migration flows to information, from energy resources to nuclear safety. This tendency is reflected in *Weaponization of Everything*, the title of a recent book by Marco Galeotti.

All points of our weaknesses and vulnerabilities which are open to undemocratic forces will be used against us. We must therefore seek to find formulas for resilience to current and future crises and wean ourselves off unstable and hostile regimes. In order to do so, we need to proactively look for alternatives, strengthen the EU's internal market, improve technological competitiveness which is underpinned by the strengthening of Europe's productive capacity and free trade with its democratic partners — this is how the European strategic autonomy in the broadest sense will be enhanced.

The abyss separating the free world and authoritarian states — the division of the world into blocs — will only get wider. The third world countries who are predominantly developing countries will therefore be increasingly forced to make geopolitical choices and become the front line in the fight over spheres of influence and political support. As representatives of the free and democratic world, we will not be able to stand aside: all our diplomatic actions will need to be directed towards a common goal.

In turn, this kind of geopolitical development reminds us of an old nightmare: Will the major political powers return to the paradigm of shared spheres of influence? An order in which world politics is dictated by the leviathans while the small states huddle in the corner in the hopes of not being seen by the aggressors as obtrusive. The interests, security and the very existence of small, even medium-sized states in such a scenario can be seen as *expendable* to larger interests.

Likewise, there were those who believed that Ukraine's legitimate aspirations to be a member of the EU and NATO should be sacrificed in order to appease Russia after the invasion in 2014. At the moment, the desire of 23 million people of Taiwan to live in a free and democratic society seems for some to be expendable in order to possibly avoid a major conflict with China.

The global security architecture has been dangerously crumbling because of Russia's war in Ukraine. If we allow it to collapse while buying some respite and temporary truce by offering concessions to the aggressor, where will that leave us? We should beware of times when the security of the Baltic States will seem expendable for the sake of some 'greater' interest pursued by the larger states.

It is of utmost importance to convey to partners and allies that this kind of reasoning is based on flawed logic. Avoiding unconditional support for Ukraine after Russia's invasion in 2014 did not bring peace — it only encouraged Russia to wage the biggest war in Europe since the end of the Second World War. Appeasement and concessions do not bring peace. They only encourage tyrants to think that the free world is weak and indecisive and to wage new wars on an even bigger scale. Europe and the free world should have learned their lessons in the aftermath of Munich in 1938, the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014; sadly, the lessons have somehow been time and again forgotten.

This forgetfulness is especially precarious for us because it paves the way to a world order where smaller states and millions of people can be expendable in order to placate tyrants and their delusions of grandeur and domination. The only way to avoid this is to not concede any inch of territory — neither physical nor metaphorical — to the authoritarians.

Only then can we hope to create a global order in which small democracies, like Ukraine, Taiwan or Lithuania, will not be considered *expendable*.

Yet how can small states like Lithuania be heard in the room of world politics where the leviathans jostle for position? How to preserve political identity without becoming a mere object in the political agendas of the great powers?

We need to look for levers of political action for which the size of the state is not an important factor. Each country has only one vote in multilateral organizations, regardless of whether it is a small Caribbean island or a billion-dollar superpower. That is why we must have a strong voice in multilateral organizations: we used to do so in the United Nations Security Council, and we are doing so now in the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Russia's war in Ukraine has highlighted the importance of multilateral diplomacy and, regrettably, the shortcomings of international organisations. Not only the United Nations, but also the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, UNESCO and other organisations are very acutely aware of the consequences of Russia's and China's membership and participation. It is increasingly clear that, in today's world, international organisations need to have flexible instruments that allow them to take unconventional decisions and ensure that they operate in a meaningful and effective way. Let us call on our partners to make more serious assessments and to start a review of the international multilateralism system, to think about building institutions that can adequately meet the challenges of the coming era.

Another important way to maximise your own political power is by having allies, by becoming a part of a network, by being a part of a broader context and more effective dialogue. Most importantly, in order to gain allies, we need to have something to say about the files that are of concern to them, which may not be obvious or natural to us. Such cases often require us to step out of the comfort zone of issues that are close to our hearts and relevant to us. In order to establish dialogue and gain trust of countries that have not been our natural allies, we must learn to listen to their concerns and be able to offer solutions.

Our primary and most obvious network of allies is the European Union which has shown solidarity and the capacity to mobilise in the face of war. Seven packages of EU sanctions against Russia have been adopted. A much stronger voice is coming out from Brussels in the international arena, committing to a complete withdrawal from Russian energy resources in the near future. It is no longer convenient to talk about cooperation with Russia among European countries. It is necessary to ensure that this mood of discomfort is not only entrenched in rhetoric but also in the long-term perspective of relations with Moscow. At the same time, we must not be tempted by the 'let's not humiliate Moscow and talk softly' rhetoric, and we must vehemently oppose the tendencies and actors that are disrupting and weakening the unity of the EU.

Lithuania's closer cooperation with like-minded allies is also necessary because, as China's example shows, the use of economic coercion to regulate international relations is unfortunately proliferating and it is necessary to be prepared for such actions in advance. At the EU level, we are focusing on a new legal instrument that will protect EU Member States against economic coercion by third countries. We hope that the EU countries will be able to agree on it soon.

The war in Ukraine and the tectonic shifts in the global security architecture have also re-emphasised the importance of transatlantic relations. NATO remains the only solid foundation on which we can build a sustainable European and global security architecture. The reconsolidation of NATO and the rapprochement between the US and its European allies, started by President Joe Biden a year and a

half ago, must be supported and continued with all possible means. We will also extend our support to AUKUS and QUAD, the new regional security initiatives based on NATO's foundations.

A global alliance of democracies is the third horizon of international solidarity and alliance building. In the face of Russian aggression, as well as in the context of China's previous economic pressures, we have clearly learned how important is solidarity and mutual assistance between democracies. This is precisely what inspires and motivates us to support Taiwan's democracy, develop our relations with Japan and strengthen ties with other democracies in different parts of the world.

Another vital tool in the arsenal of small states is the creation of narratives that enable them to change the dominant discourse. Size is by no means the deciding factor here. Through the power of its moral example, even a small state can change the prevailing narrative and influence the parameters of political choice. Consider Lithuania in the 90s context for a moment. By its courageous acts, a small country has shown the world that a monstrosity like the Soviet Union is nothing more than a giant with feet of clay. Also think of Iceland which opened up an undiscovered area of political action when it recognised Lithuania's independence. I would like to believe that Lithuania is now playing a similar role vis-à-vis other nations that seek and defend democracy.

Even on the most mundane issues, the fundamental foreign policy battle is very often one of narrative. We have witnessed the importance of ensuring that Lukashenko's hybrid migrant attack is not interpreted as a humanitarian refugee crisis. In turn, Russia has managed to impose a narrative on the countries of the developing world that food shortages are not the fault of Russian aggression but of Western sanctions, and, regrettably, this battle over the narrative has been lost.

Therefore, one of the most important tasks of our diplomacy is communication in an effort to create a narrative that corresponds to reality in order to fight against propaganda attempting to usurp public consciousness. Only having learned to communicate our position in a loud, coherent and convincing manner can we hope to protect ourselves from being trampled in a room full of jostling geopolitical leviathans.

Lithuania's actions and principled stance in the face of aggression by authoritarian regimes have earned it unquestionable moral authority. This helps ensuring that our voice is more prominent and influential. A moral policy based on fundamental values must continue to underpin all our decisions.

However, I would disagree with anyone trying to find a contradiction between this principled policy approach and safeguarding Lithuania's interests. Lithuania's current foreign policy is quite often described as a 'value-based policy' as opposed to *Realpolitik* which is based on practical considerations. In any case, what is Lithuania's fundamental interest?

Lithuania's strongest interest, in my estimation, is a world order in which small states like Lithuania can survive, live safely and thrive. This interest is prioritised in Lithuania's new foreign policy.

This implies a great many things: a global order based on international law, the rule of law and peaceful resolution of conflicts, the people's right to self-determination, human rights, the value of freedom and democracy as a measure of the value of the political order and the development of society.

Therefore, I would say that there is no contradiction between a commitment to values and an interest which is understood in the right way. While pursuing a principled value-based policy, we can and must at the same time vehemently defend Lithuania's fundamental interests — we must be like a hedgehog that the leviathans would dread to step on.

Now, the last question I would like to discuss briefly is how, in the face of the world's geopolitical and economic challenges, can we preserve what has been achieved in our country's development over the three decades of independence?

'In my kingdom,' as the Red Queen tells Alice in Wonderland in Lewis Carroll's well-known book, 'you have to run as fast as you can just to stay in the same place.' Whereas for us it is not enough to stay in the same place, so we have to run even faster.

So, the first quality is speed, a rapid reaction to situations that change unexpectedly and lightning fast, a determination not to cling to comforting certainties of the past if circumstances change, an attempt to get ahead of time by looking further afield — what relevant topics, issues and challenges are yet to be included in our, and the world's, agenda in the future.

The second quality is perseverance and endurance. It's not a sprint but a marathon awaiting us in the long run. We will need the utmost persistence and resilience to sustain the attention of the democratic world on us, to prevent ourselves and our allies from shrugging off the issues and saying: 'Everything will be fine, it is not worth the trouble.' Regardless of whether we are talking about the war in Ukraine or sanctions against Russia or a democratic future for Belarus and other countries overrun by tyrannical regimes.

And finally — courage. Courage, not as an abstract quality but as the ability to endure the uncomfortable state of standing alone at the forefront of others, aware of one's own loneliness and the fearful uncertainty that such a stance may entail, or of being confronted by a dark tunnel of new challenges, threats and menaces. The only thing you can then grasp and hold on to, the only thing that can help to see the light at the end of the tunnel is taking responsibility for others and realising that there is no turning back, only going forwards.