

Speech by Mr. Artūras Paulauskas
Speaker of the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am highly honored to visit the International Republican Institute that I have long-standing ties with. Back in 1997 when I was the Prosecutor General of the Republic of Lithuania, and when I was running for the President in Vilnius, it was for the first time that I learned from the IRI how I can turn my ideas of better life into the vision Lithuanian people want to support. I lost by a thin margin of seven thousand votes out of over two-million-big electorate then. However it was a good exercise.

I take with pleasure an opportunity to share my views about an important role that countries such as Lithuania and institutions such as the Lithuanian Parliament can play in extending the area of democracy and security to the east.

We are able to contribute substantially to the development of democratic values, which is not surprising, bearing in mind the forced belonging with now independent states such as Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia or Belarus to one big power some time ago.

The past fifteen years were very different for each member of the former Soviet Union. The Baltic states managed to become members of the European Union and NATO, while there are some which are gradually returning or have returned to the Soviet past.

Anyway our common historical experience is a tool to realize their problems better than their other neighbors can because the latter lack the knowledge of being a part of the Soviet Union.

A decade ago, Lithuania voiced its key foreign policy goals: membership of NATO and the European Union and good neighborly relations. These goals were attained.

Our accession into the EU and NATO was possible only as a result of bold, often painful reforms. This was possible only thanks to the general public and politicians working hand in hand. And that's an experience too.

We want to be now with the countries that due to different reasons did not achieve as much as we did. Lithuania offers and actively shares its experience in numerous areas with Ukraine, Georgia, the other South Caucasus countries, as well as with Moldova.

The world is watching the current situation in Ukraine. So do we. With the general election in Ukraine upcoming in March 2006, it needs international support: beside political signals, the international community should be ready to grant tangible support to Ukraine in its vitally significant reforms.

The political power of Ukraine must, first and foremost, be guided by its national interests rather than a political dividend that may be earned on the government crisis. Political stability is still missing, we know. The natural gas crisis showed the weak points, highlighted the challenges, and pointed to the continuous dependence of Ukrainian well-being on the whim of its "big" neighbor.

Faced with this problem, Ukraine must learn its lesson and concentrate on its immediate task to become a modern and democratic country, and the results it achieves will give guidance to other countries. And the only guarantor of the legitimacy of the parliament is free and democratic parliamentary elections. Preconditions for cooperation between the members of the former "orange" team must be created as well.

Lithuania is looking forward to sending its observers to the international election observer teams.

We are interested in enhanced relations between Ukraine and NATO, bringing the two closer to one another. Lithuania supports the idea of the Membership Action Plan for Ukraine, which would turn it from a NATO partner into a candidate country.

Allow me to underline that support and assistance to Ukraine should be real, that kind words and declarations are not sufficient. To make sure this really is the case I initiated the visit of NB 8 - the eight parliament speakers from the Nordic and Baltic States to Ukraine in September 2005.

We had a meeting with the Chairman of the Ukrainian Parliament Mr. V. Lytvyn, representatives of the Verkhovna Rada (the Parliament), its political groups, and the President of Ukraine Mr. V. Jushchenko. We wanted to hear from our Ukrainian colleagues about their needs in individual areas; to offer things and try to divide among ourselves - eight countries - the fields where each can be helpful and transfer its experience; to avoid duplication; and to meet Ukrainian needs better. The latter will be particularly important after the March Ukrainian parliamentary election.

I am an optimist. I hope that Ukraine can deliver on its promises given at the time of its Orange Revolution. I believe it is our duty to help them. And this is where the Parliament of Lithuania on its own as well as in cooperation with the International Republican Institute can contribute to the success of the democratic processes in Ukraine.

Moldova is now overshadowed by Ukraine. But it also wants to follow the direction of democratization, market economy, and integration with the West.

Not long ago the Lithuanian Parliament hosted Moldova Parliament Speaker Mr. M. Lupu. Our interesting dialogue already resulted in the internship of the Moldova Parliament staff in our parliament. Now our parliamentary delegation is getting ready for a visit to Moldova. I am going to pay a visit there this year.

Lithuania is determined to assist Moldova. This is where we work together with the IRI sharing our experience with Moldova primarily in parliamentary procedures and in the attempt of the old political parties to adjust to the latest developments and the democratic reality. We share our experience on a bilateral basis in how to fight corruption and coordinate EU-related affairs, while multilaterally we contribute to the efforts of democratization of the Transdnistr Region.

We must not forget that the gravest problem experienced by Moldova is the Transdnistr conflict. The development of democratic reforms and the building of a modern state is no more than a theoretical option as long as a big part of the state is in the hands of criminal structures, as long as the state cannot control its borders. These challenges are too big for Moldova to address on its own. Therefore active involvement of the international community should be secured: the EU and the US should be active payers in the negotiations on the issue.

The resolution of the conflict as well as other frozen regional conflicts such as South Osetia and Abkhazia in Georgia and Mountain Karabakh in Azerbaijan is one of the fundamental preconditions for peace and consequently rapid economic development and the evolution of democratic processes.

If we take the South Caucasus, we'll see that the currently used tools for conflict resolution are no good except that they come in handy to Russia. Georgia has two separatist regions. Moreover smuggling and illegal border crossing are the pressing problems that it has to deal with. Russia, of course, claims that Georgia gives asylum to terrorism and is incapable of its border management. I hope you will agree with me when I am saying that international assistance in strengthening Georgia's border control is absolutely critical. It is Georgia's bleeding wound, and Lithuania is ready to actively help it heal.

We must not neglect Russia's role in the South Caucasus region. When we talk with Russia, we must not fail to remind it that Russia should see the stability of the region as its own interest.

The agreement on the withdrawal of the Russian military bases from the Georgian territory is not being implemented, therefore the monitoring of the withdrawal progress and, maybe, even assistance to Georgia in the countering of the arguments must be offered.

We have lasting relationship with Georgia, and we continue to establish new ties that are developing in a very lively pattern. I want to note at this point that four Lithuanian MPs will take part in the conference to be held shortly in Tbilisi dealing with more possible ways of cooperation between the Baltic states and Georgia.

I came up with the initiative beneficial to the South Caucasus region, which is referred to as 3+3. This is the format where three Baltic states and three South Caucasus countries are engaged in close cooperation aimed at Georgia's leading role in the region since Georgia is the only country there not tortured by any conflicts with its neighbors.

The first steps of the initiative were cautious. Now it is gaining momentum as Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan are realizing that, despite mutual friction, the three countries must make an effort, find common ground, and act as one region just as the Baltic states did in the 1990s. The recent case when the gas supply to Georgia was interrupted showed that the region should have a common energy security strategy, that the neighbors should help one another in the time of hardship.

We experienced it back in 1990 when gas stopped reaching Lithuania in winter. We know how it works. Therefore we are offering our experience and raising this issue at international forums - we want to draw our partners' attention to a growing democracy deficit in Russia. The problem is often politely hush-hushed, but it was made evident by the Ukrainian gas crisis. Russia's chairmanship over G-8 had just begun when Russia ruined its reputation of a reliable energy supplier by causing the Ukrainian gas crisis. One can hardly find economic justification for increasing the price five-fold overnight. We are concerned about the processes in Russia: power concentration in one person and limited freedom of expression; legislation restricting the activities of non-governmental

organizations; the profit earned by Russia on oil and gas sales being used for military purposes; the growth of budget allocation to defense from 14 to 17 per cent in 2002-2005.

I am convinced that the common US and EU policy and their speaking in one voice on different issues can make Russia listen. If they fail, Russia will continue to find gaps and loopholes and avoid responsibility.

We must demand adherence to common moral values from Russia if it wants to cooperate with the West.

Let me now turn to another issue.

Belarus is the country that can be significantly affected by Russia. Belarus is our immediate neighbor. Lithuania has the longest border with Belarus, therefore we are very keen on what the situation in Belarus is. It experiences the fight for democratic state building between the administration and the opposition. Those who used to live in the Soviet area know that victory comes only as a result of a long battle.

The presidential election is approaching. It is scheduled for March 19, 2006. I don't think there is any hope that the Belarus government will take note of the remarks of the international community about the necessity of a democratic election process and will stage really free and just elections, and will give free and unrestricted access to mass media to all those who stand for the president.

For those reasons the international election observer teams and their valuations are of particular importance. We must, however, bear in mind that the official invitation by the Belarus authorities to the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights does not mean benevolence. The observers may encounter different barriers, such as a long visa issuance procedure, additional conditions that must be met, etc. On the other hand, the observers must go there with at least the purpose of ensuring security for the Belarus

democratic element in case there are public protests after the election outcome is announced.

The Belarus legislation that came into force at the beginning of this year stipulates criminal liability for 'discreditation of Belarus or provision of distorted facts about Belarus both within and outside the country'. This put rigorous limitations on the freedom of civil society and independence NGOs to express their opinions, which is the proof of the wish of the Belarus authorities to control every domestic process.

Our debate on Belarus must cover Moscow's role there. In my view, our démarche in Minsk should be accompanied by the same démarche in Moscow since we need to know whether election observers from Russia will be honest or will support A. Lukashenko like they did during the previous elections.

We don't feel fully safe with the last dictatorship in Europe just across our border. This explains why we want to help the Belarus opposition and to develop civil society there by using our own resources and by consolidating EU and US efforts. Yes, more funds are needed, but what is still more important is a common EU policy vis-à-vis Belarus. So in order for Belarus to have democratic elections in spring we must act together. If we fail to do this, the fragile sprouts of civil society will be trampled.

Aleksandr Milinkevich, the single opposition nominee, elected unanimously in the democratic pre-election vote, visited Lithuania not long ago. He was hosted by the Lithuanian management - the example followed by other countries and their leaders. I think it is important to know Belarus future politicians, to find out who and what gets our attention, and to support them before and after the election whatever the outcome.

In conclusion, let me say that when one visits countries such as Georgia or Armenia or meets with the Moldova or Belarus democrats, one understands how much advanced Lithuania is, and that we must share our experience with those countries, to aspire to the development of stability and security in the area, and to ensure welfare in our own states.

We see the growing role of the "core group" - Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. They are looking for the cooperation format which can help fulfil the following tasks: strengthening of democracy and integration into European structures. They will set a really good example to other countries if they succeed in the implementation of their aspired goals.

Thanks for your attention.