



**LIETUVOS RESPUBLIKOS SEIMO
UŽSIENIO REIKALŲ KOMITETAS**

SEIMAS OF THE REPUBLIC OF LITHUANIA COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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Mr Ojārs Ēriks Kalniņš
Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee
Saeima of the Republic of Latvia

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Mr Elmar Brok
Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee
European Parliament

Chairpersons of Foreign Affairs Committees
National Parliaments of EU Member States

Dear Colleagues,

In the lead up to the Inter-Parliamentary Conference on the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy to be held in Riga on 4–6 March 2015, allow me to address you and share my views on what I believe are particularly important matters that are to be debated at the Conference. I would also like to extend my gratitude to our colleague, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Saeima of Latvia holding the Presidency of the Council of the EU, for the ambitious programme of the Conference and stimulating topics for discussion. Indeed, they reflect the major challenges we face now when addressing the matters of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy.

I would like to refer to the EU Eastern Partnership Policy, which was among the key priorities of the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the EU in the second semester of 2013. It is obvious that this policy continues to face even greater geopolitical challenges; Eastern Partnership countries implementing democratic reforms remain subject both to external threats and internal difficulties, which become more serious in some cases. When implementing the Eastern Partnership policy, the European Union needs to set extraordinary objectives to respond to the extraordinary security situation in Eastern Europe. I believe that the Eastern Partnership Summit to be held in Riga on 21–22 May 2015 presents an unique opportunity not only to reaffirm our commitments to the partner countries in Eastern Europe in the context of their European integration, but also to provide

Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine with a much-needed impetus in the form of clear and unambiguous perspective of EU membership. These countries have already signed the Association Agreements and their actions have made clear that they are determined to enhance their relations with the EU and implement political, legal and economic reforms to comply with membership criteria. Building on our own experience, I can assure you that the EU membership perspective granted to Lithuania was the major push for democratic reforms that took us to the family of EU Member States over a decade ago. We are convinced that in the face of Russia's aggression in Eastern Europe, offering the perspective of European integration and EU membership to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine should become the ultimate outcome of the Riga Summit.

On the other hand, we need to look for and work out new formulas of cooperation with other Eastern Partnership countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus. I would like to refer to the case of Belarus in particular. As you know, the negotiations on visa facilitation and readmission agreements between the EU and Belarus officially started on 30 January 2014, and the initialling or even signing of the agreements are among the expected outcomes at the Riga Summit. I believe that this matter deserves much more thorough and comprehensive consideration at both governmental and parliamentary levels in the EU Member States than it has received so far. Minsk's decision not to join Moscow in imposing the economic sanctions on the EU Member States and its publicly declared non-recognition of the independent states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and of the annexation of Crimea are not an excuse for the EU to shut the eyes to manifestations of authoritarianism and continued violation of human rights in Belarus. Its increasing interest in closer relationship with the EU, which has become visible in recent months in the run-up to the presidential elections in Belarus, inevitably makes us draw the parallels with the 2008–2010 “warming” in the relations between Belarus and the EU. Back then, Belarus itself showed willingness to engage in a more open dialogue with the EU and improved, to a certain degree, the environment for activities of civil society, the opposition and free press. However, we can recall the events following the 2010 presidential elections: embarking on brutal measures and remarkable tightening of the repressive policy, arrests of presidential candidates, mass detentions, criminal prosecution of the opposition members on political grounds, and repression of human rights activists and independent media. Therefore, any positive moves with concrete practical expression in the relations between the EU and Belarus must be seen in the wider context of the policy consistent with the EU values, concurrently drawing on the painful lessons already learnt. This autumn, the presidential election process in Belarus will show to what degree, if indeed, the current Belarusian authorities are open to the value-based relations with the EU, i.e. whether citizens and candidates will be ensured the freedom of thought, the freedom of expression of political will, and

the freedom of assembly during the electoral campaign, whether the elections will be free and transparent and whether they will meet the international criteria for democratic elections, whether international observers and domestic observers representing the democratic opposition will be allowed to freely observe the elections, including vote counting procedures. These factors as well as the release and rehabilitation of Belarusian political prisoners should be the essential preconditions for an enhanced political dialogue between the EU and Belarus. Regarding the prospects for visa facilitation, it should be taken into consideration that, in a move to become more open to Belarusian people, the EU submitted its proposal on starting the negotiations on visa facilitation to Belarus as early as in June 2011. Meanwhile, the Belarusian authorities did not show any interest in this matter for more than two years. Therefore, it is my firm believe that any concrete steps towards visa facilitation between the EU and Belarus should be made after the presidential elections in the autumn of 2015. When expressing its interests and basing its actions, the EU should aim that the openness declared by the Belarusian authorities translates into real and irreversible changes towards a democratic political system in Belarus rather than merely remains short-lived pre-election statements.

Dear Colleagues,

I look forward to open and comprehensive discussions and respective decisions on these and other issues on the agenda of the upcoming Inter-Parliamentary Conference. I hope that the discussions at the Conference in Riga and the decisions made in the EU's Eastern Partnership Summit in May will prove our joint commitment to promoting the value-based approach to the EU foreign policy.

Sincerely yours,

Audronius Ažubalis

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke, followed by a sharp downward and rightward stroke.

Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania
Deputy Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of Seimas