

**STATEMENT BY
THE MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE REPUBLIC OF LITHUANIA
MR. GABRIELIUS LANDSBERGIS
AT THE MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE OF
THE PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE**

24 May 2024
9:30-12:45 Plenary Chamber, the Seimas

Mr. President of the Parliamentary Assembly,

Members of Parliament, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to Vilnius. A week ago, Lithuania assumed the duties of the Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. The next six months is a unique opportunity for my country to demonstrate our solid commitment towards preserving and promoting our common values – human rights, democracy, and the rule of law –in pursuit of peace in Europe and beyond. I am grateful for this opportunity to outline our Presidency priorities and exchange views in this forum.

Today's geopolitical landscape is completely different than it was when Lithuania held its first Presidency of the Committee of Ministers back in 2001-2002. We witness the dangerous rise of authoritarianism, declining respect for universal human rights, and backsliding of democracy, where those who dare to defend democratic values are attacked, labelled as enemies, brutalized, and oppressed.

The Council of Europe is celebrating its 75th anniversary. We can be proud of its principled performance when faced with an unprecedented ethical choice. It is one of the very few organizations that expelled the aggressor state right after the start of Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine.

The fate of Europe is currently being decided in Ukraine. It is our fundamental obligation to support Ukraine in this fight until its victory, whatever victory takes.

Our Presidency priorities stem from a clear understanding that ongoing Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is also an attack on our shared values. Therefore, full support to Ukraine defending itself, as well as ensuring accountability of Russia and its accomplices for international crimes is the primary focus for the Lithuanian Presidency.

Lithuania will bolster efforts of the Council of Europe in strengthening Ukraine's democratic institutions and support its reconstruction endeavours, including the implementation of the "Resilience, Recovery, and Reconstruction" Action Plan. We will also continue to demand the

safe return of the Ukrainian children, who have been kidnapped by the invaders, deported and illegally adopted in Russia with an aim of changing their national and cultural identity.

We welcome steps by the Council of Europe towards Russia's accountability. The smooth operation of the Register of Damage for Ukraine is key, but we need to make further progress. We will advocate for the Register's membership expansion, as well as consolidate efforts to establish a comprehensive compensation mechanism, supported by expertise from the Council of Europe.

The question of Russia's accountability will not be complete until political and military leadership of Russia and its accomplice Belarus are brought to justice for a core crime of aggression against Ukraine. For this we need the Special International Tribunal that meets the legitimate expectations of Ukrainians and the international community and could effectively reach and try those responsible. We appreciate the Council of Europe's contribution on this matter and are pleased by the progress achieved during the recent Core Group meeting in Vilnius on May 10th.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of the Parliamentary Assembly's work on supporting Ukraine, as well as on reaching out to democratic forces of Belarus. Here I wanted to appreciate the efforts by the head of Lithuania's delegation Mr. Emanuelis Zingeris and others at the Assembly on keeping the question of Russia's accountability high on the agenda. We also need discussion on harmonized information sharing on cases of Russia and Belarus sanctions circumvention.

It is also important to align the Council of Europe Secretariat employment with the membership of the Organisation. With Russia no longer a member, it is inappropriate for its nationals to continue working at the Council, where their presence could pose security and reputational risks.

Dear colleagues,

Let me now turn to Georgia, which I had an opportunity to visit last week together with my Baltic and Icelandic colleagues.

It is a country with which Lithuania shares a common purpose and belief in Europe whole, free, and at peace. Therefore, it hurts me to see that Georgia's government is turning away from this European path by pushing the "foreign agents" law, which the Venice Commission has now strongly recommended to repeal. I appreciate the Assembly's role in referring the issue to the Venice Commission and holding a debate on Georgia this morning.

We must not lose focus and be frank about what the current policies would mean for Georgia's European future before it is too late.

Dear colleagues,

Our Presidency will ensure continuity and consistent implementation of the Reykjavik Summit Decisions, strengthening the organization to face future challenges.

Under Lithuania's Presidency we will continue with a forward-looking agenda developing new guidance, instruments, and cooperation formats to face modern challenges, such as fight against discrimination and hate speech, artificial intelligence and protection of human rights, as well as the impact of the triple planetary crisis on human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

We highly appreciate the decision to open the Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law for signature on the 5th of September in Vilnius during the Informal Conference of the Ministers of Justice. This convention is making history as the first international instrument of its kind. We undertake to foster Vilnius Convention's visibility and impact.

The Council should not relent in its efforts to pursue gender equality and women's rights, fight gender-based and domestic violence, advocate for protection of lawyers, safety of journalists, and promote social rights of our citizens. It is crucial to engage closer with parliaments, civil society and youth in the development and implementation of this important agenda.

Lithuania has a strong record of providing support to civil society, independent media, and human rights defenders from Belarus and other countries oppressed by authoritarian regimes – we will continue to prioritize it.

Finally, we attach great importance to the execution of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights in good faith. It is an important measure of success and relevance of our Organisation.

With over 200 treaties that set common standards to uphold the rule of law, meaningful debates here at the Parliamentary Assembly, or the crucial work by the Venice commission to bring our legislation in line with the European standards, the Council of Europe gives meaning and depth to our common commitment to human rights and democracy. Lithuania is proud to chair this important body and will count on your support and cooperation.

Thank you.