

Welcome speech by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Gabrielius Landsbergis

„Snow Meeting 2024“

January 12, 2024, Vilnius

Dear Colleagues,

Dear Guests,

2023 was a year of long unseen challenges for the international system. Many of these will inevitably continue in 2024.

Russia continues its aggression in Ukraine. Meanwhile, the fires keep popping up globally, as the conflict is burning in the Middle East and tensions escalate in Africa, South America, and Asia. Hard power politics are unfortunately becoming the norm, and authoritarian tendencies have outpaced the speed of democratization.

Listening to public messages from the West, we hear fine self-encouraging words about the need for focus, action, opening our eyes, and the determination to defend our principles, values, and interests wherever we go. At the first glance, the narrative appears positive. However, as we look closer, the reality is less rosy and more nuanced.

The West has indeed furnished Ukraine with military and financial support for its defence. While the support provided is unprecedented, it currently suffices only to maintain the front line, far short from what Ukraine's strategic objective is: reclaiming territories and increasing leverage by securing victory on the battlefield.

Admittedly, we are emboldening the Kremlin by not helping Ukraine enough.

Moreover, as the 2024 electoral period commences in both the United States and Europe, the continuity of support is increasingly pivoting from the strategic security agenda to domestic political battles. Domestic politics take precedence over foreign policy decisions, overshadowing the significance of Ukraine's victory.

We must not be deceived into thinking that the situation in Ukraine will 'somehow sort itself out' without long-term consequences for the stability of Europe and the international system. The Western world is still harbouring an illusion that these processes are unfolding 'not in our backyard' and that they will pass without much harm to us if we refrain from “escalating”.

Yet there *will* be consequences; they are already manifesting. The Kremlin plans for new divisions on its western borders. Russians are pushing ahead with mobilization. Russia's economy is fully subordinated to military needs and is not affected sufficiently by any of the 12 packages of sanctions. Combined with the emboldened

Kremlin's imperialist mentality, all of these factors point to one clear outcome: unchecked in Ukraine, Russia will inevitably advance further.

However, this is not a sole issue. It is evident from recent global trends that the actions and achievements of dictators in one part of the world are closely watched by dictators elsewhere. An unrestrained Russia serves as the catalyst for new points of tension in the Middle East, South America, and Asia. The existing trend of authoritarianism in global politics, if left unchecked, may well transform into a wave of aggression by emboldened authoritarians.

But we still have a chance to make amends and recover. Let us be geopolitical strategists, not short-sighted hostages to internal political intrigues. In fact, as we engage in internal political power struggles, we must not compromise the security of our states and Western civilization.

Because if we do, war and dictators will surely come knocking at our door. And very soon we will still need to take this challenge, only at a much greater cost, with diminished authority, and against bolder opponents.