

Statement by Mr. Vygaudas Ušackas, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania at the Brussels Roundtable on the Community of Democracies. November 16, 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this first informal round table of the Community of Democracies (CoD) with the European Union. I am very happy that Mr. Jerzy Buzek, President of the European Parliament, has agreed to join us today, together with a big number of distinguished personalities from the European Parliament, Council, Commission, United States, and other countries and regions. A special welcome to our NGO community. We are pleased by the presence of Michael Posner from the State Department with us today, which demonstrates importance of the transatlantic link in democracy worldwide.

Why have we gathered here? First and foremost because we believe in democracy and because we also know that, to quote Nelson Mandela, "we may not take our liberty and democracy for granted". Second, because today EU's General Affairs and External Relations Council is starting the debate on the necessity to increase the coherence and effectiveness of EU support to democracy building. Tomorrow we will approve the Council Conclusions on Democracy Support, including the EU Agenda for Action on Support to Democracy-Building Processes, which names the CoD as a EU partner in this endeavor. In this light, I believe we should discuss the synergies between the EU and CoD activities and how we can work together to enhance EU's global efforts aimed at fostering and supporting democracy.

I am particularly happy that Professor Vytautas Landsbergis, the first head of the reestablished state of Lithuania, is with us here today. To me it is highly symbolic that Lithuania's Presidency of the CoD coincides with the 20th anniversary of the reestablishment of Lithuania's independence. It's also symbolic that our meeting is held shortly before Lisbon treaty enters into force. A small nation like Lithuania would have not been able to lead the CoD, comprised of over a hundred countries, without the support and assistance that we have enjoyed over the past two decades from the international democratic community, with the EU at the forefront.

We are delighted to work very closely with our Polish friends, with Professor Bronislaw Mishtal heading CoD Permanent Secretariat in Warsaw. Lithuanian-Polish cooperation is a vivid reminder of the common history of our two nations (some say "the first European Union"), which found expression in the first written Constitution in Europe, adopted soon after the French Revolution in 18th century. The lesson that we have learned from our common history is that maintaining freedom and democracy demand singular commitment. So do our efforts today in supporting pro-democratic forces, challenging political oppression, violation of human rights, and government corruption all over the world. To say it in Abraham Lincoln's words, we must work unceasingly to ensure that "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

According to various reports, 40% of the world's population still live under authoritarian rule, while only 13% live in fully developed democracies. Development, a vital issue for large parts of the world, cannot proceed at the desired pace either, where democracy is weak or nonexistent. Democratic countries face hurdles while promoting their agenda at multilateral fora; while the economic crisis has added risks to democracy worldwide. Our task is to help reverse these trends.

Coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty will enable the EU not only to build “an ever closer Union”, but also to strengthen its role as a global leader in the advancement of democracy. Our tomorrow’s discussion and approval of the GAERC conclusions may become a historic step forward in matching the ideals and visions enshrined in the EU’s founding documents, with the appropriate means in EU’s external actions, also through “its activities within international organizations, including the Community of Democracies”.

As CoD presidency, we want to build synergies not only with the EU, but also with other major democracy stakeholders, be it countries, regions or international organizations. Two months ago we had a successful informal Ministerial meeting in New York, with good discussion and a statement on the situation in Honduras. We will continue CoD involvement in cases like Honduras. We have also issued a CoD Troika statement on Burma. In a few weeks in Vilnius we have an important event with international Burmese campaign representatives. We are also ready to engage CoD in strengthening Moldova’s democracy.

We are encouraged by the responses we have received so far regarding our efforts to revitalise CoD’s working groups and establish a variety of flagship projects. A number of countries have already expressed their interest in leading or engaging with the working groups we have proposed to set up. For example, Canada expressed interest in the group on legal barriers to civil society organizations; Chile in poverty, development and democracy agenda; Hungary’s International Centre for Democratic Transition will hopefully lead the agenda on transitional democracies or democracies at threat. Romania and Bulgaria have expressed their interest in contributing to regional initiatives. We agreed with Brazil to search for synergies between the Alliance of Civilizations and our CoD activities. My Deputy has recently visited Ukraine and South Korea to discuss their contribution to regional democracy building initiatives. In December I will visit to India where, among other matters, we’ll discuss women and democracy agenda, hoping that the largest democracy in the world will get more actively involved in CoD’s projects. In addition, we hope to find committed partners to develop Education for democracy agenda that could become one of the most important priorities of our Community, we hope to demonstrate it by pushing together UN resolution on education for democracy in NY next year and by building on the success of such initiatives like European Humanities University in Vilnius. With an eye on African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance and remembering the excellent job by Mali’s CoD presidency, we also look forward to extending our cooperation with countries of the African Union.

I am convinced that we need to strengthen the political level of the Community. My wish is that by 11 March 2010, as we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the reestablishment of Lithuania, we can establish a parliamentary dimension within the Community of Democracies, where the European Parliament could have a leading role. In the run up to the 10th anniversary CoD Krakow Summit we also hope to reinvigorate CoD’s youth dimension. Most importantly, we must reform the Community, in order to make its working methods even more inclusive, representative, and open to all democracy stakeholders willing and ready to contribute to strengthening democracy worldwide. We very much hope that Maria and her colleagues from Stockholm will help us in reforming the Community and adapting it to current challenges.

To conclude, I am convinced that the Community of Democracies can serve as an effective tool of strengthening the synergies and democratic outreach on a global scale. The Community comprises countries with different institutional, regional, cultural backgrounds. This diversity adds to the unique

character of the Community. Inside the Community we also have a unique interface between governments and civil society activists. I am convinced that cross institutional activities and synergies with NGO community are the future of international efforts on democracy building. I hope today we will start a most fruitful discussion. I also encourage Spanish and Belgian Presidencies of the EU to continue such informal consultations between the Community of Democracies and the European Union. Thank you for attention.