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*INTERPARLIAMENTARY COOPERATION WITH THE
EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES*

Colleagues,

This Conference of Speakers of European Union Parliaments is the concluding event of the parliamentary dimension within the framework of the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the EU. It nicely reminds us of the approaching tenth anniversary of Lithuania's EU membership, which we will celebrate together with the other Eastern and Central European countries just in a few weeks' time. For us it is the symbol of coming back to Europe. It is as important for people of Lithuania as the tenth anniversary of our NATO membership, which we marked recently. Beethoven's Destiny Symphony No. 5 was played in Vilnius on that occasion as if reminding us that Lithuania made the right choices after the restoration of Independence, which have become decisive to our country.

Throughout the glorified history, our nation was destined to relentlessly struggle for the survival, independence and freedom of its country. I believe it is not a mistake to say that we have managed to achieve the set goals only because we joined our efforts. It's been widely acknowledged nowadays that the consolidation of major political forces and society, as well as the prospects for European integration were the decisive factors in pursuing strategic foreign policy objectives and in undertaking domestic reforms.

The difficult road we have taken makes us assess the past and also look into the future. A few week ago, the parliamentary parties of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania signed the Accord establishing, among other, the following objectives: Development and reinforcement of democracy by concerted actions of the state and its citizens, safeguarding internal and external national security; supporting further EU and NATO integration. The Accord also emphasises that it is important to increase Lithuania's and EU's energy independence by implementing a common external energy policy; and to create a common EU energy and

transport infrastructure, to join the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). Also, the Accord expresses support to further EU and NATO enlargement with a focus on Eastern Partnership countries, in particular on Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, in order to accelerate their rapprochement with the community of Western democracies.

Dear colleagues,

The Eastern Partnership is underpinned by shared European values: respect for human rights and freedoms, democracy, and the rule of law. In pursuance of those values, together with Eastern partners we want to create the area of security, stability and welfare in our neighbouring countries, which are an inseparable part of Europe. We offer a closer political association and economic integration, where it is up to every individual partner how far and how fast a country wants to develop its relations with the EU. We also realise that their ambitions and a vision might be different.

Colleagues,

When we were drafting the agenda of the Conference, we could hardly imagine that the topic of the Eastern Partnership would be debated in the context of brutal Russia's actions in Crimea: Today in the 21st century, aggression and coercion have become reality in Europe, and our neighbourhood is thrown into the shadow of war. We consider the actions by the Russian Federation in Crimea as violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and posing a serious threat to peaceful and democratic development of the region as well as to global security and stability. The events in Ukraine clearly demonstrate the attempts to veto the choice of sovereign countries thus undermining the underlying principles of the Helsinki Final Act and the shared values underpinning the vision of Europe that is free and at peace. We have stated this in our joint statements with our colleagues, Heads of the Baltic Parliaments, as well as the Speakers of the Polish Senate and the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada. I cannot but recall and draw a parallel of the current events with the beginning of our independence, when our joint efforts in the Baltic Council and the support expressed by our colleagues in Poland, Scandinavian countries, the US and other friends helped resist the attempts of the failing empire. Therefore today, in order to restore international peace and security, we call on EU Member States and the entire international community to join our

efforts and provide all possible political and economic assistance to Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova on their road towards the European Union.

Some argue that Russia's actions were its reaction to the EU Eastern Partnership policy. We have only one response to such arguments – it is indispensable to further strengthen this policy and to ensure that our neighbours have the right to choose the direction towards value-based political and economic integration. Our partners have consistently nurtured the European integration prospects thus expressing their desire to live in freedom and at peace. Integration provides a realistic opportunity to live in a state that ensures security, stability, democracy and respect for human rights. Every aspiring European country – and our Eastern partners are just like that – should be able to accede to the European Union in the future.

Colleagues,

On 21 March 2014, Ukraine and the EU signed the political part of the Association Agreement in Brussels. As we know, the Association Agreements with Moldova and Georgia are planned to be signed soon. These agreements are the most effective instruments we can employ to help these countries strengthen their political and economic stability, as well as enhance their resistance to external threats. It is also important for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova to be properly prepared for the implementation of the Association Agreements and to establish efficient and robust coordination structures. We therefore propose focusing our support on the areas, which will determine the success of implementation of necessary reforms in the future. It is indispensable to ratify the agreements soon after their signature and to ensure that this process is as smooth as possible.

We know from our own experience how important expert help becomes in these moments. The Council of Europe, the countries of the then North Atlantic Alliance (currently NATO Parliamentary Assembly), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and other structures shared their experience of parliamentary democracy with the Baltic countries not so long ago. Today, the Baltic countries themselves are sharing their own experience with the Eastern partners. We believe that by this we contribute to developing and strengthening active and vibrant civic society. I am convinced that we, as representatives of Parliaments of European Union Member States and Eastern Partnership countries, have a task to do in developing this

activity. I think our role and duty is to consolidate civic society both in the Eastern Partnership countries and within the European Union.

It is also important how these countries will resist further pressure and attempts by external forces to destabilise their internal situation. We express our solidarity with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. We are happy that a special observer mission of the OSCE commenced its work in Ukraine. The task of the mission is to gather information on the security situation, to monitor the human rights situation and to help reducing tension in the country. Lithuania delegated its representative to the mission as well. The European Union has already prepared a very concrete assistance package to Ukraine; similar packages should be developed for Moldova and Georgia too to help them withstand possible external threats.

We welcome the financial support package of 11 billion euro to Ukraine proposed by the European Commission and approved by the European Council on 6 March 2014. However, we also realise that Ukraine needs immediate financial support to stabilise its economic situation and commence reforms without delay. This is important and we have to speak about it as early as today.

Dear colleagues,

The crisis in Ukraine has once again emphasised the importance of a strong transatlantic link, based on shared values and common goals for promoting democracy. It is like air; you do not sense it when you breathe, but once you are deprived of it – you lose everything. Isn't it our duty to think how to strengthen this link and how to further develop it?

We are happy that our neighbour Latvia has identified the Eastern Partnership as one of its priorities of the Presidency of the Council of the EU. Our duty is to act now and to strengthen the efficiency of the Eastern Partnership policy before the next Eastern Partnership summit to be held in Riga in May 2015. We need to think carefully about and decide upon necessary political and institutional measures. I think we should suggest how all European parliaments, both national Parliaments and the European Parliament, could contribute to that end.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate how happy I am to see my colleagues from Eastern Partnership countries and to welcome them in the historic Hall of the Act of 11 March. I am

convinced that both you and I will find it very interesting to hear the views of our Eastern partners and share our experiences.

We understand that the future Eastern Partnership policy has to be developed in view of the significantly changed political, social and economic reality and after taking account of the choices of those Ukrainian citizens, who stood in barricades and died in Maidan. We cannot forget that their choice has unambiguously been their future in Europe.

Thank you for attention.