

Opening statement by H. E. Gabrielius Landsbergis, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, at the Social Dinner for the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence at the NATO Vilnius Summit

11 July 2023, Vilnius

Ladies and gentlemen, good evening, and a warm welcome to the Grand Dukes' palace for this brief moment to wind down – so well-deserved yet so fleeting like a Lithuanian summer.

We started out with songs of the Forest Brothers – men and women who fought for Lithuania's freedom against the Soviets in the 1940s and 50s. Tens of thousands were tortured and killed, hundreds of thousands exiled to Siberia and the GULAGs. Yet despite unspeakable oppression, their spirit kept the freedom flame alive during 50 years of the Soviet occupation and brought us to the restored Lithuania you all witness here today – proud, independent, free and at peace.

This freedom flame continues to burn in the heart of every Lithuanian. And when Ukrainians stand up against Russia's vicious terror, when Belarusians refuse to bow to a petty dictator, when seas of roses and umbrellas cry out for democracy, we hear the rhyme of history and a lesson our past taught us so well: one should never walk alone.

We have re-emerged as the Berlin Wall was tumbling down to the sounds of the "Wind of Change" and the continent hoped for a chance of peace. Thirty-four years on, the air sirens replaced the winds of change, The Scorpions have amended the lyrics, and the wall has reappeared. Europe is facing a war and has to relearn what's it like to live like the Cold War is back again.

In a midst of Russia's aggression against Ukraine a message from Vilnius was and always will be a call for solidarity and strength. With arms, ammunition, intelligence, training, logistics, diplomacy and all the rest – until Ukraine's final victory. A new European security architecture is being forged as we speak. With NATO and Trans-Atlantic partnership stronger than ever. With Finland. With Sweden. And with Ukraine as its equal and indispensable part. From the Baltic to the Black sea, from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific our security rests on the rules based international order, which we have to defend.

Imagination is not the Kremlin's strongest suit – it has to see things to believe them. We are grateful to Germany for its recent decision to permanently station a 4000-strong brigade in Lithuania. We appreciate all Allies who send their troops to defend NATO's eastern borders and are counting the days until these reinforcements arrive. Our firm response is the only way to deter Moscow who is massing divisions and mercenaries just a few hours' drive from here. It is also the only way to deter the bullies beyond this continent who want us to shrink each time we are faced with coercion and blackmail.

Ladies and gentlemen,

When 21 years ago U.S. President George W. Bush spoke to thousands at the Vilnius Town Hall and invited Lithuania to join NATO, he declared that the long night of fear, uncertainty and loneliness was over. [Very few Forest Brothers lived to see that day]. Now Ukraine is longing to hear those words and it is us who can turn their night into dawn. We cannot let this opportunity go to waste. For the sake of Ukrainians, but also for the sake of every one of us.

Thank you.