

Valdemaras SARAPINAS,
*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
of the Republic of Lithuania to Ukraine;*

‘NATO MEMBERSHIP IS UKRAINE’S DESTINY’

– *Mr Ambassador, Lithuania is among the biggest supporters of Ukraine and its people in the resistance against brutal russian aggression. In particular, Lithuania provided aid worth more than 1% of its GDP. Moreover, your state committedly supports Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic integration course. Your Excellency, please, tell us what drives Lithuania to sustain Ukraine’s accession to NATO.*

– After the Second World War, Lithuanians fought a lonely partisan war against soviet occupants until 1953. We know what it is like to feel abandoned, and every single Lithuanian feels responsible for doing everything that depends on us in order not to leave Ukrainians alone. This notion is strong all the way up from our political leadership to regular citizens.

As you know, politically, Lithuania has been a staunch supporter of Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for many years. We sincerely believe that Ukraine belongs to the community of free and democratic nations. Therefore, I am sure that our political support and comprehensive assistance will continue until Ukraine becomes a full-fledged member of both the EU and NATO.

Since the start of russia’s aggression, our military and economic support has grown manifold. The value of military hardware provided by the Lithuanian Government to the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) over the past eighteen months has exceeded EUR 500 million. Lithuania also supported Ukraine in a number of critical sectors, such as energy, post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation of Ukrainian fighters. With our military, financial, and humanitarian support added up, the total sum is more than EUR 1 billion.

Most importantly, the support for Ukraine is coming not only from the Government but from the whole of society. Lithuanians are hosting tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees in their homes. Non-governmental organisations and individuals keep delivering humanitarian assistance and all kinds of support to Ukraine’s military. For example, one of the biggest NGOs in Lithuania collecting financial support for Ukraine’s military, Blue / Yellow, has already gathered EUR 46 million. It is around 10% of total Lithuania’s military support to Ukraine. And all from individual voluntary contributions of regular Lithuanians.

Last but not least, a number of Lithuanian nationals have chosen to join Ukraine’s Foreign Legion and are currently fighting on the frontline. I have no doubt that this support will persist until Ukraine’s final victory.

– *One of the most anticipated events of the year was the NATO Summit in Vilnius. Ukrainians had high expectations for it regarding a possible invitation for Ukraine to join NATO; however, that didn't happen. What do you think were the factors or reasons, both from the Alliance's and Ukrainian sides, for not providing this invitation?*

– Let me start by stating that Vilnius Summit had significant results for the Alliance and for Ukraine. With the newly established NATO-Ukraine Council (NUC) Ukraine has acquired systemic access to the Alliance's policy-making bodies and military structures. Also, NATO has officially shortened Ukraine's accession process by eliminating the Membership Action Plan (MAP) requirement. (In the case of Lithuania, we had to go through six annual MAP cycles before the formal accession in 2004). Last but not least, the NATO Allies and the G7 nations have committed to a substantial long-term assistance to Ukraine. These are remarkable results which will shape Ukraine's relations with NATO over the coming months and years.

My second observation would be that Ukraine's 'high expectations' for the Vilnius Summit, to which you have referred in your question, inevitably carried higher risks of not being fully met. As we all know, NATO is a consensus-based organisation where 30+ sovereign allies have to agree. As we have learned through our soon twenty years of NATO membership, forging consensus on substantive issues can be an uphill struggle. Take the recent example of the Swedish NATO membership, which is yet to be formally approved.

Overall, the results of the Vilnius Summit, in my view, were as good as they could have been, given the circumstances. Using the popular analogy, I would say that the glass is rather half-full than half-empty. Ukraine's membership in NATO is now firmly on the Alliance's agenda. It will be there again for the NATO Summit in Washington next year. Therefore, Ukraine should use the coming months to garner political support in the allied capitals, take full advantage of the new opportunities for closer cooperation with NATO, and reinvigorate its defence reform efforts.

– *Ukrainians are very thankful for the decisions made in Vilnius. From your point of view, are these results sufficient at the current phase of the war? Perhaps, some draft decisions had been promoted by Lithuania but eventually weren't adopted?*

– Lithuania believes the Summit would have been even more successful if we managed to find a clearer formula for Ukraine's movement towards membership in the Alliance. Currently, we have a rather vague reference in the communique to 'conditions' that Ukraine has to satisfy. We will be working in preparation for Washington Summit to reach more clarity in this respect.

Currently, our allies are mostly focused on helping Ukraine achieve victory on the battlefield and consider it the most immediate priority for NATO and the G7. Therefore, Ukraine can expect that substantial military and economic



assistance will continue while the war lasts and beyond. I think the statements made at the Vilnius Summit were very strong and clear in this regard.

However, there are also challenges which Ukraine's Western allies have to address in order to deliver on their promises. One is to quickly ramp up their military production capacities. First and foremost, it concerns the ammunition which Ukraine's defenders need on the battlefield. The second challenge is establishing effective repair and maintenance facilities for Ukraine's military equipment like tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, artillery and, eventually, fighter aircraft. In other words, the current challenge for the West is to outproduce and outrepair Russia. I am sure the AFU will do the rest.

– *At the Vilnius Summit, the NATO-Ukraine Council was established to replace NATO-Ukraine Commission (1997–2023). What is the political significance of this decision?*

– We consider the newly established NATO-Ukraine Council as a significant step for strengthening both political and practical cooperation between Ukraine and NATO. It opens new opportunities for bringing up Ukraine's security concerns with the Alliance and coordinating responses. As you know, the Ukrainian leadership has already convened the first meeting of the NUC to discuss the future of its grain exports through the Black Sea ports.

Looking ahead, I would like to see Alliance's substantive discussions related to Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration. In our view, it is the main purpose of this new body. I also hope that we will find a consensus on Ukraine's more frequent and substantive involvement in NATO's discussions on Russia and the Black Sea

regional security matters within already existing NATO committees and working groups, increased intelligence sharing, and having more Ukrainian officers working within NATO's military structures. This would be very appropriate due to the role that Ukraine plays today in regional and European security. Greater Ukraine's involvement in NATO's structures would not only allow Ukraine to become better prepared for its future membership but also would be of great benefit for the Alliance as it would help incorporate the lessons learned from the war into NATO's military planning.

– *Mr Ambassador, what is your opinion about forging regional alliances as a security complex for states that are not NATO members?*

– Since Lithuania's application to join NATO back in 1994, we have inextricably tied our security with the trans-Atlantic community and never looked back. I believe that NATO membership is also Ukraine's destiny. Of course, alternative regional arrangements may be forged as interim or additional solutions to bolster the security of your country. For example, Nordic Defence Cooperation (Nordefco) was such a tool for Sweden and Finland in their defence cooperation with the rest of the Nordic countries prior to their decision to join NATO. However, given Ukraine's geographical proximity to a hostile and aggressive nuclear power, NATO membership looks like the only viable security arrangement for Ukraine in the long-term perspective.