

Address given by Petras Auštrevičius to the Lithuanian Parliament (23 January 2001)

Caption: On 23 January 2001, Petras Auštrevičius, Director-General of the Lithuanian European Committee and Chief Negotiator for Lithuania's accession to the European Union, delivers an address to the Lithuanian Parliament in Vilnius — the Seimas — in which he emphasises the importance of European integration for his country.

Source: Speech delivered by Mr. Petras Auštrevičius, Chief Negotiator with the European Union and Director General of the European Committee under the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, at the extraordinary session of the Seimas on 23 January, 2001. [ON-LINE]. [Vilnius]: Lithuania in the European Union-Office of the Prime Minister, [17.05.2005]. Disponible sur

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Speech delivered by Mr. Petras Auštrevičius, Chief Negotiator with the European Union and Director General of the European Committee under the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, at the extraordinary session of the Seimas on 23 January, 2001

Dear Members of the Seimas,
Ambassadors,
Distinguished Guests,

This extraordinary session and discussion on Lithuania's integration into the European Union is held at a very important moment. Numerous important events of the last few months in the European Union and in Lithuania prompted us to review our preparation for the EU membership, the main challenges, our top priorities, as well as organisation of our work. The Nice summit emphasised the commitment of the European Union to continue the enlargement process, accepted the procedure for membership negotiations proposed by the European Commission, and at least partially implemented institutional reform. (The next step is that the Treaty of Nice will have to be ratified by national parliaments.) The European Commission has issued regular reports on the progress of the candidate countries towards accession. The Regular Report on Lithuania's progress presents the most positive opinion if compared to the previous ones. Sweden, which took over the six-monthly EU presidency from France, aims to speed up the process of EU enlargement and is optimistic about the future of all the Baltic states. In the light of recent changes in Lithuania such as the newly elected Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania as well as the new Government the top priority of Lithuania's EU integration in the country's domestic and foreign policy was emphasised once again.

Our previous experience of preparations for the EU membership has shown us the complexity of this procedure, which in fact involves modernisation of the whole State. It necessitates the continuation of structural reforms as well as a lot of effort in adopting the EU law. All these steps are possible if we make qualitative changes in the government of the State. Our experience of the last five years has taught us that this kind of work requires a great number of people with modern views. At present we have many EU experts, however, we need people with a new approach to the government of the State, domestic policy, development of business and our social problems. In my opinion, it is a well-known fact already that not only the diplomats or civil servants should prepare for the EU membership but our society and the State, too. Lithuania's membership in the EU is our national objective. Not only should we realise its importance but must contribute to the achievement of it as well.

Lithuania's preparation for the EU membership and the membership itself are based on wise decisions as well as on evaluation of benefits and costs of the EU integration. The study of integration process of Lithuania and other candidate countries and evaluation of the EU membership impact on present EU Member States give us ground to state that the EU membership, transposition and implementation of the EU law as well as structural reforms are expected to make positive influence on Lithuania's political and economical development, which should increase stability, security of the citizens and the State, as well as speed up our economical, social, and cultural development. In addition, technical and financial support from the European Union makes and will continue to make positive impact, too and is expected to increase during the next three years and after Lithuania's accession. This allows us to regard the preparation for the EU membership as our investment into the development of economy and modernisation of the government of the State.

Today, having in mind the future challenges of the EU integration, it is important to emphasise that our long-term success in preparations for the EU membership depends on us, the speed and quality of our work. However, it is the European Union that defines the scope and contents of this internal work. What is the scope of work for today? What implications does it have for our preparations for the EU membership?

At the Nice summit the European Union presented its homework, indirectly fixed the possible dates for the accession of the first candidate countries and stated that negotiations should receive a new qualitative incentive. Sweden is ready to give this new incentive to the enlargement process claiming that the EU enlargement is and will continue to be the top priority during its presidency.

The European Commission issued the Regular Reports. The Report on Lithuania's progress is positive and shows the change of Commission's attitude towards Lithuania. The previous three reports contained adequate and often positive technical analysis of the situation but rather careful and cautious conclusions, however, the fourth report draws a conclusion "in advance" which is based on the hope for continuity of work and future prospects.

The decisions taken at the Nice summit that mention the possibility of the first new EU member states to participate at the elections to the European Parliament due to be held in 2004 and emphasise the principle of differentiation and individual merits give us ground to expect that this year a decision may be taken on which countries will be the first to join the European Union.

Furthermore, the importance of economic factors in negotiating as well as deciding issues on the EU membership is increasing. At this point two main aspects should be mentioned. First, it is possible to get support from the EU (ISPA, SAPARD, PHARE) amounting to more than 0.5 milliard Litass for the development of transport infrastructure, environment protection, structural reforms in agriculture, and rural areas. However, mobilisation of internal resources, adequate co-financing and administrative capacities is the second important precondition for efficient use of these funds. It is clear that more effort will be needed to define our economic policy and keep closer relations with the EU on this issue. This autumn Lithuania will have to prepare the Pre-accession Economic Programme, which should present the main guidelines of Lithuania's further participation in the economic policy of the EU.

The present stage of Lithuania's and EU negotiations should receive positive evaluation. All the negotiation positions were prepared and presented to the EU even before Christmas, which is very important. Lithuania has already opened negotiations on 16 chapters and has preliminary closed 7 chapters (Statistics, Industrial Policy, Small and Medium-size Undertakings, Science and Research, Education and Training, External Relations and Common Foreign and Security Policy). According to the number of the closed chapters we lack behind of some Helsinki group countries, but at the same time we have already started negotiations on some especially difficult chapters, first of all on environment issues.

Sweden, which holds the EU Presidency at present, stated that Lithuania will be able to open all the remaining chapters within the period of six months, including the one on agriculture. We do hope to have this opportunity. During the first half of the year we will be engaged in negotiations with the EU, which is expected to be difficult. The speed of negotiations will depend on the EU as well, but we do hope that during this half of the year we will be able to close preliminary as many chapters as we closed during the last year. At present, however, our target is to make considerable progress in negotiating on 12 chapters.

Our objective is to take advantage of the new opportunities during the Swedish Presidency and to speed up our preparation for the EU membership as well as achieve marked progress in the negotiations. This half of the year is very important to our negotiations due to the fact that this summer the European Council at Gothenburg may take a decision on the further enlargement procedure and differentiation of the candidate countries according to the progress they have made in negotiations.

Having in mind the importance of the new period in the year 2001, certain additional measures have been adopted.

Action Plan for the EU Integration for the first half of the year 2001 and determination of the Government to implement it.

This Action Plan contains our far-reaching programme for 12 chapters (Free Movement of Goods, Free Movement of Persons, Freedom to Provide Services, Free Movement of Capital, Economic and Monetary Union, Company law, Fisheries, Social Policy and Employment, Telecommunications and Information Technologies, Environment, Consumer and Health protection, Culture and Audio-visual Policy), which we are aiming to close or make significant progress during this half of the year.

o Legal acts and actions of the Government that are necessary to speed up the EU integration and

negotiations for the EU membership (initiation of amendments to the Article 47 of the Constitution, laws on bankruptcy and restructuring, Law on the Central Bank of Lithuania, laws on taxes);

- o Review of transitional periods (determination to review and substantiate periods of transition, adopt a decision on withdrawal of requests for certain transition periods);
- o Technical consultations with the European Commission on certain chapters.

These steps are expected to finish negotiations on all the remaining chapters including the most difficult ones (such as Energy, Agriculture, Regional Policy and Structural Instruments, Financial and Budgetary Provisions) during the Presidency of Belgium and Spain, and prepare the country for the EU membership at the beginning of the year 2004.

The present situation, which is closely connected with the main trends of the EU policy, necessitates to double our efforts in preparing for the EU membership and providing necessary information about that. Positive opinion of our society is a good precondition for the successful fulfilment of this task. The programme of the new Government and 100 day Action Plan are expected to find the solutions to the long-term problems, which is important to the EU integration as well.

In order to speed up our preparation we need to reach political unanimity and ensure proper functioning of all the state-run institutions. (The Statement of the Parliamentary Groups of the Seimas signed by the political parties of the Seimas and the draft of resolution presented to the Seimas on this issue are very significant steps). It should be emphasised that efforts made by the leaders and high officials of the country are very important as well.

Now I would like briefly discuss the main tasks that lie ahead of us. But before that I should state that during the next half of the year or the whole year in addition to continuing the implementation of far-reaching reforms we should focus our whole attention to the solution of sensitive problems as well, which could guarantee speedy process of negotiations.

The primary mid-term priority is to continue the main structural reforms such as privatisation, restructuring of energy sector, reform of pension funds, to observe fiscal discipline, to ensure the completion of the reforms by the end of 2001, and visible results by the end of 2002. At present the most important task is to adopt legal acts that will ensure progress in negotiations, set up and strengthen all the necessary administrative structures as well as review the list of requested transitional periods as soon as possible.

Elections to the Seimas, the new Government, recovering economy and flow of positive information about the EU have contributed a lot to the increasing number of euro-enthusiasts in Lithuania. However, the opinion of our citizens about the EU membership is rather unstable, thus unexpected decisions of the Government and the EU could make marked influence on it. Thus a lot has to be done and the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania could play an important role in this field.

Finally I would like to point out a few problems, the solution of which could influence our preparation for the EU membership as well as determine the speed of negotiations. First of all, the Law on the Central Bank of Lithuania should be mentioned, which you, members of the Seimas, have in your agenda of today for debate. This legal act, which is harmonised with the EU law, establishes independence of the Central Bank. This independence, as many developed countries would admit, is an important precondition for successful monetary policy aiming to maintain stable prices. The Law on the Central Bank is important not only as means to achieve our far-reaching aim of creating favourable conditions for Lithuania's accession into the European Monetary Union, but to fulfil our immediate aim, which is to close the chapter on the Economic and Monetary Union. Thus I would like to invite the members of the Seimas to adopt this law during this extraordinary session.

Moreover, it is vital to create suitable conditions for legal entities and natural persons from the EU Member States to acquire agricultural land. The political parties of the Seimas have already reached unanimous decision on the importance of this issue. It should be emphasised that the amendment to the Article 47 of the

Constitution, which would enable to create the desired conditions, is very important not only to the progress of negotiations. This amendment could contribute to the growth of the Lithuania's agricultural market, attract new investments, and strengthen the development of rural areas.

In conclusion I would like to say that the European Union gives us a chance to modernise as well as strengthen security and well being of the State. We must make the most of this historic opportunity.

Thank you for your attention.