Ukraine’s Integration in the Euro-Atlantic Community – Way Ahead

By Gintė Damušis*

Since joining NATO and the EU, Lithuania has initiated a new foreign policy agenda for advancing and supporting democracy and reform in the region. Euro-Atlantic integration as an engine for reform is the driving force behind our own diplomatic, defense and development cooperation initiatives in the area east of the new NATO and EU borders.

Lithuania recently shared its experience and strategy for increasing public support for Euro-Atlantic integration efforts in Ukraine with officials and opinion formers from Kiev invited to Vilnius. Our main message to our Ukrainian counterparts was simple and straightforward: We maintain that Ukraine should be given a strong message of support for its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, and even though no one disputes the strategic importance of Ukraine, membership in NATO is neither agreed, nor guaranteed. It is a tangible goal, but its realization will largely depend on Ukraine itself, on its commitment to reform.

Membership of Ukraine in NATO would be different from other enlargements in recent years, because it would alter the geopolitical map of Europe. Ukraine and other countries on the Black Sea are in an unsettled region, which has not enjoyed the same degree of commitment that “core Europe” and the United States demonstrated toward Central Europe.

This dynamic region faces a West that is sometimes distracted, divided and complacent over why it should engage as an active partner for change. Many Western leaders have issued rhetorical support for a wider Europe that is more democratic, more secure, and more of a partner for the West. But the concept remains relatively undefined, its mechanisms underdeveloped, and support for it uncertain. Some have yet to decide whether Western engagement should be foremost about keeping Ukraine happy as a constructive non-member or advancing a truly transformative approach to Ukraine and the region. That

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approach would align – and eventually integrate – Ukraine and other nations, like Georgia and Moldova, into the European and Euro-Atlantic community.

Lithuania supports and appreciates the transformative power of the transatlantic partnership. For half a century, the transatlantic link protected the western half of the continent from threats from its eastern half, while transforming relations among western countries themselves and working to overcome divisions of the continent. Then the West joined in solidarity with those in the East during their singing revolutions and seized the opportunity to build a Europe whole, free and at peace with itself. It began by anchoring the Visegrad countries in the Euro-Atlantic community. After some hesitation, and great human tragedy in the Balkans, it extended that vision to Southeast Europe. This vision was broadened to include other new democracies from the Baltic to the Black Sea. The result has been the successive advance of democracy, security, human rights and free markets through most of the Euro-Atlantic region.

Today the challenge is to extend this vision to fully include Ukraine. Lithuania believes that we must provide Ukraine with a clear perspective. In sharp contrast to the past ten years, when Leonid Kuchma led Ukraine, today we have a partner that shares our values. President Viktor Yushchenko appears very serious about embracing democracy and broader reforms. Successful reforms in Ukraine would reverberate throughout the societies of the former Soviet space, offering compelling evidence that freedom, democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law is not some faraway unreachable dream.

Ukraine actually helped to overcome some lingering strains in trans-Atlantic relations caused by the war in Iraq. The display of coordinated US-EU support for free elections in Ukraine was perhaps the most recent dramatic example of what can be achieved by transatlantic entente. Lithuania was pleased to be an active player in the process of active EU engagement during the political crisis. The West is perhaps at the same point in its relations with Ukraine as it was with the nations of Central and Eastern Europe more than a decade ago, when the notion of Euro-Atlantic integration was considered excessively ambitious, potentially threatening, or simply unrealistic. These were arguments that the Baltic States came to know only too well. That experience, while ultimately successful, tells us that anchoring Ukraine to the West will be neither quick nor easy. It cautions us about trying to predict the exact course or nature of the process, which cannot be artificially accelerated. The process of Euro-Atlantic
integration must be genuine. But it also offers some useful lessons along the way.

Firstly, closer association with the West begins at home. Western countries will deepen their links with Ukraine to the extent they see that the leadership and the people are making tough choices for democratic, free market reforms – not as a favor to them, but as a benefit to themselves. Lithuania’s breaking point in the Euro-Atlantic integration process came after this realization. Closer integration into western structures is likely to be accelerated to the extent Ukraine “acts like a member” even before it becomes a member. Seeking closer association with the West, Ukraine needs to articulate clearly and consistently to Western partners how its closer association would benefit the entire Euro-Atlantic community – and then it needs to act accordingly. Ukraine has been demonstrating its commitment by participating in NATO-led operations and acting like a de facto member.

Secondly, we need to keep the door open. Even though the burden of change rests primarily with Ukraine as it seeks reform, it is critically important that Western leaders be clear that the door to Western institutions remains open. Such a vision should be underpinned with concrete manifestations of support and outreach. Ukraine has been offered instruments for strengthening its ties with NATO, such as Intensified Dialogue. Lithuania supports extending a Membership Action Plan for Ukraine, which would officially recognize Ukraine’s aspirations and lay down further steps toward membership. Success will depend primarily on Ukraine’s concrete, measurable progress in implementing key reforms and policies, as well as the conduct of free and fair elections to the Verkhovna Rada in March 2006.

Thirdly, we must engage on a broad front. Western openness to Ukraine should go beyond monetary assistance alone. In earlier phases of enlargement, both the EU and the U.S. offered aspiring members a range of inducements credible enough to secure strategic leverage over the course of reform and practical enough to guide those reforms in ways conducive to Euro-Atlantic integration. Such leverage is likely to be limited without the prospect of admission to Euro-Atlantic institutions, even if that prospect appears to be on the distant horizon. The credibility of an “open door” policy depends on the willingness and ability of the West to provide intermediate mechanisms and transitional vehicles – as was done with the U.S.-Baltic Charter and the Northern European Initiative, the EU’s Stabilization and Association Agreements, the Northern Dimension – to
guide and support reformist Ukraine along what could be a long and winding road. The NATO-Ukraine Annual Target Plan, the EU’s “10 points for closer cooperation”, the EU-Ukraine Action Plan, the fact that Ukraine will be invited to align itself with EU CFSP common positions are all steps in that direction.

Then, we should also keep the impact on Russia in mind. Efforts to establish a closer Euro-Atlantic association must be advanced with an awareness of their impact on Russia and neighbouring countries. This is by no means in terms of political sensitivities or within the context of assigning spheres of influence. Success in Ukraine would be powerful evidence that democracy, free markets, respect for human rights and the rule of law can take root on the territory of the former Soviet Union. Ukraine’s successful transition toward a full-fledged democracy and rule of law would resonate profoundly throughout Russian society – a particularly important message now, given Moscow’s rapid retreat from freedom and democracy. Strong Western support for Ukrainian reforms is necessary not only for the sake of Ukrainian success, but also for the future of democracy and the rule of law in Russia.

Current member states can work with Ukraine in specific areas, especially in areas of comparative advantage, where Ukraine has identified the expertise it lacks. Already, in cooperation with the National Democratic Institute, Lithuanian institutions (our anti-corruption watchdog – the Special Investigations Service, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Chancellery of the Government) are actively engaged in a training program for Ukrainian civil servants. We encourage Ukraine to support the aspirations of others, for example – Georgia and Moldova, rather than holding them back in a zero-sum competition for Western favors. Here again, one can point to earlier successes, including mutual support among the Visegrad nations and the cooperation network created by the aspirant countries of the Vilnius Group. The looming danger now is that those who oppose Turkey’s membership in the EU will use Ukraine’s aspirations to block those of Turkey, arguing that Ukraine is clearly “European” and should jump the queue. Turkish and Ukrainian leaders would be well advised to join forces, rather than allow to be pitted against one another in some sort of “beauty contest.”

Finally, regional conflicts must be resolved. Efforts at Euro-Atlantic integration must be accompanied by active attempts by the parties themselves, as well as by third nations, to resolve regional tensions and conflicts. So-called “frozen conflicts” – in Moldova (Transdnestria), Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia),
and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan are not really “frozen”. They are festering wounds that absorb energy and drain resources from countries that are already weak and poor. They inhibit the process of state building as well as the development of democratic societies. They generate corruption and organized crime. They foster the proliferation of arms and a climate of intimidation. They are a major source of instability within these countries and in the broader region. They severely undermine the prospects of the involved countries for Euro-Atlantic integration, while giving Moscow a major incentive to keep these conflicts frozen. Ukraine has a constructive role to play in this region and should be encouraged to do so, especially with regard to ensuring effective control and management of its eastern borders and intensifying its cooperation with the EU on regional issues, such as Moldova and Belarus.

These lessons offer both orientation and elements of a roadmap for change in the West’s relations with Ukraine on its path to Euro-Atlantic integration. These lessons also offer one overarching reassurance – the transatlantic partnership can be truly transformative, if we choose to make it so. The solution depends not only on Ukraine, but on the democracies of North America and Europe as well. They must begin by recognizing their moral and political stake in the outcome. They must demonstrate their political will and clear preference for an independent and democratic Ukraine, firmly rooted in Europe and trans-Atlantic relations.