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### **Freedom of expression in international relations crisis**

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You will not find people who fluctuate in response to the question whether they need the freedom of expression. We believe the right to publicly express our opinions one of the main attributes of our freedom.

However, Lithuanian authorities deliberately impede the activities of the Russian political experts, who are critical of some aspects of the foreign policy of this country.

Thus, Lithuania issued a document barring Alexey Kochetkov, president of Public Diplomacy Foundation, and Stanislav Byshok, political analyst at the Russian think-tank CIS-EMO, from entering the Schengen Area.

Mr. Kochetkov was deported from Warsaw a year ago, because he “*poses a threat to Lithuania’s national security*”, although he hadn’t been to Lithuania for thirty years.

Mr. Byshok was detained in Paris airport, where he was invited to participate in international conference held by Paris Institute of Political Studies, also known as Sciences Po (*Institut d’Études Politiques de Paris*). Immigration officer explained that France had no claims to him, because his visa was OK, but Lithuania had issued a document barring him from entering the Schengen Area. Hence, the French were obliged to put Mr. Byshok for a return flight to Moscow. Mr. Byshok had never been to Lithuania in his life.

The attention of Lithuania to these two Russian experts can be explained by the fact that they had published a series of books and reports on the Ukrainian crisis. Their views were contrary to the position of Lithuania and its president. Lithuania’s action towards the experts seems to have been politically motivated, since the country had no legitimate reason for that.

It’s noteworthy that earlier Lithuania had forbidden entrance to a number of the Russian political scientists, journalists and artists. While Lithuania is in Schengen Area, this country is not formally obliged to explain to other countries their reasons for adding a person to the “black list”. But it is obvious that Lithuania is abusing this right.

In our opinion, actions of Lithuanian authorities violate a number of basic documents, guaranteeing freedom of speech and freedom of expression, such as: Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the OSCE Copenhagen Document and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU.

One of the main problems of the current EU-Russia relations is the lack of dialogue. There are only sporadic high-level contacts but constant mutual recriminations in the mainstream media of both sides. Establishing dialogue at the level of civil society could contribute to solving this problem.

However, the restricting actions of Lithuania effectively severe the possibility of restoration of professional contacts between the representatives of the expert community. In a situation of international relations crisis such actions are counterproductive.

One gets the impression that the official Vilnius is not interested in normalization of the EU-Russia relations. It is unlikely that the attitude adopted by Lithuania reflects the long-term interests of the EU.