

**OPENING STATEMENT BY MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF LITHUANIA
OSCE CHAIRMAN-IN-OFFICE AUDRONIUS AŽUBALIS AT THE
18TH OSCE MINISTERIAL COUNCIL
Vilnius, 6 December 2011**

President Grybauskaitė,
Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to the heart of the OSCE area: half-way between Vancouver and Vladivostok. It is a pleasure to see all of you here in Vilnius.

To my Parliamentary Assembly colleagues, I say "welcome back" to Vilnius, recalling our important meeting here in 2009.

With us today are also some founding members of Helsinki Committees. We salute your courageous contributions to human rights and democracy.

Finally, I am particularly pleased to welcome representatives of non-governmental organizations from our participating States and Partners for Cooperation. Your suggestions, developed over the past two days, are an important contribution to our work.

Now, dear colleagues and friends, we have much to do.

This year, the Lithuanian Chairmanship has encouraged our community to act with common purpose, building on the results of the Astana Summit. We have taken meaningful and concrete steps, without compromising core OSCE principles and commitments. Where we have followed this approach we have met success. Over the next two days, we have the opportunity, by consolidating this work, to establish new base lines on which to build.

It is significant that we are meeting in Lithuania, a nation of the Nordic Baltic region. This region embodies key principles and qualities we envision for our greater security community. More than history and geography bind it together. Of cardinal importance is its common culture of strong social responsibility, respect for human rights and co-operation and good neighbourly relations. We share a forward looking, open approach to addressing common challenges -- such as energy, the environment, transport, cyber technology and open digital communication. This region offers a vision worth emulating. Other regions of the OSCE area might wish to consider this experience in developing their own regional co-operation,

After all there are serious challenges within the OSCE area, beginning with the protracted conflicts,

which have gone on for too long.

I am pleased to report that progress has been made in the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. Last week, the 5-plus-2 negotiations officially resumed in Vilnius, after a break of almost six years. I urge the parties to seize this opportunity.

We also need to press for conflict resolution and long-term stability in Georgia. In the Geneva International Discussions, the parties continue negotiations and have undertaken practical projects to benefit the affected populations. We should build upon these steps with the deployment of an OSCE Support Team.

As for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, we must activate the incident investigation mechanism that was proposed at the Sochi Summit. This would help lower tensions.

In South Eastern Europe, there has been continued progress toward the firm establishment of transparent, democratic states committed to OSCE principles, and toward regional co-operation and stability. The OSCE Office in Zagreb is about to close. We welcome the success achieved by the Office in implementing its mandate, and by the host country Croatia in implementing reforms. This is an example of how co-operative effort results in benefits for the people and the country, the region and the OSCE as a whole.

We have also taken steps this year to strengthen our defences against transnational threats. I believe that we can find common ground here in Vilnius to enhance the OSCE's efforts in this area.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Freedom of the media has been a high priority for Lithuania's Chairmanship. We have sought to provide greater physical safety for journalists. We have also sought to remove legal and bureaucratic barriers that hinder their ability to inform and protect democracy and freedom in our societies. This Ministerial Council should complete the work begun last June at the Vilnius conference on Safety of Journalists.

Our efforts to defend human rights have led to positive results, in well-known and lesser known cases. Often together with civil society, we have promoted and protected the rights of organizers, bloggers, journalists and champions of social and human rights.

This Chairmanship has strongly promoted tolerance education. We have sponsored three high-level meetings aimed at addressing anti-Christian, Anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic behaviours and practices. Resolving conflicts between groups or nations requires confronting the truth about the present and the past, acknowledging it, however painful, and promoting reconciliation in the interest of a mutually beneficial future.

This year, and most recently this past weekend, a number of important elections took place in the OSCE area. I commend the ODIHR and the Parliamentary Assembly for conducting unbiased and professional election monitoring. Of course, election observation is not an end in itself. Each participating State must ensure the right of its people to express their will through free and fair elections. To this end, I call on all of us to follow up in earnest on ODIHR's recommendations.

We have laid the groundwork for establishing a solid OSCE policy on energy security. Reliable access

to energy resources is essential for our security and should be acknowledged as such.

Ministers, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

We all agree that security in the OSCE area is inextricably linked to that of its neighbours. We have seen that this year. This Ministerial Council should respond to the interest of the Mediterranean partners for enhanced co-operation. We should show our willingness to strengthen our co-operation with Afghanistan. Finally, we should welcome Mongolia's application to become a participating State.

Let us work together here in Vilnius. As we proceed, I would ask that we have the courage and determination to achieve a result that lives up to the core OSCE principles and commitments. By acting decisively we can keep the promises made last year at Astana.