

Speech: Building a strong new partnership with Lithuania

In the coming weeks and months, Britain will embark upon the negotiations to build a strong new partnership with the European Union.

For the UK and Lithuania, that new partnership will extend beyond our individual relationships with the European Union as a whole; you as members, and us as strong external partners.

Because our two countries share many principles: on defence and security, on trade and the economy – we are working together. In the past year alone we have collaborated closely on issues from mutual development of our financial technology sectors to the training of our military.

Last year, the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death was commemorated across Lithuania, from schools in Klaipeda to the national parliament, as part of our shared European culture. All of these joint endeavours have been based on our strong mutual values and vision for the future.

So as I travel to Lithuania today, on my first visit to the country as the UK Secretary of State for Exiting the EU, I want to stress our determination to enter an even closer and more fruitful period in our relations.

We are firmly committed to strengthening the ties between our two countries because, while we are leaving the EU, we are emphatically not turning our backs on our friends and allies across Europe.

As part of that we will continue to be a keen partner to Lithuania. We will go on co-operating extensively on defence, security and foreign policy. We will collaborate on culture and education. We will work with Lithuania on economic issues and we will pursue an ambitious future trade agreement that is in the interest of the UK, Lithuania and the whole of the European Union.

For the UK wants the EU and each of its member states to prosper politically, economically and socially. The new partnership we will seek as we leave can, I believe, help to that end.

On security, Lithuania and the UK share a particularly close and important relationship.

The UK has led European action on keeping our continent safe – whether implementing sanctions against Russia following its aggressive action in Ukraine or securing Europe's external border.

Such partnership continues to be of vital importance, particularly in the face of growing concern about the threat to security across the continent. And that is why we will continue to work closely with your armed forces on land, sea and air, with hundreds of UK troops training and exercising in Lithuania.

As key members of NATO, we both know the importance of collaboration on defence and security. For the UK, our commitment to defend the interests of the western world remains absolute. For you, having the full force of NATO right behind you is of huge value. Solidarity is crucial and the UK will continue to stand by all its allies – including Lithuania.

As Britain leaves the EU, we will seek to enhance the trading links that we currently have with member states and the British Prime Minister has been clear that the UK will be pursuing a comprehensive trade agreement with the EU.

For Lithuania, the UK is its fifth largest trading partner in goods and its eighth in services. So it's in no one's interest to see new barriers to trade. Instead, we see opportunities in building on our existing trading ties with Lithuania.

But we are not just allies and friends because of our cultural connections, military commitments and trading links. Our relationship goes far beyond that, with the firm friendship that exists between our people.

Hundreds of thousands of Lithuanians have made Britain their home. Your people are our healthcare workers, our financiers and even the conductor of our world class Birmingham Symphony Orchestra.

I understand that the thousands of Lithuanians currently living in the UK want certainty about their rights once the UK leaves the EU. And, while Lithuanians' existing rights are not affected, the British government wants to get a deal done to secure long term rights quickly that protects the rights of all EU citizens living in the UK, and British citizens living in the EU.

Indeed, we would have liked to have come to such an agreement already and have been clear it will be an absolute priority once formal negotiations begin.

It is only fair that those who have built lives for themselves abroad, who are contributing to foreign economies and giving back to overseas communities, have their rights and status guaranteed rapidly.

And the approach that we take on this issue – one of reasoned goodwill to secure mutual benefits – is the one that we will adopt throughout the negotiation process.

Because the UK is not stepping back from its role in the world – it is stepping up.