

Lithuania national day

Lithuania and Japan enjoy long-lasting friendship

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AMBASSADOR OF LITHUANIA

On the occasion of the 97th anniversary of the Restoration of the Statehood of the Republic of Lithuania, I am honoured to extend, on behalf of the Lithuanian people and government, our warmest regards to Their Majesties Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko, the Imperial family, as well as the government and the people of Japan. I also take this occasion to congratulate my compatriots living in Japan.



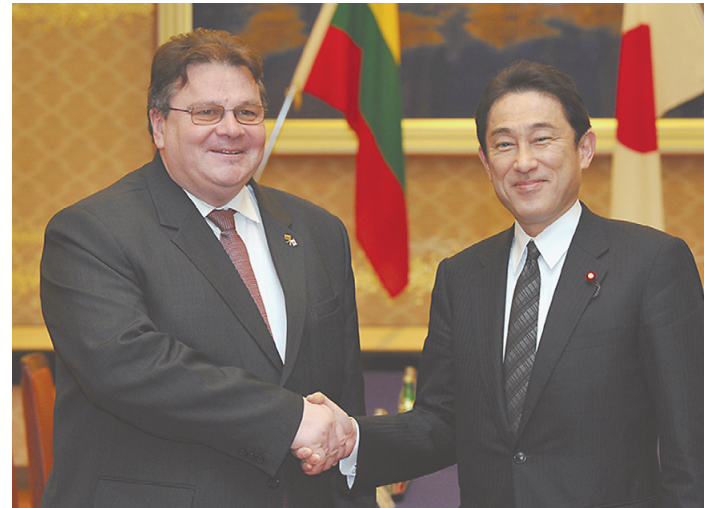
Feb. 16 is a very significant day in the history of the Lithuanian nation, as on that day in 1918 the Independence of Lithuania was restored. The long history of Lithuania, reaching over 1,000 years, is marked by both great and dramatic events. Lithuania has been one of the biggest states in Europe since the 13th century, and in the 16th century Lithuania and Poland entered into alliance and established the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth which adopted the first constitution in Europe on May 3, 1791. Nevertheless, in late 18th century the commonwealth was partitioned by other states and lost its independence, which was eventually restored in Lithuania on

Feb. 16, 1918.

Japan was one of the first countries of the world to establish diplomatic relations with Lithuania in 1922. The relationship between the nations was well fostered by Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese consul, who has been working in the Lithuanian city of Kaunas in 1939-1940. He worked day and night issuing transit visas to over 6,000 Jewish refugees, allowing them to escape from the horrors of war to safer places. A museum called Sugihara House was established in the building where the consulate was housed at that time. Today, it is visited by thousands of tourists from Japan and other countries every year. This year we celebrate the 115th birthday of this outstanding Japanese man.

In World War II our country was occupied again and lost its freedom. The independence was restored after 50 years, on March 11, 1990. This date is another important day for Lithuanian statehood, as well as for all of Europe since it marked the beginning of the collapse of the Soviet empire.

This year we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Restoration of Independence. In this rather short period of time we have created a modern democratic state based on a market economy and respect for human rights. We have joined the European Union, NATO and other global organizations. In the second half



Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania Linas Linkevičius (left) meets with Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida on March 13 in Tokyo. MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF JAPAN

of 2013 Lithuania, held the presidency of the EU Council, and last year it became the nonpermanent member of the U.N. Security Council. From this year we also joined the Eurozone.

It is delightful that cooperation between Lithuania and Japan has developed throughout this period. Last year, high-level relations also flourished. Lithuania was visited by H.E. Masaaki Yamazaki, the speaker of the House of Councillors of the Japanese Diet and H.E. Hirofumi Nakasone, chairman of Japan and Lithuania Friendship League. Similarly, Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs H.E. Linas Linkevičius, as well as the ministers of defence, science and education and the econ-

omy visited Japan.

Moreover, businessmen of both countries are showing increased interest in cooperation opportunities. We value very highly the cooperation with Hitachi Ltd. in the field of energy. Lithuania exports to Japan lasers and optical devices, which are used in the medical and aerospace fields. These items are also exported to the U.S. and other countries. Additionally, Japanese appreciate linen, furniture, natural food and other high-quality goods from Lithuania.

Last year, Japanese and Lithuanian scientists agreed on sharing knowledge in the above-mentioned fields and to the joint creation and implementation of high technology projects. In addition,

relations among universities of both countries have also strengthened, and student and teacher exchange programmes actively take place. Every year the number of such programmes increases and mutual interest is continuously developing.

Also, the interest is obvious and is seen by the increased number of both Lithuanian and Japanese tourists. The number of Japanese who visited Lithuania last year has increased by 40 percent in comparison to the year before last. Nature admirers can visit Lithuanian cities surrounded by greenery and having magnificent baroque and gothic buildings recalling the historic rulers of Lithuania. They also can go to small villages located among forests or quiet homesteads, which provide accommodation and recreation activities allow visitors to rest after trying traditional Lithuanian crafts such as bread baking, candle making, cheese production, smithery and many others.

Another important aspect is the strong human connection between Lithuanians and Japanese. This connection is continuously strengthened and reinforced by new generations of Lithuanians who are interested in Japan and Japanese who in turn are interested in Lithuania. We rejoice at the fact that the Japanese can learn the Lithuanian language in universities and that Lithuania has two universities where students can study the Japanese language as well as Japanese culture, history and even the ancient Japanese language.

Many Lithuanians who love Japan actively contribute to the promotion and spread of Japanese culture. The same can be said about our Japanese friends who, once being inspired by Lithuania, dedicate their efforts and time to spread the word about Lithuania in Japan. There are many organizations in Japan interested in Lithuania and which contrib-

ute to our bilateral cooperation. Let me mention the Japan-Lithuania Friendship Association and the Japan-Lithuania Exchange Centre, which both maintain active relations with Lithuania.

On this special day I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all friends of Lithuania and wish that the ties of friendship between our countries flourish.



The Curonian Spit is a 98 km curved sand dune that separates the Curonian Lagoon from the Baltic Sea, and is a UNESCO World Heritage site. LITHUANIA TRAVEL

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