



- Exclusive interview -

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### LITHUANIA – one of the best associates of the USA

In 2002, visiting Lithuania the President of the United States George Bush in his greeting speech on Lithuania's joining NATO, said that those, naming Lithuania an enemy will become an enemy to the USA, too. Lithuania and America are connected by tight cooperation relations, every year intensive work is done bridging Lithuania for the US Visa Waiver Program. During long years inhabitants of Lithuania and America struggled for the right to have an independent state and personal freedom. About cooperation between our countries we talk with **Thomas P. Kelly, Deputy Chief of Mission of the US embassy in Lithuania.**

- On July 4 the US celebrates the Independence Day. Lithuania is preparing to commemorate the 1000th anniversary of the state name. What does independence mean to the state? How does it contribute to the relations and cooperation among people, countries, and nations?



- I associate independence with the important ideas of freedom and self-determination – the will of a people to set out to achieve its own goals and create its own future according to the values and ideals that it cherishes. In America, we cherish the values that Thomas Jefferson enshrined in our Declaration of Independence, whose 230th anniversary we will celebrate on July 4 this year. Jefferson insisted on the link between independence and individual freedom, declaring that all [that] individuals should be free to pursue their hopes and dreams, and to choose their government. In the more than two centuries that have followed, Americans have embraced Jefferson's ideals of independence; they have even fought and died for them. I also think that this sense of freedom naturally breeds peace between people and nations. People who are free also tend to be happiest when they are at peace and eager to cooperate with their neighbors. Independence Day is also an opportunity to reflect on the costs of liberty. As we commemorate the early American colonists who risked their lives by declaring that their colonies ought to be free and independent, we also look admiringly at the sacrifices made by heroic Lithuanians in the early days of 1991. Independence Day ensures that these brave men and women are never forgotten.

- By our survey we discovered that E-version of the international business magazine JURA MOPE SEA is mostly visited by the readers from the USA.

JURA MOPE SEA is a specialized magazine oriented to the audience of big business. In your opinion, what are American readers interested in the most, and in what way business situation in Lithuania may attract their attention?

The USA has the mostly developed and powerful economy in the world, and the indicators of Lithuanian economy are growing most rapidly in Europe. Lithuania is interesting for the US businessmen not only as the country of perspective investment but also as a partner providing opportunity to cooperate with other markets. Lithuania is a bridge between East and West. The port of Lithuania unites the countries of Europe and East; and the countries of Kazakhstan, the Ukraine, and Russia are very interesting for US business.

The businessmen of America look at different fields – production, information technologies, and transport. We have many companies that are perspective investors.

The magazine JURA MOPE SEA, presenting Lithuanian business to the world, provides a potential investor, interested in Lithuanian economy and the capacities of Klaipeda port, the opportunity to get acquainted with the business environment in the country.

- During recently held international real estate and investment exhibition in Cannes Lithuania presented development vision and 36 investment projects – among them: conference centre for 2500 seats in Vilnius, entertainment and sports centre for 12 000 seats in Kaunas, on the Nemunas island, the project of entertainment island in the Baltic Sea, the project for old town revitalization in Klaipeda, the project of culture factory in Siauliai, etc.

In your opinion, which investment perspectives in Lithuania are of the highest interest to US entrepreneurs? Which most important business projects are being implemented between Lithuania and the USA?

**At present, the biggest US investor in Klaipeda port is the company V. Paulius & Associates that is engaged in port equipment and real estate development. It is a prestigious US company, which was founded by the Lithuanian from America.**

The other two big investors perform in food industry, JSC Masterfoods and SC Kraft Foods Lietuva, and also wood processing JSC Ochoco Lumber.

All those companies, operating in Lithuania, show that for potential investors any sector is attractive. Lithuania is famous for its food products of highest quality, textile production, the production of biotechnologies and lasers.

The most important factor for attracting investments to the country is taxes – favourable tax environment and the guarantee that in future it will be sustained - in other words, stability and market predictability are necessary. Lithuania has a problem of emigration, which influences some business sectors directly and rebounds on them severely; however, Lithuanians become famous as a very diligent and educated nation.

- The US Senate approved the amendments for the immigration reform law, involving Poland into Visa Waiver Program (VWP), which will allow the country inhabitants to travel to the USA without visas up to 60 days. What kind of requirements should be implemented in Lithuania in order for it to join VWP?

- First of all, nothing has been changed so far regarding visas for Poland; at present, it has the same visa situation as in Lithuania. For adopting a different decision the US Senate and the House of Representatives have to approve it; however, the final decision is made by the President. At present, we have a following situation – three senators signed a proposal to allow Poland for qualifying and becoming the member of Visa Waiver Program. The proposal is attached to the document for the main migration reform. This reform is aiming to normalize the status of illegal immigrants who currently are living in America. The proposal regarding Poland came from the Senate; however, the House of Representatives can disapprove it or suggest that not only Poland, but other similar countries, such as Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia would be included into the program as well. Surely, the House of Representatives can approve the proposal and include Poland into VWP.

Lithuania is one of the best associates for the USA and the country made a great progress seeking to become a member of VWP. The main indicator showing that the country is ready to join Visa Waiver Program is the security of passports, and Lithuania has made a big step forward – at present, Lithuanian passports are considered to be ones of the safest in Europe. Nonetheless, more time is needed in order to meet some other requirements.

The most important factor is related to the rejection percentage for applications to obtain American visas. Up to now the figure of rejected visa applications is quite considerable. This figure is determined by more and more often occurring illegal usage of the obtained visas to the USA – people manage to work having tourist visas or they stay in America after their visas expire, etc. However we hope that after the situation's investigation we will find out that such cases are less often and the percentage of visa rejection has decreased. It is the most complicated issue, because it directly depends on the inhabitants of Lithuania themselves.

We are working intensively with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs trying to involve Lithuania into the VWP. We hope that the economy of the country will grow and there will be fewer obstacles for Lithuania to become a member of the program.

Currently 28 countries are participating in Visa Waiver Program: Andorra, Austria, Australia, Belgium, Brunei, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, San Marino, Singapore, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the Great Britain, and Uruguay.

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*The country which seeks to qualify for VWP has to meet the following criteria:*

- *Rejection level – the rejection of visa applicants should not exceed 3 per cent.*
- *Reciprocity – non-visa regime should be applied to the US citizens in this country.*
- *Passport security – the country has to use safe, electronically identified passports with biometric data.*
- *Political and economic stability.*
- *Reliable frontier control.*
- *Legal cooperation with the USA and other international legal structures.*
- *Other issues of security that can be included in VWP.*

**- If, after all, Lithuania would have been included into Visa Waiver Program, what impact it would have had on the economy of our country?**

- The issue of VWP is very complicated for Lithuania. If Lithuania joins the program too early, this regime may become dangerous to the country. The problem of emigration already exists in Lithuania, and after joining the program it might become even more severe. That is why my recommendation to Lithuania would be – not to rush. Only when economic conditions in the country become stable enough and they will ensure prosperity to the inhabitants of Lithuania so that people would not seek emigrating because of insufficient standard of living, only then Visa Waiver Program could be started. Surely, easy travel to the USA would expand business opportunities considerably.

**- A few years ago Lithuania became involved in cruise business. We are very glad that the company owning one of the biggest cruise liners in the world – Constellation, which visited our port several times already, became a partner of Klaipeda port. In your opinion, what are the perspectives for cruise business in Lithuania? To what extent Lithuania, as the country of sea tourism, can be of interest to the USA?**

- Klaipeda is a historically significant and very nice city surrounded by fascinating nature on the Curonian Spit; hence, I think that cruise business should grow and prosper here. No doubt, it is also a challenge to Klaipeda to attract and keep tourists, cruise companies. The USA is rather far from Klaipeda, so we will never be the main tourists in your port but, in my opinion, we will be constant visitors for sure.

**- Container handling is growing very rapidly in Klaipeda port. What perspectives do you see for more intensive cooperation between the USA and Lithuania in marine business?**

- The USA is an important player in container market, the cargo of our country makes up 8 per cent of all the containers transported by sea. Klaipeda port has a geographically strategic position - all the roads cross here. I think that container business will only grow in Klaipeda port, and Lithuania should dynamically develop, join with other countries and expand port services.

**- Thank you for the conversation.**

*Interviewed by  
Milda Manomaityte*