

The Modernization of the Lithuanian Consular Service in Response to Global Challenges

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THE MAIN GOAL OF MODERNIZATION IS TO OPTIMIZE THE LITHUANIAN consular service by ensuring effective and high-quality consular assistance to the citizens, creating more favorable conditions for the development of tourist, business and cultural ties with other countries, and by performing consular functions in accordance with European Union and Schengen legal acts.

It is important to note that people evaluate the work of the whole Ministry based on their encounters with consular officers. In general, a person does not care much about the priorities of the Lithuanian foreign policy; what he is primarily interested in is routine issues, which needs resolving by an embassy or a consulate. Inadequate consular assistance taints the whole institution. The Ministry recognizes what great responsibility lies in the hands of the consular officers as it undertakes the modernization of the Lithuanian consular service.

The Lithuanian consular service is coordinated by the Consular Department within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

There are:

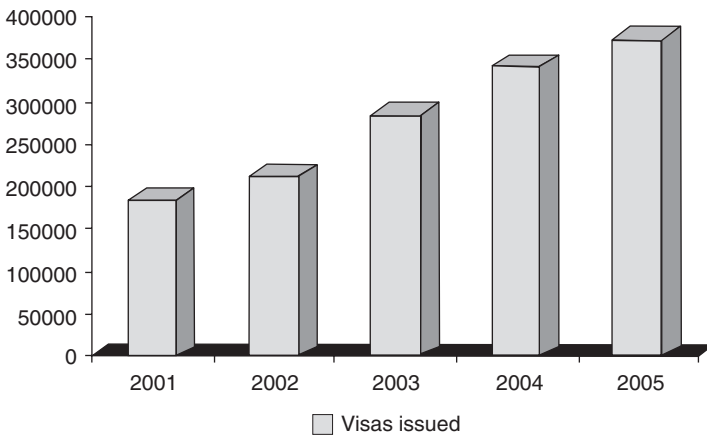
- 50 employees at the Consular Department (the largest in the Ministry, 21 employees out of 50 work with Special Kaliningrad Transit Scheme);
- 5 divisions at the Consular Department;
- 34 embassies and 10 consular posts abroad where consular services are provided;
- 71 diplomats abroad;

- 13 civil servants abroad;
- 33 technical staff abroad.

Consular workload has been increasing every year. Since the year 2000, it increased several times in all areas.

After Lithuania became a member of the European Union on 1 May 2004, hundreds of thousands of Lithuanian citizens left for various European countries. This triggered a sharp increase in the need for consular services abroad. Incoming tourism is also on the rise.

A good example of how much the consular workload has increased is the number of visas being issued. This figure had increased twice over the last five years, despite the fact that the list of countries whose citizens do not require a visa to come to Lithuania is constantly growing. The graph shows that over five years, the number of visas issued by Lithuania has doubled.



In the year 2002, as part of the preparations to join the EU, the government of Lithuania adopted a program for the expansion of consular services. It was mainly oriented as a response to the expected increase in the visa issuance rate in the neighboring countries following Lithuania's EU accession. The growth of consular services in these countries has another impetus, as Lithuania is striving to be among the regional leaders, and maintains a close cooperation with the countries on the eastern border of the EU.

Lithuania is planning to join the group of Schengen signatures next year. While preparing for the accession, the Ministry is paying special

attention to the quality of the consular services and their conformity with EU standards.

In the past few years, the Lithuanian Consular Service had to come to terms with new realities, such as natural disasters and international terrorism. These challenges require an adequate consular response.

The Ministry's goal is to optimize the consular service by:

- providing a more effective and better quality of consular assistance,
- streamlining administrative apparatus, and
- working together with EU partners to make the consular service more available and more accessible.

The Ministry sees a two-dimensional approach to the consular reform: quantitative and qualitative.

In terms of quantitative reforms, the Ministry plans to redistribute consular staff effectively within the Ministry and abroad, as well as come up with an adequate number of consular offices abroad.

The aim is to evaluate the embassies and the consular offices, based on the scope and complexity of the services performed by each. The embassies and the consular offices, which carry out high-volume and particularly complicated consular services need an adequate number of diplomats or technical staff to accomplish those tasks. Some representations may need only one consular officer. In other cases, a diplomat working in another capacity at a representation may be assigned consular responsibilities as well. The prioritization of the embassies and the consular offices allows for economizing as well as the efficient use of limited resources. Periodic evaluations of embassies and consular offices are necessary as the scope and complexity of consular work may change in certain countries due to political, economic, social, and other developments there.

An establishment of a consulate in India is of immediate concern, because of a significant increase in the number of Lithuanian citizens traveling to India. Also, the issuance of visas to Indian citizens and citizens of its neighboring countries travelling to Lithuania has always been problematic. The idea of establishing a Lithuanian consulate in India receives strong support from the Lithuanian business community as well.

Other countries that have a need for Lithuanian consular services are Australia, Brazil, South Africa, and Thailand. The Ministry is considering the possibility of establishing a consulate in the Far East of the Russian Federation, as Lithuania has a sizeable Lithuanian community there comprised of deportees and or descendants sent to labor camps and

prisons during the Stalin era. The presence of a substantial Lithuanian community in a certain country or its region is one of the key factors that the Ministry takes into account when considering the establishment of an embassy or a consulate.

In the past year, Lithuania established consular representation in

- Georgia
- Hungary
- Valencia (Spain)
- Romania
- Moldova

The workload of the Consular Assistance Division at the Consular Department encompasses ten different function groups. The head of the Division has to sign from 100 to 250 documents every day as well as deal with the different types of problems which arise on the daily basis. In order to better coordinate and balance the workload of the Consular Assistance Division, it would be expedient to subdivide the above said unit into two entities:

- Consular Assistance Division, which would focus on accidents, deaths, detained citizens, extraditions, legal assistance requests, victims of human trafficking, child care, and any consular crisis abroad, and
- Citizens Services Division, which would deal with citizenship, passports, travel documents, certificates, document legalization, and civil registry issues.

The events of the past few years, such as the tsunami in Southeast Asia, terrorist bombings in Turkey, Egypt, Spain, USA, UK, along with airplane and automobile accidents have shown that any state must have a professional rapid-reaction consular assistance team or teams. The success of any operation depends mainly on professionalism and speed. The Ministry is in the process of establishing such teams, which will be specially trained and ready to be dispatched to the crisis areas around the world.

The best measures to respond to crises have also been developed at the EU level, within the Consular working group (COCON) at the European Council. Crisis prevention and action to be taken to ensure effective performance and cooperation with other members, are the main topics during the meetings of COCON.

As Lithuania prepares to join Schengen (the Agreement) there is a need for a special secretariat within the Consular Department to work on it.

The secretariat would allow the rest of the Department to focus on its everyday and direct responsibilities. The Schengen Secretariat would deal specifically with:

- Consistent preparation for the meetings with appropriate EU working groups and committees;
- Coordination of work among various institutions and the formation of a common Lithuanian position;
- Search for common interests with other states in pursuit of certain political goals;
- Establishment of Lithuania as one of the centers for meetings of consultants and experts from the new Schengen states;
- Collection and archiving of all the documentation resulting from the work in the above-mentioned EU structures.

It is planned that the Schengen Secretariat will have three employees: two diplomats and one technical staff member. Consultations have begun with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany regarding possible training opportunities for the Secretariat staff.

The Republic of Lithuania has implemented a Project entitled 'Development and Introduction of the Technical and Information Infrastructure of the Lithuanian National Schengen Information System'. A part of the project is the implementation of the Visa Information System (VIS). The basis of VIS is a proper functioning of 'Consular Procedures Management System (CPMS)', which encompasses a computerized visa issuance system.

The Consular Procedures Management System (CPMS) consists of several computer modules used for visa processing and issuance, and the management of documentation flows among the embassies, consulates, and the Ministry.

The Ministry has provided the embassies and consulates with the necessary computer equipment. The CPMS is used in all of 34 embassies and 10 consulates.

As a part of its consular modernization process, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is furthering cooperation between other Lithuanian institutions. The Ministry is planning to formally request the Ministry of Interior to delegate special migration attachés to assist the consular staff at certain embassies or consulates abroad. For example, Lithuanian embassies in the United Kingdom and Ireland are faced with a great amount of work related to citizenship and passport issues. The assistance of special

migration attachés would be very useful. The Ministry is considering other types of special attachés such as a special police attaché or special attaché for diaspora affairs to take away certain responsibilities from the consular officers.

An agreement was reached with Spain on the consular representation of Lithuania in Brazil within Spanish diplomatic missions and the representation of Spain in Georgia within the Lithuanian mission. The agreement is among the very first of this type in EU.

An agreement with Hungary is being finalized on consular representation of Lithuania in New Delhi (India). Similar agreements are under consideration with other EU countries.

A legal reform of the consular service is also underway. The adoption of the new Consular Statute is in the final stages at the Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas) and drafts of over 20 other legal acts are being prepared. The Consular Department has published the Consular Guide as a reference source used by consular officers performing their duties. Consular training will be reformed and formalized, and consular training for officers being posted abroad will be extended to four weeks. The establishment of the 'Consular Academy' is under consideration to perform instructions for consular officers working abroad, to organize regional and other types of training.

The need to provide our citizens abroad with an efficient and quality consular assistance guaranteed by various national legal acts and international agreements requires a modernization of the Lithuanian Consular Service. The Ministry sees it as an inevitable and ongoing process geared towards responding to new challenges and implementing common EU initiatives.