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XENOPHOBIC STATEMENTS DETRIMENTAL TO LITHUANIA'S IMAGE - - FORMIN

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Displays of xenophobia are detrimental to Lithuania, said Lithuanian Foreign Minister Vygaudas Usackas, urging politicians against indifference to discriminatory statements apparent in the press and the public arena against individuals of different ethnic backgrounds or belief systems. "I think politicians just cannot keep quiet in face of antisemitic or homophobic displays in the press or public events. We must firmly condemn them and cultivate the spirit of awareness and tolerance," Usackas on Tuesday told BNS.

Expressions of a radical worldview are becoming more apparent amid the global downturn, said the minister, however expressing belief that Lithuania - this year celebrating a millennium since the first mention of its name in written sources - should conjure up the spirit of tolerance, which was prevalent back in the 14th Century during the reign of Grand Duke Gediminas. "The 21st Century is an opportunity for Lithuania to relive the times of Gediminas and aspire to have people of various nations and races discover Vilnius, as these people bring along experience and human capital, which is important for our own well-being," Usackas said. Public displays of xenophobia are detrimental to Lithuania's image, said the foreign minister, adding that a hostile attitude towards foreigners works to the economic disadvantage of the country. "This undoubtedly takes its toll on our image, just as any xenophobic or antisemitic displays in any other state. We are part of a common European civilization, we must therefore both maintain our identity and Lithuanian traditions, but at the same time respect and

tolerate other beliefs, traditions and people of other races present here, in Lithuania. It is therefore a great shame to read about people of other races getting attacked or cursed out on the streets of Vilnius. This is a sign of provincialism," said Usackas. "It is essential for us to enhance our competitive edge. In that respect, we must develop our talents, all-the-while being aware that the whole world is in competition for the greatest talents, meaning we must foster tolerance towards foreign individuals, form suitable conditions for them to come study in our universities or attract them with opportunities provided by the Lithuanian labor market," the Lithuanian foreign minister continued. Chairman of the Lithuanian Jewish Community Simonas Alperavicius cautioned this month about the spreading antisemitic mood in Lithuania, referring to the surge of antisemitic displays in the press and comments on web portals. Usackas, on the other hand, didn't sense a colossal threat of antisemitism in Lithuania, however acknowledged that some material present in the press leaves room for concern. "I wouldn't think (there to be a prevalent threat of antisemitism - BNS) except certain publications, which are hoping to capitalize on this issue. I think the Lithuanian public has come a long way since 1990, in terms of becoming conscious of the lessons of history, which we ourselves lived through, especially during World War II," Usackas said.

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