

LITHUANIA

LINAS KOJALA

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Lithuania in Focus: History, Corruption and Coming Elections

In October 2016 national elections will take place in Lithuania. In this report, we focus on the current state of politics and the topics dominating the public debate in early 2016.

The **current coalition** in the Parliament consists of centre-left and populist parties: Social Democrats (including the Prime Minister Algirdas Butkevičius), Labour Party (Speaker of the Parliament Loreta Graužinienė), and Order and Justice Party. The coalition was established soon after elections in 2012 and has remained relatively stable throughout. The biggest centre-right party, Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats, is the main opposition force (32/141 Members of Parliament), with former Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius being the minority leader of Homeland Union / Christian Democrats. The Liberal Movement is also part of the opposition.

Upcoming Parliament elections

In mid-October 2016, around 2.5 million people will have the right to vote in Parliament (*Seimas*) election. The Lithuanian parliament is unicameral with 141 members and a mixed system of election: 71 mandates are distributed via single-seat constituencies, while another 70 members are elected in a nationwide election based on proportional representation (lists of political parties).

Opinion polling. The most recent opinion pollings (February 11-19) show that Social Democrats remain the most popular political party (23%), with Homeland Union-LCD coming second (10%) and Liberal Movement in third position (8.7%). Other parties likely to pass the 5% threshold are the following: Order and Justice (7.4%), Greens and Peasants (7.1%) and Labour party (6.8%). Political analysts note that the lead of Social Democrats remains stable, so they are the favourites in the upcoming election, though the actual percentage may be slightly lower due to the fact that their voters

tend to stay at home. Homeland Union-LCD also remains stable at around 10 percent, despite being in opposition. The party's numbers has potential to increase its their voters are known to be coming to vote. It is important to note that these polls cover only the proportional part of voting, with another 71 single-constituencies depending on regional specifics. It is forecasted that in case of Social Democrats' victory in the election, the new ruling coalition could be formed on the basis of Social Democrats and Liberal Movement.

Most popular politicians. Saulius Skvernelis, former Police Commissioner General and currently Minister of the Interior, is the most popular politician, with an approval rating of 60%. He is officially not a member of any party, though will most probably participate in the upcoming elections as a Socialdemocrat. Skvernelis is followed by Prime Minister A. Butkevičius (55%) and long-time leader of the polls President Dalia Grybauskaitė (52%). Gabrielius Landsbergis, the relatively new leader of Homeland Union-LCD, remains outside the Top 10 with an approval rating of 21%.

Domestic topics of Discussion

The ruling coalition faced **a series of corruption allegations** at the start of 2016. The biggest controversy involved Minister of the Environment K. Trečiokas from Order and Justice Party, who allegedly used his influence to pass a decision in the government which favours the influential mayor of Druskininkai town, Socialdemocrat R. Malinauskas. The opposition demands his resignation, though the Minister of the Environment says he will stay and has support from the Prime Minister. Furthermore, a couple of weeks ago the Minister of Health R. Šalaševičiūtė resigned after publicly admitting she had paid a bribe to a doctor a decade ago.

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The biggest corruption scandal involved Rolandas Paksas, former president of Lithuania, who was impeached in 2004 and is currently both the leader of Order and Justice Party and a member of the European Parliament. He was recently questioned by the Special Investigation Service of Lithuania. Investigators also questioned Gedvydas Vainauskas, a media magnate who owns the biggest daily Lietuvos rytas, as well as TV channel and website of the same name. They both have a “special witness” status in Lithuania, similar to the “person of interest” designation in Western countries, because of their alleged involvement in a corruption case. It is believed that Vainauskas may have attempted to bribe Paksas by asking him to press members of his party in charge of the Ministry of the Environment to expedite permits needed to open a new supermarket in Prienai. However, these factors do not seem to have big influence on parties’ ratings.

Education trade unions began a large-scale strike on February, demanding the government to increase salaries of teachers and implement reforms. Up to 10 percent of all schools in Lithuania went on strike, with classes being cancelled for a couple of days. After lengthy negotiations, trade unions and the government reached a preliminary agreement to increase the budget for education by 8 million euros, though trade unions asked for twice the amount. An average salary of a teacher in Lithuania at the moment amounts to 830 euros, though many of the teachers are able to work only part-time due to changing demographics.

Most recently two publications triggered a wide public debate. The first book, called “Our People” by Rūta Vanaigaitė, dealt with a **topic of the Holocaust in Lithuania**. Consisting mainly of interviews with witnesses, it described atrocities perpetrated by Lithuanians against Jews during World War Two. While many admitted the book sheds a new light on the much needed debate about what happened in Lithuania during the war, critics maintained that it is not entirely accurate. The other book, **“Atheism as a Personal Choice in Soviet Lithuania”** by Nerija Putinaitė, analyses various aspects of social and cultural life in Lithuania during Soviet occupation. It caused a stir because of critical perception of poet Justinas Marcinkevičius, who is discussed in the book as a person who was an integral and active part of the Soviet system for many years, though a lot of Lithuanians regard him as one of the most

prominent poets of the independence movement.

Foreign policy topics of discussion

Defence and Security. In January, RAND published an analysis, which concluded that NATO has limited practical capabilities of defending the Baltic States in case of military intervention. It contributed to the security debate amidst Russian assertiveness in the region. Political leaders of Lithuania insist that NATO should station more troops in the Baltic States to act as deterrence. It is one of the key topics in the upcoming NATO Warsaw Summit. Opinion polls show that 82% of Lithuanians would support more NATO troops in the country, while NATO’s approval stands at 81%.

Another opinion poll showed Lithuanians favoured **enhanced bilateral cooperation with Germany** (61%), Poland (61%) and Latvia (60%).

Ukraine remains an important topic in public discussions, though it has lost its momentum in media. The discussion focuses on security in Eastern Ukraine, economic support for Kiev, as well as structural reforms in Ukraine, especially with regard to the former Minister of the Economy Aivaras Abromavičius who is Lithuanian. Most of Lithuanians support extending sanctions on Russia.

Migration crisis in Europe is a notable topic in the media, though in most cases it seems to be observed in Lithuania from an outsider’s perspective. The European Union is seen as being unable to tackle the problem because of diverging opinions and interests. Up to now, only one family has come to Lithuania as a part of quota distribution in the EU. State institutions admit that it is hard to find refugees who would voluntarily choose to travel to Central Europe, rather than richer Western or Scandinavian countries. Only around 35% of Lithuanians say that the country needs to help refugees more.