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## BLACK BELT POLITICS

### LITHUANIA'S PRESIDENT DALIA GRYBAUSKAITĖ

*Robert von Lucius*

According to Dalia Grybauskaitė, Lithuania has always been part of Europe. But the country is also in a position to provide new and creative impulses, as are other recently admitted EU member states whose reforms require flexibility. These two sentences, uttered by the recipient of the 2013 International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen shortly after Lithuania's admission to the European Union one decade ago, convey a great deal: The president associates the centuries-old tradition of the Baltic nation with the quest for new horizons. Neither she nor her country lack self-confidence, a trait rooted in the past and present. She appreciates boundaries – as small nations do – but does not automatically treat them as limits.

Her role, her life and work, and her influence within the EU are hard to separate from the fate of her country and its region. As a result, it is imperative to put the background, character, and political ambitions of the president who earned the moniker "Iron Lady" into a wider context.

### LITHUANIA, THE BALTIC STATES, AND EUROPE

Lithuania, of which Grybauskaitė has been president for four years, is the largest of the three Baltic states – its population is almost as large as that of Latvia and Estonia combined. The three are often lumped together because they were all occupied by and integrated into the Soviet Union; they later rose up together to liberate themselves and to declare their independence. Their shared experiences of history and their deeply anchored national identities are defined by oppression and violence. Stories of family members deported to Siberia, tortured, or violently killed are the ones that create bonds between people. Many

are especially concerned with the preservation of their language and culture. Lithuania's declaration of independence was the first – and perhaps decisive – step towards the dissolution of the Soviet empire. The courage of the Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians paved the way for the fall of the Berlin wall and German unification. All three are paragons of market economics and pro-Western sympathies. Moreover, the three Baltic states together successfully endeavored to acquire membership in NATO and the European Union. With the aid of these dual memberships, they wanted to secure their newfound freedoms through alliances. But they also wanted to proclaim something that, though true, had disappeared from historical awareness: Since the early Middle Ages, the Baltic states have been – and remain – a core region of Europe.

Despite some historical and economic similarities, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania manifest fundamental differences in terms of language, religious denomination, and self-understanding. The Lithuanian language is the oldest Indo-Germanic language in use. Lithuanians are virtually all Catholic, and often deeply pious. Whereas Vilnius is a baroque city that has close cultural ties to Poland, Estonia is oriented to the North and to Finland in particular; Latvia is oriented to other Baltic Sea countries such as Sweden, Denmark, and Germany. And Lithuanians are cognisant of their heritage as a great power of yore, perhaps more than is helpful for the purpose of present and future acclimations. Without a short synopsis of this kind, both the politics of Lithuania and Dalia Grybauskaitė would be difficult to understand.

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The building that houses her office, the Presidential Palace in Vilnius, has accommodated Russian czars, Napoleon, as well as French and Polish kings. But the magnificent structure, which stands opposite the university with one of the richest traditions in Europe, has also lived through different days. Radical upheavals that left deeper marks than similar events in other countries once incubated there. The palace also served as a hangout for Soviet officers and later for an artists' club. Time and again, the palace is a place of gathering: During the author's last visit in Vilnius this past October, an arrival ceremony with military honours was

organised to receive Monaco's reigning monarch. This goes to show that Lithuania appreciates both great and smaller peers. The Lithuanian president approaches the task of strengthening the role and influence of putatively weaker and smaller states in Europe with particular alacrity. In the second half of this year, the Charlemagne Prize recipient will coordinate her office's efforts with those of Lithuania's foreign ministry to assume the presidency of the Council of the European Union. Assuredly, Grybauskaitė plans to do more than push paper – her energy, ambition, and political assets are harbingers of the progress she expects to make. She interprets the fact that Lithuania is the first of the newly admitted Baltic states to take the reins of the EU presidency as both a challenge and an opportunity.



Aachen mayor Marcel Philipp greeting Dalia Grybauskaitė at the award ceremony in Aachen's historic city hall on 9 May. | Source: © Andreas Herrmann, City of Aachen.

### **COMMITTED TECHNOCRAT**

According to the Board of Directors of the Society for the Conferring of the Charlemagne Prize, the bestowal of the Charlemagne Prize on Dalia Grybauskaitė "pays tribute to one of the outstanding personalities in the Baltic region" roughly ten years after the signing of its membership agreements, which the board called "one of the great moving events of the revolutionary decade". The award recipient, the board continues, fostered confidence in her own people and in her European partners and paved the

way to a resolution of European problems with “courage and the right judgment, with determination and self-confidence”. The board concludes that Lithuania’s discipline and self-sacrificing spirit allowed the country to tackle its own economic crisis and the wider European debt crisis in an exemplary fashion.

Grybauskaitė found herself in two leadership positions during that period of time – initially as finance minister and later as president. In the intervening years, when she served as European Commissioner for Financial Programming and the Budget in Brussels, she could merely admonish (though she did occasionally rebuke) her compatriots when they took budgetary discipline lightly, thereby inviting the next economic crisis. Since her inauguration as president in May 2009, she has been back on-site in a leadership position, testing the elasticity of her constitutional mandates to the legal breaking point. She belongs to those who, in spite of their misgivings, are nudging Lithuania towards the European currency union. The accession is planned for one and a half years from now, although the date has yet to be finalised. The country’s budget deficit and its inflation rate are flirting with the Maastricht convergence criteria. Lithuania would be the last of the three Baltic countries to adopt the euro; tiny Estonia – economic poster child that it is – has already done so, and Latvia has applied for admission at the end of the year. In light of its EU ties, of course, Lithuania has been a *de facto* member of the currency union, but Lithuania’s economic conditions and domestic constraints had denied the largest Baltic state the opportunity to officially join until now. The Charlemagne Board of Directors recognises that an important signal is sent when, “in times of the greatest uncertainties when everyone is speculating on the disintegration of the Euro zone, the republic of Lithuania is still striving to become a member of the currency union”.

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In Grybauskaitė’s politics, there are unbending positions, goals, and clear values that all point the way towards the currency union: stability, a strong and predictable regulatory framework, and the notion of Europe as key to Lithuania’s political aspirations. As a rule, Europe has always been a professional preoccupation of hers, though there were

two exceptions: first, when history and her family ties prior to the upheaval in 1990 dictated otherwise; and second, when she spent three years as plenipotentiary minister in Washington, a period that emerged as a brief interruption of her otherwise swift rise and European orientation.

If you want to understand Dalia Grybauskaitė as a person and as a politician, you cannot gloss over the years of Soviet occupation. Though some treat them as lost years, they sowed the seeds of her tenacity – and are likely responsible for the way she compartmentalises her personal life. Since the death of her parents, she has had no close relatives; she is unmarried, childless, and evinces a certain detachment. Even in the early years of her career, she developed the reputation of someone who was almost always at her desk by six in the morning and who worked late into the night. In those early years – including her stint in Brussels – her sense of humor and her cheerfulness were more readily detectable. Under the weight of her duties, the formalities of office, and the austerity of the environment at the presidential palace, those traits receded, at least in official appearances.

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Born in Vilnius on 1 March 1956 as the daughter of an electrician and a saleswoman, she worked for a short period at the Lithuanian National Philharmonic Society and later as a laboratory technician at a tannery in Leningrad (Saint Petersburg). In this way, she acquired the means to continue her education, something her parents were not able to provide for her. She enrolled in night classes at Saint Petersburg State University as a student of political economy. In 1983, she returned to the city of her birth to run the agriculture department at the Vilnius party academy. At the same time, she earned her doctorate in political economy, defending her thesis at the University in Moscow in 1988.

Her grandparents, like many Lithuanians, were deported to Siberia. Back then, she observed, everyone had two faces: one at home and another in public. Nonetheless, the first 34 years of her life does not fit the pattern of a dissident. Beyond this, little else is known. She seems to have been a goal-oriented woman who found a niche within the

party-apparatus, one into which she settled with little consternation. But perhaps there is truth to what she said during an interview with the *Financial Times* – that all of it was made possible by the magnificent and well-endowed library in Leningrad (and her considerable language skills) that allowed her to study the great economic thinkers ranging from Aristotle to Marx to Keynes to Smith, i.e. books and libraries as a place a refuge. The truth is likely to be found somewhere in the middle. She is a committed technocrat with a fondness for numbers. Whether intentional or not, that's what helped her navigate the years of transition – everyone wanted and needed her unimpeachable expertise. In any case, she had (and still has) rather conservative convictions – at least economically. On social issues closer to her heart, she supports and advances liberal arguments; she has, for instance, used her presidential veto authority to block legislative proposals far more often than her predecessors.

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## **POST-INDEPENDENCE ASCENDANCY**

With the combination of technical expertise, respect for her work, independent thinking, and good contacts, Grybauskaitė laid the foundation for her rapid ascent after Lithuania declared its independence. As her nearly immediate transition into the prime minister's office after independence suggests, she was neither short on connections in circles associated with the resistance and revolutionary movements nor entirely bereft of her own convictions. The new conservative government tasked in her 1991 with drawing up an economic agenda for the administration. In the first half of the nineties, she successively tackled a series of assignments that paved the way for Lithuania's entry into the European Union. She became a director of various departments in the foreign ministry; later, she became deputy finance minister and acted as chief negotiator with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. She also served as deputy foreign minister for the free trade agreement with the EU. For a short while, she was also a special envoy at the Lithuanian Mission to the EU, where she administered the distribution of EU resources in Lithuania. She benefits from a two-folded reputation: she is known to be charming and intelligent and yet goal-oriented

and firm in negotiations. Her rise occurred during the period of conservative administrations. But she also rose when the social democrats were in power because Algirdas Brazauskas valued her and appointed her finance minister in 2001. Only after his death did her relationships with members on the left end of the political spectrum suffer for a year or two. In any case, she prizes her independence from political parties. Her abstention from party politics became clear again in 2009 when she eschewed party affiliations to participate in the presidential election as an independent candidate. She emerged triumphant after the first round of voting with 68.2 per cent of the votes – a miracle for a country in which elections have occasionally sparked discord and uncertainty. Her election made her the first woman to lead the independent Lithuania.

Juggling her responsibilities is not easy in a country that can feel like a small town, where everyone knows everyone and political elites know each other's weaknesses. It can be especially difficult when populist parties rise and fall every two years, quickly shuffling administrations in and out of power. Grybauskaitė lives modestly – how could someone who leaves little time for her personal life and does not pay heed to fashionable clothing otherwise spend her money? When she became president, she turned down half of the income she was entitled to.

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Lithuanians have reason to listen to her when she warns that Lithuanian society is increasingly splitting into factions, making it difficult to find common ground. She says that Lithuanians are often caught in vicious cycles of unfulfilled responsibilities. Reforms always beget more reforms, but never with the consistency that could achieve results.

In this way, Grybauskaitė (who loves straight talk as much as the occasional caustic joke) speaks with more ease and credibility than others. A few weeks ago, for instance, she criticised the Lithuanian foreign minister for apologising to the Polish press for a decision his predecessor made. Reprimanding him, she insisted that only a figure with elected mandate (such as herself) could apologise in the name of the country. Shortly thereafter, she had stern words for the

Lithuanian ambassador in Washington after he praised the policies of the new foreign minister. She publicly accused him of politicising an issue and reminded him that all state employees – including diplomats – have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral. Such frank talk features prominently in her campaigning, as was the case recently when she said that five her of cabinet members should fear for their jobs after the election. She wants to pick a fight with the “oligarchs” and their “criminal shadows”. Recently, she said the links between companies that are “less than clean” and the media and politicians constitute a cancerous growth on society that impedes growth and thwarts the country and its citizens.

### **ANTI-CORRUPTION EFFORTS AND KARATE**

Ever since control of the parliament flipped from a conservative majority to one dominated by the Left, she has been deprived of the opportunity to pursue her political and economic goals in the legislature. These conditions have considerably weakened her, but they have not prevented her from speaking her mind. She even goes toe-to-toe with reputedly greater powers if she deems it necessary. She was one of the members of the commission that once upbraided France and Germany for failing to heed the strictures of the Stability and Growth Pact. She fulminates against southern EU member states and Moscow in equal measure. And she does not spare British Prime Minister David Cameron in her criticisms either. Commenting on his most recent EU speech, she said she expected exactly what he delivered – nothing more than a speech that was designed to impress the British public before the elections. Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel, herself the Charlemagne Prize recipient five years ago, is one of the few whose politics she admires: Germany is assuming, she said, “immense responsibility for Europe and for member states who can’t even get their homework done. That is exceptional.”

The Charlemagne Prize recipient’s determination applies to more than political issues of everyday concern; it is especially focused on relations with Moscow. Her approach is manifest in her refusal to attend the celebrations of the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Red Army’s victory over Nazi



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Germany – a touchy subject in all three Baltic states. From their perspective, liberation from their national socialist occupiers was tantamount to the Soviet yoke. She said she would head out to Moscow if her Russian counterpart came to Vilnius on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lithuania's independence from the Soviet Union. That seemed to settle the matter. But even the historically close relationship with Poland is not immune to her criticism, a marked change from her predecessor Valdas Adamkus, for whom better relations with the country's sizeable neighbor to the west were very important.

She exhorts her fellow citizens not to trade their liberties for short-term benefits – whether in the voting booth, in their efforts to secure energy independence (Russia consistently hassles its smaller neighbors), or in their dealings with the international community. The fact that Lithuania overcame occupation, Siberia, and energy blockades over the course of five decades is not a miracle, but a testament to the resolute will of the Lithuanian people to unite, she declared in February on the occasion of the 95<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the re-establishment of Lithuania (incidentally, in the presence of the Polish President Bronisław Komorowski).

Her determination displays itself in her political and private life. She is unyielding on the subjects of fiscal discipline, independence, and values. When she left for Brussels, she said she was in pursuit of challenges, not a vacation. Her practice of martial arts exhibits the same quality. She may be the only head of state with a black belt in Karate. The idea, she stresses, is to avoid physical violence and bodily contact. For her, that's a philosophy of life – a discipline that avoids attacks and structures work.

But the Charlemagne Prize recipient's determination does not deprive her of an openness to new ideas and reforms, nor does it rob her of her ability to adapt – she says she does not fear reforms or change. That much was clear from her tenure as finance minister, when, amid public inertia and division, she pushed through reforms that were the envy of her eastern European peers and which some countries on Europe's southern periphery would do well to emulate: a system of collecting taxes electronically, an overhauled

tariffs system, and measures to tackle corruption stemming from these two areas. She opposed any attempts to increase subsidies to the Lithuanian agricultural industry. Her pragmatic approach to privatisations attracted foreign investors to Lithuania. It was no coincidence that the percentage of the workforce engaged in industrial activity was higher than in Germany when Lithuania joined the EU. During her time in office, she not only presided over a budget surplus – at nine per cent, the country recorded the EU’s highest economic growth rate on her watch. When she lowered the corporate tax rate, Lithuania reaped the highest revenues. The country did experience two severe economic downturns within a single decade, but on both occasions, Grybauskaitė abstained from seeking help from the EU or the IMF. She acted early to move Lithuania’s currency, the litas, off the U.S. dollar and to peg it to the euro, a step that laid the groundwork for the euro’s official adoption at the start of 2015, and one of the reasons for the awarding of what is perhaps the most important European prize. In her words, Europe is not experiencing a sovereign-debt crisis – it is experiencing a crisis of political responsibility.

### **GRYBAUSKAITĖ IN BRUSSELS**

When the Lithuanian government appointed her a European Commissioner in 2004, the choice was logical and obvious. Among her cohort, she was the only one who acquitted herself well before the relevant parliamentary committees. The decision that made bigger waves was the suggestion of then EU President-elect José Manuel Durão Barroso that she become the European Commissioner for Financial Programming and the Budget. It made her, the representative of an EU newcomer (and, with 3.3 million inhabitants, relatively small country), one of the most important officials in the Union. No doubt Barroso does not regret going out on a limb. His keen sense of human nature informed his choice, but so did his intuition that small players are the ones who have the courage to act independently and to make hard choices. This was also a personal coup for Dalia Grybauskaitė, who managed to cement her influence during her years in Brussels. She also laid the groundwork for the important work she hoped to accomplish as president upon her return to Lithuania – even in spite of the grumbling during the recent months of her term.



Dalia Grybauskaitė as EU Commissioner: When the Lithuanian government appointed her in 2004, the choice was logical and obvious. | Source: © European Commission, P-010866/00-28.

In Brussels, she was one of the few commissioners who developed a reputation for being something other than an advocate or a lobbyist for her home country. She frequently singled out Lithuania for criticism. During the boom years, she repeatedly cautioned political elites not to sequester themselves while the problems of their countrymen and countrywomen went unaddressed. When she later aspired to represent all Lithuanians as president, however, she wore the livery of a different cause; she became more traditional and more conscious of her nationality.

Nonetheless, Grybauskaitė's tenure as commissioner was not always marked by complaisance, something southern EU members quickly realised when fish, olive, or sugar subsidies were broached. As was her custom, she ran the numbers with equal rigor and enthusiasm. She was convinced, then as now, that the Union was spending too much money on agriculture and too little on research. Under her supervision, expenditures on growth and employment exceeded expenditures for agriculture for fiscal year 2008. This was consistent with her quest to create a knowledge-based economic system, and it also fit well with her conception of herself as a well-intentioned firebrand within the EU. She has not yet ceased to speak frankly: At the beginning of the year, she cautioned that standing around with outstretched hands "in the manner of some southern EU members" would not automatically translate into greater competitiveness or innovation.

Her assertive and successful policy of austerity may well be the greatest single contribution of the Charlemagne Prize recipient. With it, she wants to enhance the middle- and long-term prosperity of Lithuanians, guarantee the country's stability, and, indirectly, demonstrate to larger and more affluent European countries how to satisfy European and economic demands without doing a disservice to populations at home. Of course, there is a flipside to everything, particularly budget cuts, as several debates over the last few months have illustrated. In Lithuania, and in northeastern Europe in general, the cuts affect all of Europe. One of them reveals a dilemma that the president faced at the beginning of her term: Expenditures aimed at reforming politics in large neighbors such as Ukraine and Belarus (and other countries to the south of them – such as Georgia) were on the chopping block. Unusual projects – or those favourable to Europe more broadly – were allowed to expire or were cancelled altogether. These projects were attempts to strengthen democratic movements in Ukraine and Belarus – daring approaches in light of Lithuania's size and economic importance relative to its two large southern neighbors. Not that any of these changes alter Lithuania's foreign policy; Lithuania still tries to support the Belorussian opposition and to bring about change through dialogue, pressure, and prudent rapprochement.

The extent to which this emphasis on reforms has been successful may appear dubious. Under President Alexander Lukashenko's rule, Belarus remains Europe's last remaining dictatorship despite all of the efforts on behalf of Vilnius and Warsaw. Vilnius repeatedly lobbied unsuccessfully for change. Countless memorandums about intra-European policy were drafted in the foreign ministry in Vilnius that went unheeded. They were directed primarily at Belarus and Ukraine, but they also outlined a vision for an "axis of freedom" consisting of Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia. For Lithuania and then-President Adamkus, who was the driving force, the goals were to integrate this string of states into European democracy; to extend a zone of peace and stability eastwards; and to cement Lithuania's role as an intermediary between the EU, NATO (i.e. between Europe and the United States), and its eastern and southern neighbors.

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In the meantime, many in Brussels, especially southern European countries, cared little about what was happening in the former Soviet Union. There were efforts at discreet and active intervention that tested the limits of diplomatic convention. One example relates to the financing of radio stations that provided isolated regions with access to news that was independent of government monopolies. There were also civil rights groups based in Lithuania and Poland that tried to bolster democratic opposition groups in Ukraine and Belarus. And there was also the case of the European Humanities University, an institution critical of the Belorussian regime that moved from Minsk to Vilnius after it was forced to close.

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The reaction of the Russian KGB demonstrates that these actions constituted more than imperial pretensions; referring to the upheaval in the Ukraine, the agency’s letter to the Duma explained that Vilnius was on track to “export revolution to Belarus”.

All of this arose not merely out of the desire to contribute meaningfully to the EU and to NATO as a political newcomer, but also out of gratitude for the support it received from abroad during its own era of resistance in the late 1980s; the country would like to take its turn helping others that are oppressed. History, too, may have played a role; after all, the territories encompassing Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland were once largely ruled by Vilnius.

## **REFORMS AND FOREIGN POLICY REORIENTATION**

For the small political elite in Vilnius, backing and managing all of this was as daring as it was expensive. Consistent with Dalia Grybauskaitė’s emphasis on budget discipline, the projects were cut. But her decision was not solely based on economics; it was the result of a foreign policy reorientation that accompanied the transfer of power from Adamkus to Grybauskaitė. Adamkus closely coordinated his Europe policy, energy strategy, and regional policy (“axis of freedom”) with Poland. The incoming President Grybauskaitė changed that approach. The new key player would no longer be Warsaw, but Brussels (and Berlin in a limited sense), a decision that was shaped by her background and her political persuasions. Her reorientation

cannot be divorced from the close and complicated relationship between Lithuania and Poland, two countries that were once part of a single commonwealth. Linguistically, culturally, and in terms of their Catholic faith and baroque-themed architecture, the two have always been intertwined, a recipe for tensions and an exceedingly complicated relationship. Dalia Grybauskaitė facilitated greater emphasis on the national characteristics of Lithuania, and greater skepticism vis-à-vis Poland.

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Grybauskaitė effected a foreign policy departure away from Warsaw and towards Brussels and its institutions. Deeper EU integration is more important to her than any eastward expansion of influence. The same applies to Grybauskaitė's energy policy; she is seeking a secure energy supply within the framework of the EU. This reorientation has led to a waning of efforts to realise the vision of the "axis of freedom". The consequences of this decision for the region – and, indirectly, for Europe – will be hard to judge. Who could possibly know what developments would have taken place in Belarus or Ukraine? And who knows to what degree the support for reform-minded organisations would have changed anything? The desire for reforms in both countries abated in any case. Whether this was an indirect and unintended consequence of Lithuania's disciplined policy of austerity – the one to be honored and acclaimed with the Charlemagne Prize – is a question that will remain unanswered. These policies enabled Russian influence to return to cities that had just begun to lose themselves, such as Minsk and Kiev. It would be simplistic to reduce these events to austerity mandates recommended by a finance minister, commissioner, or president. The European Union's lack of political and financial support for these Polish and Lithuanian reform approaches is also related – it was a case of a European-wide failure of disinterest.

Respect for Dalia Grybauskaitė is a function of several characteristics: her immunity to corruption, her business-like approach, her unassailable competence, and her ability to adapt. But it is also a function of her successes as finance minister, commissioner, and president. Her unyielding insistence on austerity was not always easy to defend, especially when hostile parties on the Left publicised unflattering

statistics comparing minimum wages to other countries such as Greece. And yet the people of Lithuania have certainly noticed that the president's disciplined approach is bearing fruit. Cities as well as rural areas are doing slightly though unmistakably better – in contrast to neighboring Latvia, where the economic and social trends seem to point in the opposite direction; the relationships between Lithuania and Latvia in terms of quality of life and optimism have been inverted. Many regard the president as their "rescuer". Others call Dalia Grybauskaitė a "knight in shining armor". This knight is emblazoned on the coat of arms of this historic and culturally rich country, which, though geographically peripheral, belongs culturally at the heart of Europe.