

# The leftwing opposition running favourite in the general elections in Lithuania

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Analysis

On 14th October next 2.5 million Lithuanians will be electing the 141 MPs who sit in the Seimas, the only chamber in parliament. They will also be voting by referendum on the building of a new nuclear power station in Visaginas (in the country's north east). The second round of the general election will take place on 28th October.

The general election date has to be set and announced by presidential decision at least six months before the end of the previous legislature. On 11th April last, Lithuanian President, Dalia Grybauskaitė announced the dates of the next election. The campaign started immediately after this announcement with the official campaign beginning on 14th September.

2 000 candidates (+ 400 in comparison with the previous elections on 12th and 26th October 2008) from 27 of the country's 44 political parties (including six new ones), are running in this election.

## The situation in Lithuania

The country has been governed by the right for the past four years. The government comprises the Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LK), led by Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius, the Liberal and Centre Union (LLC-LSC) led by Gintautas Babravičius and the Liberal Movement (LRLS), led by Eligijus Masiulis. In spite of an extremely difficult economic context Andrius Kubilius is the first head of government to have completed his mandate since Lithuania recovered its independence in 1991.

Severely affected by the economic crisis that started in autumn 2008 (the Lithuanian GDP contracted by 15%), Lithuania refused to call on international aid and has recovered thanks to the introduction of an austerity policy and major sacrifices on the part of the population. The government made reducing deficits a national priority, arguing that there was no contradiction between growth and consolidating public finances. It enjoyed the support of President Dalia Grybauskaitė, who was elected as head of State in the first round of the presidential election on 17th May 2009.

The two heads of the Lithuanian executive have implemented a severe policy to consolidate public finances. At present the country is experiencing the highest growth rate in the EU (3% forecast in 2012 after 6% last year). Its public deficit is due to drop below the 3% of the GDP this year and its debt lies at 38.5% (2011). This figure might seem low but it has increased by 9 points in the last two years. Inflation is still high (4.2%) as is unemployment (14%). Employment is due to be a major theme in the electoral campaign.

Summarising her three years as head of State in July, Dalia Grybauskaitė said she was pleased with Lithuania's economic results. "Now that the economy is doing better we must focus on the fate of the most vulnerable and this requires a reform of the Welfare State and of our retirement system. We must reduce unemployment and increase the minimum salary next year," she declared. The Lithuanian minimum salary is one of the lowest in the EU. It totals 800 litas, i.e. 232€. Only two of the Union's 27 Member States – Romania and Bulgaria – have a lower minimum wage. "The economic situation is stable for the time being but it is tense in the surrounding countries. This is

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why that in spite of the electoral fever politicians must show their sense of responsibility, avoid populist exaggeration and not promise something that cannot be achieved. They have to concentrate on what is most important for the State and its population," stressed Dalia Grybauskaite.

The reduction of the debt, the development of infrastructures, notably in terms of energy and the economic modernisation of the country, are the main priorities set by Andrius Kubilius in these general elections. The single currency is also one of the Prime Minister's priorities. Lithuania hopes to join the euro zone in 2014. Riga and Vilnius are the two most advanced capitals in Central and Eastern Europe as far as the process of adopting the euro is concerned.

The leader of the Social Democratic Party (LSP) Algirdas Butkevicius and that of the Liberal Movement (LRLS), Eligijus Masiulis, have both said that Lithuania must not rush to adopt the single currency – at least until the euro zone crisis has not been settled

The government was weakened at the beginning of 2012 by the "Palaitis" affair. Raimundas Palaitis (LLC-LSC), the Interior Minister, was criticised for having dismissed two executives from the government's Financial Crime Investigation Service (FNIT), Vitalijus Gailius and Vytautas Girzadas, who were conducting an inquiry into cases of financial crime involving the Snoras Bank. On 9th March the Seimas ordered the re-employment of Vitalijus Gailius and Vytautas Girzadas, which is not allowed by the law. Raimundas Palaitis resigned on 20th March.

Moreover, Romas Kalvaitis and Stasys Okunevicius, candidates on the Homeland Union-Christian Democrat (TS-LK) list were replaced after their collaboration with the KGB was disclosed to the public. Stasys Okunevicius also distinguished himself during the fight for independence of Lithuania in 1991. His party recalled that anyone who wanted to join it had to inform it of

their KGB membership as soon as they joined, "not 12 years later". On 6th September the Research Centre on Genocide and Resistance put 628 new documents on line regarding the political police activities in the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic revealing the names of 1,500 KGB agents. One third of Lithuanians fell victim to repression under the Soviet regime.

### The political forces in play

According to the polls the opposition parties are due to win in the ballot box. The Social Democrats (LSP) say they are "ready to govern". Criticising the government's political austerity they are promising to raise public spending. Their leader, Algirdas Butkevicius, has said that reducing taxes for SME's and also VAT on vegetables and meat will be the next government's priorities. They also confirmed that the next majority will comprise the Social Democratic Party, the Labour Party (DP) run by Russian born billionaire Viktor Uspaskich and For Order and Justice (TT) led by former President of the Republic Rolandas Paksas.

The Labour Party is led by former Economy Minister (2004-2005), Viktor Uspaskich, a person who is as charismatic, as he is controversial. He resigned from the government led by Algirdas Mykolas Brazauskas (LSP) after the ethics committee accused him of using his position to promote his own private interests. In May 2006 he fled to Moscow after having been accused of "omitting" to declare 8 million litas (2.32 million euros) in income and 7 million litas (2.03 million €) in spending to the tax services. Returning to Lithuania in 2007 Viktor Uspaskich was arrested and then released on bail. This was lifted but since Viktor Uspaskich was elected MEP in June 2009, he recovered his immunity. He promised to reduce unemployment (to 0% in 3 years) and to resign if he did not succeed. He also said that he supported greater European integration.

On 4th September the Constitutional Court made

a ruling on Rolandas Paksas. He was impeached as Head of State by the Seimas on 6th April 2004 after being found guilty of infringing the Constitution by illegally granting Lithuanian nationality to Yuri Borisov, a Russian businessman and the main financial source behind his campaign in the presidential election on 22nd December 2002 and 5th January 2003; he was also found guilty of having violated State secrets by revealing confidential information to the same man and finally for having promoted his friends during the privatisation of a motorway company. However the European Court of Human Rights which he turned to, ruled that the measures taken regarding Mr Paksas (the life ban on standing for a position that involved a taking a constitutional oath) were ill adapted and contrary to the European Human Rights Convention. The life ban was therefore reduced to four years on 22nd March last, and the Seimas adopted an amendment to the electoral law allowing Rolandas Paksas to stand in the elections. On 4th September the Constitutional Court maintained that only a constitutional amendment could end the ban on becoming an MP. Rolandas Paksas cannot therefore run in October. His party's programme promises to give State owned land to people who want to cultivate it, to create jobs and reduce emigration.

Electoral Action for Lithuanian Poles (LLRA), the representative of the Polish minority in Lithuania and led by Waldemar Tomaszewski, has set itself the goal of rising above the 5% voting threshold and take 10 seats in the Seimas so that it can form a parliamentary group. The party has joined forces with two others: the People's Party led by Kazimiera Prunskiene (temporarily led by her son Vaidotas Prunskus because of the serious health problems his mother is having at the moment) and the Russian Alliance led by Irina Rozova. The three parties, which will campaign on economic stakes, have said they were ready to govern with the Labour Party and the Social Democratic Party (LSP).

This year, unlike the general elections of 2008 in which the National Resurrection Party led by Arunas Valinskas was the source of surprise, coming second in the first round of voting and when Viktor Uspasich's Labour Party (DP) came first in the first round of the 2004 general elections, the parties that have recently been created do not seem to be the source of attraction according to the polls. Democratic Labour and Unity led by Kristina Brazauskiene, the widow of former Prime Minister (2001-2006) Algirdas Mykolas Brazauskas; Union (TAIP) led by the Mayor of Vilnius Arturas Zuokas; the Drasos Kelias List and the Lithuanian List led by Darius Kuolys, are due win less than 10% of the vote together. The Lithuanians say they deplore the creation of new parties just before the elections.

### **The Lithuanian Political System**

Lithuania has a unicameral parliament, the Seimas, comprising 141 members elected every four years according to a mixed voting method. 71 MPs are appointed by the majority system and 70 by proportional representation. A political party has to win 5% of the votes cast to be able to have a representation in parliament (7% in the case of a coalition). In the constituency where there is the majority vote a candidate winning the absolute majority in the first round, if turnout totals at least 40%, is declared elected. If turnout is under 40% the candidate who has won the greatest number of votes (and the vote of at least 1/5 of those registered), is elected. A second round is organised if these conditions are not fulfilled. Any party that wants to take part in the general elections must have at least 1,000 members.

10 political parties are represented in the present Seimas:

- Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LK), a liberal party led by outgoing Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius, with 46 seats;

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- the Social Democratic Party (LSDP), the main opposition party led by Algirdas Butkevicius, with 24 MPs;
- For Order and Justice (TT), a rightwing populist party led by Rolandas Paksas, with 14 seats;
- the Liberal and Centre Union (LLC-LSC), led by Gintautas Babravicius, has 13 MPs;
- the Liberal Movement (LRLS), founded in 2006 and led by Eligijus Masiulis, a member of the outgoing government has 12 seats;
- the Labour Party (DP), a leftwing populist party created in 2003 by Viktor Uspaskich, has 11 MPs;
- the Christian Party (KP), centre-right founded in 2010 after the merger of the Social Union, which is Christian and conservative and the Christian Conservative Party led by Gediminas Vagnorius, with 8 seats;
- Polish Electoral Action (LLRA), a party created in 1994 and led by Waldemar Tomaszewski, with 3 MPs;
- the Lithuanian Farmers' Union (LVLS), a merger of the Farmers' Party (LVP) and the New Democratic Party (NDP), led by Ramunas Karbaukis, with 3 MPs.

### Reminder of the general election results on 12th and 26th October 2008 in Lithuania

Turnout: 48.59%

Political Parties	No. of votes won	% of votes won	Seats won by proportional voting	Seats won by majority voting	Total seats
<b>Homeland-Conservatives (TS-LK)</b>	243 823	19.72	18	27	45
<b>National Revival</b>	186 629	15.09	13	3	16
<b>Order and justice (TT)</b>	156 777	12.68	11	4	15
<b>Social Democratic Party (LSDP)</b>	144 890	11.72	10	15	25
<b>Labour Party (DP)</b>	111 149	8.99	8	2	10
<b>Liberal Movement</b>	70 862	5.73	5	6	11
<b>Liberal and Centre Union (LLC-LSC)</b>	66 078	5.34	5	3	8
<b>Electoral Action of Lithuanian Poles (LLRA)</b>	59 237	4.79	0	3	3
<b>Lithuanian Farmers' Union (LVLS)</b>	46 162	3.73	0	3	3
<b>New Union-Social Liberal Party (NS-SL)</b>	45 061	3.64	0	1	1
<b>Independents</b>			0	4	4
<b>Others</b>	106 048	8.58	0	0	0

Source : Lithuanian Electoral Commission

[http://www.vrk.lt/2008\\_seimo\\_rinkimai/output\\_lt/rezultatai\\_daugiamand\\_apygardose/rezultatai\\_daugiamand\\_apygardose1turas.html](http://www.vrk.lt/2008_seimo_rinkimai/output_lt/rezultatai_daugiamand_apygardose/rezultatai_daugiamand_apygardose1turas.html)

### The Referendum

On 17th July last the Seimas voted in support of the organisation of a referendum on the building of a new nuclear power station, 62 votes in favour, 39 against and 18 abstentions. The closure of the Ignalina (RBMK) power station in 2009 that was of the same type as Chernobyl, in operation for 26 years, producing 70% of the country's electricity, led to a

rise in electricity tariffs and an increase in Lithuania's energy dependency on Russia (the three Baltic States import 62% of their electricity, a record level in the EU). The project for the future nuclear power plant of Visaginas involves Latvia to a total of 20% and Estonia, 22%. Poland was also invited to take part in the project. Lithuania will participate to a total of 30%. The plant will produce 1,300 megawatts and should be in operation by 2020/2022. Five billion euros, i.e.

the biggest sum ever invested in the country since 1991 will be necessary for the project to go ahead with the Japanese company Hitachi!

"Do you approve the building of the new power plant in Lithuania?", this is the question that the Lithuanians will have to answer on 14th October.

During the last general elections on 2008 the Lithuanians were also asked by referendum, whether the Ignalina power plant should continue to function. To the question "do you approve of the Ignalina power plant continuing to function until a new power plant is built?" 88.59% of the electorate said "yes" but the consultation was declared invalid since only 48.44% of the electorate voted, whilst the electoral law sets a minimum turnout rate of 50% +1 in order for the vote to be declared valid.

The Mayor of Vilnius Arturas Zuokas also wanted a referendum on the day of the elections on the reduction of the number of MPs (from 141 to 101), the extension of the length of the parliamentary man-

date (from four to five years), the modification of the election date (from the autumn to the spring) and finally a ban on any MP of undertaking more than two consecutive mandates. However he failed to achieve the 300,000 signatures necessary for these questions to be the focus of a popular consultation (only 125,000 signatures were gathered).

According to the most recent poll by Spinter Tyrimai five political parties are due to win more than the 5% voting threshold necessary to enter parliament.

The Social Democratic Party is due to win 16.9% of the vote, Labour 13.3%, For Order and Justice 9.4%, the Homeland Union-Christian Democrats (TS-LK), 7.7% and the Liberal Movement, 5.2%.

Many analysts believe that the election may hold some surprises however. They recall that during the local elections on 27th February 2011 to everyone's surprise the Homeland Union-Christian Democrats came 2nd behind the Social Democrats (21%).

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