

Pandemic Politics and Lithuanian Elections

Article by Almantas Samalavičius

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The tug of war between Lithuania's traditional parties broke down definitively in 2016 with the victory of the Farmers and Greens. But their support has declined since as answers to social and environmental problems have been lacking. Amid the ongoing pandemic and in the shadow of events in neighbouring Belarus, the elections in October may yet be another turning point in Lithuanian politics.

Changes to the political landscape during the first post-Soviet decade followed the same pattern in most Eastern European countries, and Lithuania was no exception. After the spectacular success of the Singing Revolution, the national reform movement Sajūdis, which skillfully guided Lithuania to independence in 1990, was completely defeated in just two years. Former Communists – smart and far-sighted enough to abandon the highly compromised branding – assumed a more attractive and neutral label, becoming the Lithuanian Democratic Labour Party (LDDP) and winning the 1992 elections. More importantly, amidst rising inflation and economic hardships of early transition, their programme seemed to promise a more realistic and balanced form of social welfare than their ideological opponents could offer. However after four years of LDDP's rule, self-appointed successors of the dissolved Sajūdis movement regrouped themselves into the Homeland Union (Lithuanian Conservatives). This force won back the parliamentary majority in 1996 and ran the government until 2000.

In the two decades that followed, Lithuanian politics became more complex. No party on the Left or Right has held on to power for more than one term, nor won an outright majority. The internal dynamics of the LDDP and the Homeland Union became intense. Members regularly left in droves to join or establish new parties. Some of these new “non-traditional” forces persisted while others saw electoral failures and were swept away. Generally speaking, no more than three or four large political parties dominated Lithuania's changing political scene throughout the 2000s and 2010s. The old rivals – the Homeland Union and the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (the post-Communist LDDP and the Social Democrats merged in a timely decision in 2001) – were the two largest competitors until quite recently when a striking number of new political parties emerged and performed strongly despite lacking historical roots or firm ideology.

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The reshaping of the political landscape continued even more dramatically after 2010 as populism grew and the formerly polarised electorate became fragmented and less stable in its choices. Programmes of “traditional parties” became indistinguishable from one another and, in some cases, even contradicted their party's values and aims. The Lithuanian Conservatives began to eschew liberal rhetoric after Gabrielius Landsbergis – the grandson of renowned political old-timer and independence leader Vytautas Landsbergis – became the chairman of the Homeland Union. As the party's identity changed, many older members of the Homeland Union were disappointed. Some left, while others opposed Landsbergis junior's leadership and stances.

After several impressive comebacks in the first two decades of post-Soviet transition, the Social Democrats also

began to lose support in the 2010s. The death of their iconic leader Algirdas Brazauskas – a former Communist and a major player of the reform era who served as both president and prime-minister – saw followers turn away. His heirs lacked the same charisma and ability to manipulate voters. Many people considered Brazauskas as a “guarantor of stability” and turned a blind eye to his past as high-ranking Soviet official. Successive Social Democrat leaders could not impress new generations of voters in the same way, even if younger people are less concerned about the roots of this political party than their parents.

The ascent of the Farmers and Greens

Thus Lithuanian politics started to change profoundly. The results of the 2016 elections were in many ways stunning. Against expectations, the comparatively new (the original Farmers party was established 30 years ago but had remained a minor force) Farmers and Greens Union spectacularly won 59 seats in the parliament. The Conservatives meanwhile managed to secure no more than 20 seats. The Farmers and Greens became the largest party and formed a government in coalition with a few smaller left-leaning parties.

Lacking a prominent national leader (the chairman of the party Ramūnas Karbauskis is an industrial farmer and was not a public figure before entering politics), the Farmers and Greens Union adopted a populist choice in appointing a prime minister from outside their ranks. Saulius Skvernelis – a plain and otherwise unimpressive transport engineer-turned-traffic policeman who rose through the ranks to become the general police commissioner and eventually minister of interior – was chosen to lead the new government. He was an outsider but brought high ratings and was top of the candidate list for the elections.

The reasons for his popularity are quite difficult to grasp. An unimpressive public speaker, Skvernelis was a notable and popular figure while leading the national police and running the ministry of the interior. His political career almost collapsed during an infamous incident in Lithuania’s capital city Vilnius when an arrested suspect escaped from a police car, stole a Kalashnikov machine gun, and was only located and cornered the next morning.

Hundreds of police officers were summoned to track the potentially dangerous fugitive. Meanwhile, the then Minister of Interior Skvernelis remained asleep until the early hours. Speaker of Parliament Loreta Graužinienė made an emergency call to Skvernelis’s private house only to learn that the politician in charge of law enforcement saw no reason to disturb his rest. Curiously enough, this much-publicised case did not ruin Skvernelis’s reputation.

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After losing the 2019 presidential race to current president Gitanas Nausėda, Skvernelis duly resumed his duties as prime minister. On several occasions, however, he used his powers to disobey the president. In one notable instance, he refused to fire Jaroslavas Narkevičius, the compromised transport minister. Yet the prime minister’s reputation remained untarnished even as the Farmers and Greens Union became a target of heavy and ongoing criticism.

The Farmers and Greens Union began to lose public support and media backing shortly after winning the 2016 parliamentary elections. This decline had many causes: prices were on the rise, corruption remained rampant, and no social programmes had been implemented. Rapid deforestation continued unabated and the resignation of several top officials at the environment ministry from 2017 to 2019 – including the minister, his deputy, and the

chancellor of the ministry – point to the mismanagement of “green” issues.

This record begs the question of how green are the Farmers and Greens? It must be admitted that the environmental credentials of the Farmers and Greens union were and continue to be rather poor. Though their programme contains references to a “cohesive society”, “harmony between humans and nature”, “healthy local food”, and the “application of principles of a healthy life into the educational system”, they remain rather vague. The fact that the party is dominated by industrial farmers, such as its chairman Karbauskis, rather than green activists or seasoned environmentalists makes them quite vulnerable as far as environmental and climate questions are concerned.

The politics of Lithuania’s Covid-19 response

In recent years, support for the ruling Farmers and Greens Union has continued to decline, as have the ratings of their leaders. The leader Ramūnas looks more like a back-seat driver than a prominent politician, unlike smart Skvernelis who maintained much higher levels of public support. However, Covid-19 turned the situation on its head.

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The government’s reaction to the threat of the virus was delayed, and in many ways, clumsy. Hospitals were poorly equipped and lacked face masks, not to speak of the sophisticated equipment needed for intensive care. Local hospitals, including some large university hospitals, were badly hit. After several medical doctors contracted Covid-19, wards at several hospitals had to be closed and the heads of healthcare institutions exchanged fierce public messages with the health minister. Health minister Veryga was entrusted with leading the overall effort to control the pandemic. After some hesitation and confusion, lockdown measures were finally applied nationally, border controls were put in place, and emergency measures were introduced. Horrified by reports of the collapse of the healthcare system in northern Italy as well as the growing spread of the virus, Lithuanians stayed home until measures were officially relaxed. When the lockdown measures were finally relaxed early summer, many people breathed a sigh of relief.

Leading the response to the pandemic allowed Veryga to dominate the mass media and consolidate his public image. He made statements at all hours, occasionally donning a paramilitary uniform when announcing new public safety measures. The number of Lithuanians who have contracted the virus is relatively low in comparison to other European countries. Skvernelis and Veryga have pronounced this low case count a success of the government’s skillful and timely management of the health crisis. In the eyes of many, they had master-minded a successful pandemic response and their ratings rose accordingly.

October elections and events in Belarus

The political map is becoming increasingly colourful as the number of parties vying for seats grows ahead of the elections in October. The ongoing crisis in Belarus is providing an excellent opportunity for some Lithuanian politicians to strengthen their reputation in the run-up to the vote. Foreign minister Linas Linkevičius has kept himself in the news by hosting Sviatlana Cichanouskaya, the Belorussian presidential candidate who fled repression in her home country. Some informed experts, such as former Foreign Minister and Former Ambassador to Belarus Petras Vaitiekūnas, have repeatedly warned in the media that Vladimir Putin controls the Belarussian issue and it is the Kremlin that ultimately decides whether Lukashenka stays or leaves. Vaitiekūnas was extremely

reserved while discussing the role of Cichanouskaya, characterising her more as a symbol of Belorussian democracy rather than a real leader with national and international support. Notwithstanding expert opinion, many Lithuanians have taken a far simpler approach to events in Belarus and hailed the dawn of democracy there.

Looking back on previous elections, one must be cautious when forecasting the fortunes of parties in the upcoming elections. Political scientist Lauras Bielinis has recently emphasised that the largest Lithuanian parties – Conservatives, Social Democrats, and, to a certain degree, Liberals – all have good chances of gaining a significant number of seats. He notes, however, that left of the centre, a growing number of parties compete over a set of disillusioned voters and that the Farmers and Greens Union have been the main benefactors in recent years.

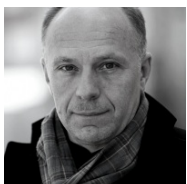
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Though trust in the Farmers and Greens has eroded, it is unlikely that their rivals will win over their left-leaning centrist supporters. The “war against the virus” rhetoric is a winning one and will only strengthen their campaign. They seem to also understand that any partial lockdown would dramatically reduce their chances at the polls. Thus although a second wave of the pandemic looms, lockdown measures remain somewhat relaxed, despite the rhetoric from some government officials. The current policy will most likely be pursued until the elections are over before more austere measures are introduced. Though the green sheen of the Farmers and Greens has worn off, they have good chances of remaining a political force that will eventually form a coalition government.

A few smaller values-based parties have growing odds of entering parliament. The Lithuanian Greens – a party established in 2011 – has grown slowly yet considerably. Despite lacking a charismatic leader, the Greens have advanced a well-designed and attractive programme that emphasises ecology, circular economy, natural resources, phasing out nuclear energy, energy security and efficiency, and rethinking the future of cities. Compared to the vague slogans of a “sustainable” and balanced way of life from the Farmers and Greens, their agenda looks far more advanced and full of potential.

Another recent political grouping – the right-wing National Association led by philosopher and former Sajūdis activist professor Vytautas Radžvilas – could also cross the parliamentary threshold. This small yet publicly visible party is gaining attention by insisting on political reform, demanding more grassroots democracy and accountability, highlighting growing emigration and immigration, and stressing the importance of national identity and human values. Often accused of nationalism, Radžvilas and his followers have exposed numerous ills of the current political system in Lithuania as well as the European Union as a whole.

The upcoming elections offer little reason to anticipate major shifts. But, for Lithuania to face its growing concerns and global uncertainties, some essential changes to the current political system are badly needed.



Almantas Samalavičius is a professor at Vilnius Gediminas Technical University and Vilnius University, and has authored more than a dozen scholarly and critical books on various topics published in Lithuania, UK and US. He is also a former president of Lithuanian PEN.

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