

## **Navigating the Culture Wars on Europe's Borders**

**Article by Tomas Tomilinas**

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Following a disappointing election in late 2020, the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union are adjusting to their role as the largest opposition party in a political climate shaped by growing culture wars and an emboldened Russia. We spoke with MP Tomas Tomilinas who explained the issues driving politics in Lithuania today and Lithuania's outlook on the future of Europe.

*This interview is part of a [series](#) that we published in partnership with [Le Grand Continent](#) on Green parties in Europe.*

### **Green European Journal: What are the major issues in Lithuanian politics in 2021?**

**Tomas Tomilinas:** In the spring of this year, Lithuania faced a second lockdown, which was a major stress for the country. Lithuania had several peaks in 2020, however it managed the smallest drop in GDP in Europe. After the elections in autumn 2020, the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union are no longer in government. They constitute the largest opposition party. The new government has tried to pin the second wave in 2021 on us, claiming that we were too mild and not strict enough with restrictions ahead of the elections. Their response has been to introduce harsher measures, including a several month-long ban on [travelling between](#) municipalities, though most have now been lifted.

Our approach has never been to argue against sanitary restrictions. In government, we introduced several rules from rather efficient mandatory quarantine rules to the not so successful attempt to limit number of supermarket shoppers via restricted parking. We looked for ways to protect the economy and people's wellbeing, like ensuring that small businesses could function, especially those that cannot move online, and creating the pan-Baltic "travel bubble" initiative – a policy that the new right and ultra-right coalition has failed to maintain.

### **Leaving aside the pandemic, what other issues are shaping Lithuanian politics?**

From our perspective, social issues and overcoming inequalities are central. During our five years in government from 2016 to 2020, inequality started to shrink from very high levels because of measures such as universal child support, tax reforms, and targeted sectorial initiatives. In the years after 2015, salaries grew by 43 per cent while the average tax burden decreased by 5 per cent; the economy grew by almost a quarter and inequality began to shrink by 0.5 per cent per annum on average. Suicide and depression rates decreased and even negative migration trends reversed. From 2018 onwards, Lithuania registered moderate population growth. Of course, I am ready to be accused of being biased and our political opponents would point out that many of these problems persist. However, we have retained support from a significant share of Lithuanian citizens because of our ambitious social programmes that reduced major social problems and maintained

one of the most favourable climates for business in the European Union (EU) and worldwide. The move up to 11th place in the [2020 Doing Business Index](#) from 20th place in 2016 speaks to the progress made.

Of course, we did not win in 2020, though we came close; the right-wing parties now have a very small majority in Parliament. The reason why we underperformed was, in my opinion, a lack of preparation in coordinating certain political ambitions, political communication, and the responsibility of running a country. We lacked the experience in international politics and basically gave away that field to more experienced coalition partners. In the domestic field, we started fights that we should have avoided, such as on alcohol advertisement and drug circulation, that caused major friction with industry lobbies and the media. Some clashes even reached the Constitutional Court.

However, just after the 2020 election, which made us the largest opposition party, an emerging “cultural clash” over human rights issues has created a concerning situation. Two small liberal parties, who are the junior partners in the new right-wing coalition, have taken controversial stances on same-sex partnerships and gender identity. Although gender and sexual orientation-based discrimination is illegal in the country, society remains very divided on these topics. Identity politics easily polarise society and spark social tensions, which can also be seen in the [debate on the Istanbul Convention](#). However, the most concerning is the lack of public awareness about the full scope of human rights, its universality, and the clash between modernity and tradition. I worry that such “culture wars” will shape our domestic debate for many years to come.

**Similar culture wars are common across Europe and divisions around LGBTQI+ and gender issues are prominent across the border in Poland. Does the Polish political climate spill over into Lithuania?**

I fear that Lithuania might be developing a sort of “Polish climate” where divisions around LGBTQI+ and gender issues are not an object for argument-based discussion, but for street protests and forcefully implemented political will. However, the situation is not there yet. Clashes over human rights only really started this year. During our term, debate on this topic were moderate and political space was rarely infested by hate speech – at least from those with the decision-making power. At the same time, the Greens and Farmers have thoroughly studied another aspect of the “Polish climate” – social policy. We have successfully implemented some of the ideas that Poland has pioneered such as increased public spending on families, people with disabilities, and pension increases. We certainly did not copy their policies on the courts or minorities.

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Since the change in government, the Greens and Farmers are becoming more conservative. I do not like it, but it reflects an increasingly polarised society and shrinking possibility to define and defend general interest. As of now I do not think that Lithuania will have similar issues to our southern neighbour, though the possibility, no matter how small, remains.

## **Are green and environmental topics prominent in Lithuania?**

The green agenda is growing but it is not a major part of the political debate. One reason is the positive environmental indicators in most small towns on water and air quality as well as forests. First on our environmental priorities list is forest protection. In recent years, local activists and NGOs have successfully mobilised society against unfair management of forests and for urban green spaces. Such groups wield major influence especially in more remote regions. Two of our ministers were pushed out of office because of forestry mismanagement accusations.

Other issues, such as pollution and animal rights, receive less attention. However major sources of industrial pollution have been revealed and punished in recent years, leading to some improvement. My recommendation to new environment ministers is that they focus on forests and rare wild animals, such as wolves. Doing that will keep them in office – that is not to say that there are no other issues such as green urban spaces, excessive dependence on cars, and public transport. But these are not burning political issues in the way that forests are.

Of course, the Baltic Sea remains a major concern. Excessive fishing, World War II chemical munition dumps rusting underwater, and the construction of Russian gas pipelines are all worrying news. Recent economic recessions in Russia and Belarus, combined with their lack of transparent environmental policies are another set of concerns. The construction of a Belarussian nuclear power plant just 40 kilometres outside of Vilnius, in blatant disregard for international conventions, perfectly illustrates that EU environmental legislation often ends at its borders, yet ecological problems do not. The case is a missed opportunity for the EU to show itself as a major actor standing for its core values.

## **What about climate change?**

On the national political agenda, climate change as a concept is still not very prominent. A common joke is that Lithuania has seven cold months and winter the rest of the year – so a warming climate may not seem a bad idea. But we feel the effects of climate change. Droughts are a threat in certain areas – a phenomena almost unheard of in a country with dense network of rivers, lakes, and underground water layers like ours. Serious challenges lie ahead for farmers and local governments. Currently, we are in search of sustainable answers.

During our term, the government introduced its first car tax, making Lithuania the last country in the EU to do so. It was not well received by the public and the opposition used it as a stick to beat us with. After gaining power, they quickly forgot their promises to abolish it. Looking back, I can proudly say that making the internal combustion engine car a less desired means of travel and securing one more source of revenue for environmental policies were great steps.

## **What role does Europe play in Lithuania's politics?**

Lithuania has always been enthusiastic about European integration. In Eurobarometer polls, the figures are always high. We are satisfied with Europe, how democracy works in Europe, and the impact European integration has made on Lithuania.

On specific debates however, this record is starting to fade. The intensifying “culture wars” also have a European dimension because some rather radical groups in society, that promote what they refer to as “traditional family values”, see Europe as a threat. It is a new situation that might break with the established consensus on Europe in Lithuania. If you go to the street and ask for opinions on values, 7 out of 10 people would say that the compromise on definition of family, currently accepted in most of the European countries, is not shared here. Lithuanian society is working on that but at a slower pace than some of the western European countries.

There are debates within the party but, in the end, we won't cross the line. We will protect European values, not just family or national values. The principles of our party are decentralisation, sustainable development, transparency in government, social equality, and the protection of family with respect to human rights. That is the line that we agreed on.

### **What is Lithuania's place in the wider European political scene?**

One of Lithuania's most important roles in Europe is the promotion of a value-based approach towards the Eastern neighbours. Lithuania's strategy is to be very active on Russia, Ukraine, Southern Caucasus, Moldova, and Belarus. Lithuania's shared history with the “post-Soviet space” means that we promote a clear and realistic approach to the Soviet past and current attempts to reanimate it. Being part of the EU is an important element of this strategy and NATO membership plays a crucial role too. Most Lithuanian politicians, if not all, support NATO as the key element for European and Northern Atlantic security as well as the need to further strengthen transatlantic ties.

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Although a strong EU security policy is yet to emerge, Lithuania is committed to this direction and to military spending above 2 per cent of GDP. Ever since Putin's regime invaded Crimea, strengthening national security has been a top priority. Prioritising guns over health spending is not a matter of debate. Some say, “First you buy the guns, then think about everything else.” Aggressive Russian behaviour in Georgia and Ukraine woken us up from the early 2000s idealism which saw military spending below 1 per cent of GDP and formal NATO membership as sufficient guarantee of security. We also did our best to wake the rest of Europe up from this dream. I am glad to see our message about what is happening on the EU's eastern borders was heard in the EU and NATO.

### **What about your party's view on the role that Europe should play in the world and Europe's future more broadly?**

We maintain the idea that Europe is an ongoing project and that its role continues to evolve. This is one of the reasons why our party does not have a very articulated stance on Europe's future or its position in the world. We are a pro-European party and are looking forward to participating in the making of Europe.

I can see at least two areas where the EU can benefit from recent Lithuanian past. The first is reducing its external dependencies. In early 1990s, almost all our external trade and energy supplies depended on Russia. It took time, effort, and political will to diversify trade. Now Lithuania is one of the most open economies in the world and no single partner dominates its trade structure. Furthermore, the economy has developed sufficient flexibility and resilience to withstand global shocks. I believe this should be the approach that the EU takes in its relations, at least with Russia and China.

Another suggestion would be to use the EU's not-so-soft power, like trade, to make the world economy greener and more socially responsible. Gradual restriction of imports of environmentally unsustainable goods, produced in violation of human health and safety, environmental and human rights standards, alongside targeted assistance for all wishing to become more sustainable could become a major policy.

Personally, I think that Europe is also missing the opportunity to become more socially just. Even if Lithuania has conservative positions on cultural issues, it would probably support a common corporate tax, for example. However, Lithuania is not going to lead this agenda as a country of 3 million people. In the European Council, Lithuania has always signalled that it would not be hostile to more integration on social issues, and I've often been disappointed that progressive countries such as Sweden are not more vocal.

### **What are your party's organisational priorities for the coming years?**

The current tendencies are worrying. The cabinet is considering moves that will likely restrict peoples' choice such as abolishing direct presidential elections and reforming the system of parliamentary elections by getting rid of regional constituencies (the Greens and Farmers naturally are strong on the regional level). Such efforts are an attempt to diminish the importance of regional dimension in national politics and to centralise power. We will need to perform strongly in the 2023 municipal elections and in the three elections of 2024: the general, presidential and European elections.

Municipal elections will take place in two years and there are two main strategies. One strategy is to remain the most influential left-wing party. This seems promising, considering that Lithuania's Social Democrats are in a deep crisis of both leadership and ideas. In Lithuania, left-wing means socially orientated, liberal economic policies, and human rights but culturally conservative. The other strategy is to attract more members to counter the current right-wing government moves to change the rules of the game. This would mean becoming a bit more of a "catch-all" type party, going beyond our current agenda.

### **You've recently published a book that tries to shift the dominant cultural and political narratives in Lithuania. Can you tell us about it?**

*A book not for children* is about the political myths that work their way into people's heads. I examine nine myths of contemporary Lithuanian politics and show that certain ideas are frequently taken with childish enthusiasm, often without a decent pinch of constructive scepticism.

I argue that Lithuania, like many transition countries, has had too much faith in the liberal market. It has suffered from continuously large numbers of emigration, from 1992 up until

2018, and huge disparities in wealth distribution as a result. I show what has been done and what could be done to counteract the power and influence of big business interests and really empower people.

I also examine the place of values and human rights in daily life and argue for a clear distinction on what is up for political debate – like the concept of a nation, the priorities of economic and social development, democracy, certain aspects of ownership – and what isn't debatable – like rights of minorities, political rights, health, protection of life. It is an attempt to explain why minority rights shouldn't dominate political discussions and why rights are important to Europe's long democratic legacy.

I address the fact that most of Lithuania's heroes are dictators or at least unelected leaders – starting from medieval dukes and kings up to Antanas Smetona (the interwar dictator who became "leader of the nation" after a military coup). Such a picture undermines the construction of a democratic political consciousness. The book addresses this gap by telling the story of important Lithuanian democrats.

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Tomas Tomilinas is a member of the Lithuanian Parliament, vice-chairman of the Lithuanian Peasants and Greens Union party. From 2014 to 2016 he worked as a senior assistant to the MEP Bronis Ropé (Greens/EFA). Elected to Parliament in 2016, he is a deputy in the Parliament Committee of social affairs. Educated as political scientist, Tomas was a social activist based in Vilnius and worked on the party platform, as well as in different social and green think tanks. His fields of interest concern food sovereignty, local democracy, and social justice.

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