

# Lithuania: Defeat of Eurosceptic parties in the shadow of a presidential campaign<sup>1</sup>

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The 2019 European Parliament (EP) election in Lithuania was overshadowed by a simultaneous direct presidential election. Three main contenders were close in the polls during the preceding months. The second round between the two frontrunners, Ingrida Šimonytė and Gitanas Nausėda, was held two weeks after the first one, simultaneously with the EP vote. The overlap of two elections raised the otherwise (potentially) low turnout in the EP election (53.1% of Lithuanians voted), but it also meant that less attention was given to the EP campaign by the main political parties.

## CONTEXT AND CAMPAIGN

European Parliament elections in Lithuania conform quite closely to the second-order theory by Reif and Schmitt (1980): voters choose on the basis of national-level questions and sympathies, instead of voting according to specific EU-related topics. When held without a concurrent national election in 2014, the European election received very little attention (in 2009, the turnout was 21%). The competition is skewed in favour of the pro-European political powers, as Lithuania is one of the most EU-trusting countries in the union: in the Eurobarometer of Autumn 2018, 65% of Lithuanians tended to trust EU with only 21% tending not to trust it (European Commission, 2018).

Except for the debates carried by the public broadcaster LRT (in the two weeks before the election), as well as a number of posters and social media advertising, the electoral campaign was barely visible. The two largest parliamentary parties tried to enhance their electoral prospects by giving high positions in their lists to popular figures that have no experience in politics whatsoever. The right-wing, opposition Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD) gave their number-one position to the academic Liudas Mažylis, who became famous two years ago for discovering the document of the 1918 Lithuanian declaration of independence. The largest government party, Lithuanian Farmers and Greens (LVŽS), gave the second spot in their list to former basketball player Šarūnas Marčiulionis.

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In contrast with 2014, the election lacked a salient European issue for the parties to campaign “for” or “against” (which, in the previous EP election, had been the introduction of euro), as immigration is very low in Lithuania. However, there still are differences on the European dimension, according to the Lithuanian voting advice application “Mano balsas” (2019). Among the parliamentary parties, the Order and Justice (PTT) is moderately sceptical of European integration and authority. Similar views are held by the party of the Polish ethnic minority, Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance (LLRA-KŠS). The main governing party (winner of the 2016 parliamentary election), LVŽS, along with their coalitional partner, Lithuanian Social Democratic Labour Party (LSDDP, founded in 2018 in a split from LSDP) are in the centre of the pro-/anti- European axis. The remaining parties of traditional centre right and left are moderately pro-European in the matters of EU integration and authority: TS-LKD, Liberal Movement of the Republic of Lithuania (LRLS) and Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (LSDP).

The number of electoral lists increased from ten to sixteen due to the decision to allow public electoral committees to compete. The main difference between a committee and a political party is that the latter needs a minimum membership of 2000, and is eligible for state financing. Committees have been taking part in local Lithuanian elections since 2011. Five national public committees participated in this EP election, alongside eleven political parties.

## RESULTS

With no active campaign, the election resembled a referendum on the LVŽS - LSDDP government. LVŽS obtained two members of the European parliament (MEPs) – one more than in 2014. However, they came in third place in terms of votes: obviously a disappointing result for the largest parliamentary party. This was foreshadowed by the first round of presidential elections where Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis also finished third, not entering the second round. This EP election proved again that, quite similarly to the other post-communist countries (Roberts, 2008), the Lithuanian electorate is prone to hyperaccountability. It is worth mentioning that all the previous Lithuanian governments lost the EP elections, with an exception of 2009 where the turnout was so low that TS-LKD capitalised on the loyalty of their voters (Ramonaitė et al. 2014). Currently, LVŽS MEP Bronis Ropė belongs to the Greens–European Free Alliance.

The LSDDP experienced a fiasco, receiving only 2.2% of votes (5% are needed for a seat) and losing the battle for left-leaning voters to LSDP. These elections witnessed a recovery of the LSDP that used to be the main party of the centre-left but came third in the 2016 parliamentary elections, suffered a split and stagnated since then. The party finished second with 15.1% of votes and gained two MEPs (the same result as in 2014). Their performance was probably enhanced by the leader of list – Vilija Blinkevičiūtė, one of the most active MEPs from Lithuania. LSDP belongs to the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats.

Table 1 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Lithuania

PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)	SEATS	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014
Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD)	EPP	245,918	18.6	3	+2.1	+1
Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (LSDP)	S&D	199,220	15.1	2	-1.2	
Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (LVŽS)	G-EFA	157,603	11.9	2	+5.7	+1
Labour Party (DP)	ALDE	112,985	8.5	1	-3.6	
Liberal Movement of the Republic of Lithuania (LRLS)	ALDE	81,916	6.2	1	-9.4	-1
Public Electoral Committee “Train of Aušra Maldeikienė” (AMT)	EPP (provisional)	80,683	6.1	1	+6.1	+1
“Bloc of Valdemar Tomaševski” – Coalition of Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance and Russian Alliance (LLRA-KŠS)	ECR	69,262	5.2	1	-2.4	
Lithuanian Centre Party (LCP)		64,091	4.8		+4.8	
Public Electoral Committee “Movement of President Rolandas Paksas” (PRPJ)		50,129	3.8		+3.8	
Public Electoral Committee “Vytautas Radžvilas: Let’s Get Back the State!” (VRSV)		41,859	3.2		+3.2	
Party “Order and Justice” (PTT)	EFD	34,298	2.6		-10.9	-2

(continued) Table 1 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Lithuania						
PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)	SEATS	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014
Lithuanian Social Democratic Labour Party (LSDDP)		29,591	2.2		+2.2	
Lithuanian Greens Party (LŽP)		28,126	2.1		-1.3	
Lithuanian Freedom Union (liberals) (LLS)		23,828	1.8		+0.4	
Public Electoral Committee “Strong Lithuania in United Europe” (SLVE)		16,671	1.3		+1.3	
Public Electoral Committee “Decisive Leap” (LŠ)		14,195	1.1		+1.1	
<i>Spoilt votes</i>		<i>71,661</i>	<i>5.4</i>			
Total		1,322,036	100	11		
Turnout (%)			53.1			
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)			<i>5 per cent from all votes</i>			

Quite similarly to 2014, this election was won by the largest parliamentary oppositional party, right wing TS-LKD (which belongs to the European People’s Party in EP). It received 18.6% of votes and three MEPs. Voting for TS-LKD was probably reinforced by a second-placed presidential candidate Ingrida Šimonytė – a non-partisan who is affiliated with the party (she won the primaries of TS-LKD and also belongs to the party’s parliamentary grouping).

Eurosceptic parties suffered a defeat. In 2014, the populist right PTT gained two MEPS, the same as the other three pro-European election winners. In this election PTT received only 2.6% of votes, 10.9 percentage points down. Several factors possibly contributed to this. Firstly, the campaign lacked a salient European issue to campaign against (in 2014, the PTT campaigned against the introduction of the euro).

Secondly, it suffered from a split: former leader Rolandas Paksas founded his own committee and participated separately in the election. Thirdly, some of their votes could have gone to another Eurosceptic list, the committee “Vytautas Radžvilas: Let's Get Back the State!”. Together these three lists received 9.6% of votes, but separately none of them climbed over the five per cent threshold needed for at least one MEP. The only moderately Eurosceptic power that received a MEP (5.2% of votes) was the Bloc of Valdemar Tomaševski, the Coalition of Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance and Russian Alliance (LLRA-KŠS). The leader of the coalition, Tomaševski, is expected to join the European Conservatives and Reformists, as previously.

One new political force entered the EP from Lithuania: the electoral committee Train of Aušra Maldeikienė, led by charismatic and explicitly pro-European politician Maldeikienė, which received 6.1% of votes and gained one MEP. The remaining two seats went to the centre-populist Labour Party (8.5% of votes) and the liberals LRLS (6.2% of votes). Maldeikienė announced that she will join European People's Party, please correct the text accordingly.

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