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Voices of Central and Eastern Europe

Lithuania Country Report

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Methodology

The outcomes and findings of this report are based on public opinion poll surveys carried out in March 2020 on a representative sample of the population in ten EU member states: Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. The surveys were conducted on a sample ranging from 1,000 to 1,047 respondents using stratified multistage random sampling in the form of computer assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) or computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI).

In all countries, the profiles of the respondents were representative of the country by gender, age, education, place of residence and size of settlement. For the purpose of graphical data visualisation in this report, the results were rounded to full numbers.

To improve the readers' experience, the responses in closed questions with a scale were generalised. For example, a question with options definitely agree/ rather agree/ rather disagree /definitely disagree, was merged to agree / disagree for the purpose of both data visualisation.

Collection of opinion polls in each country was coordinated by FOCUS, s.r.o.

Also, contextual background information was gathered from various news outlets, other public and private news sources. Unless indicated otherwise, the charts refer to the GLOBSEC survey data.

Introduction

Jolted by a fervent independence campaign that culminated in the country's establishment, Lithuania has witnessed significant economic, political, and social progress over the past several decades. By joining both the NATO and EU alliances, the country has, in particular, seen an unprecedented level of stability.

Aspirations to secure further progress, however, are not without pitfalls as Lithuania risks internal divisions and a restless and disillusioned public if progress stalls over time. While much has indeed been achieved over a relatively brief period, reversing the effects of decades of Soviet rule is no easy task. Nor is ensuring continued development in a rapidly changing world that has endured numerous shocks over the past few decades. Other longstanding issues, moreover, remain stumbling blocks.

This situation is only further exacerbated by the need to alleviate the grievances of segments of the population that have been adversely impacted by the economic, technological, and societal changes that have accompanied Lithuania's democratic transition. The upheavals of the 1990s posed a challenge for many and some were exposed to its negative repercussions more than others.



Democracy in Lithuania

Democracy as a system

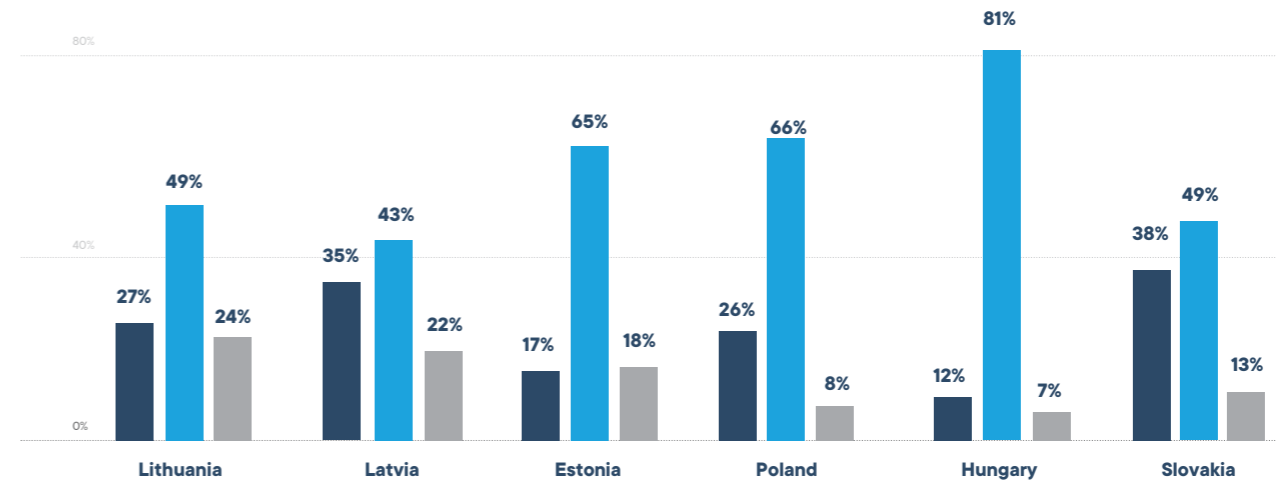
Despite 72% of Lithuanians expressing trust in the European Union, an institution that espouses democracy as a core value, there is notable ambivalence regarding the perceived suitability of democratic government.¹ Lithuania is indeed among the greatest Euro-enthusiasts yet only 49% of Lithuanians see liberal democracy that includes regular

elections and a multiparty system as their preferred form of government. This stands in sharp contrast to Poland and Hungary, two countries often reported to be suffering from democratic deficits but where 66% and 81% of the respective populations are supportive of democratic systems.²

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_4969
² GLOBSEC study, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Voices-of-Central-and-Eastern-Europe-read-version.pdf>

Which of the following is better for your country?

Having a strong and decisive leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections.
 Having liberal democracy with regular elections and multiparty system.
 Do not know.



Misgivings regarding the performance of democratic governance in Lithuania (only 32% of Lithuanians are satisfied with how democracy works in the country³), in particular, opens up space for society to contemplate the supposed benefits of a more authoritarian style of rule. In this respect, there remains a sizeable percentage of the population (21% in 2020) believing that Soviet

times were better.⁴ This sentiment, however, has been steadily declining (the same question received affirmative responses from 25% of respondents in 2016⁵), indicating that democracy may yet gain greater favour in the future. Any wrinkles inherent to Lithuania's democracy, furthermore, can be ironed out through continued work and engagement over time.

³ GLOBSEC study
⁴ <https://www.eesc.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/RESCTyrimas.pdf>
⁵ Ibid.

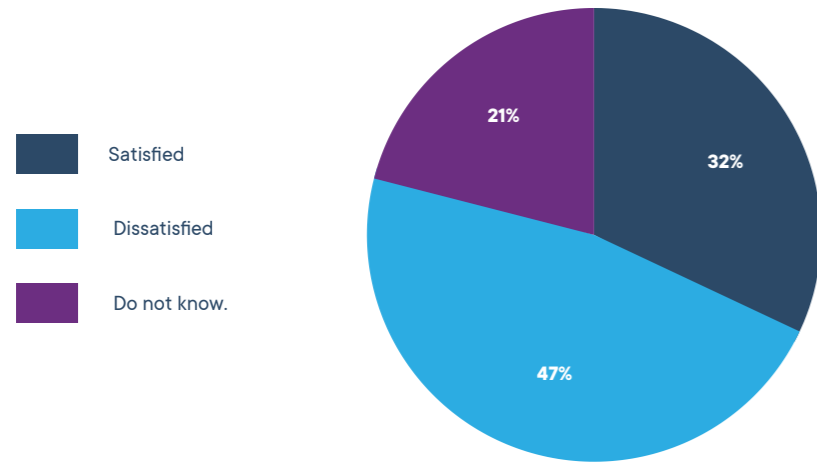


Also noteworthy is that around a third of Lithuanian respondents would be willing to trade their rights and freedoms (such as the freedom to travel, associate or engage in free speech) for either a better financial situation, enhanced national security or the preservation of traditional Lithuanian

values. Overall satisfaction with democracy in Lithuania, moreover, remains fairly low. The number of those disgruntled with how democracy works in the country stands at 47% while just 32% are satisfied. A further 21% are uncertain on the matter.⁶

⁶ GLOBSEC study

Are you satisfied with how democracy works in Lithuania?



Income inequality and social exclusion feature paramount here as factors that could be shaping mistrust and/or dissatisfaction with democracy, with Lithuania posting the second highest level of income inequality in the European Union in 2017.⁸

is debatable, however, considering that Lithuania holds 35th place on the Corruption Perceptions Index, hovering at around 60 points over the past few years, only slightly shy of the EU average of 66 points.¹⁰

Corruption and nepotism, real or perceived, also hamper pro-democracy sentiment in the country. A recent study found that citizens have relatively little trust in municipal and state level institutions being able to adequately ensure transparent labour market competition.⁹ The study notes that due to the Soviet era legacy, Lithuanian labour relations and institutional practices are still plagued by cronyism. The extent to which corruption and nepotism are truly a problem in the country

As it relates to democracy itself, Lithuania ranked 36th in the world (a spot shared with Slovenia) in The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2019.¹¹ The country scored well on electoral process, pluralism and civil liberties, receiving over 9 out of 10 points possible. Mediocre marks, meanwhile, were recorded on governance, political participation and political culture, with the country averaging around 6 and 6.5 points in these categories.

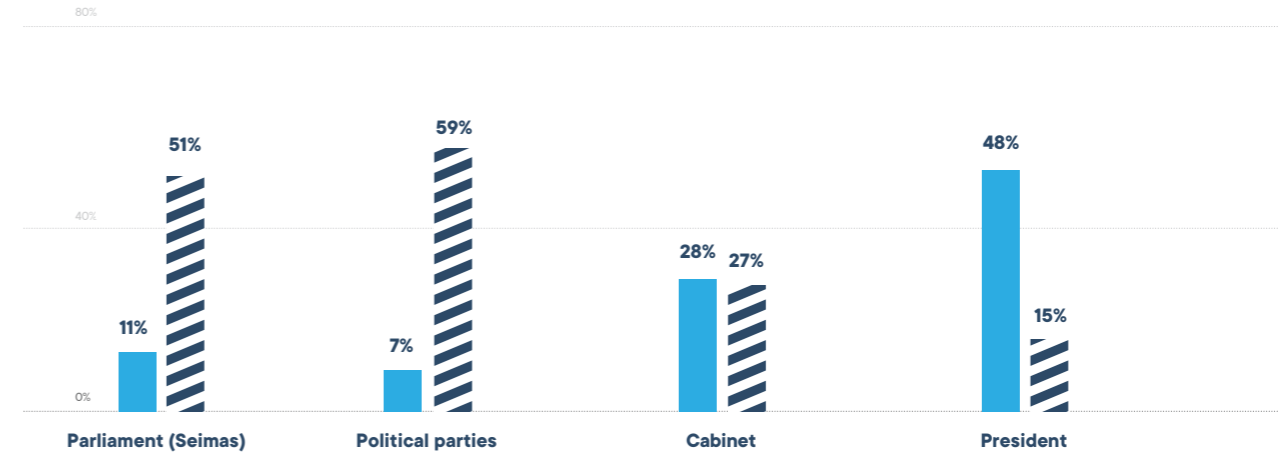
⁷ <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/demographic-decline-a-tangible-threat-to-the-baltic-states/>
⁸ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20190718-1>
⁹ https://vilniusinstitute.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/VPAI_Nepotizmas_2020_V.pdf (p. 44)
¹⁰ <https://www.transparency.org/cpi/2019>; <https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/cpi-western-europe-and-eu>
¹¹ http://www.eiu.com/public/thankyou_download.aspx?activity=download&campaignid=democracyindex2019

Potential reasons for the relatively low support for democracy in Lithuania:

- High levels of income inequality
- Challenges posed by perceived corruption and nepotism
- Lack of trust in state and municipal authorities
- Mediocre political culture
- High expectations for development
- Severe demographic decline⁷

Do you trust the following institutions in Lithuania? (Vilmorus data, July 2020)

Yes No



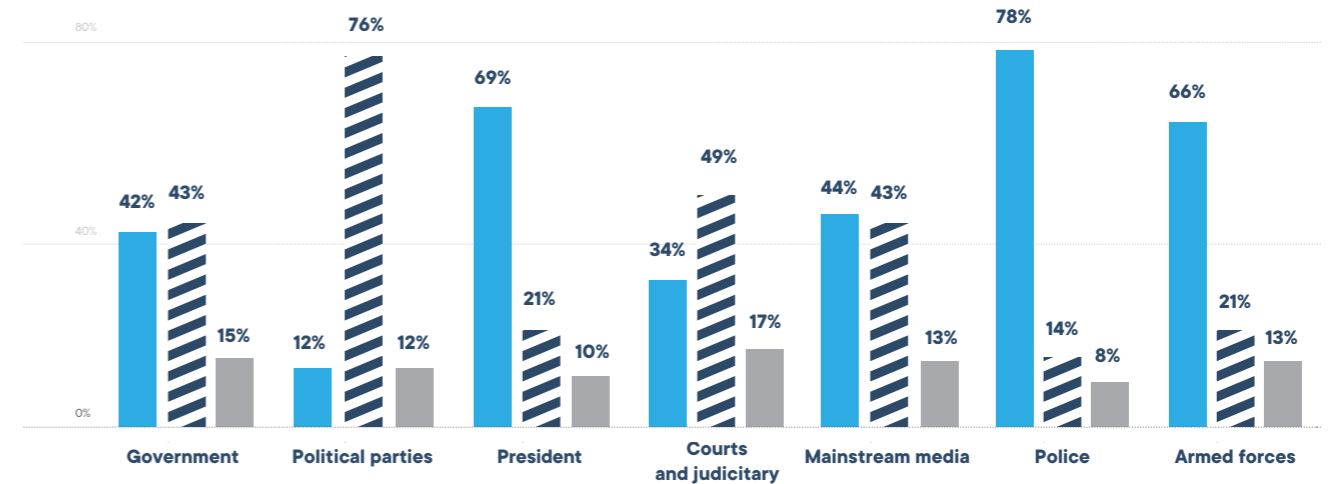
Against the backdrop of Covid-19, a recent survey by local pollster Vilmorus reveals that distrust towards Lithuanian political parties and the country's parliament is particularly pronounced while views of the cabinet are rather ambivalent. The institution of the presidency, trusted by a significant plurality, is a notable exception

to this pattern. It is worth noting that the parliament, nevertheless, has seen darker days. A November 2010 survey, following the 2007-2008 financial crisis and the subsequent economic downturn, found that 90% of respondents distrusted the Lithuanian Seimas.³

² <http://www.vilmorus.lt/index.php?mact=News.cntnt01.detail.0&cntnt01articleid=2&cntnt01returnid=20>
³ <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1116588/visuomene-ivertino-seimo-darba-pasitikejimas-krito-kaip-po-naktines-mokesciu-reformas>

Do you trust the following institutions? (GLOBSEC data, March 2020)

Yes No Do not know



The GLOBSEC study, conducted earlier this year before the pandemic truly had time to impact ratings, actually produced proportionately similar findings with respect to trust in political institutions. While comparing the changes brought about due to the coronavirus is complicated by the different methodologies employed, both studies' data results further emphasise that there is very little trust in most of the country's core political institutions aside from the office of the president.

This comes as no surprise, given how political culture and participation received somewhat mediocre ratings, as observed previously. Such circumstances create a vicious cycle where low participation and engagement with the political system could be resulting in lowered political competition, which, in turn, leads to lower political culture and, again, leaves voters disappointed and less engaged. Furthermore, while direct comparisons between the two datasets might be difficult, the very similar proportions seen in both polls indicate the level of negative perceptions of Lithuania's political system entrenched among the country's citizens.

The office of president stands alone among the top political institutions by having a mostly positive public perception. It benefits from the generally non-partisan status of the position in an environment where political parties are vastly unpopular. There is also a sizeable segment of society (27%) expressing a preference for a political system based on a strong and decisive leader at the helm rather than a liberal democratic system.¹⁴

Though the Lithuanian president's remit is constrained largely to foreign policy competencies by the country's political system, these voters may still find appeal in the office of the presidency. This is because, on the one hand, they might not be familiar with the powers bestowed upon the position,

ascribing vastly greater significance in areas where the president actually has little influence. On the other hand, with presidents typically being popular figures in their own right as they are elected directly by the entire nation, their moral "power" to sway matters despite lacking formal capacities to influence events could also be a driving factor for such voters, which is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Exclusion and inequality are fundamental challenges in Lithuania that have hindered the build-up of trust between social and ethnic groups and in the country's political system and institutions. Income inequality had already been on the rise even before the country regained independence in 1990 and further sub-segmentation has occurred on a regional and ethnic basis since.¹⁵ The country's major cities, particularly the capital Vilnius, have come to produce a vast portion of the country's GDP and consequently benefited from significantly higher quality of life and wages compared to the rest of the country.¹⁶ This problem is especially marked in areas with significant populations of ethnic minority groups that face additional barriers to integration including linguistic impediments.

Engagement between ethnic minorities and the population at large is limited. And this lack of familiarity between different groups, in turn, creates an information vacuum easily filled by detrimental stereotypes of non-Lithuanian groups and vice-versa. The squalor put on public display by the demolition of a Roma shanty town near Vilnius this year served to dramatically underscore the considerable levels of poverty faced by Roma, countering misconceptions that minority groups are privileged over the rest of society.¹⁷ At the same time, by placing the spotlight on poverty that exists among ethnic minorities, there is a risk that

it could also serve to reinforce perceptions that migrants are threats and associated with ghettoisation. A curious observation to be made is that while a very sizeable portion of Lithuanian society (43%) feels that migrants pose a threat to local identity and values, far smaller segments feel that migrants (17%) and minorities (12%) are favoured in society.¹⁸ The case of the Roma shanty town is perhaps one explanation for these views with the location long associated with the area's drug trade, buttressing negative sentiment towards the ethnic group, if not ethnic minorities altogether.¹⁹

A wariness of migrants, minorities and anything else perceived as foreign has also likely been driven by the region's historical relations with Russia. From the banning of Lithuanian language teaching and writing during the Russian Empire to the deportation of tens of thousands of Lithuanian citizens to distant and harsh locations such as Siberia by the Soviet Union, there have been a multitude of attempts to eradicate local culture.²⁰ This past serves to augment apprehension towards anything that could be plausibly perceived as a threat to national identity and autonomy, especially in a context defined by significant emigration and a general demographic decline of the population.

¹⁴ GLOBSEC study

¹⁵ <https://wid.world/country/lithuania/>

¹⁶ <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/informacinal-pranesimai?articleId=7016550>

¹⁷ <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1176779/vilniaus-taboras-griaunamas-taciau-problemos-ningingsta-lietuviu-nenori-romu-kaimynystes-o-narkotiku-verslas-plecias>

¹⁸ GLOBSEC study

¹⁹ <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1176779/vilniaus-taboras-griaunamas-taciau-problemos-ningingsta-lietuviu-nenori-romu-kaimynystes-o-narkotiku-verslas-plecias>

²⁰ Deportations of the Lithuanian population in 1944-1953, <https://www.komisija.lt/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/A-Anusauskas-ENG.pdf>

The concept of the "two Lithuanias"

Over the past decade, the concept of what we can call "the two Lithuanias" (sometimes even expanded to three) has emerged as a prominent narrative in Lithuanian news media and political discourse. This paradigm sees the country split into opposing "camps" based on different socio-economic demographics and political narratives associated with them. The three most common dichotomies are: urban – rural, highly educated – poorly educated and wealthy – poor. Depending on the actors articulating any given narrative, the opposing side is typically portrayed as over-represented politically and exerting disproportionate sway.

In a sense, this dichotomy can perhaps be best summarised as one that pits "elites" against "common citizens". The narrative typically either focuses on the "elite" being in a privileged position and gaining wealth at the expense of "common citizens" or on the "common citizens" being decisive in voting in "populist" or "inept" governments and receiving meagre short term benefits so as to

be pacified.

With various groups disgruntled at perceptions of undue influence by their rivals, this division further contributes to mistrust between different segments of society and dissatisfaction in democracy altogether. It also feeds into a blame game where each group faults one another for voting the "wrong" individuals into political office or engaging in "theft". Witnessing growing inequality, widespread emigration and perceived oligarchic power, some groups

feel marginalized and left out from the gains of the democratic transition over the past thirty years.

These attitudes are matched by perceptions that regular citizens have little power over

decision making processes with Lithuanians estimating, on average, societal influence at 3.59 on a scale of 10.²¹ This environment also likely contributes, despite the EU's popularity among Lithuanians, to the widely held belief that the EU and Brussels dictate Lithuania what to do with the country having a say. This disillusionment in terms of participation in national politics undoubtedly is paralleled with similar levels of cynicism directed towards feelings of personal empowerment in EU policy making processes.

20% of Lithuanians think that the needs of people like them are taken especially into account by the political system in their country

77% think that oligarchs and financial groups have strong control over the government

Media

A total of 44% of Lithuanians express trust in the mainstream media, while 39% believe that it is not free. This insight is underlined by additional survey data indicating that 48% believe that oligarchs and strong financial groups hold sway over the news media.²² These findings come against a backdrop where the media and corporate actors have come under increasing scrutiny over the past several years. A major business group, notably, has been accused of illegally influencing one of the country's prominent political parties and in the process promoting the respective party through its media channels, including through one of the country's largest commercial television broadcasters.²⁴ Media ownership transparency, concentration, as well as commercial influence on editorial content are indeed concerning aspects, with the Media Pluralism Monitor 2020 report for Lithuania indicating medium to high risk levels in these segments, as well as in terms of political independence in media and general editorial autonomy.²⁵ Thus, while the same report indicates that basic protection indicators such as protection of the freedom of expression and particularly journalistic profession standards and protection are

at low risk levels, there are still very clear vulnerabilities in the news media landscape.

Media access is also a relevant issue for minority inclusion in addition to the aforementioned economic challenge. Russian language media indeed comprises a significant portion of news content consumed by ethnic minorities (and this is not confined only to the Russian minority). This situation has been left unaddressed for some time, deepening cultural segregation and raising the risk of minorities being exposed to potentially hostile disinformation broadcast through various Russian language media outlets. Kremlin propagandists, consequently, have outlets for swaying minority opinions against both the general public and the state at large.

67% of people feel like the political system in the country does not take into account their needs.

51% feel like their fellow citizens cannot be trusted.

75% feel like certain groups in society are favoured over others.²¹

Who is favoured in Lithuania?

- **71%** believe that people with contacts to political elites
- **57%** believe that people from the capital
- **47%** believe that people living in a particular region or regions

Key challenge of trust

As indicated above, there is little trust to be had in Lithuania, be it with respect to the government, the news media or even to fellow citizens. With such distrust directed in a variety of directions, the end-result is that there is less buy-in to “mainstream” and “establishment” narratives. Notable exceptions include the police (trusted by 78% of Lithuanians), the armed forces (66%)²⁶, and the perennial trust rating leader – firefighters (90%)²⁷. The difference here likely owes to the fact that these roles are more task-focused areas where success or failure is far more clear-cut. In areas, meanwhile, where results

Judiciary

Low levels of trust in the judiciary (only 34% trust the courts²⁹) could be linked to perceptions that this branch of government is ineffective and sluggish, with court proceedings in high profile cases often turning into protracted events. And when guilty verdicts are delivered, sentencing is often considered insufficient. This sentiment has worsened since 2015 when data indicated that 48% of survey respondents saw the courts in a positive light.³⁰ The biting remark, “steal a million – receive a minor fine, perpetrate a minor felony – serve a decade in jail”, exemplifies such perceptions.

The fact that many cases involve business

are up for partisan interpretation, institutions tend to be less trusted, exemplified in the only 34% level of trust expressed in the news media. Importantly, the most popular state institutions have also largely avoided major scandals in contrast to the judiciary and the media.

As a whole, it could perhaps be said that those on the receiving end of distrust are also those capable of changing the status quo or perceptions of it. With 70% of the population being satisfied with their lives, any potential

groups or interests, furthermore, serves to reinforce the perception that oligarchs and powerful lobby groups maintain political dominance in the country, both in the media and in government. A total of 77% of Lithuanians indeed perceive that oligarchs and financial groups have sway over government affairs in Lithuania and 48% say that oligarchs are among the most powerful groups when it comes to media influence (with only 37% of respondents agreeing that media in the country is free or rather free).³¹ By comparison, Estonian perceptions of their judicial system is vastly more positive, possibly explained by the fact that judicial proceedings in the country have been found

upsetting of the status quo is liable to be met with scepticism.²⁸ This understanding helps explain why a significant percentage of the population perceive migrants and LGBTI individuals as threats to their identity and values. While the general population may feel that they have little say in decision making processes in the country, they simultaneously might perceive minority groups as receiving undeserved media attention and exerting influence in national level discussions despite their minority status.

to be among the most efficient and quickest in the entire European Union.³²

That said, based on a 2020 EU Justice Scoreboard, Lithuania ranks fourth in terms of approximate time needed to resolve civil, commercial, administrative and other cases between 2012 and 2018, with Estonia ranking third.³³ In 2019, moreover, Lithuania placed first, alongside Slovenia, in providing opportunities for the public to access online information about the judicial system. These findings suggest that the main challenges for the judiciary may come down to managing perceptions, particularly when handling high profile cases.

Ensuing debate connected to this issue have been accompanied by significant controversy, with individuals perceived as national heroes now standing accused of having committed atrocious acts. In a number of cases, government representatives have taken action to remedy these past transgressions, initiative that has been perceived by some as favourable treatment of the Jewish community. Tensions have only been further exacerbated by the significant public and media attention that the moves have received and by Russian misinformation campaigns that function to incite chaos and sow discord into these delicate discussions.



LGBTI community

36% of Lithuanians believe the LGBTI community is a threat to their identity and values.³⁷

30% of Lithuanian citizens feel that same sex marriage should be permitted in Europe.³⁸

60% of a survey's respondents found gay pride parades as clashing with Lithuanian public morals.³⁹

While reforms and legislation ensuring LGBTI rights are undeniably essential, any move forward leads to backlash when there is insufficient education and information provided to the public, as indicated by 36% of Lithuanians believing that the LGBTI community is a threat to their identity and values. This is indeed the case for Lithuania, with the 2018 IGLYO Inclusive Education Report indicating that LGBTI content was non-present in the Lithuanian national curriculum, nor were teachers offered training on LGBTI awareness.⁴⁰ A complementary challenge is that while under the country's Law on Protection of Minors Against the Detrimental Effect of Public Information, Article 4, “dissemination of any public information that incites bullying or humiliation on the basis of sexual orientation

is considered to be detrimental to minors and is therefore prohibited”⁴¹, the same article also prohibits “dissemination of information which promotes different concepts of “marriage” and “family values” than the concepts established in the Lithuanian Constitution and Civil Code.” Discrimination is prohibited as per a number of laws and in a number of circumstances, but under current circumstances, there exist barriers to actually ensuring that the public is informed and aware.

Despite this, younger generations of Lithuanians are notably more supportive of LGBTI inclusion – the younger the group, the less its members see the LGBTI community as a threat to Lithuanian identity and values. The widest gap is found between those in the 18–24 and 55–64 age demographics,

with respectively 63% and 29% indicating that LGBTI individuals pose no threat to identity or values.⁴² Even among the 18–24 age demographic, nevertheless, 19% report uneasiness towards LGBTI individuals and 18% are unsure, leaving plenty of room for improvement.

²⁶ GLOBSEC study

²⁷ <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/pasitikejimas-institucijomis-pirmoje-vietoje-gaisrininkai.d?id=81723981>

²⁸ GLOBSEC study

²⁹ GLOBSEC study

³⁰ https://www.teismai.lt/data/public/uploads/2016/11/gvyventoju_apklausa_2015_pristatymas.pdf

³¹ GLOBSEC study

³² <https://www.just.ee/en/news/judicial-proceedings-estonia-are-still-most-efficient-and-quietest-europe>

³³ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:3A52020D0C0306&from=EN&fbclid=IwAR07DzPoM-tXXIeyjU6W6nPgUj8CUI0uUk-9S1RouCj9TqJF0FKc24fMw>

³⁴ GLOBSEC study

³⁵ <https://manoteises.lt/straipsnis/zydai-ir-lietuviu-gyvename-salia-bet-ar-artejame-vieni-prie-kitu/>

³⁶ <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1133937/lithuanian-officer-in-holocaust-controversy-saved-jews-does-evidence-stack-up>; <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1057173/why-does-lithuanian-post-war-partisan-leader-remain-a-global-controversy>

³⁷ GLOBSEC study

³⁸ <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/30-proc-lietuvos-gvyventoju-mano-kad-es-turi-buti-leidziamos-geju-santuokos-tyrimas-56-1206610>

³⁹ <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/apklausa-ljgbt-eitynes-palankiau-ziuri-jaunimas-bet-dauguma-nepritaria-56-1155862>

⁴⁰ <https://www.lgl.lt/en/?p=21003>

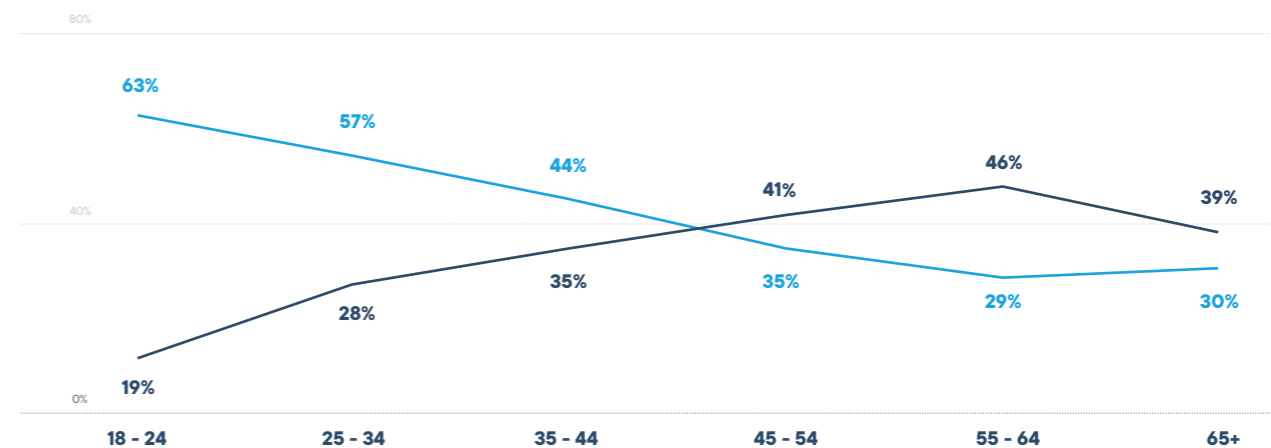
⁴¹ <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/en/TAD/TAIS.216702>

⁴² GLOBSEC study



Do you personally think people with other sexual orientations (LGBTI) threaten your identity and values?

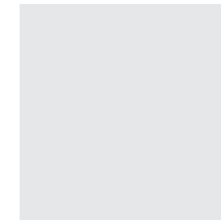
Yes No



Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the findings here of an insular and distrustful population could potentially be attributed to the fact that Lithuania is continuing to proceed on its transition from a socialist republic under the Soviet Union to an open and democratic society. There were vast expectations associated with this transition to democracy, including entry into the institutions of the Euro-Atlantic community and a restoration of the country. While there have been considerable achievements, the transition has also served as a major internal shock to the population, even as the world itself continues to transform following 9/11, the 2008–2009 financial crisis, the 2015 migrant crisis and most recently – the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent economic crisis.

Given the difficult path that has already been trodden and the many challenges that still await, it comes as no surprise that enthusiasm for the course charted ahead may waver. This is especially pertinent considering the vigilant efforts of certain hostile countries and actors to see Lithuania – and democracy more broadly – veer off course. This environment can indeed leave members of society irresolute and spark them to discount the wisdom of particular policy directions. Some may choose to look back to the past, perhaps to a time when society was ruled by a strong leader rather than guided by democratic decision making. This ambiguity predisposes individuals to manipulation, be it from hostile state actors or simply opportunistic individuals, exacerbating the proliferation of conspiracy theories and misinformation and withering away an otherwise resilient society.



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More information about the research can be found in the comparative English version **Voices of Central and Eastern Europe**.

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