



Eastern Europe Studies Centre
Est. 2006



This publication was supported by the National Endowment for Democracy under a project coordinated by GLOBSEC, Bratislava-based think tank.

LITHUANIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2020: NOTABLE NARRATIVES

In preparing this review, online comments on social media and on comment sections on news portals were examined from approximately a week before to a week after the first round of parliamentary elections in Lithuania. This study also incorporated news articles from a variety of outlets over the same time period but also extending farther back to capture relevant contextual information. Five particularly dubious portals, some of them arguably outright propaganda/disinformation outlets, deemed prominent, moreover, were inspected. Additional sources to those mentioned above were also consulted but less extensively.

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and the considerable financial difficulties that have ensued in its wake, the Lithuanian elections proceeded rather peacefully on the information front, with the Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD, Conservatives) taking the largest number of seats. The TS-LKD subsequently launched coalition negotiations with two liberal parties – the Liberal Movement and the Freedom Party, with both of these performing above the expectations set by pre-election opinion polling.

Narratives perpetuated by problematic sources continued to follow rather familiar lines of thought, geared towards portraying Lithuania as a country that is Russophobic and brainwashed by the West and/or corporate inte-

rests. Their purpose – to undermine the legitimacy of the country’s democratic system and the elections themselves. Discussed in detail in the next section, one Sputnik article¹, in particular, features a compilation of greatest hits and is emblematic of all the different core talking points typically employed.

Beyond these central themes pinpointed in the Sputnik article, there are other issues to take note of in examining the elections from a broader vantage point. This includes, for example, the matter of electoral turnout. It is an unfortunate fact that despite some improvements, voter turnout remains woefully low in Lithuania, with 47% of eligible voters casting ballots in the first round of the elections and second round turnout tumbling all the way down to 39% (the most passive district posted just 29% turnout).² This pattern could be tied to vastly negative views in society towards political parties³, with there being a strong sense that it does not matter who is in power. The sentiment that “they are all thieves/incompetents anyway” is indeed rather prevalent.⁴

The turnout angle also plays into other “traditional” narratives like the notion that the country’s citizens have emigrated *en masse*, with those that remain being either “indoctrinated” or simply incompetent, not to mention being oppressed by “leftist” elites who are selling out the country to figures like George Soros.⁵

“Leftism”

“Leftism” was perhaps the most prominent storyline when it came to the elections, blamed for various perceived wrongs in society, ranging from the pro-

motion of drug and alcohol abuse to the loss of cultural identity to the proliferation of various “antitheses” to traditional culture like LGBTI rights. While these issues are not exactly new targets for the various disinformation and propaganda narratives present in the public domain, they gained newfound attention this election cycle on account of the Freedom Party, which has been particularly vocal, among other items, in its advocacy of, for example, LGBTI rights⁶. These issues, representing genuine societal questions in need of broader discussion and resolution, are often exploited by problematic groups to galvanize the public, typically through hyperbolised depictions. Perceptions of the LGBTI community and its rights are illustrative in this regard, with a study from earlier this year finding that a sizeable segment of society (36%) feels that the LGBTI community poses a threat to their identity and values.⁷

It is particularly curious to note how the political landscape in Lithuania appears to have changed rather suddenly this election cycle. The country has seen a swath of veteran politicians from across the political spectrum fail in their bids to be returned to parliament, including former Prime Minister Kirkilas, incumbent Minister of Foreign Affairs Linas Linkevičius and dozens of others. It is notable though that many of the most prominent figures not re-elected come from parties that identify with the political left. With the elections being nominally (and fully once/if coalition negotiations complete) won by parties identifying as right wing, in fact, the “left wing” finds itself in the opposition.

This is where the concept of “leftists”, as presented by disinformation and

propaganda outlets, clashes with how the parties are arranged in reality, with there being very few parties that outright espouse solely left- or right-wing ideological thought. The liberal parties (and to a lesser extent even the Conservatives) might be described as “leftists” by some of the more dubious commentators. This approach, however, relies on merely cherry picking one aspect of their policies (primarily social and cultural policy). The majority of parties in Lithuania, nonetheless, operate on the basis of hybrid models meaning that although they might be socially and/or morally conservative, they could be fiscally liberal or vice versa. The parties attracting the most support, meanwhile, are rather centrist with some left- or right-wing bent. Consequently, unsurprisingly, we find that the concept of “leftism” is rather used as an umbrella term and rallying cry to evoke imagery of unbridled anarchy and hedonism than as a coherent argument.

Conservative-Liberal coalition back for another crisis

The government will be formed now by a coalition led by, following two terms in opposition, the Conservatives and spearheaded by three female leaders. This includes Ingrida Šimonytė, who is due to become the second female prime minister of Lithuania and the first since Kazimiera Prunskienė served as prime minister following the country’s independence from the Soviet Union. Alongside the Conservatives, the coalition will include the Liberal Movement and the Freedom Party, two parties that advocate for liberal values, with the Fre-

edom Party being arguably more assertive in regards to some topics including LGBTI rights and the decriminalisation of light narcotic substances.

The success of the two liberal parties is indicative of the fact that disinformation and propaganda might not have been able to adjust swiftly enough this election cycle (plausible in light of the fact that the usual suspects are likely currently focused on other matters including Khabarovsk, Belarus and COVID-19). While the propaganda and disinformation narratives⁸ eventually primarily ramped up against “leftism” with the seeming intention of evoking a sense of dread among those opposed to LGBTI rights and the legalisation of cannabis, the strategy appears not to have been especially successful. Political parties that are either proponents of LGBTI rights or not overly inclined against, in fact, made significant gains in both rounds.

The new coalition, meanwhile, is taking over the reins of government in a challenging climate, with a second wave of the pandemic stirring. This backdrop presents certain parallels to the last time the Conservatives formed a government (one also previously supported by the liberals), back in 2008, right on the cusp of the global financial crisis. During the election campaign, there were indeed some political moves advanced to instil fear that a Conservative government would lead to a return of austerity. Corresponding to memories of the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, these spending cuts, if enacted, would presumably prove incredibly painful and vastly unpopular across the social spectrum. This talking point

especially made use of a comment from former Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius, who led the Conservative government of 2008-2012, that budgeting decisions under the incumbent coalition and the pandemic could lead to a “painful hangover” and the need to tighten belts next year.⁹

This jostling may, however, have had only a limited impact given that the Conservatives still managed to obtain 50 parliamentary seats of a 141 total up for grabs, a solid performance in a country where political parties are generally unpopular. This general lack of political party popularity in Lithuania might have, in fact, aided the Conservatives, a party that attracts a more dependable supporter base than other groupings. Though its support is perhaps confined to certain segments of the population, with total voter turnout under 50%, the fact that they are high propensity voters might have proven a crucial factor.

An alternative explanation making sense of the Homeland Union’s success links it to the COVID-19 outbreak in Lithuania. While the government’s approach towards the virus saw general approval, the situation began to severely deteriorate before the election, reflecting increasingly poorly on the parties in power.

In terms of the coalition’s prospects for being successful, both positive signs and stumbling blocks abound. If looking to be an optimist, look no further than the fact that the three women headlining their respective parties appear to have a positive working relationship. This partnership has already been evidenced in their quickly coming to terms on numerous points of the coalition agreement with an emphasis on the

prioritization of tasks rather than the distribution of political positions. There are, nonetheless, challenges still yet to overcome. While the Homeland Union has endured criticism from conservative pundits and politicians for a supposed overly liberal turn, the party’s leanings, in fact, still tilt in a conservative direction with respect to its social and moral agenda. This orientation stands in contrast to the liberal parties, meanwhile, with the Freedom Party pledging that it will push for the legalisation of same-sex partnerships and the decriminalisation of light narcotic substances within 100 days of the start of term. The parties also hold different economic policy goals. While the Conservatives, for example, are wary of tax cuts (even if not vehemently opposed to the idea), the liberals have foreclosed any possibility of raising taxes and have instead expressed potential interest in tax relief. Despite a number of points of contention, a previous episode of conservative-liberal cooperation during the challenging 2008-2012 Seimas (parliament) term suggests that these issues could be surmounted though. Some pundits, however, still question whether this coalition might not have set itself an excessively high bar to reach and expectations to fulfil.¹⁰

As it relates to the current relatively tame media landscape, with Sputnik being the only outlet featuring disinformation that managed to (just barely) enter the top 50 most visited Lithuanian domains in October this year, two factors are paramount.¹¹ Firstly, the Lithuanian public sphere has been preoccupied with two major issues this year, COVID-19 and events unfolding in Belarus. Given the significance of these

two challenges to the Russian regime, which is ordinarily otherwise a primary source of disinformation and propaganda in Lithuania¹², considerable resources and attention were likely siphoned away from endeavours like those targeted towards influencing elections in foreign countries. At the same time, the election results proved to be something of a surprise, with the rapid shift in voter preferences perhaps rendering disruptive efforts as ineffective and resulting in misfires. Secondly, likely due to ongoing counter-disinformation endeavours in Lithuania, including the work of digital “elves”, and/or a lack of a sufficient campaign on the part of propaganda sources, the Lithuanian media landscape has been gradually heading on course for improvement and maturity¹³. The fact that engagement and readership of propaganda outlets, among the few that persist, is rather low is particularly pertinent¹⁴. That said, it could be argued that disseminators and recipients of disinformation narratives and the content itself are simply isolated in certain social media bubbles, some of which might be difficult to identify and access. Nevertheless, within more mainstream information feeds, developments appear to be somewhat positive.

CASE STUDY: Focusing on Sputnik propaganda – history, foreign policy and society’s ills

Sputnik currently remains the only news portal based in the Russian Federation to consistently report news in Lithuanian. The outlet’s reporting is often pro-Kremlin and its op-ed section hosts

an ever constant flow of texts brimming with Russian-propagated narratives. Articles that provided coverage on the Lithuanian Seimas elections were no exception.

A story published following the first round of elections that was authored by Jurgis Nevėžietis and titled *The Victory of Rainbow Liberalism in the Elections – why did it happen and what does it mean?* exemplifies the general strategy pursued in these articles¹⁵. Though the rather brief and readable text itself did not draw widespread attention – only 20 Facebook interactions, 6 shares and a possible reach of around 2,800 people¹⁶ – it is notable for its use of the full spectrum of propaganda clichés employed in Lithuania and across the democratic world.

Anti-Sovietism, Russophobia and pandering to a rotten West

“In most key questions, both sides maintain the same views that comprise the Lithuanian ‘establishment’ political consensus: anti-Sovietism, Russophobia and pandering to the West.” Just this single quote alone encapsulates a number of propaganda clichés:

First, “anti-Sovietism” is indicated as a flaw of establishment politics. Some studies show that there are differences within Lithuania on the perceptions of the Soviet Union’s occupation that still influence political attitudes. This fact is reflective of social differentiation within the population (the divide between the winners and losers, for example, of independence)¹⁷. These surveys, however, also underscore the fact that the Soviet era is increasingly perceived in a negative light by the country’s citizens. Accord-

ding to a representative public opinion survey commissioned by the Eastern Europe Studies Centre in spring 2020, around 20% of the Lithuanian population think that life was better during the Soviet era. The number of those disagreeing with this sentiment, meanwhile, has been gradually rising and currently exceeds 50%. In the same study, it was found that 66% of respondents disagreed with Russian President Vladimir Putin's claim that the Soviet Union's downfall was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century. There were only 9% of respondents who agreed with this statement.¹⁸ This example underlines the argument that so-called "anti-Sovietism" is not a policy imposed by the Lithuanian establishment but rather a point of view that instead finds considerable pre-existing public support within the country.

A more extensive analysis, in fact, reveals that the descriptions used by the Sputnik author to describe Lithuanian politics are standard narratives used as part of Kremlin propaganda. The author makes parallels between Lithuanian "Russophobia" (the term being used to describe Lithuania's strident position towards the Kremlin) and pandering to the West (a phrase constantly used to characterize Lithuania's relationship with the EU and NATO allies). This Russian propaganda campaign appears targeted towards igniting disputes in Lithuanian society in the absence of a general public consensus of a Lithuanian policy on Russia. A part of society still sees Russia as a valuable trade partner and a country that Lithuania is too small to influence. Survey data, however, shows that the appeal of Russian foreign policy has been declining in Lithuania.

When respondents are posed with the question of whether "Lithuanian foreign policy is too strict toward Russia", there has been a marked decline from 42% affirming this statement in 2016 to only 32% in 2020. The number of those disagreeing that Lithuania's approach is too stern, meanwhile, experienced a rise from 24% in 2016 to 38% in 2020. Russia is indeed judged to be an unfriendly state by the population (68% of respondents believe so) according to the EESC study.¹⁹

Another segment in the Sputnik text, steering criticism in the direction of the West, purports: "While today, the winning side with the TS-LKD²⁰ at the forefront supports Lithuania's complete dissolution in the swamp of the rotting Western world – through both neoliberal economic policies and through cosmopolitanism, LGBTI and so-called same-sex marriage legalisation – the LVŽS²¹ (and the powers that side with it, for example Waldemar Tomaszewski's Poles) are at least trying to retain some remnant of Lithuania". This line of reasoning meshes with prototypical Russian propaganda that depicts a collapsing West that is seeking to dismantle nation states and destroy traditional values. These clichés are also mirrored in other leitmotifs presented by propagandists that portray a thriving Russia, glorify the USSR era and present Moscow as a defender of traditional values.²²

Such claims are not novel and are often directed against countries that were formerly part of the USSR but have now charted a pro-Western course. Efforts to exploit a lingering societal nostalgia for the Soviet Union are especially targeted to individuals who suffered from the

bloc's downfall. These include people who fondly remember their youth or the senior positions they held at the time. These arguments are paired with narratives that portray Lithuania's strident position on the Kremlin as "Russophobic", ergo directed against Russia and the Russian nation. These claims, however, are unfounded. Senior Lithuanian officials, in fact, take care to emphasise that Lithuania's grievances and overall stance towards the Russian Federation are directed not against the Russian nation or its citizens but rather its chief officials and military officers that are responsible for pursuing a foreign policy that Vilnius generally finds unacceptable²³.

The overarching purpose of these storylines is to create rifts within society and to aggrieve subsets of the population by making them feel unrepresented and/or excluded from decision making processes in their country (i.e. the notion that politicians dictate decisions based on their personal preference regardless of what society wants). These fissures are subsequently exploited on social media during elections. A positive development can be noted on this point though, namely that very few Lithuanian politicians are, in fact, deploying these specific divisions as a part of their political agenda.

The prevalent use of a "rotten West" narrative, in which Lithuania will soon dissolve, is probably not surprising to many analysts. Fierce criticism of the Western world and the clinical diagnosis of its death have become a frequent talking point employed by politicians that either hold radical political positions or openly engage in propaganda. Although it would be difficult to find

anyone claiming that the West is perfect, these assertions are not aimed at sparking constructive discussions on challenges but rather in sowing doubts about the West's core values like democracy. This point is illustrated further down in the Sputnik text.

Capitalist oppression of minorities

The Sputnik article also sought to raise doubts about the legitimacy of the elections and democratic processes in Lithuania more generally by drawing up clear social antagonisms and expressing scepticism about the ability of citizens to freely choose their representatives in the elections.

The author, for example, questions the state of Lithuanian independence and continues by heaping scorn on voters too: "After all, a new generation has grown up, not just in "independent Lithuania", but a generation that has grown up alongside all the modern brainwashing technologies, a generation whose healthier representatives usually emigrate, while the rest, those who don't turn to alcoholism and turn to depravity, usually are also assimilated in the urbanite environment of Vilnius, Kaunas or Klaipėda." This single sentence contains four well-trodden assertions that could be labelled as manipulation.

Firstly, Lithuania has, in fact, been an independent and democratic republic for more than thirty years now. This is exemplified in the fact that the author himself can write articles like the one being discussed here while Sputnik can operate freely in the country. Such claims should be viewed as nothing

less than an attempt to deny Lithuania's achievements over the past thirty years of independence and evoke reservations in the quality of Lithuanian democracy. This line of reasoning, moreover, serves as an extension of the idea that Lithuania is being dissolved by the West.

Then there is, secondly, the matter of "brainwashing technologies." This is an example of a frequently deployed technique that makes use of statements that are challenging to factually refute. This claim is, however, not unique to Lithuania – the notion of societal "brainwashing", with technologies even occasionally being employed for this purpose is constantly suggested by various propagandists around the world and especially by conspiracy theorists. That said, no precise arguments are ever put forward on how societies are exactly influenced and programmed. These assertions rather simply seek to dismiss those who disagree with the author as being somehow influenced or programmed to think differently. This could indeed be an attempt to sow doubt in the results of the elections and the free will of voters.

Thirdly, this sentence also includes the talking point of a Lithuania on the move through emigration. This narrative, unfortunately, remains well alive in Lithuanian society and among certain politicians. Lithuania has for a long time struggled to cope with the challenge of emigration owing to which the European Union has even granted extra financial tools to compensate for economic losses.²⁴ There is no mention within this argument of the latest development though, that of a reversing trend. At the beginning of 2020, Lithuania, in

fact, celebrated 13 consecutive months of positive migration indicators.²⁵ The "emigration problem" narrative will likely remain part of public discussions in Lithuania for the foreseeable future. The only way to effectively combat this argument lies in not only resolving social problems but also engaging in broader discussions on the detrimental effects of emigration and the challenges it poses. Frank discussion can, in this case, become a robust strategy for averting hostile propaganda from exploiting this and other social problems.

These themes are ultimately combined with the author opining that "In other words, an effectively organised and ideologically processed minority is, in this case, imposing itself on the majority." This statement seeks to fully discredit democracy in Lithuania and the outcome of the parliamentary elections, demonising them as the oppression of an effective and indoctrinated minority against the majority.

Key findings from this case study analysis

There are not necessarily any novel narratives put forward in the Sputnik article as it relates to propaganda and disinformation in Lithuania. The piece, however, stands out, among others, in its unique posture of combining numerous propaganda messages on Lithuanian domestic and foreign policy into a single coherent whole.

The article sought to raise doubts among readers on the democratic credentials of the Lithuanian elections and the country's political system and geopolitical leanings. It draws on broader

attempts to exploit Lithuanian history, geopolitical choices and social problems to divide and misinform society. Lithuania, nevertheless, can take pride in its multiple civic and state initiatives that seek to challenge fake news and propaganda, decode propaganda messages and present true accounts.

These types of beneficial initiatives are crucial in combating hostile propagan-

da but we must also not forget to continue developing an ever more robust civic dialogue on key questions concerning Lithuanian foreign and domestic policy. This is particularly the case when engaging with sensitive topics that fake news disseminators seek to exploit. Openness and extensive dialogue indeed can instead serve as an effective vehicle for barring such articles from reaching the hearts and minds of people.

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