

# Freedom in the World 2014 - Lithuania

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## 2014 Scores

Status: Free

Freedom Rating (1 = best, 7 = worst): 1.0

Civil Liberties (1 = best, 7 = worst): 1

Political Rights (1 = best, 7 = worst): 1

## OVERVIEW

In May 2013, the Lithuanian Parliament ratified the United Nations Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness and amended Lithuania's citizenship law, paving the way for the government to confer citizenship upon some of the country's 4,000 stateless residents.

In July, Labor Party founder Viktor Uspaskich and three other Labor Party officials were convicted in a fraud scheme. Uspaskich was sentenced to four years in prison and the others received lesser sentences; all four have filed appeals.

A report released in June by the country's state security department said Lithuania's dependence on Russian natural gas represented a threat to the country's energy security; in 2012, Lithuanian officials moved to sue Russia's state gas company, OAO Gazprom, for €1.4 billion (\$1.9 billion) at the Stockholm Arbitration Tribunal, alleging that the firm had overcharged Lithuania for gas shipments. The case remained ongoing at year's end.

Lithuania, which joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, assumed the six-month, rotating EU presidency in July, becoming the first Baltic nation to hold the position. Soon after the presidency began, Russia took steps to discourage the import of Lithuanian goods in an apparent attempt to intimidate nations in the Eastern Partnership, a bloc of six former Soviet republics that had indicated a willingness to expand ties with the EU. Lithuania in November hosted a summit of the Eastern Partnership initiative, at which Moldovan and Georgian officials initialed partnership agreements with the EU. Russia in December lifted a ban on Lithuanian dairy products implemented earlier in the year.

In November, state intelligence agents interrogated journalists with the Baltic News Service (BNS) and confiscated several of the agency's computers in an attempt to compel the agency to reveal its sources. The order allowing the searches and questioning was later overturned.

## **POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES**

### **Political Rights: 37 / 40**

#### *A. Electoral Process: 12 / 12*

Lithuania's 1992 constitution established a unicameral, 141-seat Parliament (Seimas), with 71 members elected in single-mandate constituencies and 70 chosen by proportional representation, all for four-year terms. The prime minister is named by the president, but is subject to confirmation by the parliament. The president is directly elected, and may serve up to two five-year terms. Recent presidential and parliamentary elections were deemed largely free and fair, though there were some reports of irregularities, including alleged bribery and forged ballots. Dalia Grybauskaitė, an independent candidate, was elected president in 2009 with nearly 70 percent of the vote, becoming the first woman to hold the post. She is expected to run for reelection in 2014, but had not formally announced her candidacy by the year's end.

In the 2012 parliamentary elections, voters, weary of austerity programs enacted by the Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD), dealt the governing coalition a major defeat. Following two rounds, the opposition Social Democratic Party of Lithuania (LSDP) finished first with 38 seats; the TS-LKD captured 33 seats; the Labor Party took 29 seats; the right-wing Order and Justice Party won 11 seats; and the Liberal Movement (LRLS) captured 10 seats. LSDP leader Algirdas Butkevičius became prime minister and assembled a four-party coalition comprising the LSDP, the Labor Party, Order and Justice, and the Lithuanian Poles' Electoral Action, which had won eight seats in the legislature.

#### *B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 16 / 16*

Lithuania's many political parties operate freely. While Lithuanian politics have been characterized by shifting coalitions, the LSDP and the TS-LKD – which formed in 2008 with the merger of the Homeland Union and the Lithuanian Christian Democrats – have dominated the political arena in recent years. Support for the Labor Party and the Order and Justice Party revolves around their charismatic patrons – respectively, the Russian-born Uspaskich and Rolandas Paksas, a former president who was impeached in 2004. Lithuania's Polish minority is represented by the Lithuanian Poles' Electoral Action. The Communist Party is banned.

In June 2013, Lithuania's state security department reported that Russian security services actively spy on Lithuanian institutions and have made efforts to influence government decision-making and inflame existing ethnic tensions in the country.

#### *C. Functioning of Government: 9 / 12*

Corruption remains a problem in Lithuania, though the country in recent years has attempted to prosecute a number of senior officials suspected of abusing their power. In July 2013, a court found four Labor Party officials, including Uspaskich, guilty of participating in a fraud scheme between

2004 and 2006 that benefited the Labor Party. Uspaskich, the party's founder and a member of Parliament, was sentenced to four years in prison; Vitalija Vonžutaitė, another Labor Party parliamentarian, received a three-year prison term; former Labor Party accountant Marina Liutkevičienė was sentenced to one year in prison; and Labor Party leader Vytautas Gapšys, who was also deputy parliament speaker, was ordered to pay a fine of about €10,000 (\$14,000). All four filed appeals, but if the rulings against them are upheld, Uspaskich and Vonžutaitė will also be compelled to pay more than €870,000 (\$1.2 million) in restitution to the state. In October, Gapšys stepped down as deputy parliament speaker ahead of a no-confidence vote that appeared likely to force him from the position; Parliament Speaker Vydas Gedvilas, also of Labor, stepped down as well. Gapšys also resigned as Labor Party head, and Loreta Graužinienė, a Labor Party MP, became the party's new leader as well as the new parliament speaker.

In April, a Vilnius court opened hearings concerning an apparent vote-buying scheme during the 2012 parliamentary elections that allegedly benefited the Labor Party. In November, it found four party members guilty of the scheme; two were ordered to pay a €7,500 euro (\$10,200) fine, and the other two were ordered to perform 90 hours of community service and were placed on a form of probation for one year. Meanwhile, in May, the Baltic Institute of Corporate Governance said Lithuania did not meet Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) standards for operating public companies, citing inadequate anticorruption efforts and a tendency among politicians to consider political factors when making business decisions. Nevertheless, the OECD that same month mentioned Lithuania as a potential candidate to join the body.

Petty bribery remains a problem, though authorities have become increasingly resistant to such attempts in recent years. Despite these improvements, widespread belief remains that personal contacts inside the government are required to access ostensibly public services. Lithuania was ranked 43 out of 177 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index.

## **Civil Liberties: 53 / 60**

### *D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 16 / 16*

The government generally respects freedoms of speech and the press. However, defamation is a criminal offense punishable by fines and jail terms of up to two years. Hate speech is a crime, as is the denial of war crimes and speech trivializing Nazi or Soviet crimes. In June 2013, a Vilnius court issued a €217 (\$299) fine against a man who had displayed a portrait of Soviet leader Josef Stalin at a May ceremony commemorating the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany; the portrait was confiscated. The offender was found to have violated a measure barring the display of communist symbols at mass gatherings. In November, Lithuania's Special Investigation Service (SIS) took efforts to compel BNS, the largest news agency in the Baltics, to identify its sources. The pressure came after BNS, citing Lithuanian intelligence sources, had reported in October that Lithuanian intelligence agents had said Russian officials were planning to launch a misinformation campaign about Grybauskaitė. A subsequent judicial order prompted searches and interrogations of BNS journalists, and the confiscation of several computers. A court in December reversed the earlier order, following criticism of the searches from Grybauskaitė, BNS, and others.

A 2010 law bans the publication of material deemed harmful to minors, though no one has been prosecuted under it. Privately owned newspapers and independent broadcasters express a wide

variety of views and criticize the government freely; however, the press suffers from inadequate standards for transparency of ownership. The government does not restrict internet access.

Freedom of religion is guaranteed by law and largely upheld in practice. However, nine so-called traditional religious communities, including the Roman Catholic Church, enjoy certain government benefits, including annual subsidies, which are not granted to other groups. Academic freedom is respected.

#### *E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 11 / 12*

Freedoms of assembly and association are generally observed. However, individuals and groups must obtain permission from authorities before staging protests larger than 15 people. In May, authorities ruled that a member of the Lithuanian Poles' Electoral Action pay €145 (\$199) for holding an unsanctioned demonstration; the fine was later canceled on appeal.

Nongovernmental organizations may register without facing serious obstacles, and human rights groups operate without restrictions. Workers may form and join trade unions, strike, and engage in collective bargaining, though there have been reports of employees being punished for attempting to organize.

#### *F. Rule of Law: 13 / 16*

The constitution guarantees judicial independence, which is largely respected in practice. Defendants generally enjoy due-process rights, including the presumption of innocence and freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention, but detained suspects are not always granted timely access to an attorney. Police abuse of detainees and lengthy pretrial detentions remain problems. Prisons suffer from overcrowding, and inmates have poor access to health care.

Discrimination against ethnic minorities, who comprise about 16 percent of the population, remains a problem, especially among the small Romany population. In recent years, Lithuania has moved to compensate the country's small Jewish community for property that was seized by the Nazi and Soviet regimes.

#### *G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 13 / 16*

Lithuanian residents may travel freely within the country and internationally, and residents generally enjoy economic freedom.

Marriage is defined in Lithuania's constitution as a union between a man and a woman, and members of LGBT community face discrimination. Vilnius officials in 2013 moved to ban Baltic Pride, an LGBT march, from taking place in the city center, but indicated that it could take place in a less central location. Baltic Pride's organizers successfully appealed the move, and the event took place peacefully in July. However, Vilnius mayor Artūras Zuokas later complained that the march amounted to socially divisive propaganda and asserted that Vilnius "needs no more of these festivals."

Men and women enjoy the same legal rights, though women earn about 12 percent less than men for every hour of work. However, that rate is comparatively better than the EU average, under which women earn about 16 percent less than men.

Domestic violence, including both spousal and child abuse, remains a serious problem. In March 2013, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that officials had failed to adequately investigate a woman's complaint of domestic abuse by her partner, and ordered that the government pay the woman €5,000 (\$7,000) in damages. Lithuania continues to be a source, transit point, and destination for the trafficking of women and girls for the purpose of prostitution.

**Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)**

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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