

Freedom in the World 2016 - Lithuania

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Freedom Status: Free
Aggregate Score: 91
Freedom Rating: 1.0
Political Rights: 1
Civil Liberties: 1

Quick Facts

Capital: Vilnius
Population: 2,911,203
GDP/capita: \$16,444.80
Press Freedom Status: Free
Net Freedom Status: N/A

OVERVIEW

Tensions stemming from Russia's invasion of Crimea have been influencing developments in Lithuania since 2014. With President Dalia Grybauskaitė citing security concerns, in March 2015 the parliament approved the reintroduction of military conscription. Meanwhile, authorities continued to scrutinize broadcasts of Russian television channels. In July, the European Commission backed Lithuanian authorities' move weeks earlier to ban the Russian television channel RTR Planeta for three months; Lithuanian officials had said its programming incited hatred.

In March 2015, Lithuania held local elections. For the first time, residents were able to directly elect mayors of their municipalities. Separately, in January 2015, Lithuania adopted the euro currency, and in April it was invited to open formal accession talks with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 38 / 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.

In 2012 parliamentary elections, the Social Democratic Party of Lithuania (LSDP) finished first with 38 seats; the Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD) captured 33 seats; the Labor Party (DP) took 29 seats; the Order and Justice Party (TT) won 11 seats; the Liberal Movement (LRLS) captured 10 seats; and the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania (LLRA) won 8 seats. LSDP leader Algirdas Butkevičius became the prime minister and assembled a four-party coalition comprising the LSDP, the DP, the TT, and the LLRA. In 2014, the LLRA left the coalition after Grybauskaitė fired Energy Minister Jaroslav Neverovič, the only Polish minister in the government.

In 2014, incumbent president Dalia Grybauskaitė won the presidential run-off against Zigmantas Balčytis, a member of the LSDP. Grybauskaitė became the first Lithuanian president elected to two consecutive terms.

In March 2015, local elections were held. For the first time, voters were able to directly elect their mayors. Due to numerous irregularities, elections in three municipalities were annulled and had to be reorganized; the election commission assessed the reruns, which took place in June, as fair.

In September 2015, the Lithuanian parliament gave its initial backing to a constitutional amendment that would have allowed former president Rolandas Paksas, who was impeached and removed from office in 2004, to run for president and for a seat in the parliament. (In 2014, the Lithuanian Central Electoral Commission had refused to register Paksas for the presidential election because of a previous Constitutional Court ruling holding that persons removed from office by impeachment for having violated a constitutional oath can no longer assume positions necessitating the swearing of an oath.) However, the parliament ultimately rejected the amendment during the second required vote, held in December 2015.

An October 2015 Constitutional Court ruling found existing disparities in the number of voters per constituency unconstitutional. The parliament is subsequently expected to debate several electoral reforms that could address the ruling.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 16 / 16

Lithuania's political parties generally operate freely, although the Communist Party is banned. Lithuanian politics have been characterized by shifting coalitions among several different parties. The two largest minority groups, Polish (6.6 percent of the population) and Russian (5.8 percent), are represented by the LLRA and the Russian Alliance parties. The two minority parties formed a coalition for local elections in 2015, and won two mayoralties. Due to pressure from the European Union (EU), citizens of other EU member states who do not belong to political organizations of foreign countries and who have lived in Lithuania for at least five years were made eligible to

become members of Lithuanian political parties in 2015. However, they cannot found political parties.

C. Functioning of Government: 10 / 12

Corruption remains an issue in Lithuania. While the EU has acknowledged a strong legal framework for combatting corruption and the government's commitment to anticorruption efforts, it has also noted room for improvement, especially in the area of procurement.

In September 2015, it was revealed that Butkevičius had failed to disclose his son-in-law's ownership stake in a public relations company, as required by the law. Opposition members in the parliament threatened to launch an inquiry into the affair, but it did not appear that one had been initiated at the year's end.

Lithuanian law grants the public the right to request information, and the government generally complies with information requests. Lithuania ranked 32 out of 168 countries and territories in Transparency International's 2015 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. Privately owned newspapers and independent broadcasters express a wide variety of views. Political parties are banned from directly owning news media outlets. While individual party members are excluded from the ban, they are obligated to disclose ownership; however, regulations on the disclosure of media ownership are not always enforced. A number of both ruling-coalition and opposition politicians control news media outlets. The government does not restrict internet access.

Amendments to the Law on Public Information approved in May 2015 established penalties for media outlets that spread war propaganda, call for violently changing the constitutional order, or challenge the country's sovereignty or territorial integrity. In 2014, the parliament also reformed the media self-regulation body by establishing that it would consist of media representatives only.

During 2014 and 2015, several Russian television channels including NTV Mir, RTR Planeta, Ren TV Baltic, and PBK Lithuania were fined or saw broadcasts temporarily banned for providing misleading and derogatory information or inciting public discord. In July 2015, the EC backed a move by Lithuanian authorities weeks earlier to ban channel RTR Planeta for three months on grounds that its programming incited hatred.

After the adoption of the Law on the Protection of Minors against the Detrimental Effect of Public Information in 2010, which banned exposing minors to any materials that "agitate for homosexual, bisexual, and polygamous relations," there have been several cases in which public information about rights for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people has been restricted.

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 that are not granted to other groups. There are few mosques in

Lithuania, and none in Vilnius. Both the prime minister and the mayor of Vilnius stated in 2015 that constructing a mosque in the capital is not a priority, even as Lithuania prepares to accept a number of refugees under EU quotas, many of whom are likely to be Muslim.

Academic freedom is respected. There are no restrictions on private discussion.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 11 / 12

Freedoms of assembly and association are generally observed. However, individuals and groups must notify authorities before staging protests of more than 10 people. Nongovernmental organizations may register without facing serious obstacles, and 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 are lingering issues. In 2014, a UN committee found that Lithuania's prisons continued to suffer from a number of problems, including overcrowding, substandard living conditions, and lack of access to essential services such as health care and sanitation facilities.

Discrimination against ethnic minorities, who comprise about 16 percent of the population, remains a problem. The Polish minority has demanded the right to spell their names in their original form and to use bilingual location signs in areas with large Polish populations. However, Lithuanian law indicates that public signs must be written only in Lithuanian.

Members of the LGBT community face discrimination. A proposal to ban sex reassignment surgery stalled in 2012, but these procedures are still not possible under the Civil Code. While the code theoretically allows for such surgery in the case of unmarried adults, it stipulates that certain medical regulations must first be enacted by law. A bill that would have done so was voted down in 2014.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 13 / 16

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

Men and women enjoy the same legal rights, though women generally earn less than men per hour worked. Lithuania's constitution defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman.

In March 2015, the parliament voted overwhelmingly to reintroduce conscription due to increasing geopolitical tensions in the region and insufficient reserve forces. The National Defense Ministry plans to annually draft 3,000 to 5,000 men between the ages of 19 and 26 for nine months of service.

In 2015, the government initiated a number of programs aimed at better adjudicating cases of human trafficking and identifying trafficking victims. Boys and girls living in orphanages are at risk of sex trafficking. Lithuanian children and adults have been forced to engage in criminal activity including shoplifting and drug-selling in other parts of Europe.

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