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Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2019 - Lithuania

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Overview:

Lithuania is a democracy in which political rights and civil liberties are generally respected. However, corruption and income inequality are issues that often arouse public dissatisfaction with the government.

Key Developments:

Key Developments in 2018:

- In June, Parliament's Committee on National Security and Defense presented the findings of an investigation which concluded that a number of large corporations have advanced their interests by influencing the policy positions of members of parliament and other politicians through media pressure, bribes, and blackmail.
- August marked the beginning of a major corruption trial against the Labor Party, the Liberal Movement, three of the parties' current and former leaders, and the former vice president of investment management company MG Baltic. The trial was ongoing at year's end.
- In September, the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (LVŹS) formed a new governing coalition with the newly formed Lithuanian Social Democratic Labor Party (LSDLP) and the Order and Justice (TT) party.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 38 / 40

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 12 / 12

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

The president, who is chief of state and whose main competencies lie in foreign affairs, is directly elected to up to two five-year terms. The prime minister, who as a head of government is the central executive authority, is appointed by the president with the approval of Parliament.

The present prime minister, Saulius Skvernelis, was appointed after the parliamentary elections in October 2016 and began serving that December. The current president, Dalia Grybauskaitė, was elected to a second term of office in 2014. Both the appointment of the prime minister and election of the president took place in a free and fair manner.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

A unicameral, 141-seat Parliament (Seimas) consists of 71 members elected in single-mandate constituencies and 70 chosen by proportional representation, all for four-year terms. The most recent parliamentary elections took place in October 2016. The elections were somewhat unexpectedly won by the centrist LVŽS, which took 56 seats. The party formed a coalition government with the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (LSDP), which received 17 seats. The main opposition Homeland Union–Lithuanian Christian Democrats (HU-LCD) gained 31 seats.

The elections were considered free and fair, though the election commission faced criticism for delays in announcing the official results—problems linked to issues with new electronic infrastructure for the polls. While relatively few irregularities were reported, there was one notable case of vote buying, to benefit the TT. The election commission subsequently stripped lawmaker Kęstas Komskis of the TT of his parliamentary mandate in connection with the events.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 4 / 4

The legislative framework for conducting elections is clear and detailed. The boundaries of single-mandate districts of parliamentary elections were redrawn at the end of 2015 to comply with a ruling by the Constitutional Court. The Central Electoral Commission (VRK) has historically been known to operate and adjudicate election-related complaints in a fair manner.

In March 2018, VRK chairperson Laura Matjošaitytė survived a no-confidence vote initiated by the opposition in Parliament. Matjošaitytė had been accused of concealing the results of an investigation into alleged impropriety by Agrokoncernas, an agricultural company owned by LVŽS leader Ramūnas Karbauskis, which was accused of providing illegal support to the LVŽS between 2013 and 2016. A VRK working group that investigated the allegations produced a report with its conclusions in 2017, which was never publicized, but did not find that the law had been violated. Opposition parties alleged that Matjošaitytė was appointed in 2017 in exchange for blocking the report's release.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 16 / 16

B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 4 / 4

Lithuania's political parties generally operate freely. Citizens of other European Union (EU) member states are eligible to become members of Lithuanian political parties but cannot found them.

In the fall of 2017, the LSDP party council voted to leave the governing coalition, but the LSDP members of parliament refused to comply with the decision and remained in the government. Eleven of those members subsequently left the LSDP and established a new party, the Lithuanian Social Democratic Labor Party (LSDLP), which joined a new governing coalition with the LVŽS and the TT in September 2018.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 4 / 4

Lithuanian politics are dynamic, and opposition parties usually come to power after every parliamentary election.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 4 / 4

Sporadic cases of vote buying during national elections have been observed, and clientelism can influence politics at the local levels. However, people are generally free to exercise their political choices without undue influence or interference.

The State Security Department (VSD) has issued numerous warnings about efforts by Russians to influence politics, including through its energy policies and by influencing the country's ethnic minorities.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 4 / 4

Political rights of minorities are generally upheld. In the 2016 parliamentary elections, the Lithuanian Poles Electoral Action (LLRA), which represents the Polish minority, for the second consecutive time overcame the 5 percent electoral threshold for parties, and took seats in Parliament.

Women are underrepresented in politics, though they do hold senior political positions, including the presidency. In the 2016 parliamentary elections, women won 21 percent of the contested seats. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working toward greater representation of women in politics and business, and combating violence against women, are active in the political sphere.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 10 / 12

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 4 / 4

Lithuania's freely elected lawmakers are seated according to schedule and can design and implement policies. However, bribery scandals that erupted in 2016 raised concerns about the influence of large businesses on politics. In June 2018, Parliament's Committee on National Security and Defense presented the findings of an investigation which concluded that a number of large corporations have advanced their interests by influencing the policy positions of members of parliament and other politicians through media pressure, bribes, and blackmail.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 3 / 4

Corruption remains an issue in Lithuania, and certain sectors, including health care and construction, are perceived as prone to corruption. While anticorruption bodies are active, there are sometimes considerable delays in the investigation of political corruption cases. In 2016, the leaders of three political parties were implicated in separate bribery scandals involving illicit deals with Lithuanian businesses. In August 2018, in response to two of the scandals, the corruption trial of the Labor Party, the Liberal Movement, three of the parties' current and former leaders, and the former vice president of investment management company MG Baltic, commenced, and was ongoing at year's end.

The protection of whistle-blowers and journalists who report on corruption cases is guaranteed, though at the local level it is less effective than nationally.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 3 / 4

Lithuanian law grants the public the right to request information, and the government generally complies with information requests. However, the operations of state companies remain somewhat opaque, and prone to financial misconduct. Improvements to make public procurement fairer and more open to public scrutiny have been limited.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 53 / 60

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 16 / 16

D1. Are there free and independent media? 4 / 4

The government generally respects freedoms of speech and the press. While the media market is vibrant, some owners of media outlets attempt to use their position to influence political processes. Local outlets are usually financially dependent on the local government.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in

public and private? 4 / 4

Freedom of religion is guaranteed by law and largely upheld in practice. However, nine so-called traditional religious communities enjoy certain government benefits, including annual subsidies that are not granted to other groups. Despite the presence of a Muslim community, Vilnius has been without a mosque since one was demolished by the Soviet government in the 1960s, and the planned construction of a new mosque remains stalled.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 4 / 4

Academic freedom is respected, and the educational system is generally free from political influence.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4 / 4

Private discussion is generally robust and unrestricted. However, in the wake of increasing concerns about Russia's aggressive foreign policy, individuals who criticize the government's foreign policy stances can face pressure.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 11 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 4 / 4

Freedom of assembly is generally respected. In March 2018, thousands of people gathered in Vilnius to protest a failed vote in Parliament to impeach legislator Mindaugas Bastys, who was allegedly under the influence of Russian business interests.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 4 / 4

Nongovernmental organizations may register without facing serious obstacles, and operate without restrictions.

E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 3 / 4

Workers may form and join trade unions and engage in collective bargaining, though there have been reports of employees being punished for attempting to organize. In 2017, a new Labor Code came into force, which among other things provided additional instruments to organize strikes.

F. RULE OF LAW: 12 / 16

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 3 / 4

Businesspeople and politicians closely linked with business interests exert pressure on the judiciary, and according to the most recent results of an EU survey, only about half of the general public and representatives of the business sector believe that judicial independence is guaranteed. Nontransparent decisions by the courts also remain an issue.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 3 / 4

Defendants generally enjoy the presumption of innocence and freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention, but detained suspects are not always granted timely access to an attorney. Pretrial detention rates are high, even though the law states that pretrial detention should only be employed in exceptional circumstances. Lengthy pretrial detentions also remain common.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 3 / 4

Police abuse of detainees is a lingering issue. Conditions at some prisons are substandard, interprisoner violence remains a problem, and physical abuse by correctional officers persists. Despite a reduction in homicides in recent years, Lithuania still has one of the highest homicide rates in the EU.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 3 / 4

Public signs must be written only in Lithuanian, even in areas predominantly inhabited by minorities who speak different languages. The Romany population experiences widespread societal discrimination. Members of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community face discrimination, and there have been several cases in the past in which public information about rights for LGBT people has been restricted.

Men and women enjoy the same legal rights, though women generally earn less than men per hour worked.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 14 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 4 / 4

Lithuanian residents may travel freely within the country and internationally.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 4 / 4

Successive Lithuanian administrations have worked to maintain a well-regulated market economy, and economic freedoms are generally ensured.

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 3 / 4

Domestic violence remains a problem, and cultural attitudes lead many Lithuanians to blame women for gender-based violence. A survey commissioned by the Seimas Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson's Office in 2017 found that more than half of respondents believed that women tend to provoke violent outbursts by men. Lithuania's constitution defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman, and same-sex partnership is not legally established. Legal regulations that would allow sex reassignment procedures are not in place.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 3 / 4

Regional economic disparities remain acute. The minimum wage remains one of the lowest within the EU, and the share of the population at risk of poverty and social exclusion is around 30 percent.

Trafficking of adults and children for the purposes of forced labor or sex work occurs in Lithuania. The government actively works to prosecute traffickers, and provides aid to victims in conjunction with NGOs.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on political rights and civil liberties in 2018



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