

The Social Democrat opposition could win the Lithuanian general election

Lithuanians will renew the 141 members of the Seimas, the single chamber of Parliament, on 13 and 27 October. 1,740 people from 19 political parties and movements and 18 independent candidates will be standing for election. 700 of them will be competing in the 71 constituencies where the majority system applies.

Three new parties are taking part in this election, a fairly common occurrence in the Baltic Republic. This year, they are the Union of Democrats "For Lithuania" (DSVL), founded by Saulius Skernelis, former prime minister (2016-2020); the Christian Democracy Party (LKDP), founded by Mindaugas Puidokas, and above all Dawn of Nemunas (*Nemuno ausra*), the populist party of Remigijus Zemaitaitis, which could well cause a surprise.

A SURE VICTORY?

Leading all opinion polls since the summer of 2021, the Social Democratic Party (LSP) are the favourites. According to the latest poll by the Baltijos Tyrimai Institute, the party led by Vilija Blinkeviciute is expected to win 21.9% of the vote, ahead of the Union of Democrats "For Lithuania" (DSVL), which is projected to win 12.8%, closely followed by the Homeland Union-Christian Democrats (TS-LKD), led by Gabrielius Landsbergis, with 12.5% of the vote, then Ramunas Karbaukis' Farmers' and Greens' Union (LVZS) with 11.6% and Dawn of Nemunas with 11.1%. Viktor Ouspaskich's Labour Party (DP) is estimated to garner 7.7% and the Liberals' Movement (LRLS), led by Viktorija Cmilyte-Nielsen, 5.7%. In all, seven parties are due to enter the Seimas after the polls on 13 and 27 October.

Although favourites in the poll, the Social Democratic Party came 2nd in the European elections on 9 June with 17.98% of the vote, outstripped by the Homeland Union-Christian Democrats led by outgoing Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte (21.33%). Admittedly, the European elections cannot be compared with the general elections, and turnout was very low (28.94%), but the Social Democratic Party's result indicates a certain fragility.

In 2024, Lithuanians will have been called to the ballot box three times: they voted for their President of the Republic on 26 May (the outgoing Head of State, Gitanas Nauseda, was re-elected with 75.29% of the vote). On this occasion, the Social Democratic Party chose not to field a candidate and to support the outgoing head of state. Some members of the party expressed reservations about this decision, arguing that the other left-wing parties could easily criticise the Social Democratic Party's support for a banker and economist (Gintanas Nauseda was chief economist to the president of the SEB bank between 2008 and 2018 and director of monetary policy at the Central Bank of Lithuania between 1996 and 2000). Others argued that without a candidate, the Social Democratic Party would be absent from the election campaign and unable to defend their ideas. The Lithuanian people voted in the European elections on 9 June and parliament will be renewed in October. A high number of elections in a year always leads to a degree of disaffection. On the other hand, the ability to mobilise their voters is one of the strengths of the Homeland Union-Christian Democrats.

The President of the Republic said that Lithuanians were tired of the rivalry between the various

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state institutions. *"Do you want this situation to continue?"* he asked his compatriots.

Vilija Blinkeviciute's objectives are to curb the impact of rising prices, ensure that the country's citizens feel totally safe, strengthen the health and education sectors, moderate energy consumption by businesses and provide significant assistance to families.

If it wins the election, the Social Democratic Party will have to find partners with whom to govern. The party leader has already rejected any coalition with the Homeland Union-Christian Democrats. *"The Homeland Union-Christian Democrats and its leader Gabrielius Landsbergis are a danger to Lithuania"*, she said, suggesting that voters would not understand her party's alliance with this party, which would only benefit the most radical political forces.

For Vilija Blinkeviciute, one of the major challenges for the Social Democrats is to succeed in attracting voters in Vilnius. In Lithuania, unlike the rest of Europe, people living in urban areas are more likely to vote for right-wing parties, while those living in rural areas are more likely to vote for the left-wing. The majority of Vilnius voters therefore support the Homeland Union-Christian Democrats.

Aine Ramonaite, professor of political science at Vilnius University's Institute of International Relations and Political Science, says that a coalition between the Social Democratic Party and the Farmers' and Greens' Party would be strange. The last alliance of this type in 2017 led to a split in the Social Democratic Party, with some of its members leaving to found the Social Democratic Labour Party (LSDP). Instead, it is considering an alliance with the Union of Democrats "For Lithuania" and the Liberals' Movement. While she has made a coalition with the Homeland Union-Christian Democrats a real red line, Vilija Blinkeviciute has not closed the door on an alliance with Dawn of Nemunas.

IS LITHUANIA NOW ALSO AFFECTED?

Hitherto relatively unaffected by this phenomenon, Lithuania is now witnessing the rise of a radical

party. Remigijus Zemaitytis, leader of Dawn of Nemunas, came fourth in the 1st round of the presidential election on 12 May with 9.28% of the vote. However, his party presents itself as a left-wing, liberal, Christian party. It was founded in November 2023 by Remigijus Zemaitytis following his ousting the previous May from Freedom and Justice, the liberal party led by Arturas Zuokas, partly for the anti-Semitic remarks he made. He was joined by two deputies from the Farmers' and Greens' Party, giving him 3 seats in the Seimas. At the beginning of the year, the Constitutional Court acknowledged that the MP had repeatedly violated his oath as a member of parliament and the Constitution by making anti-Semitic comments, in particular by denying the reality of the Shoah. Remigijus Zemaitytis avoided dismissal by resigning from the Seimas in April. A populist, he portrays himself as a man of the people fighting against the country's elites.

"Remigijus Zemaitytis, who was a candidate in the presidential election, is an asset for his party. Clearly, the election was a success for him. He received a lot of attention, and he defended himself well in the debates. His real aim in being a presidential candidate was, of course, first and foremost to promote his new party, and it worked very well. The question that remains is whether he will succeed in keeping his party in the spotlight until the general elections" says Matas Baltrukevicius, Head of the Department of Information Policy and Analysis at the National Library of Lithuania.

Faced with the breakthrough of Dawn of Nemunas, many politicians have proposed forming a *cordon sanitaire* to prevent Remigijus Zemaitytis from entering office. Viktorija Cmilyte-Nielsen, leader of the Liberals' Movement, said it was *"more essential than ever for Lithuania to maintain a consistent and resolute position on security, defence and foreign affairs"*, adding: *"Anti-Semitic rhetoric is what the country needs least, as are ambiguous positions on the war in Ukraine"*.

Austrine Armonaite, leader of the Freedom Party, stressed that Lithuania might need to form a

rainbow government in the face of radical political forces fighting for Lithuania's withdrawal from the European Union and NATO.

Finally, the President of the Republic, Gitanas Nausėda, strongly regretted the lack of clarity in Remigijus Žemaitaitis' positions on Russia and Belarus. *"The next head of government will have to assume his or her responsibilities when choosing ministers,"* warned the head of state.

"In Lithuania, we stand before the possibility of the rise of the extreme right, a phenomenon that can be observed elsewhere in Europe. Remigijus Žemaitaitis, who has been rightly accused of making anti-Semitic comments and continues to justify them, could jeopardise the future of Lithuania," said Gabrielius Landsbergis, leader of the Homeland Union-Christian Democrats, who also called for a *cordon sanitaire* to be put in place to prevent Dawn of Nemunas from coming to office.

Andrius Kubilius (TS-LKD), Member of the European Parliament, former Prime Minister (2008-2012) and Lithuania's next European Commissioner, warned his compatriots. *"Political radicalisation is taking place throughout Europe, and Lithuania is no exception, but the forthcoming general elections represent a real danger for the country's future (...) Pro-European forces must join together and prevent this party from coming to office".*

THE LITHUANIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

Lithuania has a unicameral parliament. The Seimas has 141 members, elected every four years under a mixed electoral system: 71 deputies are appointed on the basis of a majority vote and 70 on the basis of a proportional list system, with seats being allocated according to the simple quotient and the highest remainder, with Lithuania forming a single constituency for this voting system. A preferential vote may be cast.

A party must obtain 5% of the votes cast to be represented in parliament (7% in the case of a coalition). In constituencies where the majority vote is used, any candidate obtaining an absolute

majority in the 1st round is declared elected, provided that the turnout is at least 40%. If the turnout is lower, the candidate with the highest number of votes (and the votes of at least 1/5th of those registered) is elected. A 2nd round is organised if these conditions are not met. In these constituencies, parties or independent candidates must obtain the signatures of at least 1,000 voters in order to stand.

Any party wishing to take part in the elections must have at least 1,000 members. The age of eligibility has recently been lowered: candidates must now be at least 21 years old. Lithuanians living abroad are represented in a special constituency.

Seven political parties are currently represented in the Seimas:

- the Homeland Union-Christian Democrats (TS-LKD), the party of outgoing Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte, founded in 1993 and led since 2014 by Gabrielius Landsbergis, 50 seats;
- the Farmers' and Greens' Party (LVZS), led by Ramunas Karbauskis, 32 seats;
- the Labour Party (DP), founded in 2003 and led by Viktor Ouspaskich, 10 seats;
- the Social Democratic Party (LSP), the oldest political party, founded in 1896 and led since 2017 by Vilija Blinkeviciute, 13 MPs;
- the Freedom Party (LP), a social-liberal party founded in 2019 by Aušrinė Armonaitė, 11 seats;
- the Liberals' Movement (LRLS), founded in 2006 and led by Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen, 13 MPs;
- the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance (LLRA-KSS), founded in 1994 and led by Waldemar Tomaszewski, 3 seats;
- the Social Democratic Labour Party (LSDDP), which split from the Social Democratic Party in 2017 to become Lithuanian Regions Party in July 2021 and is led by Jonas Pinskus, 3 seats.

Lithuanians also elect their President of the Republic by direct universal suffrage every 5 years. On 26 May 2024, incumbent President Gitanas Nausėda won the 2nd round of the presidential election by

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a large margin, with 75.29% of the vote, against Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte (Homeland Union-Christian Democrats, TS-LKD), who garnered 24.71% of the vote. This is the largest victory for a

candidate in a presidential election since Lithuania regained its independence in 1990. Less than half of Lithuanians turned out to vote: turnout was 48.99% in the 2nd round.

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Results of the general elections of 11 and 25 October 2020 in Lithuania

Turnout: 47.55% (1st round) and 38.96% (2nd round)

Political Parties	Proportional Vote			Majority Vote						Total Seats
				1st round			2nd round			
	Votes	%	Seats	Votes	%	Seats	Votes	%	Seats	
Homeland Union-Christian-Democrats (TS-LKD)	290,036	24.82	23	267,976	22.94	1	352,566	38.42	26	50
Farmers' and Greens Party (LVZS)	204,482	17.50	16	169,551	14.51	0	209,714	22.85	16	32
Labour Party (DP)	110,547	9.46	9	88,083	7.54	0	8,077	0.88	1	10
Social Democratic Party (LSP)	108,244	9.26	8	130,559	11.17	0	75,560	8.23	5	13
Freedom Party (LP)	105,474	9.03	8	69,740	5.97	0	68,630	7.48	3	11
Liberals' Movement (LRLS)	79,310	6.79	6	102,586	8.78	0	57,671	6.28	7	13
Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance (LLRA-KSS)	56,353	4.82	0	52,905	4.53	2	14,835	1.62	1	3
Social Democratic Labour Party (LSDDP)	37,043	3.17	0	51,229	4.41	0	26,198	2.85	3	3
Homeland Union-Christian-Democrats (TS-LKD)	26,686	2.28	0	20,474	1.75	0	5,405	0.59	0	0
National Alliance (NS)	24,921	2.13	0	14,938	1.28	0				0
Freedom Union (PLT)	23,266	1.99	0	28,568	2.44	0	9,631	1.05	1	1
Green Party (LŽP)	19,156	1.64	0	35,174	3.01	0	6,648	0.72	1	1
Others	41,905	3.58	0	21,465	2.70	0				0
Independents	43,756	3.74	0	41,936	4.57	4				4

Source : <https://www.vrk.lt/en/2020-seimo/rezultatai>