



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Lithuania Political briefing:  
The preparations for the next year's three elections  
in Lithuania are in full swing  
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## **The preparations for the next year's three elections in Lithuania are in full swing**

The closing weeks of August have signaled the new political upheaval occasioned not so much by the new parliamentary session as by the preparations for the next year's elections which can seal the political development of the country for the next five years or longer. In 2019 three elections will be held in Lithuania (which is a rare coincidence in the political calendar of the country), starting with the municipal elections in February and March, followed by the elections of the new President (as the current incumbent President Dalia Grybauskaitė is completing her second five-year term, the maximum period allowed by the Constitution) in May 2019 and the elections to the European Parliament soon afterwards - in May and June. The exact dates of the elections will be known when the Parliament (which is reconvening on 10 September) will make a corresponding decision.

These elections are important not only because they will be held in a sequence within the same half-a-year thus putting the political system to test of robustness and preparedness to organize itself effectively within a relatively short period of time but also because they will put the voters to test, demanding each time a different level of political maturity. Firstly, a new President will have to be elected to step into the shoes of a widely popular President Grybauskaitė (her approval ratings at the end of her second term are still hovering around 60 percent and she is well ahead of other political leaders in that respect making it difficult to find a candidate of a similar stature). Secondly, the overall mandate of the governing party will be tested at the municipality level which might create an opener for the opposition parties to expand or strengthen their hold on some of the municipalities where they have a well-established track record of governance. And, thirdly, the European Parliament elections will put to test the idea of a united Europe at the time of the increasing

uncertainties about the future course of the European Union after the Brexit due next year.

The sequence of three elections creates a highly complex context, thus putting an extra demand on the political parties to run for the offices at all three levels (the municipal, the presidential and the EU) and organize synchronized campaigns addressing different issues relevant for each of these different elections. This comes at a difficult time for the party organizations which have been weakened during the last few years due to allegations of financial and other misconduct of some of its leaders and which have not produced enough political talent, despite the emergence of a new generation of leaders who are taking up the positions in the party organizations. This leaves both the President and the Government in a favourable position to take initiative in shaping the framework for domestic politics.

The following is a brief analysis of the recent tendencies in the domestic politics which might suggest that the fortune in the upcoming elections may be with those who would align themselves with or gain support from the most popular political figures in the country, namely, President Dalia Grybauskaitė and Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis, both of whom, as a matter of fact, are not linked to the political parties. Traditionally, President Grybauskaitė's views have been endorsed by the political center-right parties, while Prime Minister has been supported by the governing center-left Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union which mandated him to lead the Cabinet as a bi-partisan figure, a former Minister of Interior and an experienced high-ranking official in the public sector. Thus, by extending their influence over both parts of the political specter, at least theoretically, both the President and the Prime Minister might act as guarantors of the continuity of the political governance by endorsing the future incumbents of their offices with their support.

Hence, one could notice the increased efforts of both political leaders to set tone for the new political season in the closing weeks of August. This has manifested through two sets of actions: the first one was aimed at the political

stabilization of the party system ahead of a new parliamentary session initiated by the President, while the second one aimed to put the mechanisms in place in order to make the political campaigning more transparent, accountable and perhaps more predictable, as endorsed by the Prime Minister and the Cabinet.

The first set of actions included a direct and open call from the President to the parties to avoid the infighting and “personal vendettas” that dominated the parliament's spring session. "In last spring's political season, we saw politicians engaged in destructive vendettas and busy raising political noise and sorting out their relations instead of working, doing something together, not necessarily together, but something productive," the president said on the public television. It was confirmed that the President would meet with the Board of the Parliament (which includes the representatives of the main political fractions) before the start of the parliamentary session to further discuss the main tasks in an effort to put the Seimas on a more firm footing.

The political infighting to which the President was referring in the comments as quoted above was related to a number of interpellations made by the opposition parties during the previous parliamentary session which aimed to question the competences of the Ministers and the rationale of some if not all of the proposed plans for reforms. The interpellations though had not succeeded to stop the Government from pursuing their plan, they did create more tension in the political system. Hence, the call from the President before the new parliament session was aimed to engage the parties in a more bi-partisan approach which is key to some of the planned legislation agenda (the most important one is the approval of the next year's budget). By making the parties less partisan one could expect the party organizations to be more focused on seeking agreements that could help them to keep a steady course throughout the electoral year until the campaigning time starts.

The second set of actions was initiated by the Government with the involvement of the Prime Minister and, in contrary to the President's initiative, was met with criticism especially among the opinion leaders and the media

pundits, not to mention the opposition. Among a number of initiatives, the most criticized one was a proposal to introduce asset, income and interest declarations for all journalists in order to ensure that their reporting activities are not directly influenced by a certain business interest. The proposal came up as a result of the conclusions of a parliamentary probe into businesses' unlawful influence on politics which led to the disclosure (which is being contested in courts) that an influential business group and the owner of several major media outlets has influenced the legislative and prosecutor-appointing process in the country. The Government envisions that under the new regulation each journalist would be obliged to submit the plans to make journalists submit asset and income declarations to the State Tax Inspectorate. The Prime Minister's was put on record with the following explanation of the rationale for the proposed measure: "what we propose is that media outlets themselves would be allowed to set their own procedures for declaring interests, but the law would stipulate the principle that journalists should submit their declarations to the editor-in-chief or director". Further, the Prime Minister argued in the media that that way "we would create a self-regulation mechanism, when the journalist will be obliged to tell the editor-in-chief that, because of conflict of interests, he or she cannot write a certain story". It is reported also that as part of this initiative the Government will consider the proposal to ban politicians from holding ownership in media organizations.

Although these initiatives still need to find enough support in the parliament and might not have a substantial impact on the immediate proceedings of the election campaigns looming large ahead, yet they indicate the efforts of the authorities to partly control the process if not the outcome of the elections by making the funding of campaigns more difficult for the potential influencers pursuing their business agendas.

However, this extra vigilance and the aim to increase the oversight from the executive branch of the government might generate different outcomes from those expected: instead of keeping the political system stabilized it risks to

further defragment it. The tighter requirements on the funding of the campaigns and the electoral advertisement can make big campaigns difficult to execute for the main parties. This in turn might flatten up the political landscape by enabling smaller parties, coalitions of electorates (which are allowed to go on the ballot paper at the municipal elections) or even individual candidates (which traditionally had it difficulty to challenge the major party campaigns) to run elector campaigns on a similar scale – door-to-door.

The state authorities in this respect might become an important conduit and a power broker between the existing political parties and the new contestants. By staying in the public eye the senior office holders have both the publicity and the administrative power to make their opinions heard before the electorate. The list of the most influential public officials published by the news portal Delfi.lt at the end of August clearly showed that the high-ranking officials (especially those from the law enforcement agencies) are regarded as the most influential ones in the country. This attests to the recent trend of high-ranking public officials with a notable track-record in civil service being appointed to political positions in the Government to ensure the stability of governance. Thus, given the circumstances, a stronger state apparatus might come out of this as a winner.