




## **Weekly Briefing**

**Lithuania external relations briefing:  
Lithuania nominates as a candidate for the EU commissioner its  
Minister of the Economy and Innovation  
Linas Eriksonas**

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## **Lithuania nominates as a candidate for the EU commissioner its Minister of the Economy and Innovation**

On 7 August Lithuania's Government officially endorsed the candidacy of Virginijus Sinkevičius, the Minister of the Economy and Innovation, to become the member of the European Commission for the next five years. The candidate was proposed by the ruling Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union where Sinkevičius holds a position of the Deputy Chairman of the party. He is also the Member of the Parliament. The endorsement from the Government came a day after the candidate's meeting with the President-elect of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyden in Brussels which sent out a signal that the Head of the Commission would in principle accept the proposed candidate by Lithuania. Though the candidacy still needs to be approved by both the Lithuanian and the European Parliaments (the candidate would have to undergo the parliamentary hearings prior to being put to vote), yet all signs show that Virginijus Sinkevičius is on his way becoming the youngest EU commissioner ever. The Lithuanian politician is 28-years old, yet despite being of a relatively young age for such a position Virginijus Sinkevičius has, nevertheless, proven that he is a political wunderkind who during a short period of time has created a remarkable track record in the national politics, and now is about to continue his successful political career on the EU level.

Below is a brief overview about the perception of the importance of the European Union in Lithuania and its relevance for the national politics as concerning the nomination of the EU Commissioners from Lithuania, explaining some of the factors which might have contributed towards the promotion of Virginijus Sinkevičius to the centre stage of Lithuania's representation at the highest level of the EU governance.

The Eurobarometer post-election survey conducted on behalf of the European Parliament in July has shown that Lithuanian citizens are extremely enthusiastic about the EU. This confirmed also the results of the survey conducted in the run-up to the elections on the emotions and political engagement of the European citizens towards the EU. When asked about the feelings which come to their mind when they think of the European Union 44 percent of respondents in Lithuania replied that they feel confidence (to compare, the average response in the EU27 was only 27 percent) and only 22 percent of the Lithuanian respondents described their feelings as certain doubts. Interestingly, the differences across the age groups were not remarkable at all: comparing to the older generation (55 years and older) in the youngest cohort

of respondents (15-24 years) the positive emotions towards the EU were higher by 5 percent only.

The first results of the European Parliament post-election survey confirmed a very clear perception among the Lithuanian citizens that the membership in the EU has been extremely beneficial for Lithuania. 91 percent of the respondents in Lithuania confirmed their views that Lithuania has strongly benefited from being a member of the Union. This is the highest level of endorsement for the EU expressed in this survey. On average 68 percent of respondents in the EU-28 (including the UK) think that their countries have benefited from the EU. In Italy, this figure is at the record low – 42 percent. Within the Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC) which are the members of the EU the lowest support for the EU has been registered in Bulgaria (57 percent), the Czech Republic (64 percent) and in the newest EU member state, Croatia (65 percent). Apart from Lithuania, the enthusiasm for the EU membership has been equally high in Estonia and Poland (87 and 86 percent respectively).

Due to the high regard of the EU governance in society, the selection for the position of a member of the European Commission has been regarded in the Lithuanian national politics something of a beauty contest, meticulously reported in the media and followed by the pundits and the citizens alike. The relevance attributed to this position goes back to the first EU commissioner from Lithuania – the former President Dalia Grybauskaitė who was appointed as an EU commissioner on the first day of Lithuania's membership, 1 May 2004 and made her mark in Brussels. She initially served as European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism, and Youth and from November 2004 until the end of her time in Brussels was appointed to lead a very important post as the Commissioner for Financial Programming and the Budget in the Commission led by José Manuel Barroso. In November 2005, Grybauskaitė was named "Commissioner of the Year" in the European Voice Europeans of the Year poll and has earned a good reputation being one of the most visible women in the EU governance. She served until July 2009 when she was elected the President of Lithuania.

Her successor in the Commission Algirdas Gediminas Šemeta, a former Minister of Finance, has substituted Dalia Grybauskaitė and during the next term of the Commission (under Barroso) served as an EU Commissioner for Taxation and Customs Union, Audit and Anti-Fraud, while President Grybauskaitė went on to become the main high-level actor associated with the EU decision making, thus only strengthening the relevance of Brussels for the national politics.

In 2014 a former Minister for Health Vytenis Andriukaitis, one of the top politicians in the Social Democratic Party, became the EU Commissioner for Health and Food Safety and he has stayed in this capacity until now. Comparing to two previous EU commissioners from Lithuania (Dalia Grybauskaitė and her successor Algirdas Gediminas Šemeta who made their careers in the public service), Andriukaitis was the first politician to enter the Commission thanks to his previous political work rather than the experience in the public governance (he had been a Minister for Health for less two years prior to becoming a Commissioner).

In this respect, Virginijus Sinkevičius is following in the footsteps of the EU Commissioner Andriukaitis. Similarly to Andriukaitis, he has been nominated by the governing political party where he has an important position (being one of five deputies of the Party Chairman) and he earned his reputation through the political work rather than the public governance. The political career of Virginijus Sinkevičius has been launched only two years ago when the Farmers and Greens Union won a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections and catapulted a number of political newcomers to high positions in power, including Virginijus Sinkevičius.

The proposed Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius graduated from the prestigious secondary school in Vilnius ten years ago. He studied economics and international relations at Aberystwith University in 2009-2012 where he was awarded a BA degree and then continued his graduate studies at Maastricht University in 2012-2013 and earned a Master degree. After university Sinkevičius gained some experience working at the Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), a think-tank in Washington analyzing the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, their membership in the European Union and relationship with the United States. In 2014 he returned to Lithuania and joined the state enterprise Lietuvos paštas (Lithuanian post) as the head of international project group. In 2015-2016 Sinkevičius coordinated a project of concessions of Lithuanian airports for the state-enterprise operating airports and also worked at Enterprise Lithuania. In all these jobs he proved his mark and attracted the attention of the leaders in the emerging Farmers and Greens Union. In 2016 he was elected a Member of Parliament in an important single-member constituency (Vilnius Šeškinė District) on the ballot of the Farmers and Greens Party beating a number of important political opponents. He went on to become the chairman of the Economics Committee and the Deputy Chairman of the Farmers and Greens Party. On 27 November 2017, he was appointed the Minister of the Economy and Innovation.

The observers in Brussels noted that his candidacy came at the moment when the Greens in the European Parliament repeatedly called for having a member of the College of

Commissioners. Apart from Lithuania, the Green parties are in the government coalitions in Luxembourg, Finland, and Sweden. Yet Luxembourg and Finland have nominated social democrats to be their commissioners and Sweden is expected to do the same. Thus, given the circumstances, the only Green party-related candidate could be offered by Lithuania, despite the fact that contrary to the traditional European Greens, the Farmers and Green party in Lithuania is a centrist, agrarian party.

This party holds two seats in the European Parliament and their Members of the European Parliament are part of the Greens/European Free Alliance group in the European Parliament, yet the party is not officially a member of the European Greens Party yet (though the situation would change with the candidacy of Virginijus Sinkevičius going through, as has been already indicated by Sinkevičius himself endorsing the view that Farmers and Greens Union should join the European Greens Party, the European political party that operates as a federation of political parties across Europe supporting green politics). It has been noted by Politico.eu that while the designation of a Green candidate could help Ursula von der Leyen in her relations with environmentalists in the European Parliament, Lithuania's proposed candidate does not help von der Leyen to achieve a more equal number of men and women within the European Commission which she has aimed to achieve.

However, unexpectedly, the candidacy of Virginijus Sinkevičius fits the bill in other respect: his young age and the experience in working in the field of innovation and improvement of the investment climate could come very handy in connecting the EU Commission with the younger generation of voters. Thus, a shortcoming emphasized by pundits following the Lithuanian national politics (where age is still perceived as a barrier rather than opportunity) could become a strength and leverage for the next stage of Sinkevičius' career in Brussels.

Though at the time of writing this report it was still unknown which portfolio might be offered to a Commissioner from Lithuania, yet the efforts have been made to publicize the interest of the Government of Lithuania to its Minister of the Economy and Innovation in a position responsible for the EU governance in the field of innovation and/or industry.

The factors which have contributed to a spectacular rise of Virginijus Sinkevičius (apart from his political acumen and personal skills) could be summarized under three headings: first, the emergence of the Farmers and Greens Union as the key political actor in the legislative and the executive branches of power which has required new people to take the positions in the institutions of public governance thus providing a political elevator to many political

newcomers, second, the political vacuum left after the end of the second term of President Dalia Grybauskaitė (who played an important role in vetting and/or pre-selecting the candidates suitable for positions in Brussels) which increased the level of power of the governing party in the Parliament, and, third, the current situation in the European Parliament where the need to gain the support of the European Greens Party created an opportunity for a politician with the Green credentials to enter the scene.

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