Lithuania political briefing:
The parties use the ranking of the electoral lists to increase competition
Linas Eriksonas
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With only two full months remaining until the next regular parliamentary elections in Lithuania (the first round is due on 11 October), which come at the time of the expected second wave of the coronavirus pandemic, the ranking of the candidates on the single party electoral lists have become the main public focus of the election campaign so far. The first half of the summer saw the main political parties going through the selection and the ranking of their candidates. For the first time, most of the largest parties conducted the selection and ranking of their candidates through the voting of all party members that was carried out by the internet. The results of the internal rankings have been in some instances corroborated with the political will of the party leaderships producing the compromise between the perceived and the real power status of the individual candidates within the party organizations.

Below is a brief overview of the main features of the electoral system in Lithuania as related to the party candidate selection process being an essential element of the liberal democracy in the country. It tries to explain the real and the perceived significance of the ranking of the party candidates, considering the assessment of the impact of such rankings on the political system.

Lithuania’s electoral system is somewhat unique in Europe. Though 31 countries in Europe are using the open-list proportional representational (PR) system, Lithuania, which also uses it for determining part of the unicameral parliamentary seats, differs in terms of the number of preferences allowed on the ballot. Lithuania uses a several-preference system with a fixed number of preferences that a voter can indicate on the ballot. Only five EU Member States (all of them joined the EU in 2004) use a similar system, namely, Cyprus (where one preference for every four seats per constituency is allowed), Czechia, Greece, Slovakia (up to four preferences allowed) and Lithuania which allows the highest number of fixed preferences among the EU Member States – up to five. The very same system to that of Lithuania’s is used in Kosovo. According to the open-list PR electoral system variant in Lithuania, the voters vote for up to five candidates from their selected party list. The candidate lists are then reordered in descending order based on the number of votes received by each candidate. This condition creates a possibility for the voters to make a biggest say on the electoral chances of the party-list candidates to become elected on the electoral list.
However, what makes Lithuania’s electoral system truly unique compared to other countries that are using the open-list PR systems with a fixed number of preferences is that Lithuania’s electoral system is not fully PR system. It is indeed a mixed system. In Lithuania 71 out of 140 members of parliament are elected in single-member constituencies using the two-round system, and the remaining 70 in a single nationwide constituency using open-list PR system with a prefixed number of preferences. The mixed system creates a possibility of having the same high-profile candidates included on the party list while also contesting single-mandate constituencies. Hence, for some, the inclusion high on the electoral list provides a higher chance of being elected without taking participation in the direct electoral campaigns in a single constituency. On the one hand, it creates leverage for the party leaderships to manage the political promotions within the party organisations, while, on the other hand, it helps to better connect with the grassroots and society-at-large.

Five main political parties which are the leading contenders to share power in the future government, as the polls indicate, concluded the rankings of the party candidates by involving their file and rank members and, in some cases also the non-party members. Those were the Social Democratic Party (which held the internal voting over the internet from 26 May to 1 June), Freedom Party (held the internet voting and ranking on 2-7 June), the Liberal Movement (the internet vote organised on 24-26 June), the Homeland Union – Christian Democratic Party (the ranking done on 28 June and completed with the announcement of the final ranking on 11 July), and the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union that completed the ranking process on 10-13 July.

The organisation of the rankings varied across the parties in terms of the level of the grassroots involvement in the process and the leverage of the party bosses. The liberal parties communicated that they preferred a bottom-up approach where all party members were involved in voting and ranking. The Liberal Movement even declared that they are the only party which defined the party lists without the involvement of the party leadership. They provided their party members with a preliminary list of 160 candidates to be considered for the final shortlist of 71. For example, the Social Democrats selected their candidates from the list of 178, while the initial list of the Conservative candidates included 239 names. In the case of the main opposition party the Conservatives and the governing Farmers and Greens Union, the final lists have been slightly adjusted by giving the prominence to the women who were moved up the list (the Farmers and Greens adjusted the list as to include at least three women per ten ranking places counting from the top of the list).
Importantly, the final ranking list of the Greens and Farmers Union was decided by the Party Council. The Council is comprised of the party leadership, the leaders of the local party organizations and the party members who are members of the parliament, the government, the European Parliament and the city mayors. The more centralized way of the selection of the party candidates has resulted in the electoral list which has prioritized the most dedicated party members over the party representatives in public governance.

The political scientists have analysed the phenomenon of the Primary Effect of the ranking in the open-list PR systems. It is argued that the individual who obtains the most preference votes in a party group has a higher probability of future political promotion. According to the latest research of Carl Folke from Stockholm Resilience Centre at Stockholm University, the primary effect is expected to be more significant when the political environment is more competitive; both internal and external political competition decreases the primary effect. Thus, the open-list PR system with a fixed number of preferences indicates that the electoral system came about in a competitive political environment and provides a barrier against radical changes.

The intense competition in domestic politics in Lithuania from the re-establishment of the country's independence until the recent elections had largely followed the pattern of two competing political parties which institutionalised the opposing political cultures. On one side of the political-cultural divide, the former Communist Party (which continued as the Social Democratic Party until the recent split) stood, while, on the other, the former independence movement (to be represented mainly by the Conservative Party and the Liberal parties). Both have been pitted against each other in very intense electoral battles for decades, and a mixed election system with the open-list PR element helped to balance the system in such a way that the political extremes were disallowed from gaining the power; the party organisations with a nation-wide presence could mount a more efficient electoral campaign.

Following the previous elections, the split of the Social Democratic party resulting in the remaining Social Democratic party joining the centre-right opposition parties (Conservatives and Liberals) and the splinter group (constituted as the Social Democratic Labour Party) joining the governing Farmers and Greens made the political environment even more competitive. Folke argues that the open-list party ranking is especially important to promote individual electoral competition within dominant parties in localities where political competition is weak. Hence, the ranking becomes most relevant to rally supporters in local constituencies.
Folke maintains that left-wing parties may prefer more centralized selection processes. It was the case in Lithuania before these elections when the Conservatives were the first to introduce the bottom-up voting and ranking not only in the case of the electoral lists but also when selecting the party leadership. The main differentiator was the relation of a particular party to the power. Those in the government chose their party candidates in a more centralized way, while the opposition parties used the ranking to rally their party base.

However, both the governing Union of Farmers and Greens and the Conservatives, the main opposition party, chose the same approach concerning the principle for selecting and ranking as the number one on their lists the most prominent politicians and public leaders having a proven track record in public governance. The list of the governing party is led by the Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis, while his former opponent in the presidential elections Ingrida Šimonytė, the former Minister of Finance, leads the list of the Conservatives. Interestingly enough, both leaders are formally not the members of the parties, though they are members of the parliamentary factions of the respective parties. The non-party membership here is seen as a bonus for helping to attract the votes of the voters who might not be very keen to see themselves as the supporters of those parties but might be attracted because of the leadership qualities demonstrated by both politicians.

Another important aspect, as noted by political commentators, is the increased focus of personalities; since the same candidate could compete for a seat in the parliament both in a single-constituency and, at the same time, in a multi-constituency (being included on the party electoral list). This duality creates an additional emphasis on the personalities rather than political parties as defining differentiators.
References:


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