



## **Weekly Briefing**

### **Lithuania political briefing:**

**The parliament gives a try to holding plenary sessions remotely**

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## **The parliament gives a try to holding plenary sessions remotely**

On 23 March, after the several plenary sittings conducted remotely, Lithuania's Seimas switched back to holding its further meetings in the Parliament hall face-to-face. The first attempt to introduce remote work in Lithuania's Parliament has been put on hold until the technical issues are solved. However, the possibility of conducting online meetings for parliamentarians has become indeed a rather contested issue politically. The debates whether the parliament members should adopt the online tools for deliberation and decision-making have been going on already under the previous government. Back then, the opposition parties, which form the government now, advocated a switch to virtual meetings, but the then government precluded that.

Below is an overview explaining the rationale behind the decisions taken to move the plenary sessions of the government's legislative arm to an online format, identifying some of the drivers that contributed to this change in the parliament's practice. It further considers the potential areas of impact of the legislative body's remote work on the democratic process, indicating the implemented solution's strengths and weaknesses.

The new governing coalition formed at the beginning of November arrived with an ambition to create long-lasting changes in the country's governance, of which one of the tacit ones is to improve the way the democratic system functions. Transparency and accountability are the tenets of the value-based politics that the governing majority vowed to adhere to and pursue. The deployment of information systems has long been seen by the adepts of a new public management school of thought as the tools for achieving efficiencies. Accordingly, the political realm with support of the IT systems, as assumed, could decrease the information asymmetries between the politicians and the voters, and thus diminish the volatility of the political domain.

Thus, right from the start of the newly elected Seimas, which convened for its first plenary sitting on 13 November, the new parliamentary majority returned to the issue of remote work, which became central to its agenda. The arrival of the second wave of the pandemic around that time created an additional urgency and a well-timed opportunity to make a rapid switch to conducting the parliament sessions online. There have been additional considerations in place. Notably, to make the government's ambition come through, a substantial backing of parliamentary votes is needed, especially regarding the contentious and politically and socially

divisive issues that the government's programme includes. Implementing the online meeting procedures promised a quicker and indeed safer way of reaching difficult decisions at the time of emergency.

The governing majority formed out of three centre-right political parties (the Conservatives and two Liberal parties) with support from few unaligned parliamentarians has lacked a decisive majority of mandates to pursue the most ambitious political aims short-term gains to sustain the momentum. Three governing parties have only 74 seats out of 141. However, the three government parties received 50 mandates out of 71 in the single-mandate constituencies indicating overwhelming support among the voters who cast their direct votes. Thus, it is assumed that the governing parties have a higher symbolic political capital with the society-at-large than the opposition ones. Hence, one way of pursuing the government's ambitious plan is to increase civic society's involvement with parliamentary politics. The online deliberations of the parliamentary committees and other parliamentary bodies have been gaining, especially during the quarantine period, increased popularity due to the web-streams on the official Seimas channel on YouTube, a perfect means to connect the politics with the voters.

Thus, the introduction of remote communication tools has become a handy instrument helping to accomplish the greater accountability of the governing majority and further increasing the support among citizens.

On 9 November, the workgroup was formed by Seimas to make changes to the Parliament's statutes that stipulated that the Parliament's plenary sittings should take place at the Parliament's premises in the capital city Vilnius. The worsening pandemic situation demanded to create more flexibility in the arrangement of work of parliamentarians. The Office of the Seimas studied the existing arrangements for remote voting in plenary sittings in other EU countries. At that time, nine parliaments in the EU had already in place access to or the legal and technical capacity to use the teleconferencing systems for parliamentary meetings, including the Belgian Chamber of Deputies, Estonian Riigikogu, Croatian Parliament, Latvian Saeima, Polish Sejm, Spanish Congress of Deputies and Senate, Slovenian National Assembly, and also the European Parliament.

On 10 December, the Parliament approved the changes to the Statutes allowing to organize the parliament sessions remotely under exceptional conditions such as the declaration of the national emergency, the extreme situation, the quarantine, or any other circumstances that can endanger the work of Seimas. Only closed meetings, including the closed committee

hearings and any other parliamentarians' meetings where classified information was made available, had to be held strictly offline.

The changes foresaw that the session should be organized remotely using secure teleconferencing platforms approved by the National Cybersecurity Centre. Lithuania's Parliament's Office selected to implement the solution proposed by Microsoft, based on its commercially successful and widely used communication and cooperation platform Microsoft Teams combined with customer-tailored modules. A press release by the Office of the Seimas also mentioned that additional security features have been enabled to ensure the secure authentication of the parliamentarians' presence during the plenary session meetings and electronic voting.

On 6 January, the Board of Parliament decided to hold the first three parliament meetings remotely during the parliamentary session's closing stage, on 12 and 14 January. After a parliament session break, the Seimas reconvened on 10 March and on 16 March restarted the plenary sessions remotely.

The Speaker of the Parliament Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen strongly endorsed the teleconferencing solution's implementation and highly praised its many advantages. "In my opinion, it is one of the most successful examples of cooperation between private and public players. My wish is that our country had as much of this kind of cooperation as possible. Particularly complex and sensitive matters pertaining to authentication, voting and other subtleties of Seimas sitting procedures were implemented very quickly. The established virtual chamber of the Seimas has become a convenient and effective tool, which the Lithuanian Parliament will be using and improving to ensure the continuity of the legislative work in Lithuania," said the Speaker.

However, on 18 March, due to technical problems with the teleconferencing software, the parliament's work came to a standstill. The opposition used the opportunity to demand the return to the traditional plenary sittings in-person. Further, the main opposition party issued a statement calling to stop online sessions' practice by arguing that online procedures helped push through the legislative acts quicker, shortening the time for more profound deliberations of each decision taken online. The advocates of the remote work of parliament argued that the issue has been wrongly politicized and that all comes down to computer literacy and the lack of will to acquire new skills or sufficient proficiency in using a specific teleconferencing tool.

There has not been a research study conducted yet assessing the potential impact of the remote procedures on the decision making in parliaments. Yet a recent survey of some of the

remote work practices adopted by the legislative bodies of different countries has identified three major options which emerged for parliaments considering the solutions for remote work. The first option was moving to fully virtual proceedings which has been attempted with a limited degree of success in Lithuania. Germany and Norway also chose such option. The second option was continuation of in-person meetings with restrictions involving adaptations to the chamber or moving to a new venue if the current one was ill-suited to the required adaptations due to design. This status-quo option remained the preferred one for most of the parliaments. The third option was a hybrid option resulting in combining the two previous options, with some form of core representative attendance and others joining remotely. The latter option was chosen, for example, by the United Kingdom's Parliament.

The preliminary analysis of each three approaches has indicated distinct challenges that emerged from each approach's implementation. The complete transfer of plenary sittings to remote platforms, as attempted by Lithuania, has created technical challenges and has carried several related consequences in adopting and disseminating the skills necessary to operate online when parliament members and their staff are dispersed. The other two options created challenges for logistics and, in the case of the hybrid model, difficulty synchronising and maintaining online and offline proceedings.

Lithuania's unicameral parliament, being of relatively small size, provided a starting advantage of switching to teleworking via video conferencing using a well-known commercial platform. Yet, the lack of experience in the online culture of political debate often turned the online proceedings, as complained by some parliamentarians, into a semi-automated and time-constrained process that though made the process more transparent yet less comprehensive (due to the lack of digital literacy) and, paradoxically, less accountable.

Undoubtedly, the remote parliament can decisively impact the way politics is done and communicated both within the parliament and concerning the civic society. A parliament conducting most of its proceedings online offers more transparency and can connect the politicians with the citizens more regularly and more readily via social media used to web-stream content. However, the switch from in-person politics to virtual politics carries some risks of creating a physical distance between politicians, which might adversely impact the interpersonal relations underpinning consensus-seeking in politics. To overcome the initial hurdles in rolling out an online system for legislators, the Office of Lithuania's Parliament and the developers will have to return to the drawing board and give additional thought making the IT work for politics and not vice versa.

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