




Weekly Briefing

Lithuania political briefing:
The old new ideological rift reshapes Lithuania's political scene
Linus Eriksonas

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.
Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin
Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.
 +36 1 5858 690
 office@china-cee.eu
 china-cee.eu

The old new ideological rift reshapes Lithuania's political scene

The start of the mask-free summer has brought an unexpected heat to domestic politics in Lithuania. The political skirmishes between the governing coalition and the President endorsed by the opposition continued to deteriorate until it turned into an outward hostility, following the Parliament's failure in May to give the go-ahead for the Law on Partnerships that foresaw the introduction of the same-sex partnerships. The emerged anti-LGBT movement that took to the streets through the motorized march of a cavalcade of cars across the country, a series of public manifestations next to the Parliament and social media commentary, only added unnecessary heat to the situation.

The latest polls concluded at the start of June show that the main governing party – the Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats - took the brunt. Its approval ratings among the respondents fell to a record low – 11,8 per cent, while the ratings of two main opposition parties – the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union and the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party – went up, thus propelling them to the top two places in the popularity rankings of the political parties with 15,1 and 13,3 per cent respectively. A partner in the governing coalition– the Freedom Party – which has been the vociferous advocate for the same-sex partnership legislation, have suffered a further decrease in the public support - only 2,9 per cent of the respondents endorsed this new party, which at the elections last year got 9,02 per cent of the national vote.

Below is a brief overview of the main circumstances that have contributed to the erosion of substantial, if perhaps temporary, electoral support for the governing coalition. It will consider the critical issues related to the political ideologies and the value systems that have opened the ideological rift across the political scene.

Until the previous parliamentary elections in 2016, Lithuania's political scene had been divided into two main opposing camps, shaped not so much by the political values but by their adherence to the social and political ties, allegiances and structures that came into being with the emergence of independent Lithuania. The political forces that favoured a gradual political development without causing a greater rupture with the inherited structures came to occupy the centre-left of the political spectrum. Those political forces consisted of the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party, the Labour Party and other, more regionally-defined, parties with support in

specific localities: the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania, the former Freedom and Justice Party.

The opposing camp had emerged out of the direct opposition to the former ties, allegiances and structures that went back to the local party organizations of the Community Party before 1990. It consisted of the centre-right political parties, of which the largest one has been the Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats, supported by the liberal parties (Liberal Movement and, most recently, the Freedom Party). Yet, despite the allegiances to different political parties and their grassroots, there had been a shared consensus across the political spectrum, that Lithuania was to develop as a liberal democracy, following the pragmatic policies based on rationalism and the liberal values of a secular state.

The centre-right and the centre-left differed only in terms of interpretation of how pervasive the state institutions should be and how redistributive the economy ought to be in liberal democracy on a case-by-case basis. The centre-right traditionally tended to argue for a smaller state, while the centre-left advocated for strengthening the regulatory oversight and strengthening the role of the state in the national economy.

This centrist political consensus, to which most of the parliamentary parties subscribed for two decades, started to fracture in 2016 with the emergence of the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union. This new political force, which encompassed the elements of cultural conservatism and social liberalism, had overwhelmingly won the elections and embarked during its turn in power on the policies of strengthening the state structures and introducing more top-down governance, centralization and regulatory oversight.

The ideological political consensus had finally ruptured in 2020 when, after winning the elections and ousting the Farmers and Greens Union from power, the coalition of the centre-right parties came to power with a new agenda of the profound change of governance based on the ideologically-driven political programme.

The main difference between the former government's approach to governance and politics and the current one soon became evident. The difference in public governance between the two is not so much related to the interpretations of individual political issues and the reasoning over their rationale but caused by a more profound difference caused by the deep-seated ideological and value-based worldviews.

The opposition parties subscribe to the tenants of a new social liberalism, a political ideology that developed out of classical liberalism that advocated civil liberties under the rule

of law, emphasising economic freedom. This new social liberalism calls on the state to redress a social imbalance in increasingly ramified ways. It is informed by the idea of the welfare state, a form of government in which the state protects and promotes the economic and social well-being of the citizens, based upon the principles of equal opportunity, equitable distribution of wealth, and public responsibility for citizens unable to avail themselves of the minimal provisions for a good life. President Gitanas Nausėda, being versed in classical liberalism and Keynesian economics, has been standing firmly as a vociferous proponent of the welfare state which is close to the ideas purported by the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union and the centre-left driven by a new social liberalism.

The governing coalition parties represent a different worldview, which has been described in the literature as post-modern conservatism. It is a new form of political culture that came to the rise in the UK and the United States and, more recently, made its mark in Central and Eastern European countries. Post-modern conservatism includes the traditional elements of classical conservative, which is sceptical in viewing the use of reason as the enabler for determining human needs (and is thus increasingly averse to fact-driven policies) and the elements of the more recent forms of conservatism which prioritize realism instead of empiricism.

On 29 June, the governing party Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats held a party-sponsored conference where different views representing post-modern conservatism have been presented cohesively and discussed by the conservative thinkers and academics. The views echoing the ideas of Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, F.A. Hayek, Michael Oakeshott – these authors are seen as the main reference points for latter-day conservatism – have been accumulated to present for the first time a new post-modern conservative agenda for Lithuania. It holds the view that the conservative is a post-modern realist who rejects the pragmatic rationalism of classical liberalism driven by the understanding of the nature and the world around it based on reason and instead holds the belief that there is a fixed human nature which coincides with concrete human needs and will always be limited.

However, in Lithuania, this post-modern strain of conservatism has been often misleadingly misinterpreted as straight-forward cultural liberalism, leading to raised eyebrows among the pundits and the supporters, rising even doubts whether the conservatives in Lithuania are not abandoning their ideological values. Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė wrote an open letter to the conference members trying to provide her view on conservatism and explain the differences between the conservatism of the government and the ideas that are foreign to it. In her letter to the conference participants, the Prime Minister acknowledged that a gross

misinterpretation of conservatism has greatly saddened her. She admitted "that it is extraordinary to talk about the identity of political conservatism because conservatism is essentially allergic to theoretical declarations and abstract principles". According to the Prime Minister, conservatism "is a way of being in the world, trusting in reality rather than in disconnected schemes, realizing that the world is inhabited by concrete, unique people rather than abstract individuals. And it is because people are concrete and unique that human rights, derived from morality and the duty to respect the dignity of everyone, are completely inherent in conservatism".

The Prime Minister said that conservatism is a realistic view of the world, understanding that political actions have a context that must always be taken into account. According to her, the government must not be a passive observer but empower people, communities, institutions to act and unleash their strengths. "The government cannot live for the people themselves but must think responsibly about how to facilitate their activities, deciding when it is most appropriate to teach fishing and when it is most appropriate to give them the fish they have already caught", - stated the Prime Minister.

This type of post-modern conservatism, as reflected by the Prime Minister, argues for the empowerment of people and communities, yet, at the same, time emphasizes the importance of diminishing the role of the state in the interference in the private and collective lives of people. Hence, its wholehearted support for the rights of individuals and communities, including the LGBTQ people or any other individuals and communities sharing distinct identities that are relevant and essential to their lives. In contrast to the cultural traditionalism that the President and the opposition parties have adopted vis-a-vis the government, the conservatism promoted by the government is not inert and historically pre-defined. It develops according to the political realities guided by both an innate scepticism and realism at the same time. Such dichotomy, however, creates tensions that can lead to detachment from the voters, as the recent polls have shown.

The latest poll from the end of May and the beginning of June showed that the support for the government has dropped from 41 to 37 per cent. For the same period, the support for the Church and the President has increased by 5 and 3 per cent, respectively. The poll results indicate that the government's post-modern conservatism has not been met with much apprehension by its more traditionally-minded supporters. It also shows that the prospects of political support for the government would depend on whether the society would continue adhering to the traditional values or slowly start accepting the government's view of thinking.

References:

1. Lrytas.lt, Indrė Naureckaitė, “Sociologas V. Gaidys apie naujausius partijų reitingus: net nepamenu, kada buvo toks rezultatas (Sociologist V. Gaidys about the latest party rankings: don’t even remember when was such result), 26 June, 2021; <https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvosdiena/aktualijos/2021/06/26/news/sociologas-v-gaidys-apie-naujausius-partiju-reitingus-net-nepamenu-kada-butu-toks-rezultatas-19873921/>
2. Delfi.lt, ELTA, Benas Brunalas, “Naujausios apklausos: po įtampos kupino periodo – prastos žinios Šimonytės Vyriausybei” (Latest polls: bad news for Šimonytė's government after a period of tension), 30 June, 2021; <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/naujausios-apklauso-po-itampos-kupino-periodo-prastos-zinios-simonytes-vyriausybei.d?id=87591787>
3. Delfi.lt, Dalia Plikūnė, “Atviras Šimonytės laiškas konservatorių konferencijoje: jaučiuosi kiek paradoksaliai (Šimonytė's open letter at the Conservatives' conference: I feel a bit paradoxical)”, 29 June, 2021; <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/atviras-simonytes-laiskas-konservatoriu-konferencijoje-jauciuosi-kiek-paradoksaliai.d?id=87579799>
4. Delfi.lt, Valentinas Beržiūnas, “Gitano Nausėdos doktrina” (The doctrine of Gitanas Nausėda), 29 June, 2021, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/ringas/lit/valentinas-berziunas-gitano-nausedos-doktrina.d?id=87573243>
5. Youtube.com, Tėvynės sąjunga – Lietuvos krikščionys demokratai (Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats), “Konferencija “Nauji vėjai” (A conference “New Winds”)), 29 June, 2021; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gghNhatwcNE&t=18024s>
6. Matthew McManus, *The Rise of Post-Modern Conservatism: Neoliberalism, Post-Modern Culture and Reactionary Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.