Voices of Central and Eastern Europe

Lithuania Country Report

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Methodology

The outcomes and findings of this report are based on public opinion poll surveys carried out in March 2020 on a representative sample of the population in ten EU member states: Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. The surveys were conducted on a sample ranging from 1,000 to 1,047 respondents using stratified multistage random sampling in the form of computer assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) or computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI).

In all countries, the profiles of the respondents were representative of the country by gender, age, education, place of residence and size of settlement. For the purpose of graphical data visualisation in this report, the results were rounded to full numbers.

To improve the readers’ experience, the responses in closed questions with a scale were generalised. For example, a question with options definitely agree / rather agree / rather disagree / definitely disagree, was merged to agree / disagree for the purpose of both data visualisation.

Collection of opinion polls in each country was coordinated by FOCUS, s.r.o.

Introduction

Jolted by a fervent independence campaign that culminated in the country’s establishment, Lithuania has witnessed significant economic, political, and social progress over the past several decades. By joining both the NATO and EU alliances, the country has, in particular, seen an unprecedented level of stability.

Aspirations to secure further progress, however, are not without pitfalls as Lithuania risks internal divisions and a restless and disillusioned public if progress stalls over time. While much has indeed been achieved over a relatively brief period, reversing the effects of decades of Soviet rule is no easy task. Nor is ensuring continued development in a rapidly changing world that has endured numerous shocks over the past few decades. Other longstanding issues, moreover, remain stumbling blocks.

This situation is only further exacerbated by the need to alleviate the grievances of segments of the population that have been adversely impacted by the economic, technological, and societal changes that have accompanied Lithuania’s democratic transition. The upheavals of the 1990s posed a challenge for many and some were exposed to its negative repercussions more than others.

Despite 72% of Lithuanians expressing trust in the European Union, an institution that espouses democracy as a core value, there is notable ambivalence regarding the perceived suitability of democratic government. Lithuania is indeed among the greatest Euro-enthusiasts yet only 49% of Lithuanians see liberal democracy that includes regular elections and a multiparty system as their preferred form of government. This stands in sharp contrast to Poland and Hungary, two countries often reported to be suffering from democratic deficits but where 66% and 81% of the respective populations are supportive of democratic systems.

Democracy in Lithuania

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Democracy as a system

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Which of the following is better for your country?

Having a strong and decisive leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections.

Having liberal democracy with regular elections and multiparty system.

Do not know.

Magistrings regarding the performance of democratic governance in Lithuania (only 32% of Lithuanians are satisfied with how democracy works in the country); in particular, opens up space for society to contemplate the supposed benefits of a more authoritarian style of rule. In this respect, there remains a sizeable percentage of the population (21% in 2020) believing that Soviet times were better. This sentiment, however, has been steadily declining (the same question received affirmative responses from 29% of respondents in 2016), indicating that democracy may yet gain greater favour in the future. Any wrinkles inherent to Lithuania’s democracy, furthermore, can be ironed out through continued work and engagement over time.

Voices of Central and Eastern Europe: Lithuania Country Report

References:

5. 16/08/20: survey by CATI.
Also noteworthy is that around a third of Lithuanian respondents would be willing to trade their rights and freedoms (such as the freedom to travel, associate or engage in free speech) for either a better financial situation, enhanced national security or the preservation of traditional Lithuanian values. Overall satisfaction with democracy in Lithuania, moreover, remains fairly low. The number of those discontented with how democracy works in the country stands at 47% while just 32% are satisfied. A further 21% are uncertain on the matter.¹

Income inequality and social exclusion feature paramount here as factors that could be shaping mistrust and/or dissatisfaction with democracy, with Lithuania posting the second highest level of income inequality in the European Union in 2017.²

Corruption and nepotism, real or perceived, also hamper pro-democracy sentiment in the country. A recent study found that citizens have relatively little trust in municipal and state level institutions being able to adequately ensure transparent labour market competition.³ The study notes that due to the Soviet era legacy, Lithuanian labour relations and institutional practices are still plagued by cronyism. The extent to which corruption and nepotism are truly a problem in the country is debatable, however, considering that Lithuania holds 35th place on the Corruption Perceptions Index, hovering at around 60 points over the past few years, only slightly shy of the EU average of 66 points.⁴

As it relates to democracy itself, Lithuania ranked 36th in the world (a spot shared with Slovenia) in The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index 2019.⁵ The country scored well on electoral process, pluralism and civil liberties, receiving over 9 out of 10 points possible. Mediocre marks, meanwhile, were recorded on governance, political participation and political culture, with the country averaging around 6 and 6.5 points in these categories.

Potential reasons for the relatively low support for democracy in Lithuania:

- High levels of income inequality
- Challenges posed by perceived corruption and nepotism
- Lack of trust in state and municipal authorities
- Mediocre political culture
- High expectations for development
- Severe demographic decline⁶

Against the backdrop of Covid-19, a recent survey by local pollster Vilmorus reveals that distrust towards Lithuanian political parties and the country’s parliament is particularly pronounced while views of the cabinet are rather ambivalent. The institution of the presidency, trusted by a significant plurality, is a notable exception to this pattern. It is worth noting that the parliament, nevertheless, has seen darker days. A November 2010 survey, following the 2007–2008 financial crisis and the subsequent economic downturn, found that 90% of respondents distrusted the Lithuanian Seimas.⁷

Do you trust the following institutions in Lithuania? (Vilmorus data, July 2020)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parliament (Seimas)</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you trust the following institutions? (GLOBSEC data, March 2020)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courts and judiciary</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream media</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed forces</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Who is favoured in Lithuania?

- 71% believe that people with contacts to political elites
- 57% believe that people from the capital
- 47% believe that people living in a particular region or regions

The GLOBSEC study, conducted earlier this year before the pandemic truly had time to impact ratings, actually produced proportionately similar findings with respect to trust in political institutions. While comparing the changes brought about due to the coronavirus is complicated by the different methodologies employed, both studies’ data results further emphasise that there is very little trust in most of the country’s core political institutions aside from the office of the president.

This comes as no surprise, given how political culture and participation received somewhat mediocre ratings, as observed previously. Such circumstances create a vicious cycle where low participation and engagement with the political system could be resulting in lowered political competition, which, in turn, leads to lower political culture and, again, leaves voters disappointed and less engaged. Furthermore, while direct comparisons between the two datasets might be difficult, the very similar proportions seen in both polls indicate the level of negative perceptions of Lithuania’s political system entrenched among the country’s citizens.

The office of president stands alone among the top political institutions by having a mostly positive public perception. It benefits from the generally non-partisan status of the position in an environment where political parties are vastly unpopular. There is also a sizeable segment of society (27%) expressing a preference for a political system based on a strong and decisive leader at the helm rather than in the mainstream media, while 39% believe that it is not free. This insight is underlined by perceptions that 44% of Lithuanians express trust in the mainstream media, including through media pluralism and protection standards and protection are

The concept of the “two Lithuanias”

Over the past decade, the concept of what we call “the two Lithuanias” (sometimes even expanded to three) has emerged as a prominent narrative in Lithuanian political discourse. This paradigm sees the country split into opposing “camps” based on set socio-economic demographics and political narratives associated with them. The three most common dichotomies are urban - rural, highly educated - poorly educated and wealthy - poor. Depending on the actors articulating any given narrative, the opposing side is typically portrayed as over-represented politically and exerting disproportionate sway.

In a sense, this dichotomy can perhaps be best summarised as one that pits “elites” against “common citizens.” The narrative typically either focuses on the “elite” being in a privileged position and gaining wealth as it consumes of “common citizens” or on the “common citizens” being decisive in voting in “populist” or left “governments and receiving meagre short term benefits so as to be pacified.

With various groups disadvantaged at perceptions of undue influence by their rivals, this division further contributes to mistrust between different segments of society and dissatisfaction with democracy altogether. It also feeds into a blame game where each group faults one another for voting the “wrong” individuals into political office or engaging in “Hellt.” Witnessing growing inequality, widespread emigration and perceived oligarchic power, some groups feel marginalized and left out from the gains of the democratic transition over the past thirty years.

These attitudes are matched by perceptions that regular citizens have little power over decision making processes with Lithuanians estimating, on average, that Lithuanians influence at 3.59 on a scale of 10. This environment also likely contributes, despite the EU’s popularity among Lithuanians, to the widely held belief that the EU and Brussels dictate Lithuania what to do with the country having a say. This disillusionment in terms of participation in national politics undoubtedly is paralleled with similar levels of cynicism directed towards feelings of personal empowerment in EU policy making processes.

A total of 48% of Lithuanians express trust in the mainstream media, while 39% believe that it is not free. This insight is underlined by perceptions that 48% believe that oligarchs and strong financial groups hold sway over the news media.

These findings come against a backdrop where the media and corporate actors have come under increasing scrutiny over the past several years. A major business group, notably, has been accused of illegally influencing one of the country’s prominent political parties and in high risk areas for swaying minority opinions. What to do with the country having a say. This disillusionment in terms of participation in national politics undoubtedly is paralleled with similar levels of cynicism directed towards feelings of personal empowerment in EU policy making processes.

Media

- 20% of people feel like the political system in their country think that oligarchs and financial groups have strong control over the government
- 77% think that oligarchs and financial groups have strong control over the government

Of Lithuanians think that the needs of people like them are taken especially into account by the political system in their country

- 75% feel like their fellow citizens cannot be trusted
- 51% feel like their fellow citizens are not trustworthy
Key challenge of trust

As indicated above, there is little trust to be had in Lithuania, be it with respect to the government, the news media or even to fellow citizens. With such distrust directed in a variety of directions, the end-result is that there is less buy-in to ‘mainstream’ and ‘establishment’ narratives. Notable exceptions include the police (trusted by 78% of Lithuanians), the armed forces (65%)37, and the perennial trust rating leader – firefighters (90%).38 The reference here likely owes to the fact that these roles are more task-focused areas where success or failure is far more clear-cut. In areas, meanwhile, where results are up for partisan interpretation, institutions tend to be less trusted, exemplified in the only 34% level of trust expressed in the judiciary and the similar lack of trust in the news media. Importantly, the most popular state institutions have also largely avoided major scandals in contrast to the judiciary and the media. As a whole, it could perhaps be said that those on the receiving end of distrust are also those capable of changing the status quo or perceptions of it. With 70% of the population being satisfied with their lives, any potential upsetting of the status quo is liable to be met with scepticism.39 This understanding helps explain why a significant percentage of the population perceive migrants and LGBTI individuals as threats to their identity and values. While the general population may feel that they have little say in decision making processes in the country, they simultaneously might perceive minority groups as receiving undeserved media attention and exerting influence in national level discussions despite their minority status.

Judiciary

Low levels of trust in the judiciary (only 34% trust the courts)39 could be linked to perceptions that this branch of government is ineffective and sluggish, with court proceedings in high profile cases often turning into protracted events. And when guilty verdicts are delivered, sentencings is often considered insufficient. This sentiment has worsened since 2015 when data indicated that 48% of survey respondents saw the courts in a positive light.38 The biting remark “steal a million – receive a minor fine, perpetrate a minor felony – serve a decade in jail”, exemplifies such perceptions.

The fact that many cases involve business groups or interests, furthermore, serves to reinforce the perception that oligarchs and powerful lobby groups maintain political dominance in the country, both in the media and in government. A total of 77% of Lithuanians indeed perceive that oligarchs and financial groups have sway over government affairs in Lithuania and 48% say that oligarchs are among the most powerful groups when it comes to media influence (with only 37% of respondents agreeing that media in the country is free or rather free).40 By comparison, Estonian perceptions of their judicial system is vastly more positive, possibly explained by the fact that judicial proceedings in the country have been found to be among the most efficient and quickest in the entire European Union.32 That said, based on a 2020 EU Justice Scoreboard, Lithuania ranks fourth in terms of approximate time needed to resolve civil, commercial, administrative and other cases between 2012 and 2018, with Estonia ranking third.41 In 2019, moreover, Lithuania placed first, alongside Slovenia, in providing opportunities for the public to access online information about the judicial system. These findings suggest that the main challenges for the judiciary may come down to managing perceptions, particularly when handling high profile cases.

LGBTI community

While reforms and legislation ensuring LGBTI rights are undoubtedly essential, any move forward leads to backlash when there is insufficient education and information provided to the public, as indicated by 36% of Lithuanians believing that the LGBTI community is a threat to their identity and values. This is indeed the case for Lithuania, with the 2018 IGLYO Inclusive Education Report indicating that LGBTI content was non-present in the Lithuanian national curriculum, nor were teachers offered training on LGBTI awareness.42 A complementary challenge is while under the country’s Law on Protection of Minors Against the Detrimental Effect of Public Information, Article 4, “dissemination of any public information that incites bullying or humiliation on the basis of sexual orientation is therefore prohibited”.43, the same article also prohibits “dissemination of information which promotes different concepts of “marriage” and “family values” than the concepts established in the Lithuanian Constitution and Civil Code.” Discrimination is prohibited as per a number of laws and in a number of circumstances, but under current circumstances, there exist barriers to actually ensuring that the public is informed and aware.

Do you personally think people with other sexual orientations (LGBTI) threaten your identity and values?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>63%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>45-54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>25-34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

36% of Lithuanians believe the LGBTI community is a threat to their identity and values.42
30% of Lithuanian citizens feel that same sex marriage should be permitted in Europe.44
60% of a survey’s respondents found gay pride parades as clashing with Lithuanian public morals.45

Do you personally think people with other sexual orientations (LGBTI) threaten your identity and values?

In terms of the significant number of individuals (34%) perceiving Jews as having too much power, it is likely that these views are connected both to a historical legacy of anti-Semitism that has unfortunately continued into the present and to the specific historical memory of Lithuanians from the Second World War, the post-war Soviet occupation and the Holocaust.46 The Holocaust has particularly come sharply into focus over the past five years. This is on account of the fact that a number of Lithuanian freedom fighters, who fought against the Soviet armed forces following World War II, have faced accusations, generally substantiated, that they perpetrated Holocaust crimes.47

Euring debate connected to this issue have been accompanied by significant controversy, with individuals perceived as national heroes now being accused of having committed atrocious acts. In a number of cases, government representatives have taken action to remedy these past transgressions, initiative that has been perceived by some as favourable treatment of the Jewish community. Tensions have only been further exacerbated by the significant public and media attention that the moves have received and by Russian misinformation campaigns that function to incite chaos and sow discord into these delicate discussions.
Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the findings here of an insular and distrustful population could potentially be attributed to the fact that Lithuania is continuing to proceed on its transition from a socialist republic under the Soviet Union to an open and democratic society. There were vast expectations associated with this transition to democracy, including entry into the institutions of the Euro-Atlantic community and a restoration of the country. While there have been considerable achievements, the transition has also served as a major internal shock to the population, even as the world itself continues to transform following 9/11, the 2008-2009 financial crisis, the 2015 migrant crisis and most recently – the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent economic crisis. Given the difficult path that has already been trodden and the many challenges that still await, it comes as no surprise that enthusiasm for the course charted ahead may waver. This is especially pertinent considering the vigilant efforts of certain hostile countries and actors to see Lithuania - and democracy more broadly - veer off course. This environment can indeed leave members of society irresolute and spark them to discount the wisdom of particular policy directions. Some may choose to look back to the past, perhaps to a time when society was ruled by a strong leader rather than guided by democratic decision making. This ambiguity predisposes individuals to manipulation, be it from hostile state actors or simply opportunistic individuals, exacerbating the proliferation of conspiracy theories and misinformation and withering away an otherwise resilient society.

More information about the research can be found in the comparative English version Voices of Central and Eastern Europe. This analysis was financially supported by the National Endowment for Democracy as a part of the project Strengthening Public Diplomacy in Central Europe, implemented by GLOBSEC.

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