

**Lithuanian Election 2016: the Mainstream Left
and Right Rejected by Voters Angry with the
Establishment**

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Abstract:

In the 2016 Lithuanian parliamentary election the established political parties suffered an unexpected and crippling defeat at the hand of the Lithuanian Peasant and Green Union (*Lietuvos valstiečių ir žaliųjų sąjunga*, LVŽS), a populist one-size-fits-all formation. The aim of this article is to identify and analyze major reasons of the populist victory in Lithuania in the context of global trend of *trumpisation* of politics. The traditional message of the establishment parties to take care of the economy, to advance foreign investment and improve business climate did not appeal to voters, while the LVŽS made a point of talking about issues people wanted to hear: the need to tackle social exclusion and poverty; to address the privileged position of big business; to fight endemic corruption; to deal with the underfunding of education and culture. The electoral message of the winner combines the hard left promise of radical change on socioeconomic issues and the far right conservative approach to identity politics, human rights, minority rights, gender equality, and refugees. The LVŽS did its best to look as an anti-establishment, anti-party politics force, a loose and wide amalgam of contrasting personalities and contradicting messages. At the same time, the major factor behind the ‘revolutionary’ victory for radical change seems to be the inability of the mainstream parties to sense the change of sentiment of the electorate and to address the growing grievances of the public. The Lithuanian anti-establishment revolt is being compared with Donald Trump’s victory in the US, Brexit in the UK, Poland after the last election in 2015, and Hungary under Victor Orban.

Key words:

Lithuanian politics, Lithuanian election, party politics, populism, establishment, radicalism

Introduction: Green Peasants reverse the trend of political fragmentation

The victorious Lithuanian Peasant and Green Union (LVŽS) is an old-timer in Lithuanian politics, with its high point of having their contender Kazimiera Prunskienė in the second round of the 2004 presidential election, which she lost to President Valdas Adamkus. Otherwise LVŽS achievements in politics have been modest: a minor partner in the 2004–2008 left-of-center Government led by Prime Minister Algirdas Brazauskas, later by Gediminas Kirkilas. At that time the party was called differently—the Peasants and New Democracy Coalition – and had up to 14 seats in the Seimas (Lithuanian Parliament) and was part of the ruling four-party coalition led by the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (*Lietuvos socialdemokratų partija*, LSDP). In 2008–2012 the LVŽS had just two members in parliament, and after the parliamentary election in 2012 the LVŽS parliamentary representation was reduced to just one seat, although at the municipal level the party retained several strongholds, like Ignalina region in the North East Lithuania.

A year before the 2016 election, in October, opinion polls indicated some growth in popularity of the LVŽS; nevertheless, the landslide victory of the ‘Green Peasants’, as they are often called, by far exceeded any forecast, and 56 seats that the LVŽS won in the Seimas election in 2016 came as a tectonic shock.

The 56 seats in the 141-seat Seimas is not a majority, but the last time the outright parliamentary majority was won happened in the distant 1992 when the post-Communist Lithuanian Democratic Labor Party (*Lietuvos Demokratinė Darbo Partija*, LDDP) took 74 seats. In 1996, the Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats (*Tėvynės Sąjunga-Lietuvos krikščionys demokratai*, TS-LKD) with 70 seats won were a seat short of the majority, and in 2004 the Lithuanian Social-Democratic Party (LSDP, formerly LDDP) led the Social Democratic Coalition to gain 54 seats. This was the last time a single party won more than 50 seats. With the 2004 election, Lithuania entered a period of political fragmentation when elections were won with 40-something or even fewer seats, and ruling coalitions included three and more political parties.

A fresh start of the second-tier political old-timer LVŽS was orchestrated by twofold means: by the intake of new outside cadre to add more luster to the party list and by expanding its political appeal to cover every extreme of the ideological spectrum from far left to far right and everything in between.

Anti-system outsiders: the ones voters were dying for

Probably as early as 2015, LVŽS leader Ramūnas Karbauskis initiated a massive search and recruitment of the outside personalities to add weight to the party list. The celebrity hunt brought in Saulius Skvernelis, a popular former interior minister and former high-ranking police officer, not known for any particular political or ideological affiliation. The LVŽS ratings in the opinion polls went up past the announcement in March 2016 that Mr. Skvernelis would lead the party list and would be an official candidate of the party for the position of Prime Minister.

Although Saulius Skvernelis proved to be the undisputed crown jewel of the celebrity hunt, there were others to make the LVŽS list more attractive. Mr. Karbauskis succeeded in luring into his fold very different-minded people like Dovilė Šakalienė, an ultraliberal firebrand for minority causes; or Agnė Širinskienė, an academician of Christian Fundamentalist conviction; or Virginijus Sinkevičius, an up-and-coming professional combining economic liberalism and moderate conservatism on social issues; or professorial Eugenijus Jovaiša, an archeologist keen to glorify the power of Lithuanian nationalism; or Aurelijus Veryga, a fierce fighter against alcohol consumption and against the lobby of alcohol producers in Lithuania; or Justas Džiugelis, a disabled entrepreneur with an agenda to defend the rights of the disabled. All in all, out of the 56 initial members of the LVŽS fraction in parliament, only 26 had LVŽS membership, while 30 of them had no political party affiliation.

Moreover, the non-partisan character of the LVŽS offer was touted as an asset, which appeals to the public that has developed a certain degree of aversion to partisan politics. The popular view is that political parties have become a self-serving *nomenklatura* of politicians elected by party lists, who are spending decades in parliament while their ability to win in a first-past-the-post way in many cases is never put to the test (In the Lithuanian election system, half of the parliament – 70 seats – are filled with MPs elected in a proportional representation format where voters vote for a preferred party list; the remaining 71 seats are filled with MPs elected in a first-by-the-post format in 71 voting districts. In municipal elections, local councils are elected through a proportional representation procedure, while mayors are elected directly by a majority vote).

The non-partisan aspect was further emphasized by declaring that the ruling LVŽS-led coalition would form a technocratic government of professionals. Indeed, the Government of Prime Minister Skvernelis has only one member of the LVŽS (Bronius Markauskas, minister of

agriculture); the other two partisan ministers (Linas Linkevičius, foreign affairs minister, and Dainius Sinkevičius, economics minister) have been appointed by the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (LSDP), a junior member of the ruling coalition. Probably the best summing up of the non-partisan strategy of the LVŽS is provided by the political analyst Rima Urbonaitė who said: “They offered an oxymoron: politics without politics” (Urbonaitė 2016). Her opinion is seconded by Liutauras Gudžinskas, president of the Association of Lithuanian Political Scientists, who said: “In Lithuania, a situation is unfolding where the anti-party sentiment is becoming increasingly important” (Vireliūnaitė 2016).

The manifestly non-partisan electoral philosophy indicates that LVŽS strategists have learned the two-year-old lesson of the 2014 municipal election better than the mainstream political parties. The distinguishing feature of the last local election was the unexpected success of so called Public Electoral Committees (*Visuomeniniai rinkimų komitetai*, VRK), loose political formations claiming non-partisanship and aspiring to some sort of direct democratic action or at least a more direct democratic action than the traditional political party representation in Lithuania would allow.

Although all over Lithuania VRK gathered just over 10% of the vote (all the political parties won 1,008,493 votes in total, while VRK secured 121,196), specific Public Electoral Committees were successful in four important cities. In Kaunas, the second largest city in the country, the Public Electoral Committee ‘United Kaunas’ (*Vieningas Kaunas*) received 35,738 votes, the largest share of seats at the city council, and assumed leadership in the ruling coalition, meanwhile the ‘United Kaunas’ candidate for the mayor’s post, Visvaldas Matijošaitis, got 117,310 votes and won by a landslide (All vote numbers are the official data of the Lithuanian High Electoral Commission, *Vyriausioji rinkimų komisija*). Candidates of various Electoral Committees won mayoral elections in Panevėžys, Šiauliai and Alytus. All four cities are former industrial centers, economically lagging behind the capital city Vilnius, and could be considered a Lithuanian equivalent of the rust belt in the US, which largely favored Donald Trump. Mayoral candidates backed by non-partisan Public Electoral Committee ousted the incumbent mayors supported by the mainstream political parties. All in all, in the four major cities, VRK non-partisan formations dealt a heavy blow to the established parties. Kaunas and, earlier, Panevėžys were considered strongholds of the conservative TS-LKD, while Šiauliai and Alytus used to be controlled by the left-of-center LSDP.

Differently from a municipal election, a Public Electoral Committee-type structure is not formally allowed in a parliamentary election, so the LVŽS succeeded in accomplishing a complicated balancing act to look as non-partisan as possible and at the same time to remain a political party still to be allowed legally to run in the national election.

The winning formula: one-size-fits-all ideology

On a parallel course, Ramūnas Karbauskis and his team have labored to reshape the political message of the LVŽS to make it embrace sometimes extremely diverse ideas brought in by the accumulated personality miscellany of the party list.

Historically, the LVŽS gradually transmuted from an outfit focused purely on agriculture to one representing a broader spectrum of issues. More than two decades ago the LVŽS started as a genuinely agrarian party named the Lithuanian Peasant Union (*Lietuvos Valstiečių Sąjunga*), in 1994 renamed the Lithuanian Peasant Party (*Lietuvos valstiečių partija*). In 1995 the party made their first pitch trying to reach different segments of the population when it joined forces with the Lithuanian Women Party (*Lietuvos moterų partija*), later renamed the New Democracy Party (*Naujosios demokratijos partija*) led by Kazimiera Prunskienė, a former prime minister. The Lithuanian Peasant Party subsequently was renamed the Lithuanian Peasant and the New Democracy party. In 2005 the party was renamed one more time to become the Lithuanian Peasant People's Party (*Lietuvos valstiečių liaudininkų partija*) to highlight the continuity with the interwar period party of the same name and also to point up the party's leanings towards the Left. The last time the change of name took place was in 2012 when the party was given the current title the Lithuanian Peasant and Green Union, reflecting the fact that the party and its chairman Karbauskis took a stance to defend renewable energy and to fight against plans to build a new, cutting-edge technology nuclear power plant in Visaginas, the home of the Ignalina nuclear plant with a Soviet type RBMK reactor, which was shut down by the end of 2009.

Although prior to the last parliamentary election in 2012 the LVŽS had already developed some liking for eclectic policies, such as combining, somewhat schizophrenically, both the interests of agriculture and the elements of green policies, by the 2016 election eclecticism became a major constituting principle of the LVŽS electoral platform. As a result, the Green Peasants were able to achieve the undisputed victory by exploiting a catch-all

ideological hodgepodge: the mixture of the extreme left in economic matters and the extreme right in some social issues, all spiced up with an anti-establishment rhetoric of radical change.

The central message of the LVŽS was that the people had been increasingly impoverished by the decades of liberal policies cultivated by the ‘evil system’ embodied by the established parties, no matter left or right. The central promise of the LVŽS was to address growing social exclusion and poverty, which is a fitting task, since 29.3% of the Lithuanian population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2015, well above the EU average of 23.7%, according to the latest available data of the Eurostat (Eurostat 2015). The leftist mouthpieces among the party leaders, like the deputy chairman Tomas Tomilinas, avouched that at the root of the extreme social polarization was the habitually pro-business policy practiced both by the Social Democrats and the Conservatives, so the voters could put a stop to these ‘forces of global neo-liberalism’ by voting LVŽS (Ironically, Ramūnas Karbauskis, the LVŽS leader, would also talk occasionally about social exclusion in spite of the fact that he himself is a multimillionaire and the biggest landowner in the country, taking the 9th place on the 2016 list of Lithuania’s richest people, with wealth accumulated in land trade, industrial farming and the trade in Russian-made fertilizers and agricultural machinery).

The LVŽS also dwelled on a growing gap between the relative prosperity of the elitist capital city of Vilnius and the rest of Lithuania, where high unemployment and lack of prospects for economic, social and cultural recovery are driving young people *en masse* to look for jobs in the UK, Ireland, Norway, Spain and some other European countries, as well as the USA and Canada. It is believed that, since Lithuania regained independence from the Soviet Union in 1990, some 825,000 or almost one third of the total population has left the country (European Migration Net 2016). Mass emigration is widely perceived as a strategically damaging trend that is emptying the Lithuanian countryside and small provincial towns of inhabitants and pushing the Lithuanian demographic situation further off balance. The Lithuanian social care system is already overstretched, as, according to the last official data available, the number of pensioners in 2015 was 912,000, while the employed and productive population made 1,317,000 (Department of Statistics 2017).

In its electoral action plan ‘The Government Program for Sustainable Lithuania’ (*Darnios Lietuvos Vyriausybės programa*), the LVŽS was promising to move the problem of two-speed Lithuania to the forefront of their agenda: “the tackling of poverty and regional exclusion must

become a priority task for the new government. Acknowledging that the economic reason for high unemployment and emigration is relatively low pay, we will take expeditious and efficient measures to increase the income of the population, and at the same time we will seek to ensure a proper social safety net” (LVŽS 2016: 58). Reflecting a peasant side of the LVŽS history (and, coincidentally, aligned with Mr.Karbauskis’s business interests in agriculture) the LVŽS program puts a special emphasis on ‘the preservation of vitality of the Lithuanian countryside’ (LVŽS 2016: 53-58).

The leftist part of the split psyche of the LVŽS pledged a sharp turn left: by promising to take care of a common man, by making an overtly populist commitment to painless employee-friendly reforms in education and healthcare, a hike in pensions and a promise to somehow increase salaries, including in the private sector. The LVŽS also assured voters that it would suspend and revise the pro-business Labor Code, which had been hastily pushed through parliament by the Social Democratic Government of Prime Minister Algirdas Butkevičius.

One of the key issues in the LVŽS election campaign was a promise to apply extreme measures to combat the acute problem of massive alcohol consumption in Lithuania. Among a variety of means to limit the accessibility of alcohol, the LVŽS promised an increase in the alcohol excise tax, a total ban on alcohol advertising and the enforcement of state monopoly in the alcohol trade. Drinking is a scourge that devastates Lithuania: according to the World Health Organization, in 2014, the latest data available, with 17.8 liter of pure alcohol consumption per head, Lithuania is among the leading countries in the world (WHO 2014). Another salient campaign slogan was a pledge to create a state-run network of pharmacies in order to reduce the price of medications. The LVŽS also promised a heavy-handed zero tolerance approach on corruption.

At the conservative end of the schismatic LVŽS thinking, the first section of the LVŽS program is pointedly dedicated to the notion of a ‘strong family’, which is explained in an extremely conservative way, literally as a patriarchal traditional family, to be supported morally against abnormal modern ideas as well as financially in order to boost the birth-rate. The social conservatism of the LVŽS takes the Catholic Church teaching to the extreme with regard to abortion, same-sex partnerships and assisted reproductive technologies. The fundamentalist stance is led by the aforementioned Mrs. Širinskienė.

At the same time, inside the LVŽS, Christian fundamentalism is coupled with neo-paganism. Ramūnas Karbauskis and his close following are fascinated with the self-invented version of Lithuanian neo-paganism. In his first Christmas greetings as the leader of the ruling party at the Seimas, Karbauskis presented an animation story explaining Christmas as a purely pagan ritual, featuring mythical figures of the nine-horn deer, the Sun, the blacksmith, the mythical goat and so on (DELFI 2016).

To complete the doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hide case in the LVŽS understanding of family, the already mentioned Dovilė Šakalienė, a member of the LVŽS parliamentary faction and former head of the Lithuanian Institute for Human Rights, is staunchly defending women rights, minority rights, including the idea of civil partnership for gay couples.

The eclecticism of political ideas, ideologies and even religions obviously helps to meet the expectations of a wider spectrum of voters than narrowly ideological parties would be able to attract. Deliberate eclecticism works even better in the society where many are immersed in an inarticulate primeval farrago of contradictory ideas, beliefs and superstitions, similar to LVŽS ideas. In her decades-long research of voter preferences in Lithuania, Ainė Ramonaitė, a political scientist at the International Relations and Political Sciences Institute of Vilnius University, points to the entrenched aversion of the voters to any ideology. “Our analysis shows [...] that abstract ideological labels like right-left, liberalism and so on by themselves do not mean much. Those who call themselves liberals could be intolerant of minorities or support redistribution through taxation, just like the Christian Democrats or the Social Democrats. While trying to understand on what grounds people choose a preferred ideology, one cannot help thinking that the choice of ideology follows the choice of the party people decide to vote for, not vice versa” (Ramonaitė, Jastramskis 2014: 143-144).

The irresistible us-against-them narrative

So far the road system of Lithuania’s capital Vilnius does not have a completed beltway, but the LVŽS succeeded in convincing the public there exists a political Beltway, inside which the self-centered and self-serving establishment is wheeling and dealing, while the people are left out in the cold without the slightest chance to make an impact on decision making. Since the plight of the ordinary people ‘proves’ that the establishment parties, first of all, the Social Democrats and the Conservatives, have betrayed them, the LVŽS was able to position itself as

the ‘first’ political force that is ‘truly’ of the people, by the people and for the people. In the electoral narrative of Ramūnas Karbauskis, the Social Democrats and the Conservatives have been governing Lithuania interchangeably for two decades, their ideological differences being only on paper, while in reality both pursue an identical no-limits free-market policy, which impoverishes large chunks of the population. As presented by Karbauskis, wild capitalism in this country has run amok, poverty and social polarization are out of control, and the established parties must take the blame for that; therefore, they cannot be trusted anymore. Lithuania’s ‘salvation’ depends on an outside force, not tainted with corrupt practices of the previous governments; so Lithuania’s best hope, according to Karbauskis, is the repainted LVŽS: a non-partisan party that the disappointed people could trust once again.

This truly people’s party comes with the promise of radical change—redistributing public wealth in favor of a regular Joe; thus the resistance of the elitist establishment will be desperate, the LVŽS leader Karbauskis duly promised. Immediately after the election he forewarned about a massive attack by the establishment which would soon follow, including by the ‘liberal’ media, aiming to stymie the good intentions of the election victors, but to this pressure they would not succumb. Via Facebook Karbauskis declared: “No matter how much smear, malice or scorn is thrown at us, I must assure you that we will not waver, and we will take on change Lithuania has awaited for more than two decades” (Karbauskis 2016).

As if taking inspiration from Donald Trump, during the first months in power, Karbauskis quickly shifted the blame for the early scandals of the LVŽS to the media and the conspiracy of the establishment. Both before and after the election, Karbauskis has borne considerable likeness to Trump in managing a manipulative us-against-them narrative and in using social media to shoot from the hip without much deliberation. Karbauskis is the Lithuanian equivalent of Trump also in the sense that, being a multimillionaire, he sometimes has problems with remembering what he actually owns. It was disclosed that in the obligatory declaration of income, assets and liabilities, Karbauskis failed to declare several valuable pieces of real estate in downtown Barcelona, Spain, as well as a loan that amounts to hundreds of thousands of euros.

And, similarly to Trump, being superrich was not an obstacle to portray himself as a champion of the ordinary people although Karbauskis sounded more socialist in declaring war against the forces of capitalism which made them poor (overlooking the fact that the same capitalism made him rich). In both cases consistency might be wanting; nevertheless, Karbauskis

and the LVŽS adroitly constructed a captivating narrative of the classical opposition between ‘us’ as the force for good against ‘them’, the selfish elite.

The mainstream failed to change the old mantra

The appeal of the LVŽS for the voters was much facilitated by the mainstream parties themselves. The LSDP, the leader of the ruling coalition in 2012–2016, was plagued by corruption scandals, especially during the past two years in government. Although Algirdas Butkevičius, the chairman of the LSDP and the then Lithuanian Prime Minister, for the better part of his term was the second most popular politician after President Dalia Grybauskaitė – even earning a nickname of Teflon Prime Minister, his popularity started to dwindle after his son-in-law’s public relations company had been exposed in a shady public procurement deal in 2015.

The crushing blow to the LSDP’s reputation came in early 2016 when the scandal of the so called Vijūnėlė Mansion (*Vijūnėlės dvaras*) erupted. The word ‘mansion’ is a popular sarcastic description of the sizeable and ostentatious lake-shore property, built in the Southern Lithuanian spa of Druskininkai allegedly by Ričardas Malinauskas, mayor of the spa and, at that time, one of the leading LSDP politicians nationally. Firstly, he is suspected of having constructed the mansion against the law of the day and, secondly, of twisting hands of the members of the Government, including Prime Minister Butkevičius himself, to change the regulation in order to make the property legal. The transcripts of the phone conversations surfaced in which the mayor was unceremoniously tasking a Government minister with amending the current legislation.

More generally, in addition to the now routinely unscrupulous muddle of public and private interests, the mansion scandal has exposed an opulent life style of the influential member of the LSDP, a party which in theory is vowing to take care of the working man and not of *nouveau riche* with party cards.

The reputation of Mr. Butkevičius and the LSDP was also badly dented by a few more scandals related to the abuse of public procurement. One of them was the Golden Spoons scandal when the Lithuanian Defense Ministry under the minister Juozas Olekas, an influential Social Democrat, bought hugely overpriced cutlery for the army. Also there were allegations of siphoning public funds in state-run enterprises, especially the practices revealed by the ongoing investigation of the big public company Lithuanian Railways (*Lietuvos geležinkeliai*). Among other things there is a suspicion that the company was engaged in various forms of pork barrel

spending in constituencies of heavyweight Social Democrats, including Butkevičius. All in all, the LSDP approached the election in a cloud of corruption hanging over it.

Moreover, politically, the LSDP made a suicidal move to advocate a revision of the Labor Code, which mostly favored the demands of the business community and largely ignored the wishes of the trade unions, in spite of the fact that most of the unions had been faithfully supportive of the LSDP and many of the union leaders are members of the LSDP. The legislative procedures which enacted the revised Labor Code could not come at a worse time: although the Code itself was adopted in June 2016 and subsequently vetoed by President Dalia Grybauskaitė, the Seimas overturned the presidential veto of the Code just a month before the election on 14 September 2016. This means that for good three months before the election the public space was overwhelmed with the presidential criticism of the Code. Among other things, in July 2016, President Grybauskaitė expressed dismay at the government that had brutally steamrolled the Labor Code proposals of their social partners. In an interview to *Lietuvos rytas TV* she said: “I was astonished at the total dehumanization of those in power. We undertake reforms not for the sake of some abstract creatures, but for the sake of the Lithuanian people. Or are we undertaking reforms for some aliens who will be living here? Such reforms [as the Labor Code] are further marginalizing our own people, undermining their trust in the government and fueling a sense that the people are not heeded: with all of this we push them even more to emigrate” (ELTA 2016).

As the LSDP, the main party of the ruling coalition, effectively imploded in the run-up to the election, the situation should have favored the opposition, but the opposition managed to dodge what at some point looked like a certain victory and hand it over to the LVŽS. The opposition ruined their chances with a series of missteps of their own making.

Since the defeat in the 2012 election, the conservative Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD), the main opposition party, was immersed in the process of generation change and search of a new leader. In May 2015, Gabrielius Landsbergis, a 34-year-old grandson of Vytautas Landsbergis, the icon of Lithuania’s fight for independence, was elected chairman of the TS-LKD. With a smart usage of social media, the new leader attracted an additional number of young voters in the first round of the election when the TS-LKD won the party list vote with 21%, but the party effectively collapsed in the second round, ending up with 31 seat. The result was two seats down from 2012, when the party was led by Prime

Minister Andrius Kubilius who at the time became a public hate figure after the four years of austerity policies aimed to rescue the country from the severe economic crisis in 2009.

Many believe that Gabrielius Landsbergis lost the election in the two weeks between the first and the second round when his inexperience and lack of sensitivity became apparent, especially when he was savaged in a TV debate by Ramūnas Karbauskis, who skillfully exposed the young opponent's willingness to carry out painful reforms in education or healthcare without much consideration for the employees of these sectors. Political analysts also largely agree that the overall message of Landsbergis and the TS-LKD to improve the investment climate in order to create jobs sounded bookish and out of touch with the ordinary people. While Karbauskis and the LVŽS poured loads of generous promises of instant relief to the needy, hurt and humiliated by the evil forces of the free market, the TS-LKD was promising further assistance to the very same evil forces of the free market.

At the beginning of 2016, the second biggest opposition party, the unfalteringly pro-business Lithuanian Liberal Union (*Lietuvos Liberalų Sąjūdis*, LLS) in opinion polls was on an equal footing with the Conservatives, sharing a third place behind the ruling Social Democrats and the rising LVŽS. The LLS looked set to fare well in the October election until May when Eligijus Masiulis, chairman of the LLS and its presidential hopeful, was caught red-handed with an alleged €109,000 bribe, hidden in a drink box and delivered by the vice-president of the MG Baltic conglomerate, an oligopoly which commands a major market share in hard liquor production as well as a major share of Lithuania's clothing retail market. Although the case is still under investigation and yet to reach court, the ratings of the LLS plummeted and, in the end, the Lithuanian liberals were glad to get 14 seats: four seats up compared with the 2012 election, but much less than expected before the money-in-the-drink-box embarrassment.

To sum up, in this context, the established parties have been increasingly perceived as detached from the voters, clinging to their passé mercantile free-market economism and not able to find a kind word for the poor and the weak in times when the crowd-pleasing LVŽS wooed the people by saying that the party feels their pain and has a cure for everything.

Conclusions: the mainstream could recover if a lesson is learned

Ramūnas Karbauskis might be inspired not only by Donald Trump. He also bears some likeness to Jaroslaw Kaczynski by his refusal to take a senior position in the Government or Parliament after the election. Instead, the head of the LVŽS party, an election winner by a

landslide, opted for a humble seat of the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee for Culture and the leader of the LVŽS faction in the Seimas. The intention, clearly, was to direct politics from behind the scenes, while publicly trumpeting something like ‘we are here not for the power grab, but for the people’.

The aspiration for the grey eminence act has received a beating as the LVŽS and Karbauskis blunder through the considerable chaos of the first months in government. The new rulers are taking a battering, because the public is dissatisfied with the first broken promises and revelations of a more private kind. Karbauskis, officially a devoted champion of ‘strong traditional family’, is engulfed in a scandal around his relationship with a fellow party functionary and LVŽS member of parliament, a divorcee who received, in dubious circumstances, a luxury car from Karbauskis’s company *Agrokonzernas*, while his wife and children have been living separately in Spain for years. True or false, speculation about the extra-marital affair, which involves generous material benefits for the alleged amorous alternative, has substantially undermined Karbauskis’s public profile, leaving the technocratic Skvernelis an uncontested leader in charge of Government policies.

At the level of government policies, little has been achieved so far and in some cases the new government is backtracking from what was promised: the idea of a state monopoly in the alcohol trade has been abandoned; the negotiation over the disputed Labor Code is stalling. At the same time, the Skvernelis Government adopted a law that will facilitate the immigration of foreign skilled workers that the Lithuanian labor market is said to be short of. The measure is supported by the industrial lobby and protested by critics, like the economist Aušra Maldeikienė, an independent member of parliament, who are anxious that the intake of cheap work force from Belarus, Ukraine, Russia and beyond will freeze the salaries of Lithuanian workers.

Leaving aside the inevitable initial disruptions, the LVŽS Government under so far blemish-free and much respected Skvernelis still has its chance to level out the course, especially if helped by the popular President Grybauskaitė.

While the ability of the LVŽS to fulfill ample and contradictory promises is being tested and their first steps and missteps closely watched, it is too early to declare the end of party politics and democracy as we know it. As far as Lithuania is concerned, it is difficult to unconditionally accept the main point made by Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris that, all over the world, populist challenger victories – like Trump’s or Brexit – over the establishment are

powered by a cultural backlash against progressive ideas which went too far (Inglehart, Norris 2016). In Lithuania's case, the victory of the populist challenger can be primarily explained by the simple fact that the mainstream parties did a poor job in running the country and preparing for the election.

The early snags the LVŽS Government is hitting give room for the mainstream parties to turn the tide. The analysis of Inglehart and Norris could be applicable to the current Lithuanian situation in so far as the researchers admit that there is a certain moment of equilibrium in which both populist challengers could consolidate their gains or, on the contrary, the established parties could make a comeback. According to Inglehart and Norris, the cultural backlash (in the Lithuanian case the alleged public disapproval of 'neoliberal' paradigm) 'generates tensions and divisions within mainstream parties' and allows 'new opportunities for populist leaders on the left and right to mobilize electoral support, although it still remains challenging for populist parties to build an organizational base and to sustain any temporary breakthroughs if they enter government coalitions and become part of the establishment'. The evolving situation –when the establishment and populists both believe they can overwhelm each other – means that “Western societies face more unpredictable contests, anti-establishment populist challenges to the legitimacy of liberal democracy, and potential disruptions to long-established patterns of party competition” (Inglehart, Norris 2016: 31).

With a certain degree of caution, the Lithuanian political commentator Kęstutis Girnius views the Lithuanian election result as a continuation of the global trend of the demise of traditional political parties: “The number and influence of non-traditional political parties is growing considerably: one could name the Italian Five Stars movement, Spanish Podemos, Greek Syriza as well as the Polish, Slovak, Hungarian ruling parties and, perhaps, the Lithuanian Peasant and Green Union party” (Girnius 2016).

The British weekly *The Economist*, a stalwart supporter of liberal thought, would certainly ascribe the Lithuanian case to what it sees as an advance of 'illiberal democracy': “If you believe, as *The Economist* does, in open economies and open societies, where the free exchange of goods, capital, people and ideas is encouraged and where universal freedoms are protected from state abuse by the rule of law, then this has been a year of setbacks. Not just over Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, but also the tragedy of Syria, abandoned to its suffering, and widespread support – in Hungary, Poland and beyond – for 'illiberal democracy'.

As globalization has become a slur, nationalism, and even authoritarianism, has flourished” (*The Economist* 2016).

The major factor behind the ‘revolutionary’ victory for radical change in Lithuania still seems to be the inability of the mainstream parties to sense the changing sentiment of the electorate and to address the growing grievances of the public over social inequality spiraling out of control, the overt bullying of the political system by big businesses. It is a general stagnation of the establishment parties, which manifests itself in leadership problems, perceived arrogance towards the man in the street, low trust and fragmentation. In sum, it is not so much a LVŽS victory, but the establishment’s defeat of its own making. The question is whether the Lithuanian mainstream parties will be able to learn the lesson of the LVŽS revolution and get to the next general election in 2020 renovated, rejuvenated and reinvigorated with a new message that the people would care for. Editors of *The Spectator*, a rather conservative British weekly, in the leading article, are reminding politicians of what is to be done: “There can be a tendency among politicians to confuse their own disorientation with the end of the world – when, in fact, the world is doing rather well. [...] For almost two centuries, it has offered a lesson in how to handle what is too often called populism: if you respond to what is troubling people, the ‘populism’ tends to go away” (*Spectator* 2016).

The mainstream parties can certainly recover their strength, provided they take on board the message the voters are sending them in Lithuania as well as in Poland, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, France, Netherlands or might be soon sending in Germany. The establishment must find ways to reconnect with voters in a credible way. At the cost of the electoral defeat, the mainstream parties in Lithuania were given precisely the lesson *The Spectator* is writing about: if you are not addressing the grievances of the people, the populists will do it for you. In Lithuania, a municipal and presidential election in 2019 will give early indications whether the lesson has been learned, with a final verdict coming with a 2020 parliamentary election.

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