



PISM

POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

BULLETIN

No. 57 (1303), 10 May 2019 © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski • Bartosz Wiśniewski • Rafał Tarnogórski

Sebastian Płóciennik • Patrycja Sasnal • Justyna Szczudlik • Daniel Szeligowski
Jolanta Szymańska • Marcin Terlikowski • Szymon Zaręba • Tomasz Żornaczuk

The Likely Impact of the Presidential Election on Lithuania's Foreign Policy

Kinga Raś

Lithuania's presidential election on 12 May will determine key directions of the country's foreign policy, as the president, in cooperation with the government, is responsible for leading it. Now, after two terms in office, President Dalia Grybauskaitė gives way. Although Lithuania's foreign policy priorities will be maintained, they may be adjusted, including relations with Poland. The range of changes is likely to be small if one of the opposition candidates wins, but it could be significant if Saulius Skvernelis, the current prime minister and presidential candidate, wins the election.

The Election Calendar, Political Context. The upcoming presidential election is part of this year's rich political calendar in Lithuania. Already in March, local government elections took place, which were won by a slight margin by the opposition conservatives (Homeland Union–Lithuanian Christian Democrats, or TS-LKD). The campaigns for European Parliament are now in progress. TS-LKD can count on three out of Lithuania's 11 seats, as many as the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (LVŽS), which forms the government and slightly leads in the latest polls with 17.1% of support from voters.

Presidential elections traditionally enjoy high turnout, and this year's will be accompanied by a nationwide referendum on several issues. Lithuanian citizens will answer whether they agree to dual citizenship for people living in countries that meet certain "Euro-Atlantic criteria", which, however, have not yet been defined. They will also decide whether they want to reduce the number of deputies from 141 to 121, which would correspond to the decreasing Lithuanian population and lower the costs of parliament.

Election Scenarios. The country's Central Electoral Commission has registered nine presidential candidates but only three are currently the favourites: the representative of the conservatives, Ingrida Šimonytė (polling at 26.2%, according to data from April); independent candidate and economist Gitanas Nausėda (24.6%); and, Prime Minister Skvernelis (16.6%). The other candidates have significantly less support.

Šimonytė represents TS-LKD and she has strong backing from the most popular opposition party (16.5%, the most of any party). In addition, of the three favourites, she has the most political experience. For years, she has been associated with the public finance and banking sectors, including stints as the minister of finance (2009-2012) and vice-president of the management board of the Bank of Lithuania.

Nausėda counts on voters appreciating his "freshness" on the political scene and lack of entanglements in various affairs. An economist associated with the private banking sector, he has the support of centrist and right-wing circles. At the same time, he is trying to attract the leftist electorate, focusing among his priorities on, for example, the welfare state and the need to increase the role of social dialogue.

Based on pre-election polls, Skvernelis has the most difficult path to the second round. His political experience, gained among others as Minister of the Interior (2014-2016) and now prime minister, is undermined by the ineffective actions of his cabinet, including the hastily implemented reform of higher education, and

controversial changes in the teachers' pay system and the worsening situation of the healthcare system. It's unlikely his support will increase either because he's locked into a conflict with the popular outgoing president, who enjoys the trust of over 60% of the public. Grybauskaitė has repeatedly criticized both the current activities of the government and the prime minister himself, among others, for statements that seem to divide Latvia from Lithuania as an ever-increasing competitor and for the controversial and ill-fated attempt to negotiate with the Belarusian authorities regarding the power plant in Ostrowiec.

Foreign and European Policy. While the presidential election likely will not result in a change in the main objectives of Lithuania's foreign policy, the nuances of its priority directions may have some significant differences, such as in transatlantic and European cooperation or relations with Russia.

Russia's foreign policy, including its aggression towards Ukraine and intensification of cyber and propaganda activities, still will be perceived by Lithuania as the main threat to its security and the most important determinant of its foreign policy. While Šimonytė supports the development of EU security policy and closer cooperation between the Member States in this area, Nausėda stresses that these measures should not be an alternative to NATO.

At the same time, all candidates declare that the U.S. will remain a strategic partner. Skvernelis is the most favourable to American policy, suggesting, for example, that Lithuania could follow the U.S. and move its embassy to Jerusalem. In turn, the most critical of U.S. policy remains Nausėda. He negatively assesses, among others, [the recent U.S. recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights](#). Šimonytė has taken a restrained position on this matter, suggesting that Lithuania should not oppose the U.S.

Another subject of the campaign is the development of economic cooperation with Russia. This idea is supported by PM Skvernelis, who calls for pragmatism in relations with Lithuania's neighbour. He notes the benefits of Lithuanian exports to Russia, which in 2017 increased by 27%. On the other hand, Nausėda opposes maintaining bilateral relations with Russia at a high political level until it fulfils certain international obligations, including the Minsk agreements concerning Ukraine. However, he supports the development of relations in their economic and socio-cultural dimensions. In turn, Šimonytė is the firmest in this respect, arguing that only a change in policy by Russia can result in the renewal of relations.

The elements of Lithuania's European policy, including its position on the future EU budget or support for deepening integration, may also be an element that changes after the election. Compared to Skvernelis, Šimonytė in economic matters is the most liberal and anti-excessive interventionist. Nausėda, on the other hand, said he understands the need to increase contributions to the EU budget and does not oppose economic migration but requires a guarantee of equal remuneration.

Each candidate stresses the importance of relations with Poland, both from a security perspective and due to common energy and logistics projects. The prime minister, who has repeatedly participated in bilateral and multilateral high-level meetings with Polish representatives, is most in favour of strengthening cooperation. Nausėda announced that he would go to Warsaw with his first state visit. However, he speaks cautiously about tightening bilateral relations, bearing in mind Poland's disputes with the European Commission. In turn, Šimonytė laconically refers to future relations with Poland, although at the same time indicating the need for their further development. In addition, she supports solutions to problems involving the Polish minority in Lithuania, declaring, among others, a willingness to liberalise regulations on the original spelling of names and surnames.

Conclusions. The presidential election in Lithuania marks the end of Grybauskaitė's second term in office and her steady hand on Lithuanian foreign policy over the last decade. Whoever takes office after this popular president will face a challenge as the new head of state. According to the polls, none of the candidates equals her in popularity. Slight differences in the rankings of the leading candidates promise tight competition into the second round of the elections.

A victory by Nausėda or Šimonytė would mean the continuation of cohabitation and the consolidation of the political conflict between the president and the government. Skvernelis's victory would give full power to the ruling camp and would contribute to greater coherence in the implementation of foreign policy.

In order to increase its security, [Lithuania, like Poland, will continue to strive for strengthening NATO's Eastern Flank](#). Lithuania's EU policy, for example, on the Union's Eastern policy and in the implementation of joint logistics and energy projects, will remain consistent with Poland's priorities. Lithuania and Poland both oppose transferring competences [from the states and the idea of a "multi-speed" EU in integration](#). However, as a member of the eurozone, Lithuania may support solutions Poland finds unfavourable, for example, deepening integration in the euro area, especially with economic and financial issues the domain of two of the leading candidates.

The presidential election in Lithuania represents an opportunity to improve and strengthen bilateral relations with Poland. There is a chance for this especially if the prime minister wins, based on the government's actions. Despite the statement about liberalising spelling rules of names and surnames, there is little evidence that a win by one or another candidate will directly guarantee stronger rights for the Polish minority in Lithuania after the election.