

## **Arturas Zuokas re-elected as the mayor of Vilnius. Poles outside the coalition in the capital**

Joanna Hyndle-Hussein

In the vote for the mayor of Vilnius held on 19 April Arturas Zuokas, the leader of the social movement "Yes", garnered the required majority of the vote (26 out of 51). Although the non-affiliated movement he heads won the local elections in the capital on 27 February, it was not certain that he would take the position of mayor. Furthermore, the incumbent mayor of the capital Raimundas Alekna, a conservative from the ruling party Homeland Union/Lithuanian Christian Democrats (which groups together conservatives, Christian democrats and nationalists) supported by Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius, stood for re-election. It was the votes of the council members from the populist Labour Party that secured Zuokas the position of mayor. The leader of the Labour Party Viktor Uspaskich is a member of the Lithuanian delegation in the European Parliament and a businessman of Russian origin. Another factor that facilitated Zuokas in taking the position of mayor was the decision made by the council members from the party that represents the Polish minority – the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania (EAPL). Faced with an exacerbated conflict in Polish-Lithuanian relations over the issue of the rights of the Polish minority in Lithuania they rejected the coalition proposal offered by the conservatives and at the last minute put forward their own candidate – Jaroslaw Kaminski. This decision meant that EAPL had to give up the chance of participation in the governance of the Lithuanian capital. Having lost support from the members of the Labour Party and EAPL the mayor Alekna found himself without key partners needed to form a coalition in the municipal council of Vilnius and the conservatives/Christian democrats also switched to the opposition.

### **An surprising political composition in the municipal council after the local elections**

The results of the local elections organised in Vilnius in February turned out to be rather surprising. Four years after he left the position of mayor which he had held twice, Arturas Zuokas again stood a chance of becoming the mayor. Although the court proved he had attempted to bribe one of the council members and his name appeared in the context of several other nationally infamous economic scandals, the citizens of Vilnius appreciate him for the modernisation of the city – the reconstruction of its historical parts and the development of a modern business district.

A new wave of nationalist feelings in Lithuania was provoked by the fact that second place in the municipal council was taken by the bloc representing the Polish minority (EAPL) and the party representing the Russian minority (Russian Alliance). The bloc of the Polish

minority was headed by the EAPL leader Waldemar Tomaszewski , quite a controversial politician for many Lithuanian voters, above all those that support the Lithuanian right wing. Activities undertaken by Tomaszewski , a representative of the Polish minority in the Lithuanian delegation in the European Parliament, constitute a problem for Lithuanian political elites. Tomaszewski is actively involved, both in Lithuania and outside its borders, in winning support for the Polish minority in order to prevent a violation of its rights and diminishing them by subsequent Lithuanian governments.

The right-wing party of the outgoing mayor of Vilnius Raimundas Alekna (conservatives/Christian democrats) came in only third in the local elections. Alekna is considered by the citizens of Vilnius and council members from EAPL a good local authorities official but lacking in the political charisma that Zuokas has.

### **The return of the controversial mayor Zuokas**

Relations between the major parties which won the elections in the capital are full of tension. Tomaszewski , in conflict with politicians of the ruling right and often referring to Christian values, condemned the unethical behaviour of Zuokas and his style of ruling in the capital that consisted in taking care of the specific interests of business circles. Also conservatives/Christian democrats distance themselves from Zuokas. It was the Labour Party that had the casting vote as on the day of the vote it handed over its votes to Zuokas despite the fact that Uspaskich also criticised the former mayor.

Equally, the Social Democratic Party and two representatives of the Russian Alliance (this party ran in a bloc with EAPL in the elections) gave support to Zuokas. After having heard accusations of representing the interests of economic circles Zuokas will rule under heavy pressure from public opinion. His actions will also be observed by the conservatives/Christian democrats who will likely use every opportunity to discredit him and attempt to take over power in the capital. In order to maintain his present support, Zuokas will also have to share part of his real power with the Labour Party and the Social Democratic Party – now he has offered the positions of two vice mayors to the two parties, the third position of vice mayor remains unseated, which proves that Zuokas will seek to strengthen his coalition by incorporating into it another partner for whom he has reserved this position. He has put forward his offer again to conservatives/Christian democrats and EAPL.

### **Against the backdrop of the Vilnius mayoral election there is an aggravated conflict between the Polish minority and the ruling right**

The failure of Alekna was sealed not only by the decision of Uspaskich's party to back Zuokas but also by EAPL putting forward their candidate for the elections despite the lack of chances for gaining support for him from any of the parties represented in the municipal council. Although an alliance between EAPL and the conservatives/Christian democrats, seemed possible (a representative of EAPL was vice mayor under Alekna), it could be now difficult to accept by a section of voters of both the parties which are clearly mobilising their electorates before the parliamentary election scheduled for autumn 2012.

Particularly vocal in their protests against such an alliance was part of the nationalists who are members of the party of the conservatives/Christian democrats.

In March the Seimas, dominated by the right wing, adopted an amendment to the education law which limited the use of the Polish language in minority schools and allowed to closure of educational establishments that did not have the required number of pupils in classes on the same level as in Lithuanian schools. This amendment was met with protests from the Polish minority and EAPL also decided to behave in a principled manner and not to make it easier to take over power in the capital for the candidate of the party that it accuses of pursuing a policy aimed at denationalising and assimilating the Polish minority in Lithuania. On the other hand, the EAPL leader was accused by Irena Degutiene, a conservative and the Speaker of the Seimas, of instigating disputes on nationalist grounds. Tomaszewski provoked conservatives/Christian democrats with a statement he gave to the popular Lithuanian daily *Respublika*, in which he claimed that the Vilnius Region is Polish land and that Lithuanians living there should integrate. This statement gave rise to a new wave of criticism against EAPL in the public debate and an enhanced chauvinist and nationalist rhetoric on the Lithuanian side. The EAPL leader was charged with instigating a declaration of Polish autonomy in the Vilnius Region. Also the issue of loyalty of members of parliament holding the Polish Card towards the Lithuanian state was again brought up by a nationalist MP with an anti-Polish approach, Gintaras Songaila, (on 19 April the Seimas sent a draft law back to its authors for revision on the issue of resubmitting this question for explanation by the Lithuanian Constitutional Court).

### **EAPL focused on the parliamentary election**

The dispute between the ruling right and the Polish minority, ongoing on the margins of the mayoral elections, has led to the situation where a gesture made by EAPL doomed the two parties to a loss of influence in the governance of the capital. Whereas the Conservatives can expect that their intransigent position in the face of Poles will encourage the nationalist-oriented voters to participate actively in the parliamentary election and establish again an influential conservative group in Lithuania's Seimas, EAPL with the highest level of mobilisation of its voters can merely count on passing for the first time the 5% electoral threshold and forming a 10-person faction in the 141-seat Seimas. However, this will not allow EAPL to have a real impact on changing the laws that are unfavourable to the Polish minority. The fact that EAPL has distanced itself from both the conservatives/Christian democrats and the coalition being established by Zuokas deprives the Polish party of the possibility of discounting the election success in the capital. The participation in the municipal authorities of Vilnius (through the position of vice mayor) has up to now been important for Polish representatives as it gave them the possibility of closely monitoring the process of returning property to Polish owners in Vilnius and supervising Polish schools accountable to the local authorities and also gave them the possibility of pushing for the acceleration of it. This last question is key to maintaining a Polish identity in the Vilnius Region due to the amended law on the education of minorities that will come into effect as early as from 1 July. This law stipulates that local authorities can, although they do not have to, close down educational establishments for the sake of savings if they do not have sufficient numbers of pupils on the same level as in Lithuanian schools. EAPL, which by

withdrawing from the alliance with the conservatives/Christian democrats has facilitated the return to power of Zuokas, still has the possibility of negotiating about its entry into the coalition that is now being formed by the mayor and taking the vacant position of the third vice mayor.

## **Appendix**

### **The composition of the mandates in the 51-seat Municipal Council of Vilnius**

Movement "Yes" of Arturas Zuokas – 12

Bloc of Tomaszewski – 11 (9 representatives of EAPL and 2 representatives of Russian Alliance)

Homeland Union (conservatives)/Lithuanian Christian Democrats – 10

Labour Party – 8

Social Democratic Party – 5

Order and Justice – 5