

Presidential election in Lithuania

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The first round of the presidential election in Lithuania on 11 May saw no outright winner. In the runoff on 25 May, the incumbent president, Dalia Grybauskaite, who is an independent candidate linked to the conservative right (with support at 45.9%) will compete against Zigmantas Balcytis, the Social Democrat candidate and member of the European Parliament (13.6%), who is also a candidate in the election to the European Parliament being held on the same day. President Grybauskaite did not manage to repeat her first round victory of five years earlier. Although the voter turnout was higher than expected (52%), she has lost almost one third of her electorate in the large cities, Vilnius, Kaunas and Klaipeda, where local politicians are popular, such as Arturas Zuokas, the mayor of Vilnius (5.2%), Waldemar Tomaszewski, the Polish minority leader who is also backed by ethnic Russians (8.2%; Vilnius region and Klaipeda) and Naglis Puteikis, until recently linked to the political right (9.3%; Kaunas and Klaipeda).

Commentary

- Although Grybauskaite will remain in the lead during the runoff, Social Democrat Balcytis still stands a fair chance of running against her as an equal competitor. He will take over a majority of the votes cast in the first round for the other candidates, most of whom are opposed to the incumbent president. They include politicians representing the groupings which form the government coalition with the Social Democrats: Arturas Paulauskas (with support at 12%, representing the Labour Party) and Waldemar Tomaszewski (Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania). Rolandas Paksas, the former president who was impeached and is not permitted to seek election and who now leads the Order and Justice party which belongs to the government coalition, and Arturas Zuokas, who dislikes Grybauskaite, have also encouraged voters to support Balcytis.
- The confrontation of the political left's candidate and a formally independent candidate who in fact represents the political right during the runoff will deepen the divide between the two traditional options on the Lithuanian political scene. At the same time, the new populist forces, which have been enjoying triumphs for the past ten years, will be pushed back to the margins; and this to a great extent will be Grybauskaite's success, since she has been actively opposing them. Although the candidates represent opposing political options, the differences in their electoral manifestos are not large (they have similar views on the economy and energy and foreign policy), and their political biographies are similar (career in the Communist Party and then work for EU structures). To effectively

compete with Grybauskaite, Balcytis would have to launch a more aggressive campaign and more strongly emphasise the things she has been criticised for, such as authoritarianism and mistakes in foreign policy. The campaign of Balcytis, who is overshadowed by the popular Prime Minister Algirdas Butkevicius, the leader of the political left, has been quite bland and the candidate himself has shown little activity so far. This has given rise to speculations that the Social Democrats in fact are not striving to win the election, and the prime minister does not want a confrontation with the president, because this would entail the risk of changes in the government; and the president has influence on such changes.

- The electorate of Grybauskaite and of the political right was already mobilised during the first round. Although she will not take over the votes cast for her competitors from the first round, she still stands a chance of increasing the group of her supporters. According to public opinion polls, most Lithuanians fear Russian aggression. Such fears are fomented by the right-wing and nationalist circles who support Grybauskaite and the Western media and analysts. Given this context, part of the voters will back Grybauskaite as a politician who, as is commonly believed in Lithuania, stands the greatest chance of getting assistance from the West which Lithuania will need in case of increasing threat from Russia.