

The first round of presidential elections in Lithuania: no clear leader, defeat for the Prime Minister

Joanna Hyndle-Hussein

In the first round of presidential elections in Lithuania on 12 May, none of the nine candidates won a majority, which would have provided a decisive outcome in the first ballot. In the second round on 26 May, which will be held together with the elections to the European Parliament, the two candidates with the greatest support will face off: the conservative candidate and former Minister of Finance Ingrida Šimonytė, who won 31.21% of the vote (mainly in the largest cities); and the non-party candidate, the economist Gitanas Nausėda, who won 30.93% (with support from small and medium-sized towns and rural areas). The current Prime Minister of Lithuania Saulius Skvernelis, who came third and thus will not take any further part, got 19.67% support. The turnout was 56.92%.

Two nationwide referendums were held in tandem with the elections. The first, a binding vote, was on whether Lithuanian citizens would be able to hold dual citizenship (an amendment to article 12 of the constitution). The second, a consultative vote, involved reducing the number of deputies in the Lithuanian parliament (an amendment to article 55 of the constitution). Only the first referendum was valid, as 52.6% of those eligible turned out. 37.7% of voters supported the change to the constitution, which means that Lithuanian citizens will not obtain the right to dual citizenship. The consultative referendum did not meet the turnout requirement of 50% plus one vote, as only 47.3% of eligible voters participated.

Commentary

- The similar results for Nausėda and Šimonytė mean that there is no clear favourite to win the second round. The presidency will be won by the candidate who is more effective at taking the votes cast for the losing candidates in the first round, including in particular the voters for Prime Minister Skvernelis, the candidate of the ruling Union of Greens and Farmers (LVŽS). Nausėda, who is an independent candidate, has the better chance of picking up those votes. Šimonytė is the candidate of the conservatives, who are contending to take power from the LVŽS. After the election, she said that she sees no obstacles in cooperating with Skvernelis as prime minister. Such words may motivate supporters of the prime minister to vote for Šimonytė. She has a real chance of winning; she has mobilised the electorate, who are concentrated mainly in large cities such as Vilnius and Kaunas, where the turnout in the first round was higher than in the country.

The lower involvement of voters outside the big cities, where Nausėda's voters are mainly focused, could favour Šimonytė, who can also count on the votes of the Lithuanian émigré population. If Nausėda wins, Šimonytė has a chance of being nominated for the office of prime minister. Nausėda and Šimonytė have not conducted negative campaigns against each other, which is a good basis for future cooperation between a possible President Nausėda with any conservative candidate for prime minister. Survey results show that the Conservatives are the most popular party in the country, and have the chance to win both the elections to the European Parliament and the parliamentary elections scheduled for October 2020.

- The two candidates' manifestoes put Nausėda closer to the centre than the conservative candidate, who is targeting the right-wing electorate. In foreign policy, which is the domain of the president, Šimonytė favours Lithuania's Euro-Atlantic integration: a strong alliance with the US, being active in the EU and not holding any talks with Russia, which is a continuation of President Dalia Grybauskaitė's existing policy. Nausėda also has pro-Western views: he is in favour of the EU as a confederation and considers NATO as the sole guarantor of Lithuania's security, but he has allowed for a gradual re-entry into dialogue with Russia. Both candidates have emphasised the importance of good relations with Poland and declared that Warsaw will be the destination of their first foreign visit.
- Prime Minister Skvernelis's failure was influenced by the residents of the bigger cities, whose votes for Šimonytė were also 'against Skvernelis'; he came in for criticism for his arrogant manner and lack of knowledge of English. Skvernelis's loss also represents a failure for Ramūnas Karbauskis, the leader of the LVŽS, who officially does not hold any prominent position (he is a parliamentary deputy and head of the culture committee).. Skvernelis's failure represents Karbauskis's second serious defeat; in March's local elections his party received the support of just 11.2% of voters (third place among the political groups). Karbauskis's position in the LVŽS has been weakened by the mistakes Skvernelis's campaign made; before the elections, Karbauskis said that if Skvernelis did not make it to the second round of the presidential elections, and the LVŽS records a weak result in the European elections, his party will withdraw from the government. A similar declaration was made by the Prime Minister, who has said that he would resign on 12 July, the day when the president is to be sworn in, if he did not contest the second round of the presidential elections. This attempt to consolidate the electorate of the prime minister and the LVŽS proved ineffective, and introduced uncertainty as to who will rule the country after 12 July. Consequently, under pressure from his own party, Karbauskis was forced to moderate his position; he announced that the decision on the LVŽS's future in the ruling coalition would be taken after the new president takes office. The LVŽS has also expressed confidence in Skvernelis as prime minister.
- The change of head of state could also be a good time to make changes in the government. At present, the LVŽS is in a minority government with the Social Democratic Labour Party. According to the Lithuanian constitution, after the President is sworn in, the Prime Minister entrusts their power to him in expectation of being re-confirmed in their office; the PM may also resign, which obliges the president to entrust the creation of a government to a new Prime Minister. If Skvernelis is sacked and the LVŽS quits the

government entirely, the only possible move will be to entrust power to the opposition leader, the conservative Gabrielius Landsbergis. However, the conservatives are not interested in taking power before the parliamentary elections scheduled for October 2020. Evidence of this is Šimonytė's agreement that Skvernelis will remain prime minister after she wins the presidential election, together with the conservative leader Landsbergis's post-election statement that he would work together with the LVŽS until the parliamentary elections. This should be interpreted as a withdrawal from any plans which would result in the collapse of the government. Although the opposition is not interested in taking power, Karbauskis's coalition may seek further support; it would be guaranteed a majority if it was joined by the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania/Christian Families Alliance and the Order and Justice Party, which have long supported the LVŽS in parliamentary votes.