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Lithuania

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Freedom in the World 2013

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OVERVIEW:

A center-right coalition headed by Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius's Homeland Union–Lithuanian Christian Democrats was ousted from power in parliamentary elections held in October 2012. Lithuanian Social Democratic Party head Algirdas Butkevičius subsequently became prime minister, heading a four-party coalition government. Meanwhile, as the economy continued to slowly recover, Kubilius's government approved the European Union fiscal treaty and raised the minimum wage for all workers.

Lithuania became independent at the end of World War I, but was annexed by the Soviet Union during World War II. The country declared its independence from the Soviet Union in March 1990, and the move was eventually recognized by Soviet authorities in 1991. Lithuania joined NATO and the European Union (EU) in 2004.

Lithuanian politics have been characterized by shifting coalitions among several different parties. A center-left coalition led by the Social Democratic Party of Lithuania (LSDP) was ousted in 2008 parliamentary elections, and a center-right coalition government led by the newly formed Homeland Union–Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD) took power. Andrius Kubilius of the TS-LKD, who had previously served as prime minister in 1999–2000, headed the new government, which enacted sharp austerity measures in response to a growing economic crisis that saw gross domestic product (GDP) contract by 15 percent in 2009, and unemployment peak at 18.3 percent in the second quarter of 2010. Meanwhile, citizens searched for work abroad as jobs disappeared and wages fell. Independent candidate Dalia Grybauskaitė was elected president in 2009 with nearly 70 percent of the vote, becoming the first woman to hold the post.

Defections in Kubilius's government in 2010 reduced the ruling bloc to just 69 seats, forcing the TS-LKD to secure an informal alliance with the Lithuanian Peasant Popular Union (LVLS), which held three seats in the legislature.

In February 2012, Interior Minister Raimundas Palaitis fired Vitalijus Gailius, the director of Lithuania's financial-crime investigation service, saying he had acted on recommendations from Lithuania's state security department. Kubilius expressed disapproval of the move and asked Palaitis to resign, but Grybauskaitė backed the interior minister, and a subsequent rift between coalition partners TS-LKD and the Liberal and Center Union (LCS) nearly caused the collapse of the government. Palaitis resigned in March, saying he had done so to keep the government from falling apart.

The parliament in June voted overwhelmingly to approve a new EU fiscal treaty that required EU member nations to balance their budgets, and allowed for penalties if they failed to do so. The same month, Kubilius's government approved a 6.3 percent increase to the minimum wage, starting in August 2012.

Lithuanian voters, weary of the TS-LKD's austerity programs, dealt the governing coalition a major defeat in two rounds of parliamentary elections held in October 2012. After both rounds, the opposition LSDP finished first with 38 seats in the 141-seat legislature. The TS-LKD captured 33 seats, the Labor Party took 29 seats, the right-wing Order and Justice Party won 11 seats, and the Liberal Movement (LRLS) captured 10 seats.

Grybauskaitė upset the LSDP's coalition talks by opposing any participation by the Labor Party in the new government, citing allegations that it had rigged the elections. She further claimed that it would be improper to include Labor Party leader Viktor Uspaskich in the new government because he was facing tax fraud charges, having been accused of participating in illegal financing activities for the Labor Party between 2004 and 2006. However, in November, Grybauskaitė relented, tapping LSDP leader Algirdas Butkevičius to serve as prime minister. The parliament confirmed the nomination, and Butkevičius proposed an LSDP-led coalition with the Labor Party, the Order and Justice Party, and the Lithuanian Poles' Electoral Action, which had won eight seats in the legislature. In December, Grybauskaitė approved Butkevičius's cabinet, which included four Labor Party members, though not Uspaskich. The parliament confirmed the cabinet later that month.

The economy continued to recover from the country's economic crisis. Unemployment decreased to about 13 percent in October 2012, down from 13.9 percent in the fourth quarter of 2011, and the GDP expanded by 3.6 percent in 2012. However, Lithuania had the EU's highest emigration rate, with the exodus of educated young people remaining a major concern. Following the LSDP's election victory, a central bank official in November said announced that Lithuania would not adopt the euro currency until 2015 or later; the outgoing TS-LKD-led government had planned to adopt the currency in 2014. The remark came amid mounting speculation that Lithuania, under a new LSDP-led government, would miss a 2014 inflation target set by the TS-LKD.

Energy issues remain a source of tension between Lithuania and Russia. In September, the European Commission opened an investigation into whether Russia's state-owned natural gas company OAO Gazprom was illegally blocking competition in natural-gas markets in a number of Eastern European countries, including Lithuania. In October, Lithuanian officials said Lithuania would sue Gazprom for \$1.9 billion at the Stockholm Arbitration Tribunal, alleging that the firm had overcharged it for gas shipments.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES:

Lithuania is an electoral democracy. The 1992 constitution established a unicameral, 141-seat parliament (Seimas), with 71 members elected in single-mandate constituencies and 70 chosen by proportional representation, all for four-year terms. The prime minister is named by the president, but is subject to confirmation by the parliament. The president is directly elected, and may serve up to two five-year terms. Recent elections were deemed largely free and fair, though there were some reports of irregularities, including alleged bribery and forged ballots. In the 2012 election, candidates with criminal records and those who had worked with the “special services of other states” had a note printed beneath their names on informational materials posted in polling places, resulting in some candidates being stigmatized. Lithuania’s many political parties operate freely, but the Communist Party is banned.

Corruption remains a problem, though the country has attempted to prosecute many officials suspected of abusing their power. In 2011, Lithuania’s central bank took over the country’s third-largest bank, Bankas Snoras AB, after some 20 percent of its claimed assets went missing. In November of that year, two of the bank’s former directors—Vladimir Antonov and Raimondas Baranauskas—were arrested in London on charges of stealing some \$610 million from Snoras, after Lithuanian prosecutors had issued a European arrest warrant for them. They were rearrested in London in July on expanded charges. Both men denied the allegations and were fighting extradition to Lithuania at year’s end. In October 2012, the country’s anticorruption office charged Vilnius deputy mayor Romas Adomavicius with taking a \$15,000 bribe in exchange for promising that a certain company would win a large contract; he denied the charges, but was temporarily suspended from his job by a Vilnius court later that month. Also in October, officials in Vilnius arrested Eligijus Vilkickas, the director of the city’s legal affairs department, on charges of requesting and accepting a bribe of \$7,400. The fraud case against former economy minister and Labor Party leader Viktor Uspaskich was ongoing at year’s end, as was a corruption case against Alytus mayor Ceslovas Daugela. Lithuania was ranked 48 out of 176 countries surveyed in Transparency International’s 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The government generally respects freedoms of speech and the press. Privately owned newspapers and independent broadcasters express a wide variety of views and criticize the government freely. However, private television station TV-3 terminated the contract of journalist Ruta Janutiene in November after canceling plans to air a documentary that she had produced about President Dalia Grybauskaitė, saying that the program did not meet the station’s ethical standards. In June, a Vilnius court found journalist and Socialist People’s Front leader Algirdas Paleckis guilty of denying Soviet aggression against Lithuania, overturning an earlier acquittal. Paleckis’s supporters paid the approximately \$4,000 fine, but Paleckis appealed the fine and conviction to Lithuania’s Supreme Court; the case was pending at year’s end. The press suffers from inadequate standards for transparency of ownership. Additionally, international rights groups continued to complain about a 2010 law banning the publication of material deemed harmful to minors, though no one has ever been prosecuted under it. The government does not restrict access to the internet.

Freedom of religion is guaranteed by law and largely upheld in practice. However, so-called traditional religious communities enjoy certain government benefits, including annual subsidies, which are not granted to other groups. Academic freedom is respected.

Freedoms of assembly and association are generally observed. Nongovernmental organizations may register without facing serious obstacles, and human rights groups operate without restrictions. Workers may form and join trade unions, strike, and engage in collective bargaining, though there have been reports of employees being punished for attempting to organize. Slightly less than 10 percent of the country’s workforce is unionized.

The constitution guarantees judicial independence, which is respected in practice. Defendants generally enjoy due process rights, including the presumption of innocence and freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention, but detained suspects are not always granted timely access to an attorney. Police abuse of detainees and lengthy pretrial detentions remain problems. Prisons suffer from overcrowding, and inmates have poor access to health care.

The rights of ethnic minorities, who comprise about 16 percent of the population, are legally protected, but discrimination remains a problem, especially among the small Romany population. Unlike Latvia and Estonia, which continue to have large noncitizen populations, Lithuania made it relatively easy for all residents to gain citizenship after independence. However, graduates from minority-language schools have to take the same Lithuanian-language exam as students from Lithuanian-language schools beginning in 2013.

Marriage is defined in Lithuania’s constitution as the union between a man and a woman. Members of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community face discrimination.

Although men and women enjoy the same legal rights, women earn 17 percent less on average than men in comparable jobs. Women occupy 24 percent of seats in the parliament, and the first female president and speaker of parliament were elected in 2009. Domestic violence, including both spousal and child abuse, remains a serious problem. Lithuania continues to be a source, transit point, and destination for the trafficking of women and girls for the purpose of prostitution.

2013 SCORES

STATUS

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FREEDOM RATING

1.0

CIVIL LIBERTIES

1

POLITICAL RIGHTS

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