

LITHUANIA



The populist Far Right in Lithuania during Russia's war against Ukraine

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Abstract

In Lithuania, centrist populist parties have been challenging the stability of the party system since 2000. Yet Far Right populist parties have not yet managed to enter the parliament. As Russia's war against Ukraine has unfolded, the Far Right has had to reorient itself in a changing political landscape. On the one hand, the economic and energy crisis resulting from the war seems to provide the perfect conditions for populist mobilization in a low-trust and low-participation society. On the other, the Lithuanian government has benefited from a rally-around-the-flag effect. Lithuanian society has been particularly active in supporting Kyiv and welcoming refugees from Ukraine. In this article, we analyse the rhetoric of the Lithuanian populist Far Right, focusing on how these parties position themselves in light of changing circumstances due to the war and how they reframe criticism of national and international elites.

Keywords: Lithuania; Russia–Ukraine war; Far Right; populism; rally-around-the-flag effect

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Introduction

Although centrist populist political parties have been challenging the stability of the party system in Lithuania since 2000, Far Right populist parties have not yet managed to cross the 5% threshold needed to enter the parliament. These groups successfully mobilized support against the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Now, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has eroded the significance of that critique and forced Far Right populist parties to reorient themselves in a changing political landscape.

The economic and energy crisis caused by the war might seem like perfect conditions for populist mobilization. However, the Lithuanian government has benefited from a rally-around-the-flag effect, and the ruling party's popularity ratings have soared (Brunalas, 2022). In addition, Lithuanian society has been particularly active in supporting the Ukrainian side. According to a recent survey, two-thirds of Lithuanians supported the Ukrainian side by donating money, volunteering in related organizations, or welcoming refugees from Ukraine into their homes (Stankevičius, 2023). The donation of a military drone crowdfunded by ordinary Lithuanians is a prime example of this public generosity (BBC News, 2022). Furthermore, attitudes towards Russia, which have always been negative, have become even more so. Opinion polls published in January 2023 found that 90% of Lithuanians have an unfavourable opinion of Russia, while 75% have a negative view of Belarus (Pankūnas, 2023).

In this report, we examine the rhetoric of Lithuanian right-wing populists concentrating on how they reframe criticism of (inter)national elites and navigate possible associations with Russia. We conceptualize Far Right actors operating according to the procedural rules of democracy. They can be located at the far right end of the Left–Right ideological scale, with populism, nativism, radicalism, and conservatism as essential characteristics. In their discourse, a nation is seen as a homogeneous unit that must be protected from outsiders or dangerous intruders (Wodak, 2019), such as immigrants. For them, the principle of majority rule is an essential feature of democracy (ibid.), and a strong or even authoritarian-leaning government is required to protect the homeland (Bustikova & Kitschelt, 2009). A strong emphasis is put on family values and a return to “better times” (Wodak, 2019). In addition, the political elite is perceived as corrupt, working against the will of the people and promoting the European Union (EU) agenda (Golder, 2016; Bustikova & Kitschelt, 2009; Wodak, 2019).

The report focuses primarily on the discourse of three Far Right actors: two political parties and a movement. The National Alliance (Nacionalinis susivienijimas, NS) and the Union for Nation and Justice (Tautos ir teisingumo sąjunga, TTS) took part in the last parliamentary elections in 2020 but did not get any mandates. The Lithuanian Family Movement (Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis, LŠS) has organized several protests in the past two years. The biggest in May 2021 — the “Great March in Defence of the Family” — attracted as many as 10,000 people, an exceptionally high number in a society with low levels of civic engagement and political participation (Žiliukaitė, 2006). Marchers sought to uphold traditional family values and criticize the management of the pandemic. Later in the summer, the LŠS was involved in riots that prevented MPs from leaving the parliament building, and some of its leaders were prosecuted. As a result, the movement’s popularity declined, but it did not abandon the criticism of the pandemic restrictions and even claimed responsibility for ending COVID-19 restrictions in Lithuania. The NS, the TTS and the LŠS are now running candidates in municipal elections scheduled for March 2023. The analysed data consists of communications on official Facebook pages or official websites from the start of the war on February 24 until the end of 2022.

In addition, we provide examples of the discourse of two populist (but not Far Right) leaders closely related to the NS, the TTS and the LŠS. Ramūnas Karbauskis is the leader of the opposition Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (Lietuvos valstiečių ir žaliųjų sąjunga, LVŽS), which led the governing coalition in 2016–2020. Members of the NS worked for this party’s MPs and are now running on its list of candidates for municipal councils (as are members of the LŠS). Ignas Vėgėlė, a lawyer and professor of law, became a well-known and popular politician after his vocal opposition to the government’s COVID-19 restrictions. He is currently supported by all the Far Right organizations analysed in this report.

National security: New wine in old “family values” bottles?

At the heart of Lithuanian Far Right ideology is what ideologues call the “defence” of families, meaning a backlash against legal recognition of same-sex relationships, the Istanbul Convention on Combating Violence against Women,¹ and other

1. There is no legal recognition of same-sex relationships in Lithuania. Vilnius has signed the Istanbul Convention, but not yet ratified it.



political issues related to gender and sexual identities. They frame binary genders and heterosexual families as essential to national culture, appealing to the sense in Lithuania that this small nation may disappear due to mass emigration and negative natural population growth. This theme has remained salient in Far Right rhetoric since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

In the discourse of the Far Right, one way to support Ukraine is to resist “genderism”, as both the NS and the TTS suggest. For them, Ukraine is one of the greatest defenders of the “natural family” simply because it does not recognize same-sex unions, and Ukrainian public opinion is not favourable. To quote the TTS: “We invite you to support the Ukrainian fight for natural values, the nation-state, and Christian civilization as well as to adhere to these ideals in our state as well” (Gražulis, 2022).

The LŠS goes as far as comparing the “gender propaganda” that the Lithuanian elite allegedly promotes with war propaganda from the Kremlin. The former is even more threatening because it “propagates a war inside our country, among us” (Lietuvos Šeimų Sąjūdis, 2022a). In the rhetoric of politicians, ensuring security means uniting and mobilizing society. That is why Far Right actors and the opposition leader, Ramūnas Karbauskis, criticize the government for subverting the unity of society by debating the Istanbul Convention and the gender-neutral civil partnership bill. According to Karbauskis, it is unseemly to discuss such an irrelevant question as a civil partnership with a war underway (Tapinienė, 2022). Overall, the strategy is to kick the can down the road, saying, “now is not the time”.

European friends and foes

As security has become a top priority as the war has unfolded, populist and Far Right politicians have used the conflict to criticize the national and international political elite. They have sought to delegitimize the Lithuanian government by calling ministers “temporary administrators of the country” incapable of making independent decisions, much like in the Soviet Union and, more recently, the EU. A common claim is that the government is not doing enough to protect the country. Populist and Far Right politicians argue for increased defence spending. The NS has gone further, saying additional social measures are needed to strengthen the country’s security, such as increasing the birth rate, reducing social exclusion, and strengthening patriotic education (Nacionalinis susivienijimas, 2022a).

Since Lithuanians are among the most trusting in the EU,² compared to other Europeans, the Far Right does not target EU membership directly. Nonetheless, they criticize the Lithuanian political elite for prioritizing “foreign forces” over “the will of their citizens” and blame Brussels for “political and cultural dictates”. Vytautas Sinica, one of the leaders of the NS, has recounted with glee how Western Europe used to teach Central and Eastern Europe about equality, diversity, ecology, and cosmopolitanism, but everything has changed. Now Volodymyr Zelenskyy teaches Brussels what European values — namely, nationalism, sovereignty, and independence — mean (Petkus, 2022). The distinction is made in this case, as in many others, between “new” Europe, which is young, full of life, and proud of the nation, and “old”, pragmatic Europe.

Whereas Lithuanian society, in general, was disappointed with the slow speed and limited extent of Western military support for Ukraine, and the government urged NATO members to provide Ukraine with more weapons, a new undertone became evident in Far Right discourse. They argue for strengthening military cooperation with the United Kingdom and the United States, not with Germany, currently leading a NATO brigade in Lithuania. They went further than mocking the reluctance of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to send arms or diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis Russia by France’s Emmanuel Macron. The key word was “hypocrisy”, and it was argued that the words and deeds of Western leaders differ.

Yet Lithuanian Far Right actors wish to cultivate some friendships in Europe. Since the outbreak of the war, the discourse on counterparts in Europe has been very cautious. For instance, the victory of Giorgia Meloni in Italy was celebrated with emphasis on the “strong” pro-Ukrainian position of her party, Fratelli d’Italia. On the other hand, when criticized for congratulating Victor Orbán for his victory in the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections, the leader of the TTS employed a strategy of “whataboutism”. In his rhetoric, Orbán is as pragmatic towards Russia as Scholz or Macron, so why are Germany and France justified by the Lithuanian political and media elites while Hungary is condemned? His answer, unsurprisingly, claimed that “leftists” or “liberals” — who work against “nation-states, the natural family and Christian ethics” — are running the show (Gražulis, 2022).

2. In Lithuania, 69% of citizens say they trust the EU, while the European average is 49% (European Commission, 2022).



Refugees: Overlap with the political elite

Since the invasion, Lithuania has welcomed over 73,000 refugees from Ukraine (UNHCR, n.d.). Even Far Right actors have provided housing support or volunteered to organize the settlement process. In doing this and communicating about their contributions, they have acted in line with the popular pro-Ukrainian sentiment, simultaneously evading associations with the Kremlin. To date, their nativist ideology emerges in discourse only in a very subtle way. Instead of using economic arguments against support for Ukraine, the LŠS leans on the cultural dimension by accusing the elite and their supporters of “ostentatious Ukrainophilia” (Čepaitienė, 2023). Their sympathizers are especially prone to complain about the widespread usage of the colours of the Ukrainian flag instead of Lithuanian ones. In their interpretation, national symbols have been deliberately ceded, and the LŠS is fighting to “take them back”.

Not just Ukrainians seek asylum in Lithuania. Since June 2021, migrants from the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa have tried to cross the border with Belarus almost daily. Although more than 4,000 were admitted in June and July 2021, since August 2021, irregular migrants have been denied entry and pushed back. Amnesty International issued a report detailing the practice of pushbacks, which violates international law, and documenting other human rights abuses against refugees and migrants (Amnesty International, 2022). The report emphasized the stark contrast between the treatment of people fleeing the war in Ukraine and victims of Belarusian President Lukashenko’s “asylum politics”. The Far Right NS has grasped the elite and public opinion adequately by saying: “It is likely that in our country there are not many people having doubts about the fact that Ukrainians fleeing the war in contrast to economic migrants sent here by Belarus have an untrammelled right to refugee status”. (Nacionalinis Susivienijimas, 2022a)

The strategy of contrasting “real” Ukrainian refugees and “illegal” and “politically and culturally disloyal” economic migrants does not help them to instigate dissatisfaction with the ruling elite. The government has built a fence along the border with Belarus and is not letting migrants in, framing the issue solely as a matter of national security. The Court of Justice of the European Union also found that preventing irregular migrants from applying for asylum and putting them in automatic detention contradicts European directives (Bakaitė, 2022). Some of the Far Right actors in Lithuania described this judgement as an additional example of how “the EU promotes multiculturalism and mixing of nations” (Petkus, 2022).

They even are inclined to defend the mainstream policy.

Post-pandemic restrictions and economic crisis

The LŠS, NS, TTS, and Ignas Vėgėlė have taken advantage of the prevailing solidarity with Ukrainian society and presented themselves as victims of a brutal regime while framing the Lithuanian government as the aggressor. The LŠS accused the government of using the war as a pretext to impose “a dictatorship, total control of society and censorship of opinion, persecuting critics of its actions and unjustifiably restricting other constitutional rights and freedoms of citizens” (Lietuvos Šeimų Sąjūdis, 2022b). They say the government “actually contributes to Russia’s aggressive ambitions” (ibid.).

Ignas Vėgėlė, who has taken the most advantage of the opposition to pandemic restrictions, is now a potential presidential candidate (Baltic News Service, 2022). As a legal scholar and former chairman of Lithuania’s Bar Council, he has positioned himself as a civil society representative, advocating for citizens’ freedom and rights and demanding accountability of politicians. Since the outbreak of the war, the claim that the Lithuanian government was restricting freedom and human rights has been extended to other contexts, equating it with the Russian authoritarian regime. Ignas Vėgėlė complained that he was being delegitimized by the cultural, media, and political elite (Vėgėlė, 2022) and suggested that the Lithuanian government was actually working for the benefit of Putin.

The NS added to criticism of the government by expressing concern about the state of emergency and linking it to constitutional restrictions on freedom of expression and information and censorship (Nacionalinis Susivienijimas, 2022b). They also introduced another trope to associate themselves with the victims of the war, creating an analogy between Putin’s claim to the “de-Nazification” of Ukraine and EU policy. In the words of one of the NS leaders, “the Lithuanian “soft de-Nazification” is particularly dangerous in that the purposeful destruction of the nation and state are usually covered up by the defence of “European” and “Western” values while avoiding the need to disclose the conceptual origins of these values and their ideological and political content” (Nacionalinis Susivienijimas, 2022a).

Politicians are still using the memory of the 1990s to invoke resentment and feelings of injustice in society (Lietuvos Šeimų Sąjūdis, 2022c). The LŠS and the NS have questioned the country’s post-communist transformation by calling



political elites “privatizers of freedom”. In the words of Vytautas Radžvilas, an NS leader, democracy in Lithuania has steadily declined along with the “plundering” of public goods through privatization (ELTA, 2020). The LŠS argues that Lithuanian parties are “entities, created in the process of *prikhvat-ization*³ of state assets and pseudo-elite warfare, which take turns in sharing seats in the cabinets of territorial administration, also known as Lithuania” (Lietuvos Šeimų Sąjūdis, 2022c). This way, mainstream political forces are described as self-interested and disconnected from society.

Moreover, they are also depicted as deliberately worsening the living conditions of society. They have been accused of raising the price of food, fuel, taxes, and electricity. Since the liberalization of the electricity market (the change from regulated electricity supply to open market competition), the system has faced challenges, and the price of electricity reached record highs in the summer of 2022. The energy minister, naturally, became one of their most criticized targets. Even more, Ignas Vėgėlė called the liberalization of the electricity market and price fluctuations coercive, while the NS argued it was criminal and portrayed the liberalization and price fluctuations as a malicious scheme. The TTS called it a fraud and the LŠS a “pretext for the predatory privatization of the electricity supply system for the benefit of business groups” (Lietuvos Šeimų Sąjūdis, 2022c). Therefore, although Lithuania had already secured its energy independence and did not face an energy crisis due to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, this did not prevent populist politicians from articulating and stimulating the crisis in the country and blaming the government.

Conclusion

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has had a negative effect (at least temporarily) on right-wing populist politics in Lithuania. All the political, media and economic connections these parties have with the Kremlin or openly pro-Russian activists were put under the magnifying glass. The usual arguments of mainstream politicians and journalists that populists’ favoured causes coincide with the Kremlin’s gained ground in Lithuania, as the society is highly anti-Russian and supports Ukraine. In view of the unfolding war in Ukraine, Far Right actors have found it difficult to present

3. This term — a play on the Russian word *прихватить* (“*prikhvatit*”, to grab) — became popular in the 1990s. It refers to the (at best) illegitimate and (at worst) downright illegal process of converting public assets to private property across that decade.

themselves as “anti-system patriots” to attack the political elite, which is seen as focused on the national interest. Both an insider (Ramūnas Karbauskis, the leader of the main opposition party) and an outsider (Vytautas Sinica, the leader of the NS) have publicly backed the government’s performance in relation to the war. They were also deprived of the chance to escalate the issue of irregular migration from Belarus as the government handled it in their preferred way (i.e., with a border fence).

Nevertheless, the Far Right actors have attempted to pass through an eye of a needle. It is evident in the populist rhetoric we investigated for this article that right-wing politicians have tried very hard to capitalize on any public grievances and to stimulate them even more, especially concerning the energy crisis and pandemic restrictions. They will continue to base their campaign on creating a sense of insecurity and channelling discontent toward national and EU elites. At the same time, they will most likely continue using a strategy to draw a parallel between the Lithuanian government and Putin’s regime, simultaneously identifying themselves and the whole society as victims. But in practice, their results will be best seen in 2024, when presidential and parliamentary elections will be held. The Far Right in Lithuania will likely try to secure a higher level of support through cooperation with popular but not so extreme, “non-systemic” candidates.

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