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Lithuania in Comparative Perspective: From Transition to Flawed Democracy

Introduction

Thirty years ago, Central Eastern Europe was taken by a storm of democratic revolutions. A cradle of these revolutions was on the Baltic shores. In 1988, new popular movements in Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia suddenly and unexpectedly emerged from below to reshape the Soviet political system. A *zeitgeist* at least temporarily managed to land in three Baltic Republics almost in parallel. Like in a snowball effect and in just half a year, three new popular movements have been set up here: Rahvarinne or the Popular Front of Estonia was founded in April 1988, Sąjūdis in Lithuania emerged in June 1988 and finally Tautas Fronte in Latvia was created in October 1988. Initially all three popular movements intended to support Gorbachev's *perestroika* as a reform from above to modernise a state-controlled economy and very partially to liberalise political regime or to bring a human face to communism.

The Baltic singing revolutions

However, the emphasis of the agenda of revolutions from below in the Baltics gradually, but also fast,[1] was changed from democratisation to a re-building or rather restoring of independent nation states, which was lost in the 1940s. If the Baltic singing and peaceful revolutions with goals for a democratisation had been seen as a kind of political allies even by Gorbachev's reformists, a move to restoration of independence would have meant a new and clear centrifugal trend directed against Kremlin's policies to keep the Soviet Union intact.

At least until the early 1990s, the Baltic revolutions could be named negotiated revolutions, where moderates from the local Communist parties were trying to find out a *modus operandi* with moderates from the popular movements together to resist Kremlin's pressure.

Since 1988, the Baltic revolt has been a litmus paper for the non-USSR communist countries about how far they may go to democratise their own political regimes. Moreover, the Baltic countries helped a lot to remove the Brezhnev doctrine, that is, a foreign policy strategy put forward by Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev in a response to the Prague

[1] A move of the popular movements from goals of a broad autonomy within the Soviet Union to a restoration of independence unfolded mainly in early 1989.

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Spring in 1968, calling on the Soviet Union to intervene, including militarily, in countries where communist rule was under threat. The Brezhnev doctrine was replaced by the Sinatra doctrine.[2] The new doctrine has been seen by the Soviet government of Mikhail Gorbachev as giving permission to its communist allies, that is, neighbouring Warsaw Pact states, to decide their own internal affairs and own futures.

If to compare the Baltic revolutions of the late 1980s to the regime changes along the 'triple transition' scheme in the Central Eastern European countries, there is one but substantial difference. As Claus Offe noted, the 'triple transition' scheme that acquired classical status in political science includes democratisation of the political system, marketisation of the economy, and establishment of a civil society.[3] In reality, Central Eastern Europe outlived the triple transition or democratisation, marketisation and civil society building, that is, to democratise the political system, to change the administrative command economy with rigid centralisation, the state ownership and an absence of economic freedom to free capitalist market, as well as started to install the basics of civil society. The Baltic countries in addition to the triple transition have been facing a state/nation building or quadruple post-communist transition. This means that the extremely complicated triple transition in Central Eastern Europe was even more complex in the Baltic countries.

The famous German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf in the very early phases of political changes in Eastern Europe described the future political and social agenda in the following way, that is, the formal process of constitutional reform takes at least six months, to transform economy takes six years, and sixty years are barely enough to lay the social foundations which are capable of withstanding all-weather storms.[4] We are still in need of the next three decades to build up the social foundations of democracy.

Meanwhile, after the interim period in 1989–1991 and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union, the Baltic countries restored statehood and implemented all necessary political, economic and social reforms in the early 1990s.

After a revolution or where did we end up?

Still, there is a non-rhetorical question here – where did we end up? Not to speak about all three Baltic states, just a few and brief insights about Lithuania. In Lithuania's history, these three decades since 1990 will be remembered a time of unfulfilled expectations and hopes, when this country has created an oligarchic capitalism and a flawed democracy

[2] The phrase was coined on 25 October 1989 by Foreign Ministry Spokesman Gennadij Gerasimov, when he told that the Soviet Union recognised the freedom of choice of all countries, including Warsaw Pact states. He added that Frank Sinatra has a song *I Did It My Way.* So every country decides on its own which road to take.

[3] Claus Offe, 'Capitalism by Democratic Design? Facing the Triple Transition in East Central Europe', *Social Research* 58, no 4 (1991), 865–892.

[4] Ralf Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe in a Letter Intended to Have Been Sent to a Gentleman in Warsaw* (New York: Random House, 1990), 99–100.

instead of a welfare state and full democracy. If to find one single reason to explain these results or to find out a kind of Archimedes principle of the lever, it would be that market utopianism thus replaced socialist utopianism as a hegemonic trope,[5] with disastrous immediate and medium term results.

Now and certainly, Lithuania is a growing European country. It is safe from external threats incomparably more than many decades ago. The economic face is also changing of the Lithuanian society. It is becoming more affluent and wealthier than few decades ago, but a distribution of wealth is highly uneven. A major impact on the growing economy was achieved through Lithuania's accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004. But due to the shortcomings of state policy, the development of the Lithuanian economy does not ensure solidarity and greater equality in society. Only one third of society is satisfied with the socio-economic results of the country's economic growth. The other third is neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Finally, the last third of society feels significantly marginalised and dissatisfied with social and economic change.

At risk of poverty and social exclusion remain around 25 per cent of the population. It has hardly declined in recent years, although the economy is growing up. As many as 31.6 per cent retirees are at risk of poverty. The highest risk of poverty was in the age group of 65 and older and among the unemployed. In 2019, it accounted for 31.6 per cent, and among the unemployed – as much as 38.2 per cent.

Income inequality between 20 per cent of the richest and 20 per cent of the poorest is more than 7 times higher. 20 per cent of the richest accounted for 43.2 per cent of the total revenue, and 20 percent of the poorest accounted for only 6.1 per cent of all monetary disposable income. Income inequality is not only not decreasing, but is clearly growing, as in 2012 this indicator slightly exceeded 5 times. Even in-work poverty has risen from 7.6 percent in 2012 up to 7.9 per cent in 2019. At the same time, the Social Inequality Index, or GINI, rose to almost 37 points, compared to 30.6 points in neighbouring Estonia. Social security spending is only about half the European Union average, even though Lithuania is one of the fastest aging societies in Europe.

The demographic crisis continues and is ongoing. It has three components: birth rate, mortality rate and emigration. Birth rates remain low. Mortality remains high. And emigration continues. Since 1990 until 2020 inclusive, the population of Lithuania decreased by a quarter, or around 1 million inhabitants. This happened as most inhabitants have been lost due to foreign emigration and this number is higher than the population of the two largest cities – Kaunas and Vilnius – combined. A more complicated demographic picture appears as Lithuania is also emptying because of internal migration. This local migration contributes to regional depopulation. In recent years due to internal migration, the population grew in only a few municipalities out of sixty: in Vilnius city and district, in Kaunas, Klaipėda, Šiauliai, Panevėžys districts. In all other more than fifty municipalities, the number of inhabitants was decreasing.

[5] Andrè Liebich, 'The Transition in East-Central Europe', in *Democratisation in the 21st Century,* ed. by Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou and Timothy D Sisk (London: Routledge, 2017), 102.

An obvious development is regional inequality. If the gross domestic product of the Vilnius region reached 112 per cent of the European Union average, the rest of Lithuania has only 65 per cent of GDP of the EU average. This difference is unbearably large. And regional policy has largely disappeared or is becoming insignificant.

Lithuania is a democracy, but it has significant shortcomings. First, Lithuania suffers from the alienation of citizens and the state. The scale of this alienation is exceptional. Its manifestations are primarily a lack of trust in most political and governmental authorities. Only a few percent of the citizens trusts the Seimas and political parties. Courts are the third most unpopular institutions in Lithuania. A slightly higher confidence is felt towards the Government but still it is low in the context of other European countries. Recent social surveys show that just a few percent believed that the government has an ability to respond to the interests of citizens. The transparency of government decisions is also evaluated highly critically. Compared to the first years of the restored Lithuania in the 1990s, we see a clear decline of trust in all political authorities.

Instead of solving problems, the government often engaged in self-suggestion, manipulation of convenient statistics and essential political decisions were replaced by public relations. And Lithuania is not the only country with the above described developments and trends. Central Eastern Europe has been living in a democracy for a little more than three decades. And there is a general understanding and knowledge in the region that democracy is not a panacea for many political diseases. Not to mention other areas of public life.

A disappointment with democracy is not unique to Central Eastern Europe. To illustrate this is just to make a few references to the two best measurements of democracy currently compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU). Two headlines from their annual reports: 'Democracy Index 2010. Democracy in Retreat'[6] and 'Democracy Index 2019. A year of democratic setbacks and popular protest'.[7] There is no panic here. It is only reality. Or the 'recession of democracy', as the well-known American political sociologist Larry Diamond points out.

Even more critical views about new democracies have been raised by Philippe C Schmitter, who was studying democratic transitions for many years. He noted that:

> The present Fourth Wave will crest and may even recede. I am convinced that it will leave behind more cases of consolidated democracy dispersed over a wider area than all previous waves, but some polities could well be dragged by the undertow back to autocracy. I am also certain that it will produce a profound *sense of desencanto* (or *disenchantment* and *disillusionment*) when people discover that modern liberal, constitutional, representative political democracy does not resolve many of the palpable inequalities and much of the unhappiness in this world. We are still very far from 'the end of history'. To the contrary, I believe that once democracy has become the established norm within a given region and no longer faces a rival regime-type that is so markedly inferior, then and only then, are the disenchanted citizens going to demand that their leaders explain why

[6] 'Democracy index 2010. Democracy in retreat.' A report from the Economist Intelligence Unit. London: Economist Intelligence Unit, 2010.

[7] 'Democracy Index 2019. A year of democratic setbacks and popular protest' A report from the Economist Intelligence Unit. London: Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019.

> their persistent practices are so far removed from the ideals of democracy. I suspect that democracy consecrated will become democracy contested – that the triumph of democracy in the last decade of this century will lead to renewed criticism of democracy well into the next.[8]

Apologies for the very long quote but it is really worth to have it here.

So once again – where did we end up? A couple of more observations from the Democracy Index. Between 2010 and 2019, the number of full democracies fell from 26 to 22 countries. Not a large decrease, but still a downward trend. But full democracies make up just 13 per cent among the 167 countries assessed, with about 6 per cent of the world population. Not many, but rather few. There is no one country from Central Eastern Europe named as a full democracy. The closest to full democracies in this region is Estonia.

To keep the picture of democracies from being too sad, we still have 54 flawed democracies. They are home to almost 43 per cent of the world population. Many Central Eastern European countries belong to this group. The remaining states are hybrid or authoritarian political regimes.

Social context of democracy

The focus of this article, however, is the social context of politics and democracy in Lithuania in comparative perspective after thirty years from transition to democracy.

Transitologists, as usual, point out that the transition to democracy is a phased process. And a full democracy is possible just after a prolonged period of consolidation of democracy. This is highly straightforward and a linear thinking. Also Philippe C Schmitter noted that "democracy is not a necessity; it is a collective and contingent choice. It demands a continuous and extraordinary effort because it depends on a complex process of cooperation and competition involving a large number of citizens; and because the formal equality it establishes in a limited political role is put in question everyday by the informal equality of the socio- economic system into which it is inserted.[9]

Looking back, perhaps the biggest political and social change in Central Eastern European countries in those thirty years has been the diversion of societies from politics and the flourishing of political apathy. A growing political apathy and a decline of trust is a starting point or point of departure to a discussion of social context of democracy.

This discussion will be based to a large extent on findings from the European Social Survey. In 2012, the ESS introduced a special module on understanding of democracy. Therefore, it was based on a multi-dimensional concept of democracy drawing mainly

[8] Philippe C Schmitter, 'From Transitology to Considology', in *Democratisation in the 21st Century,* ed. by Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou and Timothy D Sisk (London: Routledge, 2017), 182–183.
[9] Ibid. 182.

on the work of Leonardo Morlino[10] and Hanspeter Kriesi et al.[11] The main added value was the broadened concept of democracy to embrace notions that go beyond the classical model of liberal democracy. The main objectives of this ESS study of democracy were to understand citizens' attitudes towards democracy in Europe, that is, how many Europeans still trust democracy, what exactly they do expect from democracy and do Europeans show particular dissatisfaction towards the aspects of their countries' democracy? In other words, the main idea was to find out the subjective perception of democracy, and assessment of the functioning or performance of democracy. The ESS study raised four key questions: 1. to analyse the concept of democracy: how do citizens understand it? 2. to analyse the quality of democracy: how do citizens view democracy? 3. to analyse people dissatisfaction with democracy: why are they dissatisfied with it? 4. to analyse democracy at micro and macro levels: is there a connection between them?[12]

The ESS was conducted in 29 countries towards the end of 2012. Approximately 54,600 standardised face-to-face interviews were carried out in the 29 countries, providing representative national samples of the population via random probability methods. Moreover, for a reason of comparison the last ESS study from 2019 is used in this article. Unfortunately, only few lines from the very rich ESS data will be taken in this article due to its limited scope and size.

Now let us get back to political apathy and declining trust as it is often one of the main outcomes of democratic developments in many Central Eastern European countries and in particular in Lithuania. In the 1990 European Values Survey as many as 79 per cent of the respondents declared that they were very or sufficiently interested in politics in Latvia, in 2019 the European Social Survey (ESS) showed that the number of such respondents decreased to 37 per cent. The same decline in interest in politics hit Lithuania – an almost 74 per cent in 1990 fell to 31 per cent in 2019, Bulgaria – 73 and 30 per cent respectively, Estonia – 60 and 39 per cent, Slovenia – 57 and 38 per cent, Hungary – 52 and 26 per cent.

And this list of Central Eastern European countries can be continued. In more than one case, the decline in interest in politics can be measured at times. But let us think critically. Maybe the same thing is happening in the old European democracies? Well, no. In Austria, for example, interest in politics remains essentially the same as 30 years before, that is, 54 and 52 per cent, a similar figure is in the Netherlands with 62 and 63 per cent. Respectively, in Sweden the focus on politics even increased from 47 to 72 per cent, and in the United Kingdom from 47 to 57 per cent. Of course, we would be able to find a few countries where interest in politics has declined. This has been the case in Norway, where it has fallen from 72 to 53 per cent, or in Germany from 75 to

[10] Leonardo Morlino, 'Legitimacy and the Quality of Democracy', *International Social Science Journal* 60, no 196 (2009), 211–222.

[11] Hanspeter Kriesi, Sandra Lavenex, Frank Esser, Mark Bühlmann, Daniel Bochsler and Jörg Matthes, *Democracy in the Age of Globalization and Mediatization* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[12] Hanspeter Kriesi, Mónica Ferrin, Leonardo Morlino, Pedro Magalhães, Sonia Alonso and Bernhard Wessels, *Europeans' Understandings and Evaluations of Democracy: Topline Results from Round 6 of the European Social Survey* (European Social Survey ERIC, City University London, 2014).

66 per cent, but the effect of the former East Germany may well be strong here.[13] In general, however, we are witnessing two opposite trajectories: a turn away from politics in Central Eastern Europe, and stability or even a certain increase in focus on politics in Western and Northern Europe.

A few more remarks about Lithuania in particular. Here, a decline of interest in politics not only more than doubled between 1990 and 2010 from 73.8 to 35.8 per cent over this period but it continues to decline. In 2019, according to the European Social Survey, only 31.1 per cent were interested in politics, compared to 42.2 per cent on average in the other 27 European countries, or 11 per cent more than in Lithuania.

Interest in politics is one of the important signs of political apathy and/or, conversely, political involvement. It is usually closely linked to trust in key political authorities. Trust is an expression of citizens' relationships with key political actors. Unfortunately, in both the 2010 and 2019 ESS studies, trust in parties, politicians, or parliament is measured in single digits *(Figure 1).* Looking very closely at these confidence indicators, a slight improvement can be seen. But it is reminiscent of optical deception or mirage, especially when we see distrust indicators on the other side.

In 2019, 62.7 per cent of the ESS respondents did not trust parties in Lithuania, as their trust was assessed by only 0–3 points on an eleven point scale, at the same time 58.1 per cent distrusted politicians and 55.1 per cent had no trust in parliament. Or more than half of all respondents showed clear distrust in main political authorities, and all this means a broad alienation between citizens and the political system in principle.

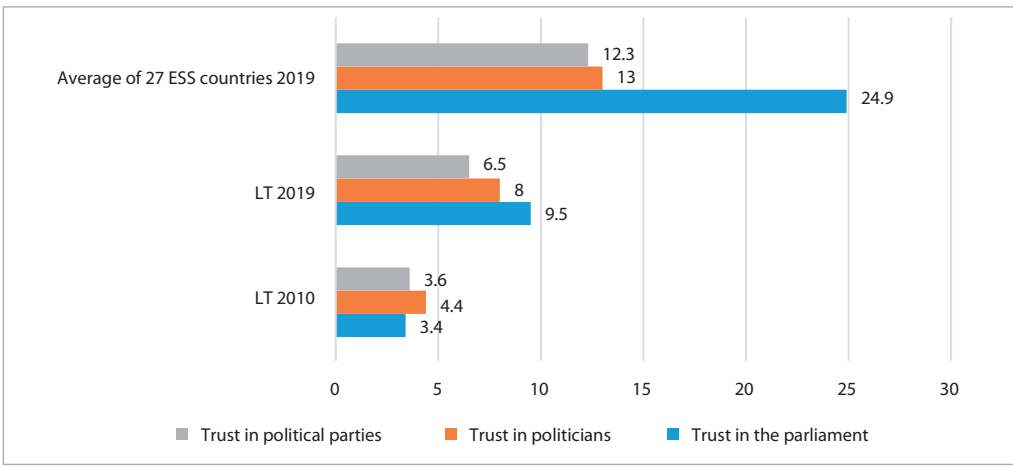

Figure 1: Trust in parties, politicians and parliament in 2010–2019, ESS (%) (7–10 points)

Source: European Social Survey, ESS Round 5 (2010/2011) Technical Report. London: Centre for Comparative Social Surveys, City University London, 2012; European Social Survey, ESS Round 9 (2018/2019) Technical Report. London: ESS ERIC, 2019.

[13] EVS: European Values Study 1990, 2nd wave, Integrated Dataset. GESIS Data Archive (Cologne, 2011), ZA4460 Data File Version 3.0; European Social Survey, ESS Round 9 (2018/2019) Technical Report (London: ESS ERIC, 2019).

Thus, political passivity permeates both political attitudes and trust, and ultimately involvement in political action. Trust also explains political behaviour. Again, in Lithuania, and in terms of political behaviour, we can observe significant political apathy. The only relatively positive phenomenon that has emerged recently is a relatively stable participation in the most important national elections – for the Seimas and for the President. About half of the registered voters take part in both. By the way, due to emigration, the number of voters has already decreased. While those 50 per cent of turnout is rather an indicator of low political activity as far as even in these times of declining voter turnout in many other European countries, on average, still about two-thirds of voters come to cast their vote.

Other indicators of individual political behaviour are also not inspiring. Let us look at just a few of them. Few respondents in the ESS studies told that they were working for a political party, contacted politicians or they were sure about their own or personal competence to take active role in political organisations *(Figure 2).* Again, all indicators are measured in single digits. In other words, we also see a clear apathy in political actions.

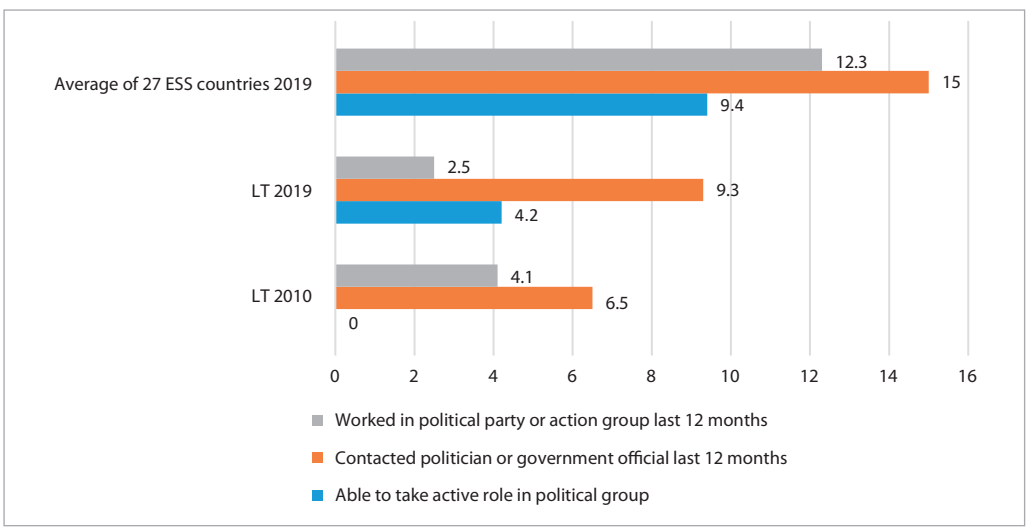

Figure 2: Ability to take active political role and political activity in the last 12 months, ESS (%)
Source: European Social Survey, ESS Round 5 (2010/2011) Technical Report. London: Centre for Comparative Social Surveys, City University London, 2012; European Social Survey, ESS Round 9 (2018/2019) Technical Report. London: ESS ERIC, 2019.

In 1928, two American sociologists William Isaac Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas formulated the Thomas theorem, or a principle that says that 'if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'.[14] William Isaac Thomas also argued that in

[14] William I Thomas and Dorothy S Thomas, *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs* (New York: Knopf, 1928), 571–572.

everyday life, any definition of a situation determines not only the present but also the attitude of the whole life and the personality of the individual himself.

There are at least a few such long-term impact variables whose estimates produce real consequences for political behaviour. These would include the general openness of the political system to citizens, the government's responsiveness to citizens' interests and the transparency of its decisions, as well as the self-assessment of personal competence to participate in politics. All these variables, as indicators of the responsiveness of the political system, are periodically used to measure the attitudes of European societies towards political authorities in the European Social Survey.

A satisfaction with the fairness of the political system usually means a short-term reaction of citizens to the implementation of governmental policies. Meanwhile, we measure the openness of the political system to our citizens as the extent to which people think that politicians and/or political authorities will listen to and will act according to the opinions of ordinary citizens. According to the answers that the political system provides equal opportunities to participate in politics, where on the one pole there are statements 'a lot and a great deal' and on the other – 'not at all and very little', Lithuania has 59 per cent negative assessments and only 9.7 per cent positive. Eventually, Lithuania is at the bottom among Central Eastern European countries along the dimension of fairness of the political system *(Figure 3).*

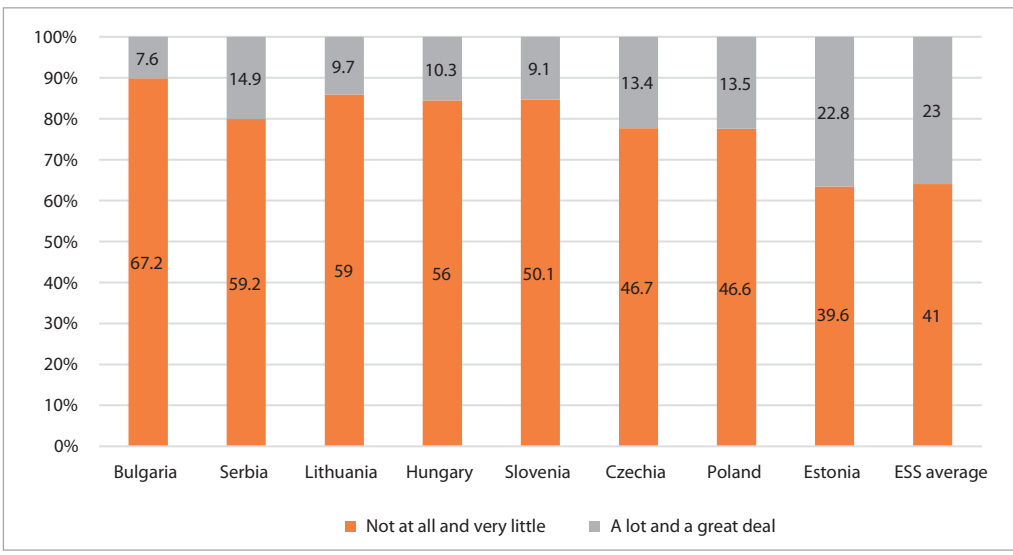

Figure 3: The political system in the country ensures everyone fair chance to participate in politics, 2019 ESS (%)

Source: European Social Survey, ESS Round 9 (2018/2019) Technical Report. London: ESS ERIC, 2019.

Lithuania looks even worse than in the assessment of fairness of the political system when it comes to the extent to which the country's government considers the interests of their citizens. Just 2.2 per cent evaluated as 'a lot and a great deal' and 64 per cent

of the respondents thought that the government was able to respond 'not at all and very little' to the interests of citizens *(Figure 4).*

In a comparative context, we can observe several trends. First, the openness of the political system (positive evaluations range from 2.2 to 58.3 per cent) is rated better everywhere than the government abilities listening to the interests of citizens (positive evaluations range from 1.2 to 45.1 per cent). Second, the regional grouping of European countries according to both variables is the same: Northern and Western European countries have much higher positive scores followed by Central and Southern European countries with generally low scores.

However, in case of Lithuania, according to positive assessments of the openness of the political system, the difference from Norway and Switzerland, which have the highest percentages, is about six times. A general conclusion is that Lithuanian political authorities and political system in general are rather closed and nonresponsive to citizens.

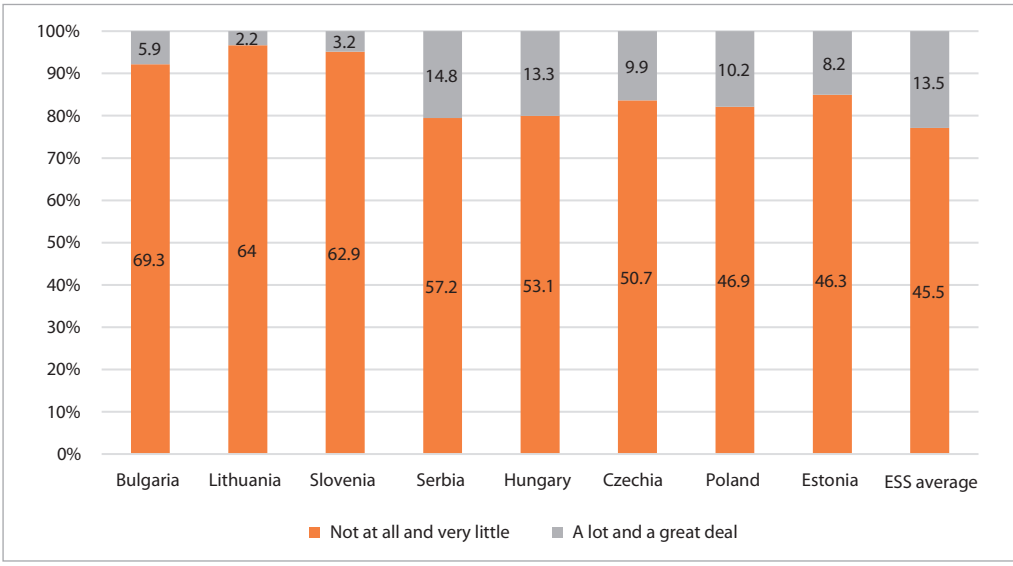

Figure 4: The government in the country takes into account the interests of all citizens, 2019 ESS (%)
Source: European Social Survey, ESS Round 9 (2018/2019) Technical Report. London: ESS ERIC, 2019.

Closely related to the two variables already discussed is the third, the transparency of political decisions. Although the Lithuanian Corruption Perceptions Index[15] has improved somewhat in recent years, the transparency of policy decisions is extremely critical *(Figure 5).* By the way, among 20 European countries from the ESS study in 2019, the scores of this variable are the worst, as on average only 11.6 per cent said that in their national policies decisions in 'a lot or a great deal' cases are transparent. Even an average of 52.6 per cent thought they were 'not at all or very little' transparent. Lithuania, as

[15] See more: Corruption Perceptions Index 2019. www.transparency.org/files/content/pages/2019_CPI_Report_EN.pdf

nearly always, is at the bottom among these countries with just 3.2 per cent positive and 63 per cent negative responses.

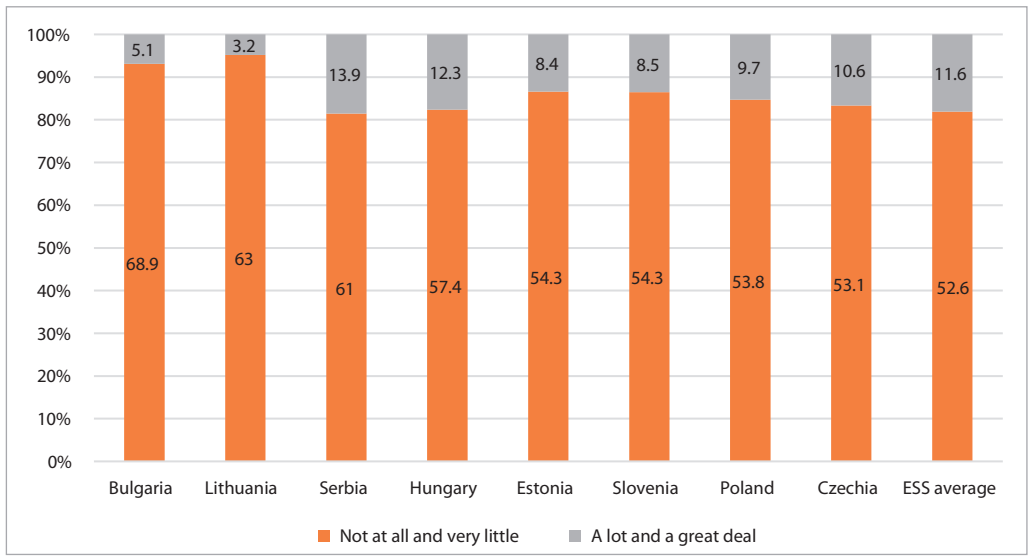

Figure 5: Decisions in country politics are transparent, 2019 ESS (%)

Source: European Social Survey, ESS Round 9 (2018/2019) Technical Report. London: ESS ERIC, 2019.

The cancer of political opacity, even in Western democracies, is a clearly perceived problem in their societies. No drugs or antidotes were found for this problem yet. But the openness of the political system, ability of the government to take into account the interests of all citizens, and the transparency of governmental decisions correlate with general political trust and the assessments of the current government.

So, without going into the equilibrium of numbers, there is nothing strange if, according to the ESS study from 2019 only 6.5 per cent trusted political parties (giving 7–10 points), 8 per cent in politicians, 9.5 per cent in parliament, 13.3 per cent in government, 26.1 per cent in the legal system of Lithuania. As well as with the statement that most people can be trusted agreed 25 per cent of the respondents (this is an indicator of social trust). Although there were better times in Lithuania. For example, in 1992 as many as 38.1 per cent trusted the political system. We are now seeing, if not a regression in confidence in all political authorities, but there is essentially no progress. The aggregate indicator to justify these trends is satisfaction with democracy. In 1999, according to the European Values Survey, 25.5 per cent were satisfied with the functioning of democracy in Lithuania. Twenty years after or in 2019 only 23.8 per cent of the respondents said the same. So, it looks like Lithuania is running on the spot.

A higher level of responsiveness of the political system is associated with a higher level of political participation, including voting in elections. However, the subjective political competence, or the individual's ability to understand politics and act politically responsibly, is crucial here.

Do Lithuanian citizens trust their competence in politics? In 2019, just 3.3 per cent of the respondents in Lithuania were very or completely confident in their ability to participate in politics, but 83.8 per cent were not confident of that *(Figure 6).* Lithuania was in the last place among 8 Eastern Central European countries.

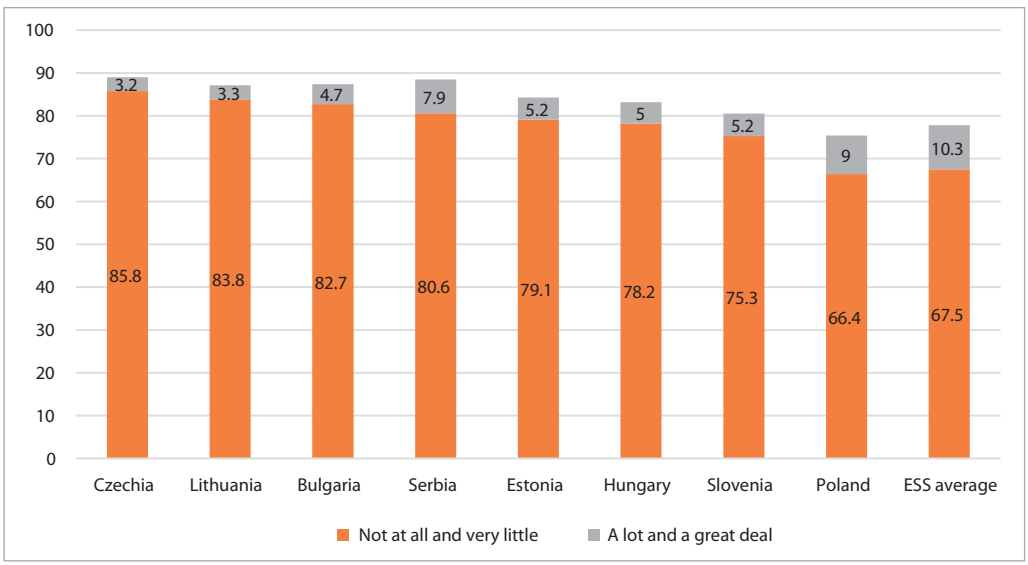

Figure 6: Confident in own ability to participate in politics, 2019 ESS (%)
Source: European Social Survey, ESS Round 9 (2018/2019) Technical Report. London: ESS ERIC, 2019.

Subjective competence to take part in politics is a particularly good prognostic variable of political activity. The correlation coefficient between participation in parliamentary elections and the subjective political competence in the ESS studied countries, when it is assessed negatively, is a minus 0.38 points. The correlation between participation in elections and negative equal opportunities within the political system reaches minus 0.47 points. And the highest correlation is between the voter turnout and ability of government to take into account the interests of all citizens as it is as much as minus 0.51 points.

What conclusions do these correlations offer for an understanding of real political life? First, the fact that about half of the voters are coming to votes in the parliamentary elections would not come as a surprise, as the level of frustration with politicians and political authorities is extremely high.

So, in this situation predicting voter turnout is fairly easy. It is like a self-fulfilling forecast that about half or just over half of the electorate will come to vote. The preconditions for rather low turnout (participation in elections in Lithuania is about 15 per cent lower compared to the most of European countries) are not short-term, but long-term. These correlations also explain the low level of trust in democracy. If citizens think they can influence governmental decisions, then they have more confidence in democracy as a system, and vice versa.

The satisfaction with democracy

Therefore, there are more long-term problems in the Lithuanian political arena than necessary. The European Union, whose membership criteria include functioning democracy and the rule of law, improved the quality of democracy in Lithuania just to some degree.

One of the best descriptors of people's feelings about the state-of-the-art of democracy, which is always asked in the ESS studies, is the following: How are you satisfied with the way democracy works in your country?

Now take a look at the Lithuanian data. In 2009–2010 during the financial and economic crisis, trust in democracy fell into a deep pit *(Figure 7).* After that, we see some stability is coming at the low end of satisfaction scores, as the standard 3 per cent margin of error in the surveys shows that constantly only a quarter of the citizens have been satisfied with the way democracy works in the country.

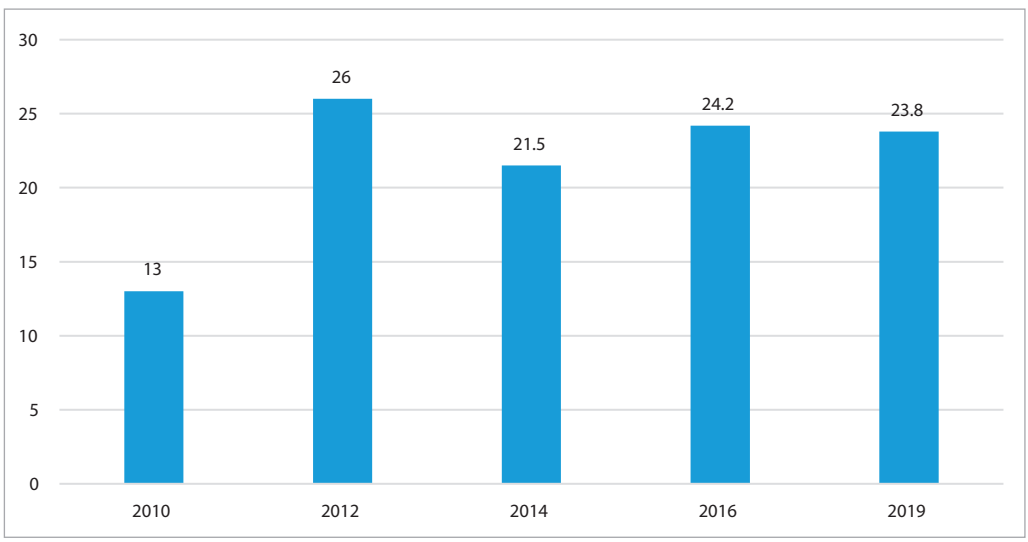

Figure 7: Satisfied with the way democracy works in Lithuania, ESS (%)
Source: European Social Survey, ESS Round 5 (2010/2011) Technical Report. London: Centre for Comparative Social Surveys, City University London, 2012; European Social Survey, ESS Round 9 (2018/2019) Technical Report. London: ESS ERIC, 2019.

Finally, some thoughts about hope. Democracy in both Lithuania and Central Eastern Europe is still a relatively new phenomenon. So in assessing the state-of-the-art of democracy, it is quite useful to use Niccolò Machiavelli's words, who once told about the introduction of a new order of things noting that people 'do not readily believe in new things until they have had a long experience of them'.[16] So we cannot repeat enough that democracy is still a relatively new phenomenon in Lithuania and in the whole of Central Eastern Europe.

[16] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (The Project Gutenberg EBook, 2006).

Once again, a few more comparative touches. According to Almond and Verba, every stable democracy needs so-called civic citizens with positive attitudes towards the political system and readiness to play an active political role. But recently citizens of democratic countries are divided into four categories or groups. Along with civic citizens we have critical citizens, who are dissatisfied with the way democracy works but remain open for political participation. The stealth citizens follow, who are satisfied with the way democracy works but prefer not to take part in the political process. And there are disenchanted citizens who show very low scores of satisfaction with democracy and readiness to take part in the political process.[17]

In 2015, Thomas Denk, Henrik Serup Christensen and Daniel Bergh measured the relative strength of these four groups in 25 European democracies, including 10 of the new democracies in Central Eastern Europe.[18] What are the differences between Central Eastern Europe and Western Europe? The civic citizens are relatively few as an average of 12.5 per cent in Central Eastern Europe as opposed to 34.8 per cent in Western Europe. The disenchanted citizens are relatively numerous as an average of 35 per cent as opposed to 15.4 per cent in Western Europe.[19] In Western European countries civic and critical citizens make more than a half of all citizens. The largest group in the new democracies is the politically disenchanted with about 35 per cent followed by the critical citizens who constitute about 31 per cent.[20]

To sum up and to come back to political trust, it would allow us to make a few observations. So far, both democracy and the key authorities of the political regime lack not only trust but also legitimacy. Worse than that is another trend. The political class makes little contribution to increasing of trust and legitimacy, although it should also set an example to society. Rather, the opposite is true.

Moreover, Lithuania as most of Central Eastern European societies built up elitist democracies instead of popular democracies, where the political and business elite has a disproportionate power in a society. Starting from Vifredo Pareto and going to Harold Laswell, Ralf Dahrendorf and other proponents of the elite theory, all agree that in democracies life is shaped by a handful of power elite. However, in the advanced Western countries the irony of democracy is not only that masses respond to the attitudes, proposals and behaviour of elites, but these elites must govern wisely if government 'by the people' or democracy is to survive.[21] In Central Eastern Europe, the power elite exercise a great weight of power (greater than in advanced Western democracies), but they have too little experience about how to rule wisely. The behaviour of the power elite here is in many ways ignoring the attitudes and expectations of masses. The whole picture is

[17] Kjetil Duvold, Sten Berglund and Joakim Ekman, *Political Culture in the Baltic States. Between National and European Integration* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 9–10.

[18] Unfortunately, Lithuania was not analysed in this study. See more in Thomas Denk, Henrik Serup Christensen and Daniel Bergh, 'The Composition of Political Culture: A Study of 25 European Democracies', *Studies in Comparative International Development* 50, no 3 (2015), 358–377.

[19] Duvold et al., *Political Culture in the Baltic States,* 10.

[20] Denk et al., 'The Composition of Political Culture', 371.

[21] Thomas R Dye and Harmon Zeigler, *The Irony of Democracy: An Uncommon Introduction to American Politics* (Cengage Advantage Books, 2008), 1.

becoming more complicated because of the specific circumstances of Central Eastern European countries. Firstly, we have here much higher social and economic uncertainty because of a less developed or smaller middle class, which is seen as the backbone of democratic polity. Secondly, a higher vulnerability of most countries from this region is caused by social economic crises, because of lower wealth and net welfare compared to Western European countries. Thirdly, we have here much less stable political attitudes and habits of political behaviour as they are not rooted in social cleavages, where the space for challengers to the existing political order is broad and permanent.

To summarise everything, it is a well-known trend that many contemporary democracies are suffering from a legitimacy crisis.[22] But in Central Eastern Europe there is a higher deficit of democracy if to measure it by a difference between the importance of democracy vs. satisfaction with democracy than in Western European countries *(Table 1).*

Table 1: Importance of democracy vs. democracy in own country, EVS, 2017 (%)

	Average mean: Importance of democracy	Average mean: Democracy in own country	Difference: real democracy vs. importance
Western and Southern Europe (WES)	9.20 (9.22*)	7.19 (7.34*)	–2.01 (–1.88*)
Central Eastern Europe (CEE)	8.44	5.42	–3.02
Difference between WES and CEE	0.76	1.77	1.01

Notes: *If to exclude two Southern European countries: Italy and Spain.
Importance of democracy measured with a question: How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically? Democracy in own country measured with a question: How democratically is this country being governed today?
Western and Southern Europe: Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland
Central Eastern Europe: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia
Source: EVS: European Values Study 2017: Integrated Dataset (EVS 2017). GESIS Datenarchiv, Köln, 2020. ZA7500 Datenfile Version 3.0.0

Good news in a bad game is that Lithuania along other Central Eastern Europe countries completed transition to a new liberal democratic order, but the status and condition of democracy is still fragile.

On the other hand, it is hardly possible to conclude this review with hope. Sometimes, and very often, the world of Lithuanian politics is a reminiscent of the absurd. Rolandas Pavilionis, Lithuanian philosopher, eloquently wrote about all this in his book *Against the Absurd* in the following way: ‘The absurd is a part of our lives. The bigger it is, the

[22] Pippa Norris, *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

more absurd life is. Partly absurd is determined by our nature; much more – by our way of life; but most of all – by our reconciliation with the absurd, living in the absurd without feeling it, not noticing it, not being able to or not wanting to see it.'[23]

Instead of conclusions

Nowadays, globally and regionally (in Europe as such), there is a clear wave of dissatisfaction with democracy. So, the challenges to democracy are not just local. Also, we will not get to the end of history with the victory of full democracy, as Francis Fukuyama had hoped almost three decades ago. And Lithuania, as all Baltic and Central Eastern European countries, at least in the medium term, will muddle through in the flawed democracy.

In the same 1989 Ralf Dahrendorf noticed that often revolutions might fail. But in Central Eastern Europe democracy in a better or worse shape have survived. But if to follow Ralf Dahrendorf's thoughts once again, he claimed that, certainly, the open society has its own problems, not least that of citizens in search of meaning. Moreover, the Good Society must square the circle of prosperity, civility and liberty. Looking on Central Eastern European societies, we see that liberty is to a large extent achieved. Also, these societies are on a road to prosperity. But still, it will take time to reach. Perhaps the civility is the most distant aim to achieve. And Ralf Dahrendorf might be very right when he spoke about a sixty years transition to build up social foundations of free and open societies. But you never know here. Still one thing we know that social sciences and social scientists can help us understand what needs to be done, as well as intellectuals have a responsibility to initiate and accompany change.[24] Too optimistic? It might be.

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