

# Lithuanian elections return US Republican as president

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The presidential election in the Baltic country of Lithuania has returned former President Valdas Adamkus to office, following the June 27 second-round defeat of rival candidate Kazimeira Prunskiene. The elections were called as a result of the impeachment in April of Rolandas Paksas, who had beaten Adamkus, incumbent since 1998, in the presidential election of January 2003.

Seventy-seven year old Adamkus, a former American citizen and active member of the Republican Party in the United States who returned permanently to Lithuania in 1997, is a longstanding advocate of the rapid market reforms of the 1990s. Like almost all Lithuanian politicians, he is a supporter of the country's alliance with the US over the occupation of Iraq and the "war on terror."

In the face of overwhelming backing for Adamkus from the country's political and media elite, Prunskiene nevertheless managed to garner 48 percent of the second-round vote. Prunskiene's campaign was aided by her populist phraseology about defending the interest of those whose living standards have suffered over the past decade. Her campaign was also given a boost by the backing it received from Paksas, who has retained much of the support that saw him win last year's presidential election.

Adamkus's far from overwhelming victory disproves the claim that the Lithuanian population is happy with the pro-US foreign policy and European Union-dictated "free-market" economic policies with which the re-elected president is associated. With most Lithuanians feeling either alienation from or hostility to the country's politicians, in the first round Adamkus won only 30 percent of the vote in a poll where less than half of those eligible to vote turned out. Prunskiene (Farmers and New Democracy Party) took just over 21

percent. She was Lithuania's first prime minister following the country's secession from the Soviet Union.

In the second round almost all the major parliamentary parties swung behind Adamkus, as the favoured candidate of big business. Only the Liberal Democrats, the political organisation founded by Paksas, shifted to back Prunskiene—whose own party has its voter base in poor rural areas.

Paksas had been banned from standing for election following the passage of a rushed law through parliament in May barring any impeached public official from running for office for five years. Paksas's period in office had been dogged by allegations from the State Security agency of his corruption and criminality and that of his official advisors. Nonetheless, in an indication that most Lithuanians see little difference between Paksas' alleged actions and those of the rest of his political rivals, opinion polls had indicated that should Paksas have run in these elections he could have won.

The presidential campaign was marked by further allegations of corruption, and the anti-Russian chauvinism that has become common in official politics in the Baltic States. The offices of the governing Social Democratic Party, as well as those of three other parliamentary parties backing Adamkus, were raided by the Special Investigation Service (SIS), purportedly as part of an investigation into corruption among members of parliament. Former Lithuanian president and leader of the right-wing Conservative and Homeland Union, Vytautas Landsbergis, used the raids in order to stir up anti-Russian sentiments, stating that they had been part of an attempt by pro-Russian forces within the security apparatus to weaken the Adamkus campaign to the benefit of a "pro-Russian" Prunskiene, a reference to

allegations that were floated in the 1990s that Prunskiene had links with Russian intelligence agents.

In Lithuania's vote for the European Parliamentary election, which took place on the same day as the first round of the presidential election, there was a major upset for the governing Social Democrats and their coalition partners, the Social Liberals. Over 30 percent of votes were cast for the recently formed Labour Party, led by millionaire Russian parliamentarian Viktor Uspaskich, with the Social Democrats beaten into second place with just 14 percent of the vote. The Social Liberals failed to garner enough votes for a mandate in the European Parliament.

Uspaskich has been a member of the Seimas (Lithuanian parliament) since 2000, initially for the Social Liberal Party—where he was considered a senior figure, heading the Seimas' economic affairs committee—before breaking away in January 2004 to lead the new Labour Party. He is the only politician of Russian origin to have been allowed a major role in Lithuania's stridently anti-Russian official political life since 1991. He made millions of dollars during the 1990s from the natural gas transportation industry from Russia through Lithuania, and is now the president of one of Lithuania's largest—and notoriously corrupt—companies, Vikonda.

Essentially a political extension of his Vikonda empire, the Labour Party has won its current popularity partly thanks to Uspaskich's denunciations of official corruption and expressions of sympathy for the plight of the working class. But Uspaskich's greatest advantage is that he is relatively new to the political scene and has not yet held high office, making him appear less tarnished in the eyes of ordinary Lithuanians when compared to his rivals.

This confused mass resentment towards those in power was also expressed in the European votes of the other two Baltic States. In Latvia there was a major shift in support away from the ruling coalition to the two main opposition parties, the right-wing anti-Russian Fatherland and Freedom Party, which increased its vote from 5.4 percent in the 2002 parliamentary elections to take 29 percent of the vote, and the New Era Party, which took a 20 percent share. There were also gains for other opposition parties. Coalition government parties, the Greens and Farmers' Union, and the Latvia's First Party, saw their share of

the vote plummet to 4.2 percent and 3.2 percent respectively, both failing to win a mandate in the European Parliament.

In Estonia the European elections recorded the country's lowest voter turnout since 1991, at fewer than 30 percent. The governing parties fared almost as badly as their Latvian counterparts, with Res Publica, the party of Prime Minister Juhan Parts, gaining less than seven percent of the vote and its coalition partner, the People's Party, taking eight percent. This means that less than one in every 20 Estonian electors could bring themselves to support the government.



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