

# Lithuania: election sees low turnout, large gains for Labour Party

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The Labour Party—a recent political formation led by multi-millionaire businessman Viktor Uspaskich—became the single largest party of the 141-seat Lithuanian parliament following the October 24 second-round elections. Gaining 39 seats, Labour beat the governing coalition of the Social Democrats and the Social Liberals, who saw their combined representation in the seimas (parliament) plummet to 31 seats from the 80 that they won in the 2000 election.

Turnout was an all-time low for parliamentary elections in Lithuania, with 45 percent of those eligible voting in the first round and just 40 percent in the second.

Despite its victory, Labour is to be locked out of power by Lithuania's more established political parties. In brazen disregard of the vote against the government, incumbent Social Democrat Prime Minister Algirdas Brazauskas can expect to receive the backing of the head of state, President Adamkus, and be invited to form a new coalition government.

Brazauskas, a veteran of the Soviet-era Stalinist bureaucracy, has made overtures towards forming a new cabinet with the main right-wing opposition parties, the Homeland Union and the Liberal Centre Union, which won 43 seats between them.

Labour achieved a 30 percent share of the vote and 23 seats in the first round of the election on October 10, in which half the seimas is elected on the basis of proportional representation. In the two weeks leading up to the second half of the election, when single-member constituency seats are fought for, the anti-Uspaskich campaign of the dominant section of the ruling elite intensified.

Lacking any policies capable of resonating with the social interests of the working class, the Lithuanian establishment relied on chauvinistic attacks on

Uspaskich, who was born in Russian but has lived in Lithuania since 1985, and hysteria about supposed shadowy Russian interference in the country. Thanks to this atmosphere, the far-right Homeland Union was able to increase its representation in the seimas.

Besides Uspaskich's Russian origins, Labour's populist phraseology also marked it out for political ostracism. The party was able to rocket from nothing to its current electoral success on the back of a few radical-sounding slogans about defending poor, hard-working Lithuanians. Focusing its campaign on small towns and semi-rural areas where living standards have been worst hit, Labour has been able to exploit the mass resentment against the Lithuanian elite.

This highly confused response by voters has allowed Uspaskich, one of the richest men in the country with a personal fortune reportedly in excess of \$160 million, to advance his status in the political wrangling of Lithuanian bourgeois politics.

Essentially an extension of his Vikonda conglomerate—Lithuania's largest industrial concern—Labour is a means through which Uspaskich hopes to gain leverage in relation to his big-business rivals. Excluded from power by the native-Lithuanian elite, Uspaskich wants a share of political power that he feels is commensurate with his bank balance.

He is, therefore, quite willing to form any seemingly beneficial alliance with his rivals, no matter how unprincipled. Following Labour's first-round success, Brazauskas refused to rule out attempting to form a coalition with Uspaskich, provided the Labour leader did not attempt to usurp the premiership from him. Uspaskich responded by saying that he would consider forgoing the post of prime minister depending on the situation.

While Uspaskich has not yet fully discredited himself,

at least compared to the more longstanding political figures in the country, Labour's current popularity has no genuine base of support. The shameless self-promotion through his business and media empire by which he has been able to portray an image of a benevolent common-man-made-good can only last so long.

Like every political formation in Lithuania since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Labour is committed to the anti-social "free" market policies of privatisation and deregulation. Responding to the anti-Russian smear campaign that labelled him an agent of Moscow, Uspakich responded that he was committed to current Lithuanian foreign policy: "the European Union and NATO will remain our natural priorities."



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