

Presidential Election in **LITHUANIA**

How Events of 2023 May Lead to Surprises in 2024



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About The Beacon Project

The International Republican Institute strengthens citizen voices and helps make their leaders more accountable and responsive. To put it simply, IRI encourages democracy in places where it is absent, helps democracy become more effective where it is in danger and shares best practices where democracy is flourishing.

Vladimir Putin is actively trying to sway public opinion throughout Europe using hostile propaganda, disinformation, and political subversion as a way to destabilize its neighbors. Therefore, in 2015, IRI launched the Beacon Project to counteract this misinformation.

The Beacon Project does not prevent disinformation from occurring—a laudable but impossible goal. Nor does it confront every instance of disinformation—though we work with partners who do just that. IRI’s focus is to dismantle the underlying conditions that allow disinformation to spread. Strengthening democracy is the best approach for nations to respond not just to today’s threat, but to better endure in the face of future threats in whatever form they take.

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Presidential Election in Lithuania: How Events of 2023 May Lead to Surprises in 2024

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Presidential Elections in Lithuania: How events of 2023 may lead to surprises in 2024

The fundamental contribution elections play in democratic governance has always been of great importance to Lithuanians. A relatively young democratic country, Lithuania's political culture is still developing thus adding a high degree of unpredictability about future coalitions and governments. This unpredictability will soon converge on several fronts. All three main elections in Lithuania – Presidential and parliamentary, as well as elections to the European Parliament will all take place in 2024. While much time remains between now and the first election next May, we can draw some conclusions by analyzing the current political landscape of Lithuania.

With one year remaining before the election of a new President of Lithuania, the names of potential candidates have begun appearing in the media. The current President of Lithuania, Gitanas Nausėda, was recently involved in a scandal, as journalist **Dovydas Pancerovas revealed** that he once was a member of the Communist Party. This fact itself is not scandalous, considering that other **Lithuanian presidents** were also party members. However, Nausėda failed to disclose this fact publicly while running for the presidency. This event, widely covered across all types of Lithuanian media, gave a further impulse for the anti-government narrative to spread, harshly criticizing all officials and questioning their integrity.

Kremlin-aligned media placed heavy emphasis on this narrative.¹ Popular among specific audiences, this narrative has always targeted either the ruling government or governing politicians, claiming their poor competency to rule the country and blaming them for events caused by global crises and generally placing blame for worsening living conditions in the country.

A prominent spreader of the anti-government narrative and one of the main actors within this topic's frames – lawyer and a former President of Lithuania's Bar Association Ignas Vėgėlė, who is often labelled as a Kremlin-sympathetic character. Previously known primarily in legal circles, he became a famous public icon after offering harsh, public criticisms targeting of the governments, specifically its measures to control the coronavirus pandemic. As such, Vėgėlė quickly became visible and appreciated by Kremlin-aligned media followers as he constantly pushed the idea of poor pandemic control and out-of-touch politicians. He also widely commented on a “*public poll*”, claiming that more than 66 percent of Lithuanians are hugely dissatisfied with politicians' work controlling the pandemic and other aspects that fully correspond with his stance. Only after extensive coverage of his critiques citing the public opinion poll was it discovered that the survey was funded by Vėgėlė's companions.

After scandals related to the failed disclosure of the current President Nausėda's membership in the Communist Party have recently emerged, Vėgėlė revealed that he is considering standing as a candidate in the 2024 presidential elections. He based his decision on public opinion polls indicating he has voters' support, claiming that “*he sees almost no reason not to run for the post*”. According to many reputable polls, he ranks among the top three potential candidates for president., alongside current President Gitanas Nausėda and Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė. Even though it is a sound statement to be among the top three

1 For example: <https://bukimevieningi.lt/>, <https://ekspertai.eu/>, <https://77.lt/>, <https://www.laisvaslaikrastis.lt/>



candidates, there are many potential candidates who have yet to announce their intentions to campaign for the presidency. According to these polls, Nausėda gathers almost 20 percent, Šimonytė 13 percent, and Vėgėlė 6.8 percent. Compared to the other two candidates, both from the governing coalition, Vėgėlė's numbers have him trailing but with numbers that mirror those of voters expressing strong discontent with the government.

Vėgėlė has also positioned himself as a civil society representative, advocating for citizens' freedom and rights and demanding accountability of politicians, thus further pushing a well-known anti-government narrative in the country. Since the outbreak of the war, the claim that the Lithuanian government restricts freedom and human rights has been extended to other contexts, equating the government with the Russian authoritarian regime. Vėgėlė has complained that he was being delegitimized by the cultural, media, and political elite and even suggested that the Lithuanian government, one of the most prominent in support of Ukraine, was working for the benefit of Putin. His populist statements and strong criticism of the current government gained support from particular parts of the society in the country, including those associated with far-right political leanings, anti-system and anti-vaccination adherents. For example, as the civil union bill aimed at regulating relations of same-sex partners passed the first vote in the Lithuanian parliament, Vėgėlė claimed: *"Obviously, for this decision, they [conservatives, the ruling party] sold something for their coalition partners liberals and Freedom Union. Treachery, lies, and double standards become the fundamental operating principles of this so-called Christian government."* when one of his public speeches was recently analysed, it revealed many factual misrepresentations.

For instance, he stated that the *"European Medicines Agency confirmed that one in 100,000 of those vaccinated died from AstraZeneca."* AstraZeneca is a pharmaceutical company that manufactured a widely prescribed anti COVID-19 vaccination. However, the European Medicines Agency actually claimed that 1 in 100,000 might experience an unusual blood clot, while the rate of death is actually less than one in a million. Nonetheless, his statements gathered many positive reactions under his posts, revealing a base of support.

Most Lithuanian media outlets covered Vėgėlė's recent statements about the possibility of running for President. Although the articles gathered high audience traction from both Kremlin-aligned and independent outlets, audience reactions to the news varied considerably. Followers of Kremlin-aligned outlets shared their excitement and enthusiasm in the comments: *"Finally not a communist, not a globalist and the one, who ignored the "sheep passport" [referring to the national certificate in Lithuania, meant to control the coronavirus pandemic]. I will finally have a reason to visit the elections"* (see below).

"Finally, a proper candidate to lead the country!", "Best of luck, we trust, support, and believe in you", "Please, don't change your mind to run for this post, don't leave us in despair", etc.

Pagaliau nekomunistas, neglobalistas ir spjovęs į galvijo pasą. Bus proga pagaliau užeit į rinkimus.

Like Reply 2w Edited



At the same time, the readers of independent publications presented a radically opposing stance: “He sees no reason not to try? Is he blind?”, “I can come up with at least fifty reasons from the top of my head”, “I beg you, do not even try that”, etc. Many of these readers openly mocked Vėgėlė, his plans and the few supporters who stood up for him in their comments section.

One of the most prominent pro-Ukrainian activists in the country, Oleg Surajev, repeatedly mocked Vėgėlė and his alleged ties with Russia. Surajev’s strong stance against Vėgėlė dates back to his first public statements against coronavirus restrictions.



Surajev made an ironic Facebook post in October of 2022 , writing:

*“DEMOCRACY: Let’s vote! Who would you vote for if the Presidential Elections were to happen tomorrow?
LIKE – Baby, my dog, a poodle, four years old.
LOVE – Ignas Vėgėlė, an expert in medicine and law, 47 years old.
THE RESULTS WILL BE OFFICIALLY PUBLISHED TOMORROW!
Many thanks”.*

The post has become one of the most engaged posts in a long time, quickly gathering over 12,000 reactions; almost all of them chose Surajev’s dog over Vėgėlė.

Although Vėgėlė has never publicly claimed Russian ties, he has never dared to deny that and was constantly voicing pro-Kremlin narratives. Pro-Ukrainian activists analysed the case of Vėgėlė and his Kremlin-aligned stance: he did not collect

money or any other kind of support for Ukraine; as a lawyer, he did not suggest how to improve the sanctions mechanism for Russia nor did he support any pro-Ukrainian organisations. He has never condemned the aggressor, but when it comes to publicly doubting other people’s action to support Ukraine, yes, there were many articles, posts, comments and all other possible resources were used here. As Lithuania is among the most prominent supporters of Ukraine, **Vėgėlė has publicly questioned the financial support**, claiming that it *“allegedly has been wasted somewhere else by those who collect it”* without offering any concrete examples. He constantly undermined those trying to support Ukraine, guessing the *“actual goals”* and *“actual means of spending”* the collected money”. Surajev, in one of his (many) Facebook posts related to Vėgėlė, highlighted that the possible candidate for President’s post has never expressed any support towards Ukraine, has not tried to impose changes regarding sanctions imposed on Russia as former chairman of the Council of the Lithuanian Bar, and not only did not support any pro-Ukraine activities and fundraisers but has also publicly undermined them, doubting their legitimacy.



Take for example his response to Andrius Tapinas, a presenter for Laisves TV and one of the main pro-Ukraine activists in the country, who successfully initiated a fundraiser for a drone back in May 2022. For this, Vėgėlė targeted Tapinas for criticism on social media. Vėgėlė argued in a Facebook post that Tapinas spent the money collected to help Ukraine play poker in the U.S. The post was only followed by comments agreeing with Vėgėlė encouraging him to start a career as a politician and condemning Tapinas. However, as the post was published from his personal account, the possibility cannot be ruled out that all the comments opposing Vėgėlė were simply deleted.

Vėgėlė's possible candidacy and the debates that it has caused further exploit efforts to destabilise the political landscape in Lithuania. Kremlin-aligned media, constantly pushing anti- system narratives, is adeptly using various domestic events and conflicts to further deepen public dissatisfaction with the current government. The 2024 elections may result in some new actors entering the field of the country's politics, and with candidacies such as Vėgėlė's, should they take roots garner wider support, assistance for Ukraine wouldn't be endangered.





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