

Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė will face a harder fight in this year's presidential election than she did in 2009

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Lithuania is due to hold presidential elections, with the first round of voting scheduled for 11 May. [Ingrida Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė](#) writes that while the incumbent president Dalia Grybauskaitė won the 2009 elections comfortably, she is unlikely to emerge with an absolute majority in the first round of voting in 2014. Despite having a healthy lead in the polls, she is still short of the 50 per cent required to avoid going to a second round, and it is not unforeseeable that she could lose to one of her challengers in a direct run off.



The first round of the upcoming 2014 Lithuanian presidential election will take place on 11 May. The second round of elections is scheduled alongside the European Parliament election on 25 May. The last Lithuanian presidential election in 2009 was short, with no serious competition and Dalia Grybauskaitė emerging as a clear winner long before Election Day. The President was elected in the first round with over 68 per cent of votes, the closest challenger managing around 11.7 per cent.

Although many experts relying on polling results predict Dalia Grybauskaitė will win again in 2014, this year's election will be much more competitive and challenging than last time around. Almost no one doubts that the contest will go to the second round, but equally no one is ready to predict who the opponent of Ms Grybauskaitė will be, and some experts are not sure who will ultimately win the election. More reliable predictions will be available only when the exact number of candidates is announced and official campaigning starts in April.

Why is the 2014 presidential election more of a challenge than 2009 for the incumbent President?

Several factors likely play a role. First, this campaign is not a challenger's campaign but an incumbent campaign, which means that the President needs to give an account of what she has done for voters and prove that she has been successful and has made the right decisions. This is far from easy. She has been characterised as controlling and arrogant, while also being criticised for caring more about poll ratings than presenting concrete initiatives and a coherent vision. Moreover, she has faced criticism for foreign policy mistakes and for losing strategic partners in neighbouring countries.

Although two opposition parties, Lithuanian Conservatives and the Liberals Movement, have expressed their support for Ms Grybauskaitė, she is registered as an independent candidate, as she was in her first election. This independence was useful last time, but waging an incumbent election campaign is more complicated without party support.

Second, 19 candidates (a record number) have declared their intention to run. However, each must collect 20,000 signatures before the start of the campaign in April. Of course, not all of them will be able to collect the required number of signatures and will not be able to compete in the official election campaign. Probably half of this group will



Seimas Building in Vilnius, Credit: Bernt Rostad (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

make it, but that still leaves a significant number of candidates.

None of these 19 candidates, apart from the President, is doing particularly well in opinion polls at the moment, before the start of the official campaign. However, all together, they may receive a substantial share of votes and therefore force the election to go to a second round (as the winner must obtain an absolute majority). This means one of these smaller contenders will face Ms Grybauskaitė in the contest head on.

Third, the elections are a challenge for the incumbent because the European Parliament election campaign will also take place at the same time. The governing parties will be much more active in campaigning for their own presidential candidates, in order to boost the turnout of their own electorates and secure more seats in the European Parliament. The active participation of the parties should mean a more engaging campaign and a greater splitting of votes between an increased number of candidates.

Fourth, the campaign is taking place alongside the serious and important changes in neighbouring Ukraine. Lithuania has been actively involved in the democratisation efforts in its neighbour, and the leading candidates will have to react to and make known their positions on the issue. This situation directly tests their abilities to respond to foreign policy events and will further complicate the campaign.

The candidates

The significant and intensive campaigning has yet to start. This is currently the signature collection period for potential candidates. The 19 registered candidates wishing to become official campaign candidates must gather their 20,000 signatures, which is a high number for a country the size of Lithuania. This is why most candidate activities at the moment are being directed towards getting voters to endorse their campaigns by signing paper lists or doing so electronically. These efforts are most visible on social media and other online sources.

Proper advertising for the election campaign will start in April when all the certified candidates are announced. The official campaign will hopefully bring more clarity as to the policy positions of candidates on certain issues and test their abilities to get votes and make it to the second round of elections.

Currently only two other candidates besides the incumbent, representing the governing parties, are certain to have the necessary number of signatures and show more active signs of campaigning. Artūras Paulauskas, former General Prosecutor and Speaker of the Lithuanian Parliament, representing the Labour Party, is travelling around the regions of Lithuania and meeting various civil society groups. He also put up the first advertisement of the campaign, introducing his experience and personality on TV, news media and social networks.

Zigmantas Balčytis, former Minister of Finance and Minister of Transport and current Member of the European Parliament, represents the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party and has also started introductory ads on his experience on his website, TV and social networks. Dalia Grybauskaitė herself introduced her election website by adding her photos from the past, and she has made use of every opportunity that her incumbent position provides to maintain visibility in the media.

Other potential candidates have been active on social media and traditional media, trying to encourage people to endorse their candidacy with their signatures. Some of the pretender candidates (those who have little chance of getting the necessary signatures) probably simply wish for public attention and are likely to participate in various TV shows.

Another significant development has been the announcement that former President Rolandas Paksas, who was impeached in 2004, has decided to run again in this presidential election. However, he has not been registered by the Central Electoral Commission as a potential candidate, because Lithuanian law prevents a person who was impeached from public office from holding a similar position again. Nevertheless, Mr Paksas says he intends to fight the election and he will try to get parliament to change the voting laws to allow him to run.

The campaign

It seems that the 2014 Presidential election will feature some candidates with Eurosceptic positions, or who at least wish to discuss reform of the EU. Public initiatives for a referendum to keep a prohibition on the sale of land to foreigners (scheduled for 29 June 2014) and a referendum on the introduction of the euro (just registered for collecting signatures) have also increased the profile of EU issues. For these reasons, the candidates will not be able to escape European questions.

The second important issue of the campaign will likely be construction of a new nuclear power station. The public voted against it in a consultative referendum, but the government has pushed to move ahead and start construction. The third topic, which was important in previous elections and continues to be a hot issue in Lithuanian society, is that of justice. Also we can expect that the campaign will not be able to avoid foreign policy issues. This is not just because responsibility for foreign policy is among the most important functions of the President, but because much of the criticism aimed at Ms Grybauskaitė has focused on her foreign policy.

The latest polls show that, before the start of the official campaign, the incumbent President is the forerunner, although she is losing some support to the other registered candidates. The intensive campaigning a month before the election will be decisive for the other candidates seeking to make it to the second round. It is highly likely that the contest will go to the second round, particularly if the challengers can succeed in taking support away from Ms Grybauskaitė. Low voter turnout would also make a second round of voting more likely. The Table below shows results from recent polling.

Table: Support for candidates in 2014 Lithuanian presidential election

<i>Candidate</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Percentage support 13-17 March</i>	<i>Percentage support 15-23 February</i>
Dalia Grybauskaitė	N/A	40.9	43.3
Zigmantas Balčytis	Social Democratic Party of Lithuania	10.3	8.3
Artūras Paulauskas	Labour Party	9.6	7.3
Bronis Ropė	Lithuanian Peasant and Greens Union	4.1	2.4
Linas Balsys	Lithuanian Green Party	3.8	4.1
Valdemar Tomaševski	Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania	3.4	-
Artūras Zuokas	YES – Homeland Revival and Perspective	2.3	1.9
Rolandas Paulauskas	N/A	1.1	1.5
Kristina Brazauskienė	N/A	0.6	1.7
Rolandas Paksas*	Order and Justice	-	14.8

Note: Rolandas Paksas is banned from standing in the election, but appeared in the poll in February. In addition to those candidates listed there are a number of other candidates with less support. The polls also included a ‘don’t know’ or ‘will not vote’ option (19.1 per cent selected this in the March poll) so polling numbers do not add up to 100 per cent. Polls are from ‘Vilmorus’ and ‘Baltijos tyrimai’ – available on www.lrytas.lt

At the moment, it is impossible to predict the winner of the election. Only the campaigning the last month before the election and its impact will provide an opportunity to make more accurate predictions. In any case, we can look forward to exciting, active and fruitful discussions during the campaign, which will ultimately show whether incumbent President Dalia Grybauskaitė will retain her post.

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