

Economic Populism in Post-Soviet Lithuania

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The terminus of the Cold War in Eastern Europe is often characterized by the fall of Communism and the rise of capitalist governments. This narrative is only half true when applied to Lithuania. Popular elections did occur peacefully with the transition to multiparty power. Democracy was successfully reintroduced, resulting in a new constitution. With democracy asserting itself, it may seem logical that economic reforms would as well. Despite being nicknamed a *Baltic Tiger*, due to rapid economic growth, it would not be accurate to describe Lithuania's post-Soviet government as a capitalist democracy until the 21st century.⁸⁵ Instead of supporting a privatized government, Lithuania's first presidential election was used to elect the former Communist Party leader, Algirdas Brazauskas. Anatol Lieven, a journalist in Vilnius during the revolution, wrote about his experience in *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence*. Lieven argues that Lithuanian independence ended with "disintegration of the Soviet Union – as opposed to the end of Communism."⁸⁶

⁸⁵ "Baltic Tiger," *The Economist*, July 19, 2003, 1.

⁸⁶ Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence* (Yale Univ. Press, 2005), 274.

Within two years of declaring independence, the old regime was back in control of parliament and had implemented measures to curb free market policies. The ex-Communists governed Lithuania as the Democratic Labor Party of Lithuania (LDDP) and remain politically influential in 2020. Five of the seven total parliamentary elections in Lithuania resulted in the LDDP coalition obtaining a ruling majority. Lithuania's political spectrum has continuously swung between the free market-oriented Homeland Union (TS) and the LDDP which supported a interventionist approach to economics. Initially, in 1990, these two factions were united in advocating a full economic and political break from Russia and shift towards a free-market system. The first leader of Lithuania's multiparty Parliament (Seimas), was Vytautas Landsbergis. Landsbergis was the head of a coalition comprised of ex-Communists, economic conservatives, and religious fundamentalists. Elections in 1992 resulted in an overwhelming loss for Landsbergis's coalition party, named The Movement (Sajūdis).

Why did Lithuania reject Sajūdis in favor of the former Communist Party? Why has Lithuania supported different political ideologies instead of favoring one consistently? To answer these questions, another must first be addressed: what determines Lithuanian political activism? This paper will argue that Lithuanian political activism is the conjunction of three main factors: economic pragmatism, populist candidates, and a lack of strong ideological affiliation. These motivations were significant contributors to independence and continue to determine political and economic outcomes in Lithuania.

Moving Toward Democratic Elections

After losing independence in 1940, the former Republic of Lithuania was governed by a single political party. This was the Communist Party of Lithuania (LKP), a puppet party of the Soviet Union. Because the party had such strong ties to Moscow, Lithuanian concerns came second to those of the Soviets. As long as the Soviet state remained strong, so did the LKP's authority in Lithuania. Despite Moscow's efforts to maintain stability and order, the Soviet state did not remain strong. Growing dissatisfaction with economic and political realities led to a rejection of the one-party system by 1988. As a result, Soviet leaders were not seen as truly representative of the people they governed. The LKP responded to unrest by assigning the position of First Secretary to Algirdas Brazauskas, who advocated for reform. Despite this, political ambivalence and repression of the local will culminated in one of the largest demonstrations in human history, known as the Baltic Way.⁸⁷ The protest was largely inspired by the 50-year anniversary of and opposition to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which illegally placed the Baltics under Soviet control in 1940.⁸⁸ Shortly before the protests, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was revealed to be an illegitimate partition of territory, contributing to erosion of support for the Communist regime.

⁸⁷ Charles Woolfson, "'Hard Times' in Lithuania: Crisis and 'Discourses of Discontent' in Post-Communist Society," *Ethnography* (November, 2010): 488.

⁸⁸ The Baltic Way, also referred to as 'Arms Across the Baltic' or the 'Singing Revolution,' was a mass demonstration that took place in 1989 across Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia simultaneously. Over two million Balts participated in this peaceful protest, with the greatest number of participants in Lithuania.

Rejection of the LKP in 1989 increased populist sentiment in Lithuania against the Soviet Union. Responding to public discontent, The Academy of Sciences in Lithuania formed a commission to propose changes to the constitution.⁸⁹ This led to a public meeting on June 3, 1988, at the Academy in Vilnius. At this public meeting, the institution's proposals were drowned out by dozens of independently-minded faculty. Instead of reforming the current system, political autonomy was demanded. These activists at the Academy in Vilnius called themselves the Initiative Group, later known as the Movement (Sąjūdis). Many future politicians were present, politically united under Lithuania's first coalition party. Sąjūdis contained staunch Communists and free market conservatives and tended towards populism rather than anti-Communism.

Vytautas Landsbergis was among the professors who raised the initial call for non-Communist parties. His knowledge and use of ethnic poetry and literature inspired nationalist sentiments. Landsbergis was a cultural expert who used religious overtones to make profound and impactful speeches. As a musicologist, Landsbergis was perceived as detached from the Soviet bureaucracy, granting him credibility when speaking about Lithuanian autonomy. Having social ties in Kaunas and Vilnius, the largest centers of population, helped Landsbergis assume a prominent position within the Sąjūdis. Economic ruin may have brought crowds together, but leaders such as Landsbergis were capable of transforming them into an institutional force.

⁸⁹ Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 224.

Sajūdis organized a large rally to discuss proposing a mandate on June 24, 1988. Speakers at the event included the leadership of the future conservative party and socialist parties. Public activism for these events is reported on the Global Nonviolent Action Database page about the Lithuanians Campaign for National Independence 1988-1991 and states that “20,000 people attended the second demonstration where they heard speeches by Vytautas Landsbergis (who would later become the leader of Sajūdis) and Algirdas Brazauskas (a Communist Party leader).”⁹⁰ Brazauskas, speaking on behalf of Sajūdis was a red herring, he would later run against the party and its free market agenda. In the initial stages of the revolution, conservatives and ex-Communists showed more willingness to forge a mutually beneficial path of compromise. The willingness to work together as a revolutionary coalition quickly became strained. Revolutionaries would later become rivals, splintering the country’s political spectrum.

Sajūdis in 1988 was more moderate and populist than it would be during the post-Soviet era. The ideological broadness of Sajūdis constricted with the influx of nationalist members. Kaunas, the second largest city in Lithuania, quickly joined the nationalist discussion. The Kaunas faction brought more adamant calls against Communism and the existing bureaucracy to the Sajūdis. Membership in Sajūdis from outside the capital, as Lieven states, led directly to the “gradual takeover and radicalization by representatives from Kaunas.”⁹¹ In order to

⁹⁰ “Lithuanians Campaign for National Independence, 1988-1991,” *Global Nonviolent Action Database*, 1991.

⁹¹ Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 226.

maintain the coalition for independence, Landsbergis, himself originally from Kaunas, rose to represent both factions by 1990. In order to contain the Kaunas nationalists within Sąjūdis, Landsbergis became more extreme in his rhetoric, demanding a complete separation from the Soviet Union. This trend resulted in alienating many of those in Sąjūdis who desired moderation.

The Baltic Way represented the crest of a tidal wave of populist expression. Sąjūdis was highly active in organizing the Baltic Way, collecting signatures and spreading information to the population. Organizing efforts were met with enthusiasm, and as time went on participation in demonstrations increased. The Lithuanian people clearly desired freedom from one-party Soviet rule. Populism was the defining political catalyst for change in 1989, and continues to define Lithuanian politics today. *Populism in Lithuania* defines populism as a style, not an ideology, meaning populism brought together individuals with differing political principles.⁹² The roughly two million participants in the Baltic Way were responding to nationalist sentiment that appealed to capitalists and Communists alike. The Baltic Way demonstration should be historically viewed as an expression against the Soviet concentration of power, not as an anti-socialism movement. Independence was the main political concern of the people, as is evident in this 1991 survey asking: “Do you agree that the Lithuanian state should be an independent, democratic republic?” About 85 percent of eligible voters participated and 90 percent said

⁹² Gintaras Aleknonis and Renata Matkevičienė, “Populism in Lithuania: Defining the Research Tradition,” *Baltic Journal* (2016): 30.

yes.”⁹³ The level of activism the population showed toward political elections was significantly less. The role of Sajūdis in the mass demonstrations of 1989 is uncontested, but the transition from protest movement to political party is more muddled. Popular voting for the newly independent parliament barely exceeded 50 percent participation, the minimum by law to count as an election. According to *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network* (EPERN), after the adoption of the 1992 Constitution came “a general decline in political activity by Lithuanian citizens.”⁹⁴ Lithuanians were less interested in supporting political parties than gaining autonomy from the Soviet Union.

Nationalist Direction

After losing to Landsbergis for head of state in 1990, Brazauskas changed his stance on Lithuanian independence. According to an article put out by *The Telegraph*, Brazauskas initially “believed that the old USSR might be reconstituted as a looser federation of independent but still Communist states.”⁹⁵ Reading into the popular sentiments of the people, Brazauskas continually changed his ideological position to stay politically viable. As the political atmosphere grew more factional, the centrist parties refused the idea of forming a coalition while Brazauskas expressed

⁹³ Richard Ebeling, “How Lithuania Helped Take Down The Soviet Union,” *Capitalism Magazine* 8 (Feb., 2016): 2; Liudas Mažylis, “Referendum Briefing No. 8: The Lithuanian EU Accession Referendum 10-11 May 2003,” *Institute of Political Science and Diplomacy, Vytautas Magnus University, European Parties Elections and Referendums Network* (Aug. 2003).

⁹⁵ “Algirdas Brazauskas,” *The Telegraph*, June 27, 2010, 1.

a desire for compromise.⁹⁶ Reform to introduce independent political parties was something the LKP had recommended under Brazauskas' leadership. Calls for full independence however, placed Sąjūdis and its leader Landsbergis, in ideological opposition to Brazauskas. By February 1990, the radical wing of Sąjūdis was intensely nationalist, demanded complete independence, and won on it.⁹⁷ As Brazauskas took steps toward becoming a populist through promoting minor reform, Landsbergis' persona became more ideologically hardline. Taking a hard stance brought victory in 1990, but would alienate Sąjūdis from the electorate in the long run.

Urged on by extremists in Sąjūdis, such as the Kaunas faction, Landsbergis' insistence on immediate independence was less appealing to moderates in his party and Lithuania in general. Natalia Vekteriene resided in Lithuania during the political movement toward independence and she recalls hearing the news about Sąjūdis coming to power: "They would say 'the new government is coming' and that's it, you just accept it. You see, we are not very political people. We, as citizens, just accept a new government. We did not know it was going to bring a new order."⁹⁸ Uncertainty about the new system by people like Vekteriene was shared by members within the Seimas.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 270.

⁹⁷ Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 233.

⁹⁸ Natalia Vekteriene, "Lithuanian Revolution," interview by Scott Cichowlas, January 21, 2018.

⁹⁹ Five interviews were conducted by phone with Lithuanians who experienced the post-Soviet transition or grew up in its aftermath. Subjects were selected to allow for a diversity of perspective. Participants vary in age, gender, and socio-economic background. In 2018, Greta Baltrusaityte was a 22-year-old student from Vilnius. She

Within three months of the declaration, Landsbergis was under pressure from his own party to place a moratorium on independence to improve strained Soviet relations. The reluctance to put the good of the economy over nationalist ideology further marginalized Sajūdis from mainstream sentiments. Momentarily betraying his ideology, Landsbergis did capitulate to popular demands to improve Lithuania's economic and international standing with the Soviet Union. A June 14, 1990 issue of *The Chicago Tribune* demonstrates the ideological shift by the head of state; "Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis has maintained that everything may be laid on the bargaining table except the declaration of independence. But on Wednesday - Landsbergis told parliament that 'our side should think it over: how to do some maneuvering without inflicting damage on Lithuania and on the political path chosen by it.'"¹⁰⁰ As negotiations with Russia failed to alleviate

witnessed the 'I Want To Work Here' demonstrations and provides a millennial's perspective on Lithuanian politics. Auguste Cichowlas is a 22-year old expatriate from Lithuania. Auguste's testimony helps to shed light on how the younger generation views the Lithuanian government. Auguste is my spouse and was invaluable in facilitating interviews with Lithuanian contacts. She also transcribed interviews conducted in Lithuanian into English. Jolanta Baltrusaitiene was in her early 20s when Lithuania became independent. Jolanta comes from a rural background, helping to counter the dominantly metropolitan narrative of the revolution. Natalia Vekteriene was attending high school in Vilnius during the revolution. Natalia's experience helps to show how students were impacted. Thomas Vekteris, in his 20s when independence was declared, provides a firsthand account of how those in the capital endured the revolution.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Shanker, "Soviets to Send Some Supplies to Lithuania," *Chicago Tribune*, June 14, 1990.

economic and military threats, Landsbergis abandoned his cautious rhetoric and pivoted toward full independence in December 1990. Sajūdis, under the leadership of Landsbergis, was ideologically opposed to compromise with the old regime. The rejection of moderate policies led to the party's victory in 1990 and its loss of public support by 1992.

Blockade and Occupation

Military operations by Soviet forces commenced in the capital directly following the reinstatement of independence. Soviet tanks and troops occupied strategic points in the city, killing and wounding civilians. Popular outrage over Soviet atrocities turned into support for the new government. Tomas Vekteris was a student at Vilnius University during the military occupation of the city. He remembers that “at my University there was nobody campaigning, nobody was talking about it. Only after January 13th and 14th everybody started talking that people died and then everybody started expressing their feelings that something is happening and that we have to do something.”¹⁰¹ Another student at the time was Jolanta Baltrusaitiene. Baltrusaitiene joined the demonstrations to preserve the parliament building and recalls that “we were keeping guard by parliament, but only driven by solidarity to indicate that we really support our government and its leaders on their aspirations to resist and dissociate from Russia.”¹⁰² Popular support for the reborn republic was out

¹⁰¹ Thomas Vekteris, “Lithuanian Revolution,” interview by Scott Cichowlas, January 21, 2018.

¹⁰² Jolanta Baltrusaitiene, “Lithuanian Blockade,” interview by Scott Cichowlas, April 3, 2018.

of protest to Russian aggression, not ideological agreement with Landsbergis.

The Soviet Union's blockade of Lithuania's ports embargoed essential supplies into the country. This blockade was crippling to the burgeoning republic. *Transforming the Lithuanian Economy*, by Valdas Samonis, explains the dependent relationship between the Baltic economy and Soviet imports. Samonis notes that "Lithuanian agriculture was made heavily dependent on cheap mixed fodder, oil, and other inputs imported from Russia and other Soviet republics. The use of local inputs, except heavily underpriced labor, was limited to a minimum".¹⁰³ A *New York Times* article from 1990, *Soviets Say Blockade of Lithuania Is Lifted*, gives some sense of the social impact, describing how "hundreds of factories were closed, putting almost 50,000 people out of work."¹⁰⁴ Economic hardship in the transition towards independence was not only prevalent in the industrial sectors, but in rural areas as well. Jolanta Baltrusaitiene comments on her parents' predicament outside of the city: "Those who lived in cities – had bigger food or fuel shortage, but since my parents are from the village – deprivation was more related to non-food products and money shortages."¹⁰⁵ Not only was employment and supply affected by sour relations with Russia, but commodity prices shot up forcing the Lithuanian Supreme

¹⁰³ Valdas Samonis, *Transforming the Lithuanian Economy: from Moscow to Vilnius and from Plan to Market* (CASE, 1995).

¹⁰⁴ "Soviets Say Blockade of Lithuania Is Lifted," *The New York Times*, July 3, 1990.

¹⁰⁵ Baltrusaitiene, "Lithuanian Blockade."

Council to introduce rationing.¹⁰⁶ These extreme circumstances hindered the ability for the Sajūdis government to implement privatization of the Lithuanian economy.

Economic Dreams and Realities

Popular support for independence was coupled with demands for economic autonomy. Inspiration for free market reforms came from prominent Lithuanian economists who joined Sajūdis.¹⁰⁷ By September 1988, Sajūdis was promoting guidelines for dismantling the Communist system. These capitalist reforms were known as “The Blueprint for Lithuania’s Economic Independence,” or simply the “Blueprint.” The main directive of the Blueprint was to increase living standards by making the economy more efficient. The Blueprint rejected the old regime’s economic model of resource allocation in favor of cost-benefit analysis. To create a decentralized market economy, the Blueprint called for the creation of a National Bank, along with a separate Lithuanian currency. Along with currency reform, state planning and price committees were to be abolished.¹⁰⁸ The Blueprint called for radical and immediate implementation. Valdas Samonis states in *Transforming the Lithuanian Economy*, that “gradual economic reform is inadmissible, one cannot go step-by-step.”¹⁰⁹ Above all, the Blueprint sought to dissociate the

¹⁰⁶ Paul Goble, “25 Years Ago, Gorbachev’s Economic Blockade Failed to Keep Lithuania in the USSR,” *The Interpreter* (April 19, 2015).

¹⁰⁷ Samonis, *Transforming the Lithuanian Economy*, 7.

¹⁰⁸ Samonis, *Transforming the Lithuanian Economy*, 10.

¹⁰⁹ Samonis, *Transforming the Lithuanian Economy*, 11.

Lithuanian market from that of the Soviet Union. Samonis claims that before the Blueprint was implemented, “90-95% of the Lithuanian economy was firmly controlled from Moscow.”¹¹⁰ Sajūdis advocated for not only political separation from the Soviets, but economic separation as well. The pace and comprehensiveness of Sajūdis’ economic reforms matched their extreme stance on independence. Just as the population initially supported Landsbergis’s nationalist extremism, they likewise upheld his economic plans out of protest to Soviet hegemony.

Three months before the Baltic Way demonstrations, the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet passed an adulterated version of Sajūdis’ economic plan. The Communist regime under Brazauskas responded to demands for radical reform, showing a preference for populism over Communist ideology. Despite incorporating reforms from the Blueprint, Brazauskas desired slow and minor economic change. The final version of the law was heavily watered down, avoiding issues like the National Bank and currency. The version of the Blueprint that Brazauskas supported still gave preferential status to Moscow, failing to create a separate Lithuanian market. Lithuania’s natural resources were earmarked for Soviet purposes over national ones. Most significantly, Brazauskas’s path of minor reform helped to preserve the relationship between central economic planning and enterprises.¹¹¹ Far from economic independence or free markets, the Communist form of the Blueprint did not go far enough to win over the populist surge of activism occurring across the country.

¹¹⁰ Samonis, *Transforming the Lithuanian Economy*, 8.

¹¹¹ Samonis, *Transforming the Lithuanian Economy*, 9.

Dissatisfaction with the pace of economic change was a leading factor for Brazauskas's electoral defeat in 1990.

The promises of higher living standards through privatization won populist support for economic reforms. Once Sąjūdis was put into power, however, the ideology of privatization lacked the mass support it had held in 1990. Jolanta Baltrusaitiene remembers when privatization was introduced: "We were hurt pretty bad economically. I can say that the majority of provincial people who were less economically educated lost their jobs after the privatization. After the collective farms were torn up, they were not satisfied with free Lithuania."¹¹² Gediminas Cerniauskas published *Emerging Market Economy in Lithuania*, which tracks Lithuanian economic reformation from controlled economy to a free market. Cerniauskas defines the years 1990-1994 as the "initial transition period for Lithuanian, which – witnessed a 43.86 percent fall in real [Gross Domestic Product] GDP and 318 percent annual inflation."¹¹³ With such an extensive recession, Baltrusaitiene's testimony is hardly unique to the provincial region. Natalia Vekteriene experienced the initial transition period from the capital: "It was complete turmoil, factories shut down, no one was producing anything because a lot of the factories were making things for the army."¹¹⁴ This statement is supported by Cerniauskas's analysis that the free government of Lithuania made the decision to drastically

¹¹² Baltrusaitiene, "Lithuanian Blockade."

¹¹³ Gediminas Černiauskas and Algis Dobravolskas, "Emerging of Market Economy in Lithuania (1990-2010)," *Intellectual Economics* (Mykolas Romeris University, 2011): 375.

¹¹⁴ Vekteriene, "Lithuanian Revolution."

reduce production of military goods, negatively impacting GDP.¹¹⁵ By September 1991, Russia had recognized Lithuania's independence, but economic conditions were slow to improve in the Baltic state. Instead of ushering in a free market economy, which was an ideological priority for Sajūdis, the conservative government had initiated price controls and vouchers. Natalia Vekteriene recalls that, "the stores were as empty as before, but now you also have vouchers. Queues and queues of people, everybody would stand in lines, just like before."¹¹⁶ Between 1990 and 1992, Lithuania's real GDP had plummeted nearly 50 percent.¹¹⁷ Despite Sajūdis' long-term policies of privatization and competitive markets for Lithuania, full implementation of a free market was not achieved. Due to the abrupt reforms, coupled with a Russian embargo, Lithuania experienced an economic crisis. On the eve of the 1992 election, public demands to halt reforms intensified. Sajūdis was unable to achieve its economic goals and was subsequently voted out of power. According to *The National Archive for Parliament Election Results for Lithuania*, the 1992 elections should be read as the result of "popular anger about the economic crisis, in particular the fuel shortage since Russia, the main supplier, had cut off imports."¹¹⁸ The rise of Lithuania's free market was incomplete after independence, despite the reform party controlling the government from 1990-1992. After taking initial steps to privatize the market, Lithuanians

¹¹⁵ Černiauskas and Dobravolskas, "Emerging of Market," 375.

¹¹⁶ Vekteriene, "Lithuanian Revolution."

¹¹⁷ Černiauskas and Dobravolskas, "Emerging of Market."

¹¹⁸ "Lithuania: Parliamentary Elections Seimas, 1992," *Historical Archives of Parliamentary Election Results for Lithuania*, 1992.

rejected the conservatives in favor of a more populist economic path.

Return to the Old Regime

A moderate stance on breaking from Russia had initially lost Brazauskas his chairmanship of the Seimas, but when parliamentary elections were held in 1992, his party of ex-Communists easily won the first round of voting. Had Lithuania resolutely voted freely and fairly for the old regime? There were many similarities between the Democratic Labor Party of Lithuania (LDDP) and the Communist Party of Lithuania (LKP), suggesting a vote for the LDDP was a vindication of the LKP. Brazauskas was the head of the LKP just prior to its dissolution and resurrection in the form of the LDDP. Both the LKP and LDDP urged maintenance of close international ties with Russia. A policy of gradual independence had been favored by the LKP and LDDP. The LDDP promoted far left socialism, resembling traditional Communist governance instead of free markets and privatization. As president, Brazauskas chose his staff exclusively from the LDDP. Ausra Park wrote *Post-Communist Leadership: A Case Study of Lithuania's 'White House' 1993-2014*, detailing the policies of various post-Soviet administrations. Park remarks that “such an attitude indicated a tendency to avoid openness and keep many matters secret – suggesting that the presidential office under Brazauskas was built on a model reminiscent of the Soviet Politburo.”¹¹⁹ Despite ideological ties to the old regime, the

¹¹⁹ Ausra Park, “Post-Communist Leadership: A Case Study of Lithuania's ‘White House’ (1993–2014),” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Institute for European,

LDDP coming to power was less a vindication of Soviet rule and more of a populist backlash to poor economic conditions and Landsbergis's decreased popularity.

Evidence that Lithuanians were not enthusiastic about a 'new man' in government is the election of July 1992, when the first popular vote was definitively in support for the former Communists, and against Landsbergis.¹²⁰ Adherence to nationalist rhetoric cost Landsbergis, and his party, the presidency, and parliament. Tomas Vekteris comments that "probably more people voted against Landsbergis than for Brazauskas."¹²¹ Landsbergis, as Lieven explains in *The Baltic Revolution*, "misjudged the temper of his own people. He failed altogether to appreciate their dour underlying pragmatism."¹²² Insight into the temperament of Lithuanians toward Landsbergis can be found in Tomas Vekteris's interview; Landsbergis's message was "to cut off all the ties with Russia, start from zero, destroy everything. No compromise, he wants to limit people's choices. Even now a simple citizen understands the political life a bit differently, they see it through their own economic status. If it is profitable for you to have business relations with Russia, then they would much rather keep the business going and live well."¹²³ Instead of trying to rule with the ex-Communists within a coalition government, Lieven claims that Landsbergis "left the nation more divided than when he

Russian, and Eurasian Studies (George Washington University, June 5, 2015), 160.

¹²⁰ Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 218.

¹²¹ Vekteris, "Lithuanian Revolution."

¹²² Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 273.

¹²³ Vekteris, "Lithuanian Revolution."

became its leader.”¹²⁴ Landsbergis failed to tap into populist sentiments after Lithuanian independence, causing the LDDP to be the more appealing choice in 1992.

One factor for the lack of support Landsbergis received, was due to religiously-based nationalism. Notions of divine justice were touted at the expense of economic pragmatism. According to a *Chicago Tribune* issue from September 4th 1990, “eighty percent of Lithuania’s 3.6 million people call themselves Catholics.”¹²⁵ Politically, it would seem wise to appeal to religious ideology in such a monotheist nation. Unfortunately for Landsbergis, religion in Lithuania was more divisive than uniting. The decades of anti-religious Communist rule had created suspicion throughout the population with regards to religious expression. Natalia recalls her family’s sentiments toward Catholicism under Soviet governance: “There was no official religion, but my grandma was still going to church. My mom was so embarrassed that her mother was religious, it was embarrassing to face the neighbors but you were also scared to get caught - you were not allowed to talk about it or tell people.”¹²⁶ Although most Lithuanians did have some connection to the Catholic faith, it did not translate into political allegiance. Identifying as Catholic should be read in Lithuania’s case, as identifying with tradition as opposed to religious ideology. Landsbergis was more concerned with ideology than political pragmatism, serving to alienate moderates within the population.

¹²⁴ Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 274.

¹²⁵ Michael Hirsley, “In Lithuania, Cardinal Finds A Lasting Faith,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 4, 1990.

¹²⁶ Vekteriene, “Lithuanian Revolution.”

Brazauskas took steps to move Lithuania away from a competitive market economy. Lieven points out that with the ex-Communists in control, Brazauskas reinforced “the growth of unhealthy-close links between ex-Communist business and ex-Communist bureaucracy and government, or ‘crony capitalism.’”¹²⁷ Samonis backs up Lieven’s claim that the Soviet system returned under Brazauskas. He writes that “the new post-Communist government quickly resorted to old bad habits of inflationary wage increases, reversing some of the effects of the earlier income policies.”¹²⁸ The LDDP politicized the economic market. Detrimental to the Sajūdis’ Blueprint, the LDDP subsidized businesses, enacted protectionist policies on imports, and created a currency board to undermine the National Bank. Samonis points out that these policies served to “unnecessarily politicize the whole process of economic transformation.”¹²⁹ The fiscal interventionism that the ex-Communists enacted should be seen as adhering to populist pressures for economic relief as well as an ideological adherence to a command economy. From 1992, deficit spending increased thanks to the LDDP’s economic policy. As Samonis puts it, depleting the county’s currency reserves was “aimed at propping up consumption levels in the known populist tradition.”¹³⁰ In contrast to the goals of the Blueprint, Lithuania moved toward a corporatist system under Brazauskas.

¹²⁷ Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 271.

¹²⁸ Samonis, *Transforming the Lithuanian Economy*, 19.

¹²⁹ Samonis, *Transforming the Lithuanian Economy*, 19.

¹³⁰ Samonis, *Transforming the Lithuanian Economy*, 22.

Free Market Government Returns to Power

Public support for Brazauskas and the LDDP waned as the economy continued to falter. LDDP policies negatively impacted Lithuania's workforce, increasing unemployment rates. By interfering with the National Bank, Brazauskas helped to create a recession by the mid-1990s. As voters were scheduled to return to the poll booths in 1996, Brazauskas's approval rate sharply declined. According to the *Historical Archive of Parliamentary Election Results for Lithuania*, in the 1996 Seimas elections: "The economy was at the forefront of campaign debate, as four years earlier when LDDP had won out on the same basis."¹³¹ Sajūdis had broken apart into differing conservative parties, with the most prominent being the Homeland Union. Landsbergis had formed this second coalition party out of the ashes of his political defeat in 1992. Popular opinion had swung back toward the conservative free marketers as ex-Communists gained a reputation for inhibiting growth. As the *Historical Archive* notes, the LDDP "was criticized for the country's economic stagnation and had been plagued by financial scandals."¹³² Lithuanians were not willing to adhere to the ideology of command economy through thick and thin, and they shifted support to the Homeland Union in 1996. This politically polar switch was due to economic pragmatism. Landsbergis promised Lithuanians prosperity through European Union (EU) membership and increasing ties to the West. Economic pragmatism has been the driving force concerning the transfer of power since independence.

¹³¹ "Lithuania Parliamentary Chamber: Seimas," *Historical Archive Page of Parliamentary Election Results for Lithuania*, 1996.

¹³² "Lithuania Parliamentary Chamber: Seimas," 1996.

Ideological attachment to the party was insignificant compared to the promise of prosperity.

The shift from a Soviet model of bureaucracy was accelerated with the ascension of Lithuania's second president, Valdas Adamkus. During the Brazauskas presidency, reinforcement of the Soviet model of state resulted in a dichotomy between the presidency and the Seimas. Not until the presidential election of 1998, did the Soviet model completely lose out to free market governance. Valdas Adamkus ran as an independent, allowing him to obtain votes from moderates within the socialist LDDP and conservative Homeland Union. Park notes that "the electorate was looking for a high-impact, change-oriented leader."¹³³ By running unaligned, Adamkus was successful in projecting himself as a populist rather than an ideological candidate. Despite running as an independent, Adamkus had strong notions that economic growth would be obtained through membership into the EU. By focusing on economic reforms that conformed with EU guidelines for membership, not only did Adamkus spread a populist message of making things better for everyone, he implemented substantial free market changes to the system. The article *Post-Soviet Transformation of Bureaucracy in Lithuania*, by Saulius Pivoras, discusses the dismantling of the Communist bureaucratic structure. Pivoras comments on the structural change of government after Brazauskas: "The model selected was Weberian, which presupposes a strict division between the spheres of politics and administration. The major motive for selecting this model was the effort to

¹³³ Park, "Post-Communist Leadership," 163.

abolish the practice of Soviet administration.”¹³⁴ The presidential election of 1998 was a rejection of the Soviet system for its poor economic performance. Populist sentiments in Lithuania shifted away from the east-looking LDDP and towards westward-looking Adamkus. Park writes: “Many voters took a favorable view of him and hoped that with his half-century in America, he would bring a fresh, totally non-Soviet approach to government.”¹³⁵ Valdas Adamkus had lived in the United States since 1949, easily winning the expatriate vote. His populist message for closer ties to the West convinced domestic Lithuanians that he was truly a vote for change. Populist messaging coupled with economic dissatisfaction once again aroused political activism to reject whatever ideology belonged to the status quo.

Continuity of Populist Activism and Economic Protest

Political activism in post-Soviet Lithuania is routinely unleashed by weak economic performance. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union had financially mismanaged its satellites. By the 1970s, Lithuanians were becoming politically active, as shown in the article, *Self-Immolations and National Protest in Lithuania*. Political demonstrations erupted in the late 1980s, but had occurred previously in 1972 when riots in Kaunas broke out. Tomas Remeikis is a researcher whose focus is Lithuanian resistance to Soviet rule. Remeikis claims that “the attack on

¹³⁴ Saulius Pivoras, “Post-Soviet Transformation of Bureaucracy in Lithuania: Main Features and Trends,” *Baltic Journal of Law and Politics* (April 6, 2011): 120.

¹³⁵ Park, “Post-Communist Leadership,” 163.

economic policy indicates that perhaps we are witnessing what has been called ‘a revolution of rising expectations.’”¹³⁶ Economic dissatisfaction progressed into political activism by the 1980s. Samonis reiterates this point, claiming “economic sovereignty meant something less than independence in the beginning – during 1988 however, these terms converged.”¹³⁷ In the post-Soviet era, economic demonstrations have continued to occur. This tendency to take to the streets over economic dissatisfaction supports the claim that economic performance motivates political activism. In 2009, economic demonstrations in Vilnius turned violent. *The New York Times* described the scene in the capital; “A group of 7,000 gathered to protest planned economic austerity measures. A small group began throwing eggs and stones through the windows of government buildings until the police moved in, using tear gas and rubber bullets.”¹³⁸ Lithuania’s 2009 election appointed an independent economist by popular vote. Again, candidates promising prosperity trumped party allegiances.

Economic conditions in Lithuania have continued to be a point of political contention past the 2009 global recession. In 2018, Lithuania experienced a protest movement focused on economic issues. The ‘I Want To Work Here’ movement was a reaction to the exodus of job-seeking Lithuanians. Poor job opportunities in the country

¹³⁶ Thomas Remeikis, *Self-Immolations and National Protest in Lithuania* (1972).

¹³⁷ Samonis, *Transforming the Lithuanian Economy*, 7.

¹³⁸ Ellen Barry, “Baltic Riots Spread to Lithuania in the Face of Deteriorating Economic Conditions,” *The New York Times*, January 16, 2009.

inspired protests just a year after the 2017 parliamentary election, showing discontent for the new government's economic policies. Auguste Cichowlas is a Lithuanian expatriate living in the United States. The recent socialist victory in the Seimas has come as an upset to Cichowlas: "The political perspective that the peasant party holds is not capitalist enough, they focus on agricultural growth and that is not what Lithuania needs at the moment."¹³⁹ Many Lithuanians feel their country needs to take a new political direction based largely on improving the domestic economy. Greta Baltrusaityte resides in Vilnius, and although she did not take part in the recent economic demonstrations she is upset with the country's ruling socialist party. Greta claims the Peasant and Greens Union "...is a total disaster, they keep doing reforms and they are terribly corrupt."¹⁴⁰ Dissatisfaction with economic reform and performance remains a poignant factor for supporting the status quo. Economic mismanagement recurrently motivates political activism in Lithuania's past and present.

Conclusion

The Lithuanian government is not a product of people's ideological convictions but a result of economic populism. When the economy fails to benefit the lay person, Lithuanians take to the streets and the ballot box. Because of the strong desire for economic pragmatism over ideology, political parties with diverse ideologies have alternated after

¹³⁹ Auguste Cichowlas, "I Want To Work Here Protests," interview by Scott Cichowlas, April 5, 2018.

¹⁴⁰ Greta Baltrusaityte, "I Want To Work Here Protests," interview by Scott Cichowlas, March 25, 2018.

independence. The popular shifts in party support demonstrates a weak affiliation between the people and ideological political platforms. The 1992 backing of the ex-Communist LDDP was a vote for change, not for business as usual. Business as usual is what Lithuania got however, under the Brazauskas presidency. When the LDDP failed to bring economic prosperity, Lithuanians once again supported Landsbergis for his message of change. In 1998, Lithuanians threw their support behind the Western-oriented Valdas Adamkus. Running unaligned, Adamkus benefited from the weak ideological ties Lithuanians have with political parties. Lithuania was admitted into the EU shortly after the turn of the century. Admittance marks the point where Lithuanian government and markets had obtained a level of separation worthy of being called a free market. The traditional narrative of Lithuania as a capitalist *Baltic Tiger* should be applied to the 21st century as opposed to the years immediately following independence. Populist demands for economic pragmatism over ideology led the country toward a competitive market. Candidates promising superior economic results routinely garner populist support at the ballot. Populism, economic pragmatism, and weak ideological affiliation continues to drive Lithuanian activism. This activism can and has been used to support ex-Communists as well as free market conservatives. As the LDDP and other socialist parties periodically resurge in the ranks of parliament, it would be wise to read such trends as dissatisfaction with the status quo and not be misread as the desire for a return to the former Soviet system.