

Lithuanians on Course to Reelect President Grybauskaite

May 11, 2014



Lithuanian President and independent presidential candidate Dalia Grybauskaite casts her vote during the first round of the country's presidential election in Vilnius.

Lithuania votes on Sunday in a presidential election that will almost certainly hand a second term victory to Dalia Grybauskaite, popular for her abrasive style and strong criticism of what she sees as Russian expansionism.

Grybauskaite's vocal stance against Moscow's intervention in Ukraine has struck a chord in Lithuania, which, like the other former Soviet Baltic states has been on edge since Russia seized Crimea, saying it needed to protect Russian speakers there.

Concerns have grown that Russia may try to destabilize the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia which have small military forces and Russian speaking minorities.

Grybauskaite has supported moving Lithuania away from energy dependence on Russia — which she described as an "existential threat" to the small republic. Lithuania is constructing an LNG terminal called "Independence" in the port city of Klaipeda to provide an alternative

to Russian gas.

The 58-year-old president, who has a black belt in karate, held consistently high ratings throughout her first five-year term and had been touted for a senior EU job in Brussels before she announced her candidacy for re-election.

"People in Lithuania like her style, the outwardly projected toughness, resoluteness, her willingness to subject any minister to a talk-down," said Kestutis Girnius, associate professor at the Vilnius Institute of International Relations and Political Science.

With a strong lead in the polls, the only real question is whether Grybauskaite will win outright or in a second round run-off. Results will not be announced until late Sunday or Monday morning.

The other main contenders are Zigmantas Balcytis, a social democrat who has the support of Prime Minister Algirdas Butkevicius, and Arturas Paulauskas from the center-left Labor party, who opposes Lithuania's membership of the euro zone.

APPROVAL HIGH

The presidency holds considerable power in Lithuania. Grybauskaite appoints government ministers, as well as judges, the head of the central bank and the Lithuanian member of the European Commission, although she needs approval of the parliament or the prime minister for most of her appointments.

Formerly the finance minister and European budget commissioner, she supported the harsh austerity measures of Lithuania's previous government, which included cutting pensions and the wages of public workers.

When Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius lost power at the last general election in a backlash against austerity, Grybauskaite's approval ratings remained high.

"A president in Lithuanian politics is a free-rider. He or she can take credit for everything good that comes out of politics, and then distance himself from anything that is unpopular," political scientist Algis Krupavicius said.

Constitutionally in charge of foreign policy, Grybauskaite pivoted Lithuania towards the Nordics and away from Russia and Poland.

Her brash style has not been without controversy.

Eyebrows were raised when she refused to attend a meeting of East European leaders in 2010 with President Barack Obama in protest against a U.S.-Russian treaty on arms reduction which she said was harmful to central and eastern Europe defense.

This year, as the Ukraine crisis grew, she backtracked on her policy of cutting defense spending and pushed for Lithuania to commit to raising defense spending to the NATO target of two percent of GDP by 2020.

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