Policy Paper

Government Coalitions and Consensus Politics: Case of Lithuania

Lukas Pukelis, Mažvydas Jastramskis

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lukas Pukelis - Lead Data Scientist at Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI), Vilnius, Lithuania
Mažvydas Jastramskis - Associate Professor at Institute of International Relations and Political Science (IIPRS), Vilnius University

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following paper analyzes how, in the case of Lithuania, various political parties managed to reach an agreement and cooperate on issues relevant to the national interests of the country. The peaceful and civil transition of political power has contributed to ensuring Lithuania's stable political system, and most importantly the assurance that when a party loses an election they do not expect to be prosecuted by the new government. These conditions have helped create and reproduce a pragmatic working environment for all political actors in the country. No less important have been the nonpartisan and directly elected presidents, who have played a major role in promoting consensus-based political culture in Lithuania.

As the Georgian political field has been haunted by deep political polarization and the unwillingness of political parties to cooperate with each other, Lithuania's experience can provide an important lesson for Georgia. Through a case study of Lithuania, this paper provides several recommendations to policymakers in Georgia that include strengthening the functions of the nonpartisan president, proceeding with electoral reform, determining the ideological overlap between the main political parties, and investing time in preparing detailed coalition agreements in advance.

Key words: Lithuania, Georgia, Sharing Experience, Coalition Building, Democracy

INTRODUCTION

In the last 30 years Lithuania's political system has undergone a major transition from a one-party state within the Soviet Union to an independent democratic republic, where political power changes hands every parliamentary election. Given the deep polarization in Georgian politics and the unwillingness of political parties to cooperate in multiparty alliances an analysis of coalition building in a European Union (EU) country that was, despite major differences, also a part of the Soviet Union, may facilitate narratives of consensus building in Georgia.

Lithuania, with its relatively strong institutions and stable though diverse political environment, offers a relevant case study for Georgia, a country entrenched in an extended political crisis. Despite political differences, Lithuania's rival political parties managed to reach an agreement on national-level strategic goals and achieve consensus on necessary policies and the reforms needed to reach them. Lithuania's EU and NATO membership in 2004 was a direct result of such cooperation. Georgia's uneven and multifaceted process of European integration provides an opportunity to search for good examples of political rivals abiding to democratic rules of the game, and try to better understand consensus-based policy making and how it might be applied in the local context.

In this policy paper, we focus on the government coalitions and party agreements in Lithuania. First, we present an overview of the Lithuanian party system and the coalitions in the country since the 1992 parliamentary elections. Second, we discuss the major instances of across-the-aisle-party agreements that united the Lithuanian opposition and government in the name of key strategic goals. Then we move to an analysis of the main factors behind multiparty cooperation between the governments: the electoral system, similarities in party ideologies and the informal mechanisms that helped the coalition cabinets stay more cohesive (coalition agreements and ministerial shadowing). Lastly, we present a list of recommendations for coalition building and consensus politics that might be applicable to Georgia's political situation.

BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE LITHUANIAN PARTY SYSTEM

Lithuania has a multi-party system. Usually after the parliamentary elections no political party receives an absolute majority of seats to form a single-party cabinet (one clear exception is the 1992 parliamentary election). Governmental coalitions are typically composed of two, three or four parties. The development of the Lithuanian party system can be traced back to the late 1980s, when two major political groups were formed: the anti-Soviet/pro-independence movement Sąjūdis and the Lithuanian Communist Party (LKP), which split from the main Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, the LKP reformed itself into the Lithuanian Democratic Labor Party (LDDP) and later, in 2001 merged with the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (LSDP) to form one left-wing party (LSDP). The Sąjūdis movement splintered into many political groups after the restoration of independence in 1990. The Homeland Union-Lithuanian Conservatives (TS-LK) has become the largest of these groups, occupying the niche of being the main right-wing party in Lithuania. This position was cemented in 2008, when TS-LK merged with several smaller parties to form the Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD).

Throughout the 1990s the Lithuanian party system was characterized by competition and the oscillating electoral success of these two parties. Transitions between different governments were smooth and peaceful with newly elected parties not seeking to prosecute or imprison members of previous cabinets. The main cleavage in Lithuanian society divided the winners and losers of the transition from communism to market-economy and democracy. Naturally, these two parties became associated with different sides of this cleavage – TS-LKD with the transition winners and the ex-communists (LDDP and later – LSDP) with the losers (and neutrals) of transition. In the 2000s the stability of the party system decreased. Several new parties were founded and achieved immediate electoral success, but usually did not manage to maintain their prominent positions in the party system. This trend continues to this day, with the Union of Farmers and Greens (LŽVS) being the most recent example of a previously little known party experiencing a rapid rise in popularity and electoral success. Since 2016, it replaced the LSDP as TS-LKD's main competition.

OVERVIEW OF COALITION CABINETS IN LITHUANIA

The history of party-based governments in Lithuania starts with the 1992 parliamentary elections. In the period of 1990-1992 governments were mostly formed on a non-partisan basis and supported by the broad, big tent Lithuanian independence movement the Sąjūdis. Since then, only the 1992 elections to the Seimas (unicameral Lithuanian parliament) resulted in a government with a one-party majority. All the other governments after the 1992-1996 parliamentary term were multiparty (coalitional), except the one-party minority government of TS-LK in the 1999-2000 parliamentary term (see the appendix for abbreviations of Lithuanian party names). As could be observed from Table 1, in a relatively short period of time Lithuanian democracy experienced all types of party government coalitions: minimal-winning (only those parties needed to obtain a majority), oversized (more parties in coalition than required for majority) and minority (coalition that has fewer than 71 out of 141 seats in the Seimas).

Table 1. Prime ministers and coalition types in Lithuania since 1993

Prime minister	Year	Prime minister party	Number of parties in government	Type of coalition at the cabinet inception
Šleževičius	1993-1996	LDDP	1	One party majority
Stankevičius	1996	LDDP	1	One party majority
Vagnorius	1996-1996	TS-LK	2	Oversized coalition*
Paksas	1999	TS-LK	2	Minimal-winning coalition
Kubilius	1999-2000	TS-LK	1	One party minority
Paksas	2000-2001	LLS	2	Minimal-winning coalition
Brazauskas	2001-2004	LSDP	2	Minimal-winning coalition
Brazauskas	2004-2006	LSDP	4	Minimal-winning coalition
Kirkilas	2004-2006	LSDP	4	Minority coalition
Kubilius	2008-2012	TS-LKD	4	Minimal-winning coalition
Butkevičius	2012-2016	LSDP	4	Oversized coalition
Skvernelis	2016-2020	LVŽS	2	Minimal-winning coalition
Šimonytė	2020-	TS-LKD	3	Minimal-winning coalition

* Technically TS-LKD could govern as a one-party majority with 70 mandates, as several parliamentary seats out of 141 remained vacant after the 1996 elections.

ACROSS-THE-AISLE PARTY AGREEMENTS

Competition between the governing coalitions and opposition is the norm in Lithuanian politics (opposition is also usually fragmented: f.e., in 2021 the Seimas had five parliamentary groupings that did not belong to the government). However, national-level strategic goals unite all the parliamentary parties from time to time.

Usually this cooperation arises due to external factors, such as membership in international alliances or foreign threats. One early example of such a consensus was the unanimous aspiration among major Lithuanian political powers for EU membership (despite political polarization between the ex-communist left and right wing parties in the 1990s). From the onset of the Restoration of Lithuanian Independence, the aim of EU membership was claimed not only by the right-wing descendants of the Sąjūdis (foremost TS-LK), but also by the ex-communist left and its leader Brazauskas. After he won the first direct Lithuanian presidential elections of 1993, in one of his first public addresses the new president declared that Lithuania will strive for EU membership and this claim later was never seriously contested among major political parties, notwithstanding their governmental or oppositional status.

Another consensus for NATO membership was achieved with some efforts by prominent politicians. Even though in early 1994 Brazauskas sent a letter with an official claim by Lithuania to become a NATO member,

there still remained some splits regarding the pursuit of this membership in the ex-communist (LDDP) and left (LSDP) parties. However, in 2001 representatives from eleven parliamentary parties re-affirmed the strategic goals of Lithuanian defense policy and a commitment to NATO membership in an official agreement. According to Gediminas Kirkilas, former prime minister (2006-2008) from LSDP (merged with LDDP in 2001), opinion on NATO was unanimously positive among the right-wing parties; however, leaders of the left had to convince their party colleagues to endorse the agreement (Jastramskis 2021). Leadership by the non-partisan president (1998-2003, 2004-2008) Valdas Adamkus was also important. Adamkus has been a staunch supporter of Western orientation. His efforts and popularity positively contributed to the inter-party consensus and the integration of Lithuania to the EU and NATO in 2004.

Another across-the-aisle agreement was reached in 2014, in the context of military aggression of Russia against Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. Seven major Lithuanian parliamentary parties (including LLRA that usually holds pragmatist views towards Russia) agreed upon the goal to to devote 2 percent of GDP to defense by 2020. Again, leadership and pressure by another non-partisan president Dalia Grybauskaitė (2009-2019) was key for such an agreement.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LITHUANIAN ELECTORAL SYSTEM

The need to build government coalitions in Lithuania arises from the fragmentation of parliament: which, in its own right, is quite well explained by the effects of the mixed-parallel electoral system (Jastramskis 2018). Since 1992, Lithuania has been using an almost purely mixed electoral formula with two independent tiers. 70 out of 141 members of parliaments (MPs) are elected in single-member districts with two round majority rule (the only exception was the 2000 election, when the simple plurality rule was used). The remaining 71 out of 141 parliamentary seats are elected in a nationwide proportional district with a 5 percent legal threshold (a 7 per cent threshold is applied for electoral coalitions).

Table 2. Seats by election winner in the Lithuanian parliamentary elections, 1992-2020.

Year/winner	Single-member districts	Proportional tier
1992/LDDP	37	36
1996/TS-LK	37	33
2000/Social Democratic Coalition*	28	23
2004/Labor Party	17	22
2008/TS-LK	27	18
2012/LSDP	22	15
2016/LVŽS	37	19
2020/TS-LKD	27	23
Total	70(100)	71(100)

* including two independents that enjoyed support of the party and joined the parliamentary grouping after elections.

As could be observed from the data in Table 2, the proportional tier in 6 out of 8 parliamentary elections was less favorable for the winning party. In the 1996 and 2020 elections, TS-LKD and LVŽS respectively could have commanded a clear majority if elections were held only in the single member districts. A proportional tier does not create fragmentation alone, as Lithuanians naturally vote for more than two parties even in single member districts for a variety of factors (two-round system, partisanship, electoral volatility and supply of new parties). But nationwide proportional districts facilitate a situation where coalition building becomes a pragmatic necessity for the formation of government and the distribution of ministerial (and other, such as chairing of parliamentary committees – see below) posts.

Judging not only from Lithuanian experience, but based on other research done on electoral systems (f.e., see Norris 1997, Norris 2004, Gallagher and Mitchell 2005), a proportional system leads to multi-party systems and coalition governments: thus, it should be introduced where the majoritarian trends are a threat to democracy. By making coalition building a necessity for the formation of government, increased proportionality of the electoral system can facilitate consensus - based politics.

PARTY IDEOLOGIES AND CONSENSUS BASED POLICY MAKING

Since 1996, the Lithuanian party system resembled moderate pluralism, alternating between left and right government coalitions led by LSDP and TS-LK (TS-LKD; TS-LKD merged with Christian democrats in 2008) respectively. In 2016, LVŽS replaced LSDP as the main pole at the centre-left.

Although some degree of polarization between the major parties can be observed, especially in the early 1990s, it was mostly related to the assessment of the Soviet past (ex-communist and anti-communist cleavage) and personal antagonisms between the party leaders. However, the social and economic policies of the main political parties and alternating (left or right) governments have been quite similar and this enabled cooperation. Quite unanimous and positive attitudes towards the EU served as a unifying ideological factor across the main competitors in the party system. As a result, the 2006 government crisis (after the exit of populist FP) was solved with a minority coalition led by LSDP prime minister Kirkilas: although the oppositional TS-LK did not delegate ministers to government, it supported the parliamentary confidence vote. The role of non-partisan president Adamkus also facilitated the formation of a minority government.

One of the reasons behind the relatively easy coalition building and party cooperation in Lithuania is that attitudinal cohesion inside the political parties regarding the two main Western dimensions (economic left–right and cultural liberalism–conservatism) is relatively low (Ramonaitė 2021). It is easier to build alliances when there is a significant ideological overlap between the elites of the major parliamentary parties: politicians from different parties can find a common ground on some issues. This does not mean that Lithuanian parties are ideologically the same - there are important differences in terms of ideological positions of party elites (Ramonaitė and Jastramskis 2014; Ramonaitė 2021). However, these political divisions are not cumulative. In the 2016 parliamentary elections, coalitional partners LVŽS and LSDP had a similar centre-left position on economic issues. But on cultural issues the moderately conservative LVŽS was more similar to the oppositional TS-LKD. Thus LVŽS could rely on the support of some TS-LKD members when introducing policy that restricted alcohol in early 2017.

Cooperation is facilitated by the growing consensus of parties on the evaluation of the Soviet past and Russia. Although differences in these attitudes between the party electorates persist, positions of the major parliamentary parties has become quite similar. As Ramonaitė (2020, p. 8) summarizes in her analysis of Lith-

uanian parliamentary elites, after the 2016 parliamentary elections "attitudes of the four biggest parliamentary parties – the LVŽS, the TS-LKD, the LSDP, and the LRLS – are indeed clearly anti-Soviet, with the position of the LSDP being slightly more moderate". Common ground on history and relations with Russia positively contributes to party cooperation. LLRA (8 parliamentary seats out of 141 after 2016 and 3 seats after the 2020 election) is somewhat of an exception to this rule, as the representatives of the party still hold relatively pro-Soviet and pragmatic views towards Russia. However, these attitudes do not translate into politics: for example, pressure from the other parties and the president meant that LLRA also signed the agreement on the increase of defense spending in 2014. In sum, attitudes towards Russia serve as a unifying factor for the Lithuanian political elite.

There is another consensus on the country's orientation towards the EU. According to the Lithuanian voting advice application My Vote, there are no major parliamentary parties that would be clearly against the EU, with the LVŽS taking a centrist position in the anti-EU and pro-EU dimension. This consensus is deepened by Lithuania's EU-supporting non-partisan presidents.

FORMATION OF COALITION CABINETS AND COHESIVE GOVERNMENT

By definition, coalitions are composed of multiple ministers delegated by different coalition partner parties. Each minister is responsible for the day-to-day operation of a certain ministry and naturally is significantly more informed about that area than his/her colleagues. This is called 'information advantage' or 'information asymmetry'. The danger that coalition cabinets face constantly is that individual ministers will exploit such information asymmetry to engage in activities which would narrowly benefit them or their parties, but might not be aligned with the interests of the coalition as a whole. Such activities, sometimes called 'hidden action' are one of the core reasons why coalition cabinets collapse mid-term.

This being the case, government coalitions have developed various mechanisms to limit information asymmetries between coalition partners and to prevent hidden actions from the ministers. Two such mechanisms that first appeared in the Western European countries have been employed in Lithuania (and the other Baltic states) and were demonstrated to help coalition cabinets function more smoothly and contribute to cabinet longevity (Pukelis 2018). These mechanisms are: coalition agreements and ministerial shadowing. Sections below present an overview of how these agreements have been used in Lithuania and how they benefited the coalition cabinets.

Coalition Agreements

Formalization of the key points that were agreed during the coalition formation into a Coalition Agreement is beneficial in two ways. First, it is one of the ways how government coalitions can (at least partially) make sure that the provisions agreed upon during the coalition formation will stick. Second, in the event of falling out other coalition partners will not be able to spin wildly different narratives on what was initially agreed to.

These agreements are not legal documents in a formal sense: it is not possible to sue a coalition partner if the agreement is broken. However, they are still quite powerful. Usually they are made public, which helps achieve several things:

- A public coalition agreement helps the cabinet communicate its goals and priorities to the public.

- It publicly demonstrates the commitment of each coalition partner to the agreed goals. This makes it harder for individual coalition partners to change their minds and walk-away from difficult decisions mid-term. In other words, these agreements are 'politically binding' - breaking them results in a significant loss of reputation.

Coalition Agreements can take multiple forms. They might be a single consolidated document, but also they might be a collection of documents as well. Some coalitions in Lithuania have preferred to lay down the policy sections into the draft document, which is later formalized as the Cabinet Agenda and to sign a separate agreement of the division of cabinet and other positions and the functioning of the coalition. Usually, the Coalition Agreements serve several functions:

- Outline how the main political positions such as the ministerial portfolios, positions in the parliament (e.g. Speaker, committee chairs), etc. are allocated between the coalition partners.
- Outline how coalition partners deliberate and make joint-decisions.
- Specify policy priorities for the cabinet.
- Outline the content of the key reforms and policy reform to be made in each policy sphere.

Coalition Agreements have been used by the Lithuanian coalition cabinets since the very first coalition cabinet in 1996. Since then they have become a critical feature of Lithuanian coalition cabinets and have increased in length and precision. The initial agreements spanned only several pages and outlined the abstract goals and general policy priorities. Later ones have increased in length to more than a hundred pages and feature not only general policy priorities, but also the precise reforms and policy implementation steps.

Several former PMs we have interviewed have emphasized the importance to take time and invest into developing a comprehensive Coalition Agreement. According to them, after entering office each cabinet has a relatively short period when they can initiate more substantial reforms. Therefore, it is important to reach the agreement between the coalition partners and carry out as many preparations as possible in the coalition formation stage in order for the new cabinet to start working right away. If that is not done, there is a risk that the coalition partners will fail to reach an agreement on some key policy decision and the coalition will become paralyzed. The comparative analysis of the coalitions in the Baltic States demonstrated that cabinets that had longer and more comprehensive coalition agreements had longer and more stable tenures (Pukelis 2018).

However, at the same time some coalitions (especially those that form mid-term) have taken a more pragmatic approach. Seeing that the principal positions between the coalition partners differ greatly, these coalition cabinets have sought to identify a small number of concrete and tangible policy steps that all the partners can agree on and focus on those. Such pragmatic cabinets are a good way to avoid premature elections and avoid political crises by focusing on simple common-sense policy steps.

Shadowing Ministers

Coalition Agreements help coalitions to get off to a productive start and help to prevent disagreements down the road. However, they cannot fully address the problems of information asymmetry and hidden action described above. How do the coalition partners know if a certain minister is not deviating from what was agreed upon?

This is achieved by shadowing the ministers: appointing people from the other coalition partners in close proximity of the minister. Thus that person has access to inside information and can detect if the mister is doing something that could upset the other coalition partners. Shadowing can be done by appointing the junior ministers (i.e. political appointees that serve in the minister's team) or by appointing the chairs of corresponding parliamentary committees. Ministerial shadowing is employed to a very large extent in many Western European countries and also in the Baltic States. On average, around half of all the ministers are shadowed and in Lithuania this figure is even higher at 64%.
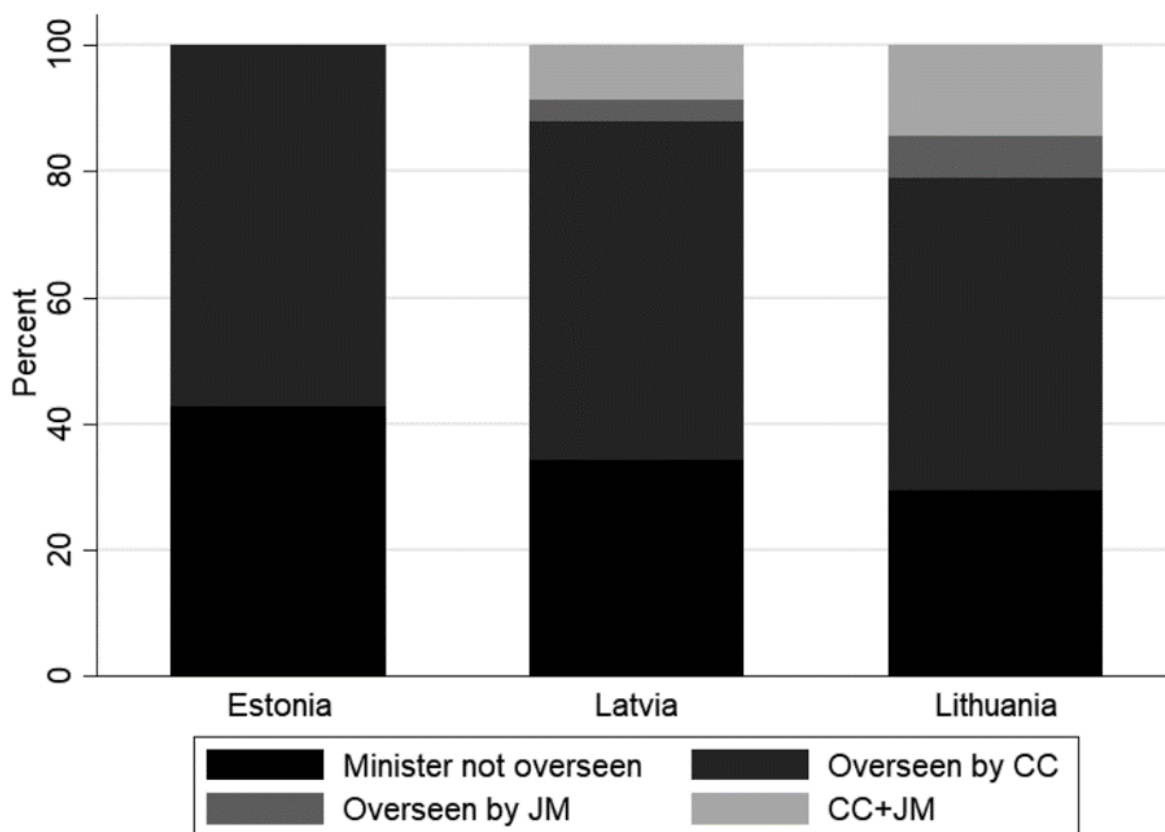

Figure 1. Ministerial Shadowing in the Baltic states (Pukelis 2018)

Both modes of ministerial shadowing have their own benefits. Using junior ministers is advantageous because coalition partners can get a better sense of what is going on inside the ministry. They get to know not only the minister's policy plans and intentions, but also the mood and attitudes of the civil servants. Meanwhile, the chairs of parliamentary committees have more formal power: they can suggest changes to the legislative proposals that come from the ministry and they also have some control over the government bills that are voted on in the parliament. Additionally, they can pose formal questions and sequester documents and information from the ministry.

However, each mode has certain drawbacks as well. Committee chairs are somewhat removed from the daily comings and goings of the ministry. Therefore, they usually do not have full information about what is happening. Meanwhile, appointing junior ministers to shadow cabinet members might be perceived as too intrusive. Some ministers might rightly expect to be able to assemble their own team. Delegate junior ministers from the other coalition partners might be unwelcome.

Historically, both junior ministers and committee chairs have been used for oversight in Lithuania. The reason for this was the need to have the best possible mutual oversight and information exchange between the coalition partners. However, as time went by, use of the junior ministers were abandoned. Appointing the committee chairs became the dominant way of ministerial shadowing in Lithuania. Similar trends occurred in Estonia, where shadow junior ministers were used only for a short while but were later abandoned as being too intrusive.

In the Western European countries, shadow committee chairs are appointed in various patterns, but in Lithuania it works like this: committee chairs are appointed from the largest (prime-ministerial) coalition party to shadow the ministers from the junior coalition partners' parties. This allows for a certain power-sharing between the senior and junior coalition partners in a given policy sphere. Some high ranking politicians we have interviewed also indicated that such an arrangement also allows the senior coalition partners to feel safer and grant junior coalition partners more important ministries. Having a parliamentary committee chair from their party that oversees and shares power with the minister removes some uncertainty and hesitancy about entrusting a junior coalition partner with an important position.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The political system in Lithuania is relatively stable, when compared to the other post-Soviet states. A key step in achieving this stability was peaceful and civil transitions of political power when two major party groups alternated in the governments. The fact that political parties that lost an election could feel safe in knowing that they will not be prosecuted by the new government created a pragmatic working environment among the major political parties. This allowed the Lithuanian political parties to establish and maintain the consensus on key foreign policy issues, EU and NATO integration. In turn, such a consensus, altogether with the low ideological cohesion inside the parties facilitated the further coalitional practices and across-the-aisle party agreements. Moreover, non-partisan, directly elected Lithuanian presidents acted as unifying force from time to time and positively contributed to consensus politics.

Since 1996, all except one government in Lithuania were coalitional. However, the high prevalence of coalitions does not mean that managing these cabinets was easy for the parties. In fact, the first coalitional cabinet and prime minister that survived the full four-year term was Butkevičius: in office from 2012 to 2016 (if the exit of LLRA from the cabinet is ignored). Managing a coalition cabinet is a complicated task, as it involves dealing with multiple partners who may have diverging or sometimes even conflicting interests. This process can be made easier by practical experience and putting in place certain mechanisms, like the coalition agreements: they facilitate communication between the coalition partners and allow us to keep an eye on ministers from different parties. Using such mechanisms helps to increase the cohesion and longevity of the cabinet coalitions in Lithuania.

On the basis of analysis presented in this paper, we list the main insights and recommendations regarding party cooperation and coalition building:

- Consensus politics are enhanced by the leadership by non-partisan presidents.
- Coalition building and cooperation agreements between the parties are facilitated by shared aims of integration into Western international structures, foremost EU and NATO. Political debates focused on these matters may foster party cooperation.

- As coalition building is a necessity in a multi-party parliament without one-party majority, electoral reform that would strengthen the proportional tier is recommended.
- Search for the ideological overlaps between parties and emphasis on the unifying ideological factors (such as anti-soviet attitudes and pro-EU stances) among the party elite may enhance the cooperation and overcome personal polarization.
- Invest time during the coalition formation phase to prepare detailed agreements on what the coalition will do really pays off. They help the coalitions to be more productive and prevent disagreements down the road.
- Consider employing some way to oversee the cabinet ministers by shadowing them: using chairs of parliamentary committees or junior ministers from coalition partners' parties.

Annex: Party name abbreviations

Abbreviation in Lithuanian	Party	Party name in Lithuanian
TS-LK	Homeland Union-Lithuanian Conservatives Democrats	TS-LK Tėvynės Sąjunga-Lietuvos Konservatoriai
TS-LKD	TS-LKD Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian	Tėvynės Sąjunga-Lietuvos Krikščionys Demokratai
LDDP	Democratic Labour Party of Lithuania	Lietuvos Demokratinė Darbo Partija
LSDP	Lithuanian Social Democratic Party	Lietuvos Socialdemokratų Partija
LLS	Lithuanian Liberal Union	Lietuvos liberalų sąjunga
LRLS	Liberals' Movement of the Republic of Lithuania	Lietuvos Respublikos Liberalų Sąjūdis
DP	Labour Party	Darbo Partija
TT	Order and Justice	Tvarka ir Teisingumas
LVŽS	Lithuanian Farmers and Green Union	Lietuvos Valstiečių ir Žaliųjų Sąjunga

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