UNEQUAL DEMOCRACIES

WHO DOES (NOT) HAVE A SEAT IN THE LITHUANIAN PARLIAMENT?

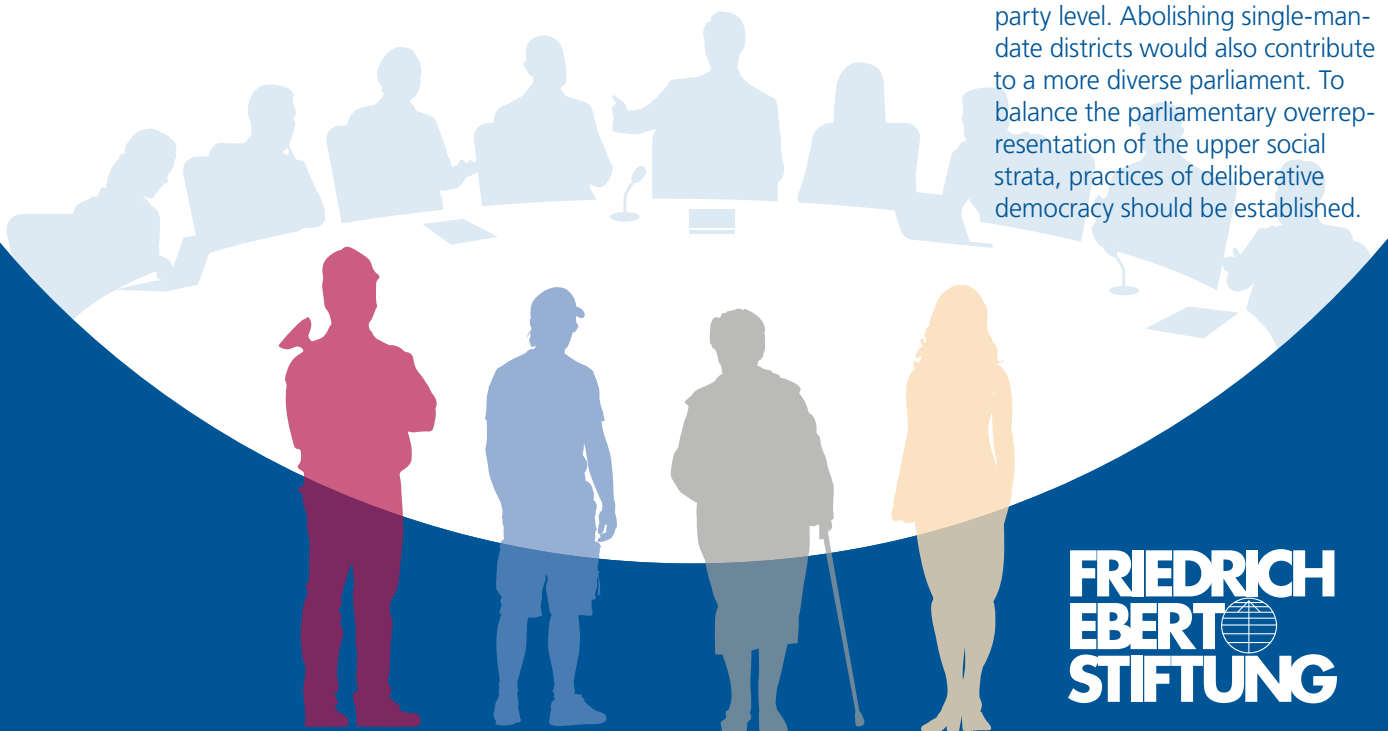**Liutauras Gudžinskas and Karolis Jonutis**
September 2024

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In Lithuania, the parliament is among the least trusted institution. The better it represents the people in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, class, education level, the more favourable the circumstances for effective communication and mutual understanding between citizens and lawmakers.

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The Parliament in Lithuania is highly elitist in terms of both education and class. Around 90% of MPs come from the upper-service class, with higher-grade managers and administrators comprising two-thirds of the legislature. Although the share of women and youth is gradually increasing, it remains lower in the Seimas than in society.

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The proportion of female and young MPs should be increased through electoral quotas, public education, and mobilization at the party level. Abolishing single-mandate districts would also contribute to a more diverse parliament. To balance the parliamentary overrepresentation of the upper social strata, practices of deliberative democracy should be established.

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

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Content

INTRODUCTION

There has been growing considerable public distrust and disenchantment towards representative democracy in Europe in recent years. Party competition becomes increasingly hollow and fails to meet voters' expectations. The rise of anti-systemic populist parties seems rather imminent. The question how we could reinvent the very liberal democratic order to make sure it does not lose its core legitimacy becomes therefore increasingly relevant (Mair 2013).

One way to seek an answer to it is to understand to what extent our representative institutions truly reflect the composition of society. To be precise, if and how we can make the parliament a better mirror of the people? Advocates of so-called 'descriptive representation' argue that an ideal legislature should represent society's diversity, encompassing various parameters such as gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and education level.

The inclusion of representatives of various, in particular, marginalized social groups, might improve the quality of democracy in different ways. First, it may increase public trust in the institution thanks to better communication between citizens and members of parliament who share the same specific characteristics. Second, representation is vital for policymaking, as it brings direct experience and knowledge of specific social group issues. Ultimately, having representatives from marginalized backgrounds can inspire their broader participation in political life, and it may help society heal from the traumas of past discrimination (Mansbridge 1999).

Empirical research investigating these normative claims is growing. Initially, there was a focus on the positive effects of increased representation of women in parliament (see, for example, Wängnerud (2009)). More recently, one also began to explore whether MPs from socially and economically less privileged backgrounds are more dedicated to addressing the concerns of lower income and occupational groups (Gilens & Page 2014; Schakel 2021).

In this paper we are seeking to identify which groups are evenly represented, overrepresented, underrepresented, or entirely absent in the current legislative term in Lithuania. Although its democratic regime has been so far resilient against regional trends of democratic backsliding, the country has one of the lowest electoral turnouts, and one of the most unstable and low-trusted party systems within the

European Union, which betrays its hollow character (Greskovits 2015). Therefore, the discussion of whether the Parliament of Lithuania, the *Seimas*, represents its society is of utmost importance.

POLITICAL COMPOSITION OF PARLIAMENT

The Seimas's 141 members are elected to a four-year term according to the mixed electoral system. In the multi-mandate district, 70 seats are distributed for the competing open party lists using the largest remainder method. Voters have five preferential votes to influence the final order of candidates in their supported list. Parties need to receive at least 5% (7% for parties' alliances) of the votes to get any seats in this proportional subsystem. The rest MPs are elected via a majoritarian system in 71 territorial single-mandate districts (one of them is devoted to the citizens residing abroad). If no candidate gets an absolute majority, a run-off between two contestants receiving the most votes is held in two weeks.

In 2020, as in all previous elections in Lithuania since 1990, the incumbents were electorally "punished" by the voters. The then main ruling party, i. e. the agrarian and socially conservative Farmers and Greens (LVŽS[1]), shrank from 47 to 32

MPs, while their minor coalition partners (Social Democratic Labour Party (LSDDP), and Polish Electoral Action – Union of Christian Families (LLRA-KŠS)) lost their political groups and were elected only in single-mandate districts receiving 3 seats each. Meanwhile, the then key opposition party, the centre-right Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD), expanded their political faction from 36 to 50 MPs and eventually formed a ruling coalition with two pro-market and socially liberal parties: Liberal Movement (LS) (13 mandates), and newly founded Freedom Party (LP) (11 seats). The latter distinguished itself during the election campaign with maverick pledges of same-sex marriage and decriminalization of cannabis. Other major parties elected in the Seimas were the centrist-populist Labour Party (DP) (10 MPs), and the mainstream centre-left Social Democrats (LSDP) (13 representatives).

In Table 1, we provide the full political composition of the Seimas elected in 2020. An important caveat to this is that at the end of 2021, the Farmers and Greens split. Ten MPs, including former Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis (2016–2020),

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[1] Original parties' names and their abbreviations are provided in the Table No. 1 on the page below.

Table 1
Elections to Parliament (Seimas) in Lithuania in 2020

Party	Original name and acronym	Number of mandates (Total: 141)	Governing status (2020–2024)
Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrat	Tėvynės Sąjunga – Lietuvos krikščionys demokratai (TS-LKD)	50	Government
Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union	Lietuvos valstiečių ir žaliųjų sąjunga (LVŽS)	32	Opposition
Lithuanian Social Democratic Party	Lietuvos socialdemokratų partija (LSDP)	13	Opposition
Liberal Movement	Liberalų sąjūdis (LS)	13	Government
Freedom Party	Laisvės partija (LP)	11	Government
Labour party	Darbo partija (DP)	10	Opposition
Electoral Action of Polish in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance	Lietuvos lenkų rinkimų akcija – Krikščioniškų šeimų sąjunga (LLRA-KŠS)	3	Opposition
Lithuanian Social Democratic Labour Party	Lietuvos socialdemokratų darbo partija (LSDDP)	3	Opposition
Party Freedom and Justice	Partija "Laisvė ir teisingumas" (LT)	1	Opposition
Lithuanian Green Party	Lietuvos žaliųjų partija (LŽP)	1	Opposition
Independents		4	

exited the LVŽS political group in Parliament and together with three non-affiliated MPs established a new faction and later a centrist party called "Democrats' Union for Lithuania" (*Demokratų sąjunga "Vardan Lietuvos"* (DSVL)). Nevertheless, given that we are analysing the composition of the legislature just after its election, we are treating them as part of the Farmers and Greens. For the analysis of the composition of the general population, we are using the data from 2021 (provided by the State data agency). Timewise, it is the closest to the actual date of the last legislative elections held in October 2020.

AGE DISTRIBUTION

MPs are somewhat older than the general population. The median age of an MP is 48 years old, while the median age of permanent residents of Lithuania is 44 years. Only two representatives under the age of 30 were elected in the 2020 parliamentary elections. The youngest elected representative was born in 1992 and was 28 years old on the day of entering the Seimas.

A somewhat unusual feature, also compared to other European countries is that the largest group in the Seimas is the 30–44 age group with 54 representatives (38%), while it makes up only 27% of permanent residents of Lithuania. The representation of the other two age groups (45–59 and over 60) in the Seimas was almost identical to their distribution in the general population. The average age of male MPs is slightly higher than that of female parliamentarians – 50 years for men and 46 years for women.

Already obsolete constitutional restrictions played a crucial role in determining the youngest adult people to be so underrepresented in the Seimas. Only those Lithuanian citizens, who were at least 25 years old, had been eligible to run in the parliamentary elections. This constitutional norm, however, was amended in 2022, and the current minimal age for running to become an MP is 21 years. Thus, we may expect more younger politicians to come to the Seimas in the forthcoming elections in October 2024, and onwards.

In addition, considering that if we were to count MPs under the age of 36, there would be as many as 20 of them. In fact, most members of the Seimas under the age of 36 served on municipal councils, and the vast majority of them were elected from party lists. This suggests that political parties may use local politics as a way to select younger prospective MPs.

GENDER DISTRIBUTION

The government formed after the legislative elections in 2020 has been remarkable for its gender balance. Almost half of the ministers (7 out of 15) in the newly appointed cabinet were women. Not only the new Prime Minister herself, MP Ingrida Šimonytė of the TS-LKD, but also leaders of other two ruling parties, the Seimas's Speaker Viktorija

Čmilytė-Nielsen of LS, and Minister of Economy and Innovations MP Aušrinė Armonaitė of LP are women. This makes a sharp contrast with the previous government, when since the end of 2018, after reshuffle of the Skvernelis's cabinet, there were no women left at all in it.

The legislative elections have also brought more women to the parliament than ever – 38 out of 141 (or 27%). However, it still indicates a substantial underrepresentation compared to their demographic share (53% in 2021). Nevertheless, one can observe gradual progress in this regard since Lithuania regained its independence. In the legislative elections from 1990 to 1999, female MPs comprised only 12% on average. In the next decade (2000–2010), their share grew to 17%, whereas in the ultimate decade (2011–2020) the average increased further to 24%. These figures could have been higher if it were not for Lithuania's mixed-member electoral system. For example, in the last elections, women constituted 30% of MPs elected through the list tier (70 seats), but only 24% of MPs elected in the majoritarian, single-member district tier (71 seats).

The newcomer party LP stands out among other political groups in the Seimas (including previous terms of the Lithuanian Parliament) with over half of its MPs being women. Moreover, it has also an open gay among its representatives, only the second time in the Lithuanian parliamentary history. Meanwhile, the three main political parties – the Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats, the Farmers and Greens, and the Social Democrats – exhibit similar levels of female representation in the Seimas (28–31%).

It is somewhat paradoxical because only the Social Democrats applied quotas in forming their electoral list (there should have been at least 40% of men or women in every group of ten candidates). Among factors of this mismatch, one may consider the aforementioned worse female representation among candidates in the single-mandate districts, but also gender bias of voter behaviour when ranking final candidates' order.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Almost all MPs (98%) hold at least a bachelor's degree, in comparison to only 43% within the general population of 25–74 years. While overall data on the prevalence of master's or doctoral degrees among the general population is not publicly available, the figures for the Seimas are undoubtedly higher – 61% of representatives hold master's degrees and 20% hold a doctorate[2]. There are no significant differences in educational attainment levels between men and women. The incumbent parties' representatives enjoy somewhat higher educational achievements (in terms of formal degrees) than representatives of the opposing side.

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[2] In 2009, Lithuanian Statistics Office estimated that there were 9.6 thousand residents of up to 70 years old who held PhD degree, or 0.5% of general population of 25–70 years.

Table 2
Age distribution in the Seimas, after elections in 2020

Age	MP seats	Share within the parliament	Share within the general adult population
25–29	2	2%	8%
30–44	54	38%	27%
45–59	41	29%	29%
Over 60	44	31%	36%

Table 3
Gender distribution in the Seimas, after elections in 2020

Party name	Men	Women	Percentage of women
TS-LKD	36	14	28%
LS	12	1	8%
LP	5	6	55%
Total (government)	**53**	**21**	**28%**
LVŽS	23	9	28%
DP	8	2	20%
LLRA-KŠS	1	2	67%
LT	1	0	0%
LSDP	9	4	31%
LSDDP	3	0	0%
LŽP	1	0	0%
Total (opposition)	**46**	**17**	**27%**
Independents	4	0	0%
Total	**103**	**38**	**27%**

Table 4
Distribution of education level in the Seimas, after elections in 2020

	General	Men	Women
High school degree	100%	100%	100%
Bachelor's degree	98%	97%	100%
Master's degree	61%	60%	64%
Doctorate	20%	20%	18%

Table 5
Education differences between political camps in the Seimas, 2020–2024

Political status	Party name	High school (ISCED 3)	Bachelor (ISCED 6)	Master (ISCED 7)	Doctorate (ISCED 8)
Government	**TS-LKD**	1	13	22	14
	LS	0	4	5	4
	LP	0	4	5	2
	Total	**1**	**21**	**32**	**20**
Opposition	**LVŽS**	0	16	12	4
	LSDP	0	6	6	1
	DP	1	3	5	1
	LSDDP	0	3	0	0
	LLRA-KŠS	0	1	2	0
	LT	0	0	1	0
	LŽP	0	0	0	1
	Total	**1**	**29**	**26**	**7**
Not affiliated	**Independents**	1	1	2	0

CLASS DISTRIBUTION

We determined the social class of the representatives by using Oesch's (2006) class scheme, which categorizes class status based on occupational position within the labour market. Oesch's original class scheme distinguishes between 16 occupational classes, which are depicted in Figure 1 along with examples of specific occupations within each class. A simplified version of the scheme groups these 16 classes into four categories, which are color-coded in the figure. According to this scheme, all university-educated occupations fall under the upper service class (red), which includes higher-grade managers and experts, also large employers, and self-employed professionals. Employees in semi-professions are categorized as middle or lower-grade service class (green), and all apprenticeship and semi-skilled jobs are classified as working class (yellow). Small business owners who have employees, such as restaurant owners, and those owners who work by themselves (such as shopkeepers, or hairdressers) comprise the last category coloured in grey. The last occupation of the MPs before entering parliament was used to determine their position within the class scheme.

Most MPs (127, or 90% of the Seimas) come from the upper service class. The presence of the other three classes is negligible: there are 8 small business owners with employees (6%), whereas the lower-grade service class is represented by 5 MPs (3%), while only one MP (1%) belongs to the working

class. Ironically, she is the speaker of the parliament. That might be interpreted, however, as a methodological anomaly, given that Čmilytė-Nielsen, before entering the parliament, was a highly successful chess player. Although such occupation – like with all professional sport persons – is formally attributed to the working class, one might argue a career as a chess grandmaster requires no less cognitive skills than any occupation in the upper-service class.

The upper service class, however, can be further broken down into five different categories. The biggest block, comprising 93 MPs (73% of the upper service class), is higher-grade managers and administrators. The second biggest group is 23 (18%) sociocultural experts. They are followed by 7 MPs (6%) who are large employers (i. e. businesspersons employing more than 9 employees), as well as 3 self-employed professionals (2%), and a single technical expert (1%).

There are no significant differences in terms of class allegiance among political camps. The proportion of high-grade managers and administrators (the biggest group within the upper-service class) is also similar among the political camps.

Analysis of other dimensions, however, reveals some contrasting patterns. First, the share of male MPs representing the upper-service class (92%) is somewhat higher than that of their female colleagues (84%). While the gap is almost the same within the subclass of high-grade managers and

Figure 1
Class scheme with 16 occupational classes according to Oesch (2006)

|	EMPLOYEES			SELF-EMPLOYED	
	Administrative work logic	**Interpersonal work logic**	**Technical work logic**	**Independent work logic**	
Upper service class	**Higher-grade managers** accountants, senior ministry officials, advertising professionals	**Sociocultural experts** secondary school teachers, physicians, university teachers	**Technical experts** engineers, IT experts	**Independent professions** lawyers, practicing physicians, independent consultants	**Large employers** managers, business owners, farmers
Lower-grade service class	**Lower-grade managers** skilled administrative staff, skilled commercial professions	**Sociocultural professions** social workers, elementary school teachers	**Technical semi-professions** skilled workers in engineering professions, medical technicians	**Small business owners with employees**	
Working class	**Skilled clerks** skilled secretaries, warehouse clerks	**Skilled service providers** salespersons, preschool teachers, practical nurses	**Skilled crafts workers** electricians, building electricians	**Small business owners without employees**	
	Routine office clerks call-centre agents	**Routine service providers** bartenders, cleaning professions, security professions	**Routine skilled workers** machinery operators, freight professions		

Figure 2
Class composition of the Seimas
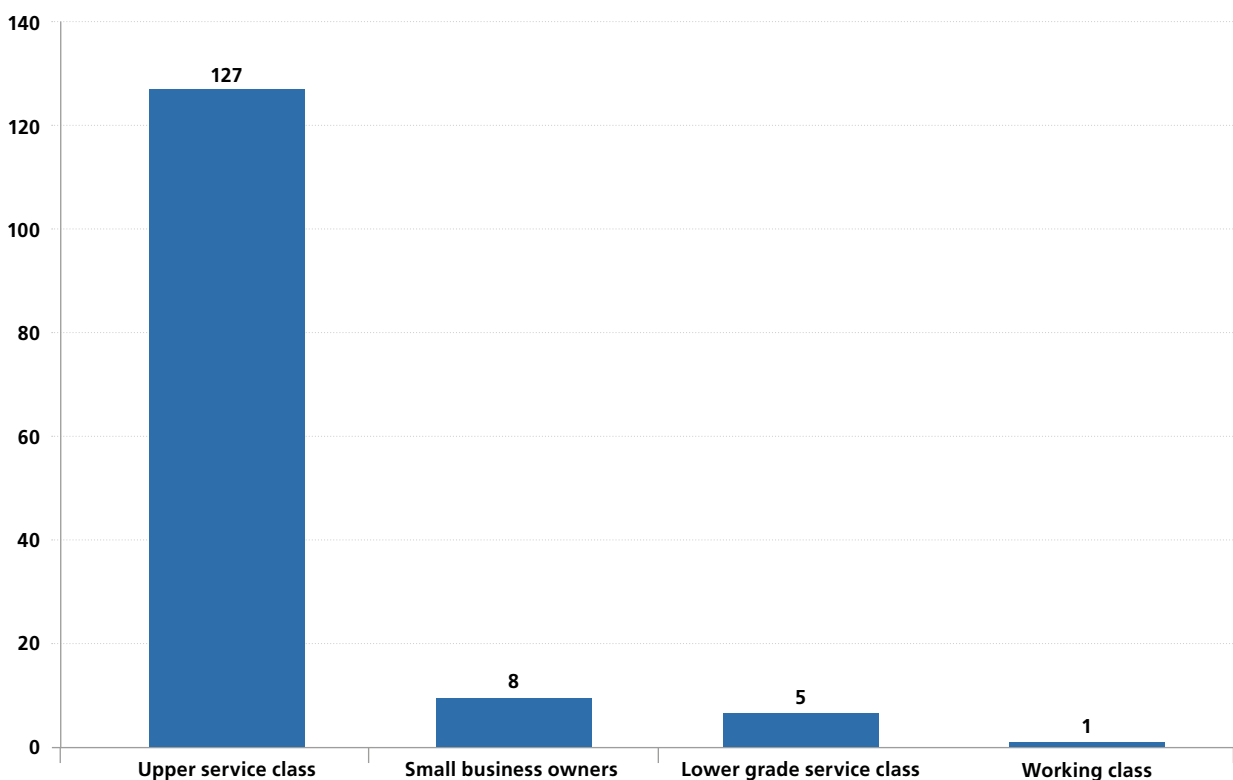
Figure 3
Types of jobs of upper service class MPs
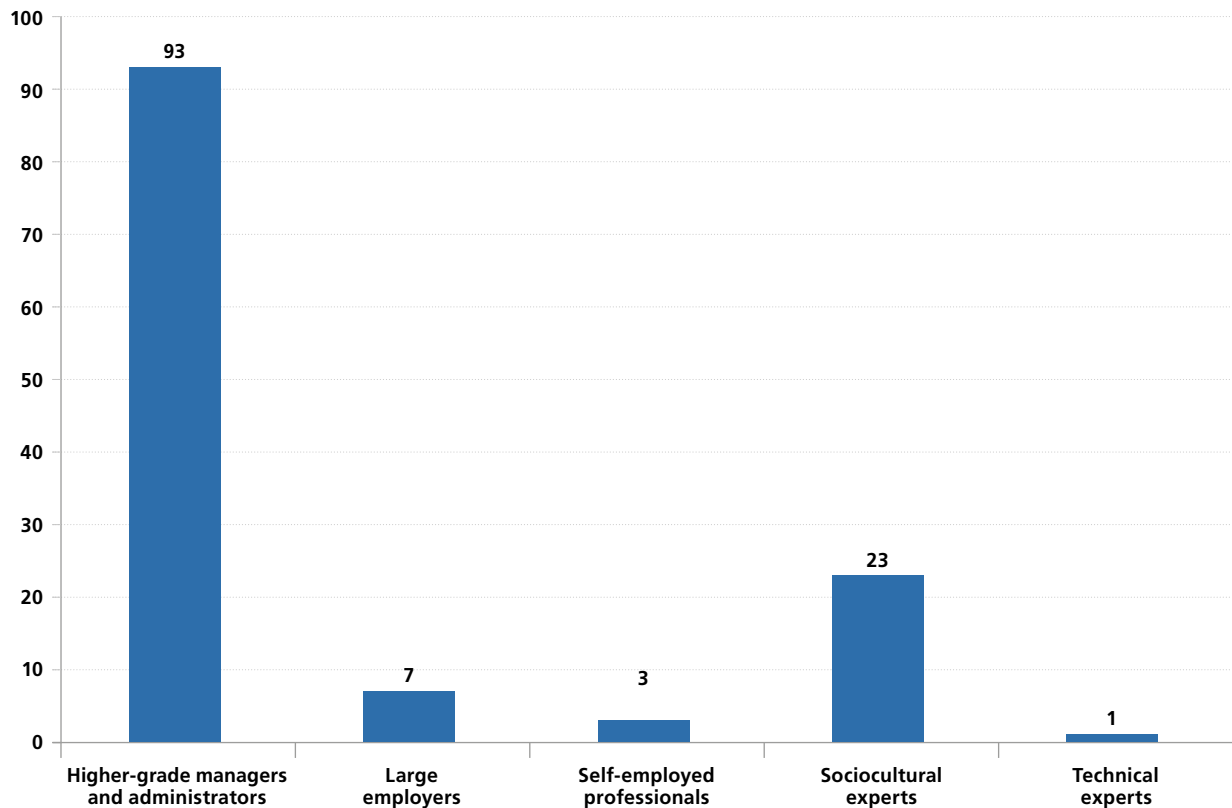
administrators, there are no women among large employers, and there is only a single female representative among small business owners. Furthermore, there is a quite notable divide between MPs elected in the single-member districts and in the multi-mandate districts. 73% of MPs coming from the single-mandate constituencies belong to the high-grade managers and administrators, while the share of this subclass among MPs elected through the party lists is just 59%. Instead, almost a quarter of MPs elected in the multi-member district (24%) were sociocultural experts before their entry to the parliament, while only 8% of parliamentarians elected in the single-member districts hail from such professional backgrounds. On the other hand, the proportion of the upper-service class is almost identical among MPs coming from the single-mandate districts (89%) and the multi-mandate districts (91%).

In terms of age distribution, both MPs representing the youngest cohort (under 30) were lower-grade managers before coming to the Seimas. However, all three following cohorts (30–44, 45–59, 60 and older) are highly salient in the upper service class: 83%, 93%, and 100% respectively. There are, however, some differences concerning the share of high-grade managers and administrators among these three cohorts. While around 80% of MPs are 60 years old and older and belong to the subclass, only 56% of parliamentarians 45–59 years are coming from this professional background. On the other hand, a relatively high proportion

of 29% of them were sociocultural experts before coming to the parliament (vis-à-vis only 9% in the cohort after 60 years). Representatives from the youngest of these three cohorts (i. e. 30–44) are somewhat in the middle with 65% of them pertaining to the subclass of high-grade managers and administrators, and 13% of them belonging to the sociocultural professionals.

We also looked what is the proportion of MPs being so-called "career politicians". Their occupations before entering the parliament are of "political nature", e.g. advisors to ministers or MPs, or managers in political parties. Moreover, they have hardly any other professional experience from their 20s (see: O'Grady (2019, p. 555)). To reflect the local context better, we also classified as "careerists" those MPs who have been engaging in politics since the 1990s, when Lithuania became independent, or staying in the Seimas at least for four terms of office.

The analysis demonstrated that almost half of the parliament (47%), i. e. 66 MPs, can be considered career politicians. The proportions are similar across most political affiliations, except for the centre-left parties (LSDP, LSDDP, LŽP), where career politicians actually make up the majority (10 out of 17). The proportions of women and men are equal in this case (47% of men and 46% of women are career politicians). Regarding age, the average age of career politicians 47 years and that of non-career politicians equals 51 years.

Figure 4
Sectoral composition of the Seimas
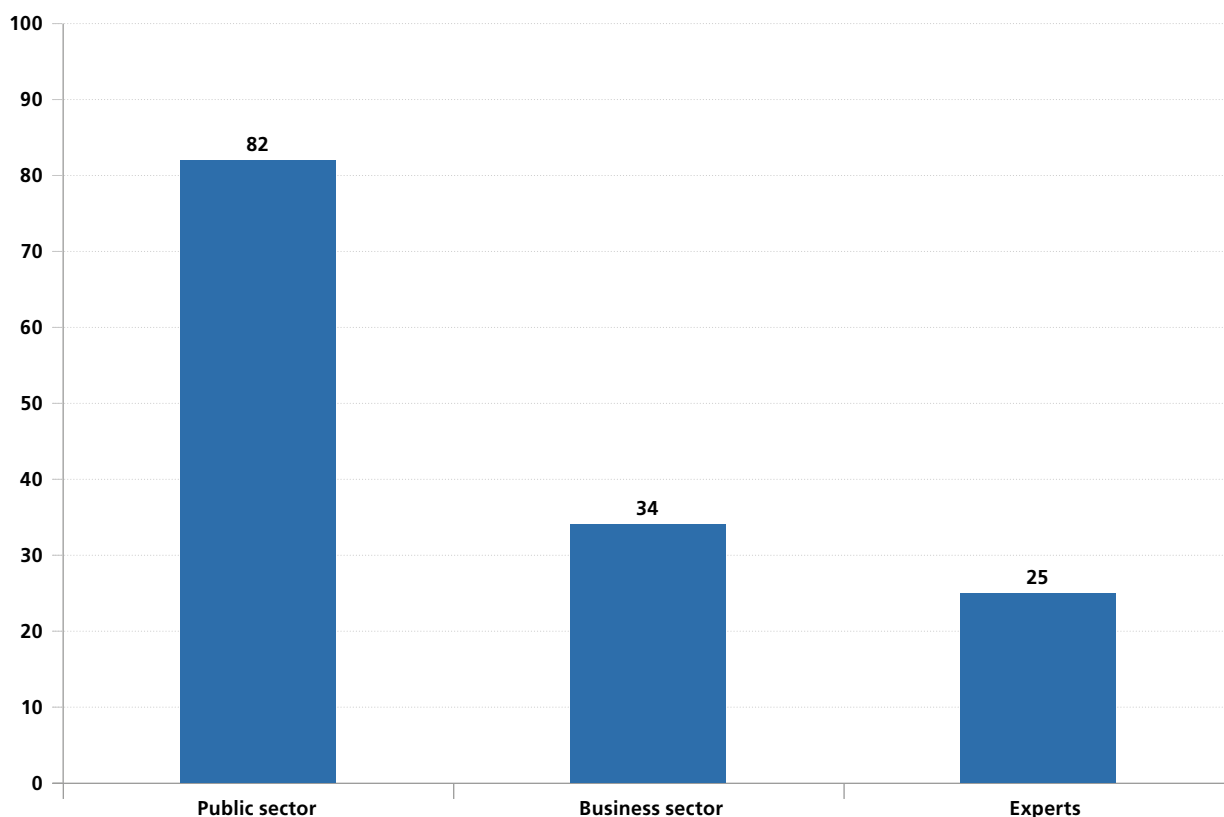
Both career and non career politicians mostly come from the upper service class (around 90%). However, there is a stark contrast in regards to their presence in high-grade managers and administrators' echelon. Even 85% of career politicians are coming from this subclass, while only 49% non carreer politicians belong to it. That is not a coincidence, however, given that high-grade management and administration provide arguably the straightest way for aspiring individuals to pursue a political career.

From a more general perspective, i. e. considering all political positions that MPs can take (but not necessarily receiving major income from there), we may conclude that almost three-fifths of the Parliament (83 or 59%) have been already involved in politics. The most common experience derives from local politics, with a total of 72 MPs belonging to the municipal councils or occupying the mayor's post in the past. This trend further reinforces the observed pattern that political parties tend to select candidates who have already got some political experience. The office at the local level, as well as, the intraparty management, or the assistance to MPs or ministers, are thus key instruments for parties to nurture a new generation of politicians in the future.

Ultimately, the prevailing subclass of high-grade managers and administrators does not differentiate between those who work in the public and private sectors. Therefore, we have also looked at how many MPs came from the business and other fields. From the analysis, we can conclude that the most dominant sector in the Seimas is *politicians / government officials*. This group can be further subdivided into several categories: former senior government officials and professional politicians, especially at the local level. Professional political party workers, such as party secretaries and various types of political advisors, also fall into this category. If we add public sector managers holding high-level positions in public institutions, we have a total of 82 MPs (58%) belonging to this sector. *Experts or professionals* consists of 25 members (18%), primarily working in state-funded organizations like universities, hospitals, and museums, and others like journalists in private entities. Finally, the *business sector*, consisting of business leaders, owners and various managers, has 34 members (24%).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A single representative of the working class in the Lithuanian parliament is also its speaker. Such a finding of this report may be a perfect choice for the news headline to catch the reader's eye. Whether one agrees that professional chess players belong to the proletariat or not, a more important takeaway from the analysis is that there are in fact no candidates in the Seimas that could credibly claim their allegiance to the occupations that foremost require manual input. To some extent, it may signify a repudiation of the famous Soviet slogan to make sure that "every kitchen maid could run the state". After all, many voters in Lithuania tend to value candidates' competence and efficacy to govern (Jastramskis et al. 2018). Political parties take note of that when forming their electoral lists. Across the political spectrum, around 90% of MPs are coming from the upper-service class, with higher-grade managers and administrators (comprising two-thirds of the Seimas) being the prevailing subgroup within this class.

In terms of age and gender, we observe some promising trends, though the parliament still does not represent the society ideally in this regard either. The share of women in the Seimas rose around three times since the 1990s to 27% in 2020. Moreover, the constitution has been recently amended to lower the minimal age criterion for passive eligibility from 25 years to 21 years. Already in the current parliament (2020–2024), the 30–44 years cohort is the biggest with 38% MPs. In fact, it effectively outbalances the under-representation of those who are 25–29 years old (2% MPs) given that both cohorts comprise around 35% of the general adult population. We tentatively infer from this observation that political parties aim to rejuvenate themselves by picking rather young candidates who have already got some political experience.

Nevertheless, more organizational efforts and some fundamental reforms are necessary to widen the scope of democratic representation and to enhance its quality in Lithuania. The following recommendations stem from this research.

First, certain changes in the composition of the parliament occur gradually along sociocultural development within the society. Some nudges could be helpful to steer this process in a progressive direction. Wide discussions on descriptive representation with the involvement of representatives of political parties, NGOs, trade unions, universities, and other stakeholders are needed. Meanwhile, political parties should be encouraged to establish intra-party women's, youth, and student gatherings to formulate specific policies, and improve the visibility of these demographic groups. Parties should invest in women and young people as prospective politicians, as well as aim to establish and maintain an inclusive atmosphere within the organization.

Second, legislation introducing quotas for women and youth in electoral lists at local, national, and European levels needs to be placed for comprehensive discussions in the parliament. While not all political forces are likely to prefer such regulation, a gradualist approach may be proposed. For example, minimal quotas could be made compulsory, while more ambitious norms, such as the zipper system, could be encouraged via financial incentives. After all, political parties in Lithuania are mostly funded from the public coffers. Moreover, public campaigns could be launched to educate voters on which parties are offering more balanced candidate lists.

Third, a more radical approach would also require overhauling the electoral system – switching from the current mixed model to a fully proportional one. As this analysis demonstrated, in addition to the distorting effects of party representation (Jastramskis 2019), single-member districts have a systemic bias in electing MPs with the same characteristics – men, of senior age, and similar professional background, i. e. high-grade management and administration. While this reform would need substantial cross-party support, its implementation could both make the parliament more representative and strengthen the whole party system by making parties more coherent and disciplined.

Fourth, both parties and voters tend to value competence and education when picking candidates to represent them in the parliament. Therefore, the core institutions of representative democracy may not be perfectly suitable for directly including people of different socioeconomic backgrounds, other than the upper-service class in the decision-making process. However, democratic innovations such as participatory budgeting, deliberative polls, or citizen assemblies (Česnulaitytė 2020) may be an effective antidote against representative biases of the current system and thus reinvigorate the very democratic order by realising its essential normative appeal – the rule of the people, by the people, and for the people.

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IMPRINT

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Why should one care about the composition of the Seimas?

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Who does (not) have seat in the Lithuanian parliament?

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What should be done?

The proportion of female and young MPs should be increased through electoral quotas, public education, and mobilization at the party level. Abolishing single-mandate districts would also contribute to a more diverse parliament. To balance the parliamentary overrepresentation of the upper social strata, practices of deliberative democracy should be established.

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