



# The Lithuanian Dream

Bread is enough, we want games



# Authors

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**Dr Dalia Grybauskaitė** is the former President of the Republic of Lithuania (2009-2019). She was the country's first woman President and the only President in Lithuania's post-Soviet history to have served two consecutive terms. Before the election, from 2001 to 2004, she worked as Finance Minister. In 2005, while serving as European Union Commissioner for Financial Programming and Budgets, she was elected Commissioner of the Year. D. Grybauskaitė holds a bachelor's degree in Political Economy, a Doctorate in Economics, and a Doctor of Humane Letters, *Honoris Causa*, at Georgetown University. She remains widely popular with the Lithuanian public, continuing to speak on women's leadership, gender equality, sustainable development, economic transparency and accountability, energy security, transatlantic relations, and geopolitical security.

**Dr Reinhard Krumm** headed the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Regional Office for the Baltic States (Riga) from 2021 to 2024. From 1991 to 1998 he worked as a journalist in Eastern Europe, as the Baltic correspondent for Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa) in Riga and later serving as the Moscow correspondent of *Der Spiegel* magazine. For the FES he directed the offices in the Russian Federation (Moscow), the Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe (Vienna) and the Department of Central and Eastern Europe (Berlin).

# **The Lithuanian Dream**

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# Introduction

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Do the people of Lithuania have a dream? A dream for their personal life, for their country? And are they able to follow that dream? Is it the state that fulfills the citizen's dream, or are the citizens the ones responsible for making their own dreams come true? And are there different dreams among the elderly and the youth? Is there a common Lithuanian dream, or does each region have its own?

These are the main questions the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) wanted to ask the Lithuanian, but also, in two other studies, the Estonian and Latvian people. To find answers, the FES worked together with the Estonian polling institute Turu/Uuringute, the Latvian polling Institute SKDS and the Lithuanian polling institute Baltijos Tyrimai. Over three workshops and with the support of focus groups it was possible to draft a common questionnaire for the three Baltic states, consolidating the core questions and adding specific questions for each country.

The time for such an endeavour is right. Lithuania has been a member of the EU and NATO for 20 years. Despite the Russian military aggression against Ukraine, Lithuanians feel secure in the knowledge that they are an integral part of both organisations. The Baltic countries no longer want to be referred to as former Soviet republics. And rightly so. More than thirty years after its second independence (the first period of independence was from 1918 to 1940), Lithuania is a stable, democratic and prosperous country.

But what is next? What are people aiming for, what is the guiding motive for the next decades? Their dream could be close to the American Dream, which came into existence only about a hundred years ago. This conjures up the good life: freedom, stability and the opportunity for everyone to move up – financially and socially. And this ideal still remains very popular around the world. If you type the words 'American' and 'dream' into Google, you get over 1 billion hits.

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But that dream is also about the understanding that Americans did not inherit their nation but earned it. A new state, new citizens, new goals. This can be said to a certain extent about Lithuania, as well. The citizens actively worked to make independence happen, in 1990/1991 as well as in 1918. It is a nation and people that completely set itself apart from the Russian Empire, and certainly different than the Soviet Union.

And now it is up to the Lithuanians themselves to create a guiding compass for their future. A dream alone is clearly not enough, but it helps. It is a vision, a description of the national character and a way to present itself abroad. These are also some of the reasons that the American Dream was born. But whereas that dream was articulated in the depths of the Great Depression of the 1930s, Lithuanians can define their dream in an economically less critical time – despite sharing a border with a currently nightmarish neighbour, the Russian federation.

**Dr Reinhard Krumm**

Director of the FES Regional Office for the Baltic States

# Foreword

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The ultimate and perpetual prerequisites of Lithuania's survival are freedom and everything that ensures it may continue in a clear and continuous direction, while preventing loss of vigilance and empowering the state and the nation to grow and become stronger.

Thirty-five years ago, our nation lived with one thought only, the idea of regaining its independence. Finally, we regained it for the second time in the twentieth century. The re-establishment of Lithuanian independence allowed us to set our own goals: membership in NATO and the European Union. We duly achieved them through joint effort and will. But then we got to thinking: what's next?

Geopolitical circumstances clearly dictate the answer: freedom and its consolidation. The periods when we lost it were too long and truly overwhelming. The brutality of the occupation, the tens of thousands deported to and subsequently dead in Siberia, the partisan resistance movement that lasted for an entire decade after the Second World War ended – the memory of all that is much too vivid. The collective experience embedded in our genes does not allow us to think about Lithuania's future without also taking into account such fundamental concepts as freedom of the nation and state autonomy.

Both times that we regained our independence were miraculous. These are proud pages in Lithuanian history, and they impressed the world with the strength of our nation and the diplomatic foresight of our ancestors, both when this state was being created and when we strove to preserve it.

This year we commemorate the 120th anniversary since the four-decade-long ban on the Lithuanian press in Latin characters was ended. The ban was countered by the exceptional actions of a thousand book smugglers who

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brought in banned Lithuanian publications. These were ordinary people of extraordinary spirit, just like the tens of thousands of volunteers who stood up to defend the state's independence a century ago. It was patriotism in its truest sense.

We cannot afford to lose our language, our identity or our country. That is why the Euro-Atlantic Partnership is so important to us. It is a body in which the voice of such a small country as Lithuania – and its defence – are just as significant as those of any other member.

Russia's war against independent Ukraine has rallied all freedom-loving people. However, it is obvious that we will have to work incessantly to make sure that animosity, fatigue or selfish interests do not arise in the face of the aggressor to threaten our unity, and so that solidarity takes increasingly clear forms: defensive, economic and cultural. We need to invest a lot in making progress across the board, deepen political wisdom and strive to make freedom in both Lithuania and Europe overall a shared responsibility grounded in reclaimed ideals.

We have a clear idea of our state. It is indisputable. It is better defended than ever. The long decades of freedom have laid a solid foundation for this.

**Dr Dalia Grybauskaitė**

President of the Republic of Lithuania 2009-2019

# The Lithuanian Dream

## Bread is enough, we want games

**Ovidijus Lukošius**

Editor-in-Chief at *IQ*

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At a conference convened by *IQ Magazine* in Vilnius, Estonian philosopher and writer Rein Raud, a professor at Helsinki University, remarked that Lithuanian society had a big problem: it no longer had a dream. This was after the Global Financial Crisis of 2008–2009, which had hit Lithuania and other Baltic States especially hard, but well ahead of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which was unimaginable at the time. Under discussion were the key Lithuanian and global events of the coming year.

The Estonian professor proceeded to present his arguments to a dumbfounded audience. Having fought for its freedom, restored state independence and attained European Union (EU) and NATO membership – which boosted economic development and guaranteed its security (or at least created a sense or illusion of it) – Lithuanian society no longer had a big dream and a shared goal, said Raud. There were no new causes, he explained, that everyone or at least the majority or perhaps the national elite could get behind and strive towards. There wasn't even a clear sense of the direction we wanted to take.

While one might challenge Professor Raud's reasoning, it is nonetheless true that, at the

time, Lithuania, like its two Baltic sisters, seemed to be well on its way to becoming a quiet, boring and affluent country, having lost the fervour and energy that had propelled it forward since Sajūdis and through the wild 1990s. Soviet and post-Soviet society had been transformed into something more Western, as a completely different set of behaviours gained wide acceptance and took precedence over those more familiar from the period of Soviet occupation.

Once someone's dream comes true and they don't have a new one to pursue, they risk getting stuck in the present and failing to address and thus not solving persistent social issues. In this instance there was also the danger of not shaking off the last vestiges of Soviet thinking, getting caught in the average income trap, forever remaining in a state of latent transformation, and never getting to 'live like they do in Sweden'.

Indeed, 'living like they do in Sweden' was also a dream Lithuanians cherished during the National Revival and the first years of independence. Newly emerging political leaders had to come up with an idea or goal that would be attractive to Lithuanians. In those days, the EU seemed far too distant



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and vague a prospect, which the awakening nation knew little about, and truth be told the very notion of a 'Union' sounded rather threatening after decades under Soviet rule. The avowedly neutral Sweden, on the other hand, which was not yet part of the EU, a country on the other side of the Baltic in whose direction Lithuanian holidaymakers had longingly cast their gaze from behind the Iron Curtain, quietly dreaming about living in freedom and justice, was a long-cherished dream object.

But this dream, too, has come true, in a way. Once every few years, in the March issue of *IQ Magazine*, we publish an index titled 'When will we catch up with Sweden?' Assessing certain economic and social indicators, we initially compared Sweden with Lithuania and other post-Soviet countries, but eventually the gap between the Baltic States, on the one hand, and Belarus, Ukraine, the South Caucasus, and Central Asian countries, on the other, became so large that such comparisons lost all meaning. In response we later opted for a selection of EU states, including those that once belonged to the so-called Socialist Bloc and Southern European countries. Of course, Lithuania has not caught up with present-day Sweden and perhaps never will.

But at least the level Sweden had attained in the 1990s, which once seemed such a sweet but unattainable dream, has already been surpassed.

According to a *Financial Times* article dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of the 2004 EU enlargement: 'Almost all of the 10 countries have doubled their GDP per capita in the past two decades, boosted by the influx of investment and surge in exports. Lithuania stands out as the star performer, more than trebling its GDP per capita in the past two decades.'

Thus, even the boldest of dreams are coming true. Lithuania has indeed transformed itself into a country in which dreams that once seemed pure fantasy have now become reality.

But returning to the question posed at the beginning of this article, does Lithuania still have a dream? If so, what would it be? We will try to answer it with the help of a survey conducted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, along with the Baltijos Tyrimai market and public opinion research company, in the three Baltic States. Between 15 and 25 March 2024, they surveyed 1,103 Lithuanian residents aged 18–74.

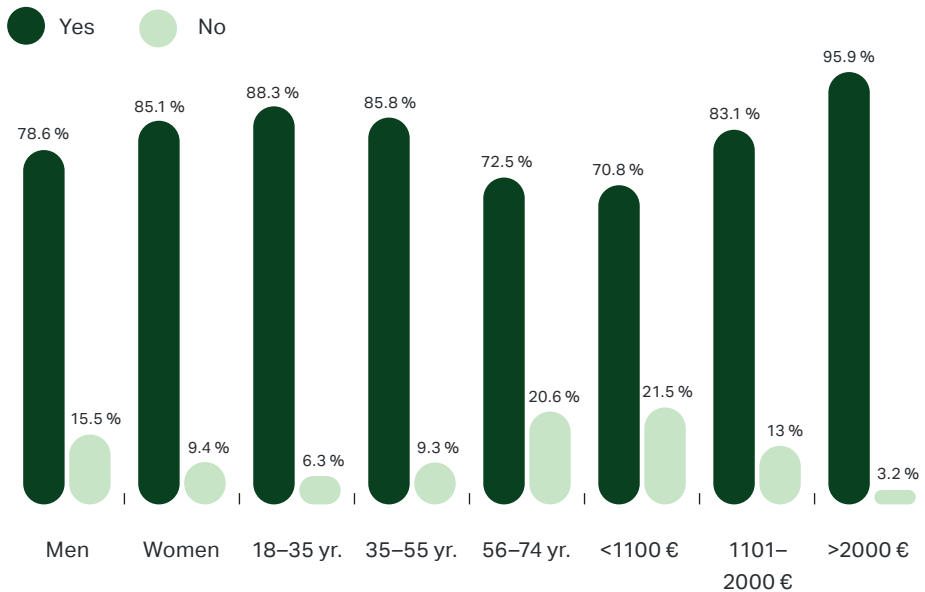


# Top three wishes

Evidently, Lithuanians do continue to dream. Eight in 10 (82%) survey respondents reported having a dream or at least a wish. More dreamers were found among women (85.1%) than among men (78.6%), and among young people (88.3% in the group aged 18–35) than among the older population (72.5% in the group aged 56–74).

The more well-to-do (95.9% in the group with household incomes exceeding €2,000) also professed having a dream more often than those earning less (70.8% in the group with household incomes below €1,100). Residents of Lithuania’s major cities (87.4%) also tend to dream more than those in towns (81.8%) or rural areas (74.9%).

## Do you have a dream or wish?

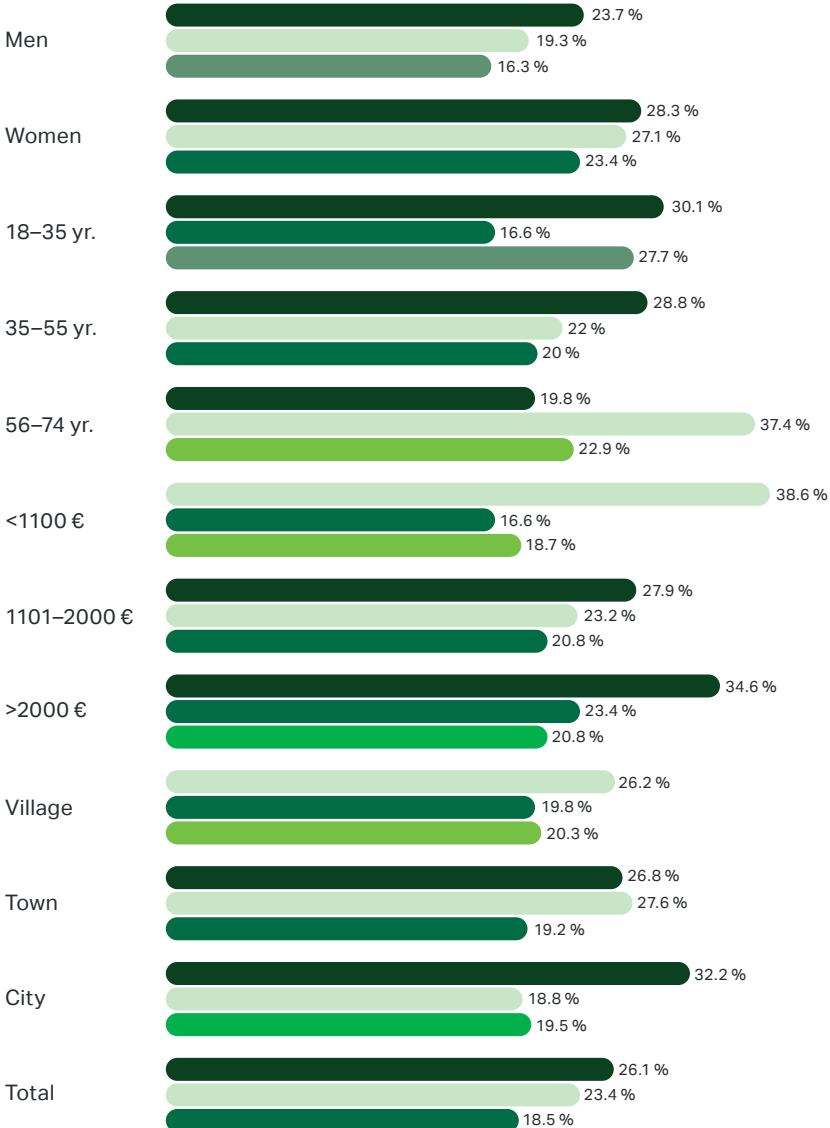


Asked to name their top three wishes, women (28.3%) and men (23.7%) most frequently mentioned travel, whether it be travelling around the world, seeing exotic places or having exciting vacations. The second most popular wish was for them and their family to remain in good health. This dream ranked highest among the

older population (37.4%), second only to travel among the middle-aged (22% in the group aged 36–55). However, it ranked significantly lower among younger people (7.8%), who prioritised owning a car and an apartment, raising well-behaved children and not having to count every penny when deciding what to buy.

# What are your three biggest wishes?

- Travel around the world, visit exotic countries, go on amazing leisure trip
- Good health for me and my loved ones
- Good children
- To live in wealth and not count every penny
- Have a well-paid job, a successful career
- Peace, live without war



A considerable proportion of survey respondents (20.1%) responded to the question about their top three wishes by indicating 'don't know' or left it unanswered. Men, as well as persons on lower incomes and living in rural areas, tended to respond this way more frequently than others. However, only 0.6% of people categorically denied having any wishes or dreams.

The third most common wish (18.5%) was raising well-behaved children, which was important for all age groups but far more prevalent among women (23.4%) than men (13.1%).

## From war to climate change

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Lithuanians' dreams have also been affected by geopolitical tensions. Peace and life without war ranked fifth on the list of priorities, with the older age group assigning especially high significance to it (22.9%, second only to good health). This is most likely attributable to the experience of the Soviet occupation, even though the vast majority of Lithuania's present-day residents were born after the Second World War and know about the post-war repression and the armed resistance that continued until the mid-1950s mostly from history books and their parents' and grandparents' stories. However, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, when young Lithuanians were forcibly conscripted into the Soviet army, the blood-soaked events of January 1991, and the Medininkai massacre in July of the same year are a direct, dramatic and deeply ingrained experience among those middle-aged and older.

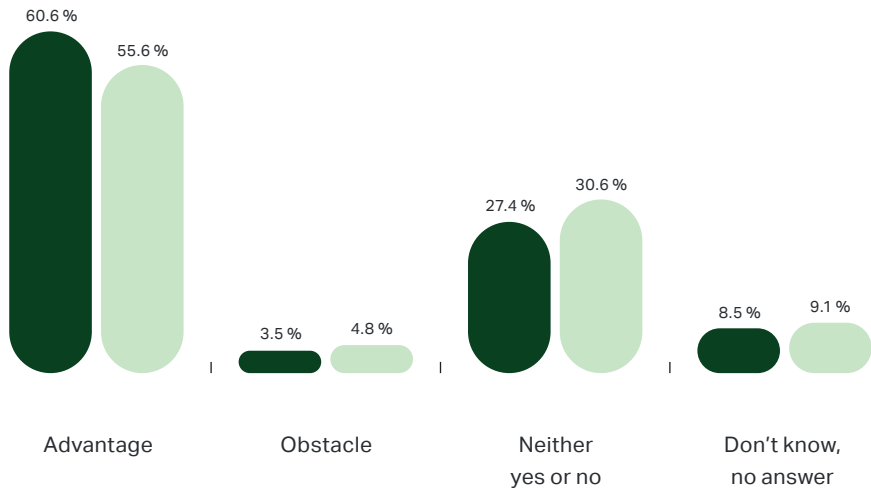
Membership in NATO and the EU, which Lithuania and the other Baltic States secured in the spring of 2004, is often seen

as a successful utilisation of the window of opportunity to shake off Russian influence and attain security guarantees. Viewed from a long-term perspective, this window was narrow indeed: starting with the 2008 invasion of Georgia, Vladimir Putin's regime became open and unabashed about its claims over the entire post-Soviet area.

Lithuanians appreciate this and are the strongest supporters of the EU in the entire bloc. Their trust in the Union has risen from 50% in 2004 to 63% in 2024, according to Eurobarometer. This is confirmed by this Baltijos Tyrimai survey, which also asked respondents whether the EU presents opportunities or threats to making their dreams a reality. The same was asked about NATO, and the respondents' answers demonstrate strong support among Lithuanians for the two alliances.

# Is membership in the European Union and NATO an advantage or an obstacle to realising dreams?

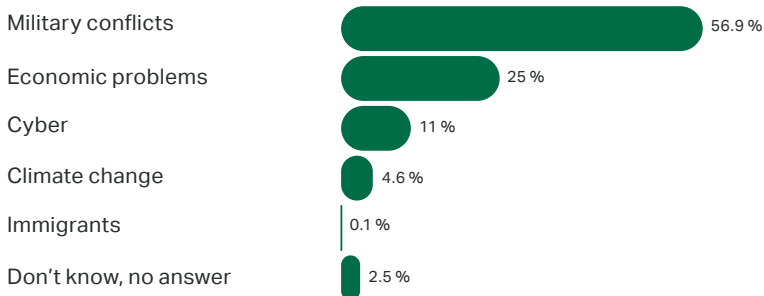
● European Union    ● NATO



EU membership was described as helping Lithuanians to pursue their dreams by 60.6% of respondents, and the figure for NATO was 55.6%. Only 3.5% and 4.8%, respectively, of respondents saw the respective alliances as obstacles, and less than a third remained neutral in both cases. Membership in both NATO and the EU garners more support from men than women and from younger than older respondents, as well as from the well-to-do and those residing in major cities. That said, other demographic groups view the opportunities presented by the EU and NATO to pursue one's wishes and dreams mostly favourably.

The dominant external threat to Lithuania, according to respondents, is war or military conflict (56.9%). Lagging far behind are economic struggles (25%) and cyber-attacks (11%). Across all demographic groups included in the poll, more than half of the respondents cited war as the greatest threat, but this answer came more frequently from women, older people, people on lower incomes, and those living in rural areas.

# What are the biggest external threats?



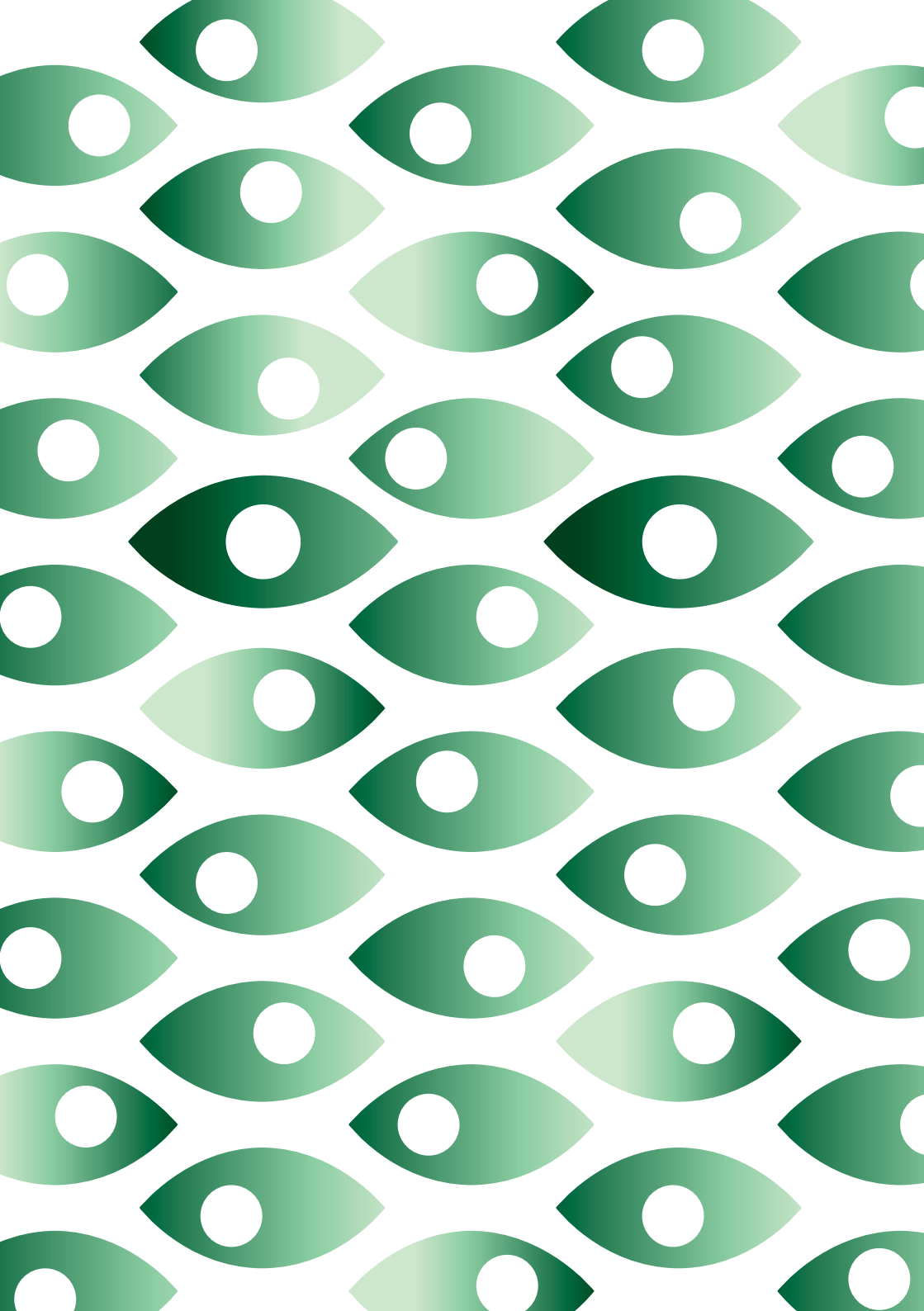
Climate change was seen as the greatest threat by 4.6% of respondents, but there was a notable difference between different generations: 7.4% of the youngest respondents described it in these terms but only 2.7% in the oldest age group did so. This difference between the age groups may be attributable to several factors: warm winters with little to no snow and hot, dry summers seem to clash with older respondents' memories of their childhood and early adulthood, when schools would be closed due to  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  or  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$  temperatures

in winter and it would rain for days on end in July. It would, therefore, seem that opinions are shaped by personal experience. However, the changes in weather brought about by climate change have not been drastic in Lithuania, with no serious consequences, financial losses or tragedies to speak of, and so the problem is not perceived as acute. Young people, on the other hand, view this problem with concern for the future, fearing that it will worsen over the coming decades and impact them directly, not to mention their children.

## Untrustworthy politicians

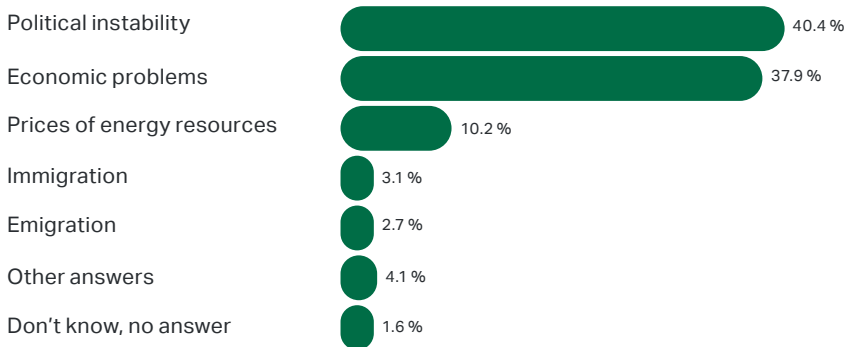
The greatest internal threat, according to respondents, was political instability, which can be attributed primarily to the three elections scheduled for 2024. A total of 40.4% of respondents took this view of political instability, which is a surprisingly high number for Lithuania, which has not experienced any significant political turmoil or social unrest since the restoration of independence. Somewhat more political

instability was experienced in the first decade of independence, but since 2001 governments have been very stable and, with rare exceptions, have served their full terms. Furthermore, transitions of power have been smooth after each election, and the last truly significant political crisis was the impeachment of President Rolandas Paksas in April 2004, when he was removed from office.





# What are the biggest internal threats?



Almost a quarter of respondents were completely dissatisfied with the country's political system, more than half were somewhat dissatisfied, and only just under one-fifth were either fairly or fully satisfied.

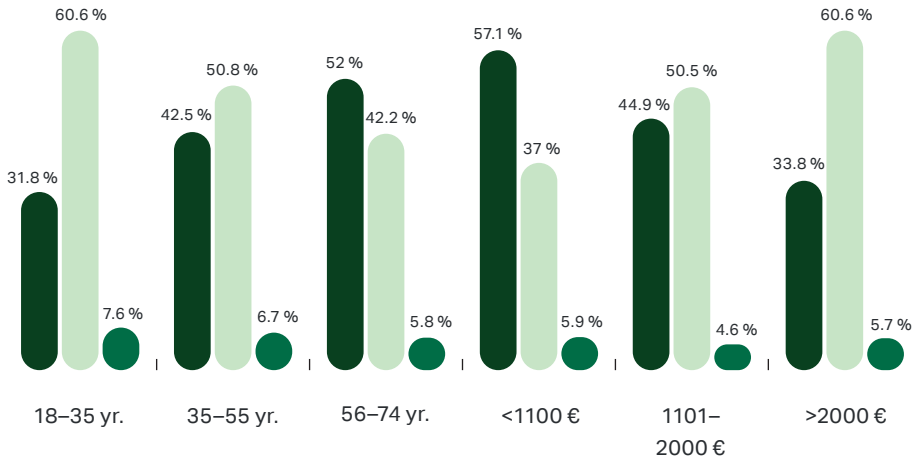
Are Lithuanians fed up with the prevalent bickering in politics and constant fighting between the President and the government, the ruling majority and the opposition in the Seimas? Is political polarisation, which can be observed in many other countries, also increasing in Lithuania? Can it be claimed that Lithuania, still a young democracy, is becoming frustrated with freedom? The answer to this last question is more of a no than a yes. A total of 62.5% of respondents see freedom as the most important value, in the absence of which human life loses meaning. However, almost one-third view material well-being as more important than freedom. This was the position of the oldest respondents, those with the lowest incomes, and those living in mid-sized cities.

There is a fairly pronounced desire for a 'strong hand', a tough political leader who would 'set things straight' and 'take care of everyone'. This view was expressed by

42.8% of respondents. However, more than half believe that political freedom and democracy cannot be surrendered. This attitude is most common among younger respondents, the more well-to-do and residents of major cities. Although coalition governments almost always involve the major traditional parties (the Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats or the Social Democratic Party of Lithuania), the demand for leaders who would 'take care of ordinary people' is high, and when the political pendulum swings left, populist forces and self-proclaimed saviours tend to gain significant political power (for example, the 2016–2020 parliamentary election was ultimately won by the populist, economically left-leaning but socially conservative Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union, leaving the Social Democrats to play only a minor role in the coalition). The need for a strong leader is expressed most strongly by those on lower incomes (57.1%, compared with 33.8% of the well-to-do), those living in rural areas and towns (48% and 46.8% respectively, compared with 36.6% among residents of major cities), and older respondents (52.8%, compared with 31.8% among those in the younger age group).

# Which government model and governance method is more suitable for the country?

- The country needs a strong leader to bring order and take care of the people
- Political freedom and democracy are things that can never be sacrificed
- Don't know, no answer



# Economy: State or private ownership?

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During its three-and-a-half decades of independence, Lithuania has suffered from multiple economic crises. These include the Soviet economic blockade, privatisation and the transition from a planned to a market economy. The 1998 Russian financial crisis also affected Lithuania, whose economy was still dependent on Russia. The euphoria of becoming an EU member was dissipated by the Global Financial Crisis of 2008–2009, which coincided with the overheating of the economy and the bursting of the real estate bubble, which slashed almost 13% from Lithuania's 2009 GDP. This eventually resulted in mass emigration of mostly young people, which in turn precipitated a set of demographic problems down the line. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Lithuania's economic growth was rather negligible and among the most moderate both in the region and the entire EU.

Although middle-aged and older people personally experienced all or most of these crises, they perceived economic threats with less concern (39.5% and 32%, respectively) than the youngest group (43.1%). This is a positive development, indicating that older Lithuanians no longer feel economically vulnerable, and the greater anxiety among younger people may be attributed to increased needs at the beginning of their independent lives, as youth unemployment data and earnings statistics do not indicate any

structural problems. Quite the contrary, greater anxiety while navigating the job market is actually felt by older people, who, after losing their jobs, struggle to find new employment because they lack the qualifications required to meet employers' present-day needs, and age discrimination is widespread. In terms of place of residence and income, an economic threat is perceived most sharply by middle-income respondents and those living in mid-sized cities.

The list of economic challenges should also include high energy costs, mentioned as the greatest threat by one-tenth of respondents. All in all, survey respondents (48.1%) thus perceive economic problems as a very significant internal threat.

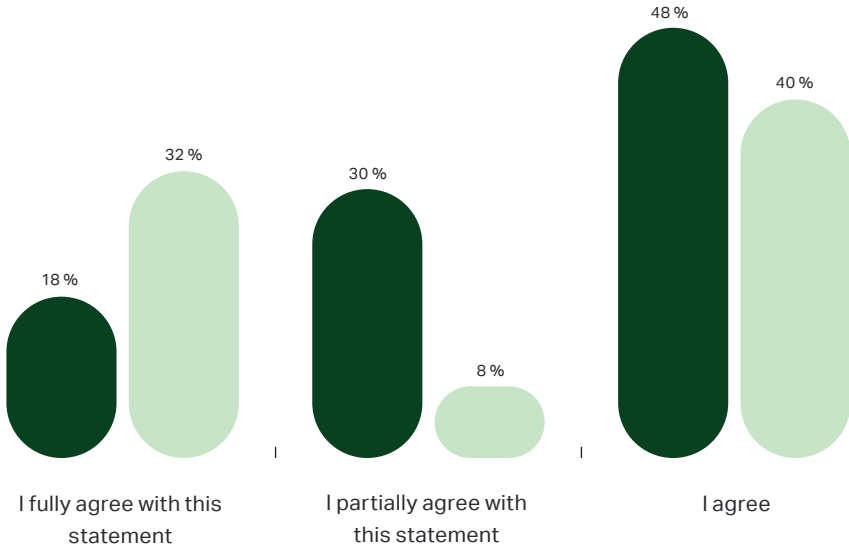
People's views on the relationship between the state and private business may reflect two dividing lines in public attitudes. Some may favour a greater role for the state due to their nostalgia for the Soviet Union, but, as this poll shows, their numbers are relatively small and are likely to decrease. The other dividing line is between the political left and the political right, with one side valuing the state's more active involvement in economic management or regulation and the other convinced that free markets and competition bring the most value to consumers, ensuring the greatest supply and the best price/quality ratio.

The scale is increasingly tipping to the economic right, however. In business and industry, Lithuanians tend to ascribe a greater role to private initiative and private ownership. A total of 18.3% of respondents completely agree and 29.9% somewhat agree with the proposal to extend private ownership. The idea of increasing the role of the state in the economy is somewhat supported by 32.5% and fully supported

by 7.9% of respondents. It may therefore be said that both views are represented by fairly large groups, which in turn sets the stage for certain proposals that have recently come not only from populist forces but also from the Social Democratic Party, which proposed, for example, to establish a national bank and state-run pharmacies. However, a greater proportion of Lithuanians would be against this.

## Which statement do you fully or partially agree with?

- Private ownership of business and industry must be increased
- State ownership of business and industry must be increased



The desire for a greater role of the state in economic activity is not correlated with deep frustration with public, that is, state-provided, services. This frustration may also be linked to the dissatisfaction with politicians and politics itself. In fact, public services and their quality receive more criticism than anything else, with Lithuanians expressing a desire for improvements primarily in health care (64%), social security (32.8%) and education (30.3%). Better health-care services are the top priority across all demographic groups, but especially for the oldest respondents (80.4%). The second priority in the youngest group of respondents is housing prices (42.5%), with better quality of education ranking second among residents of major cities. One in six respondents would like to see a richer cultural life and a cleaner environment. Respondents show little interest in the creation of new jobs (0.1%), which actually reflects the current labour market situation with its shortage of workers, not jobs, and rapidly rising wages.

Lithuanians' economic liberalism is further highlighted by the question of whether they have a positive view of competition. Does competition make people work harder and generate new ideas? Or does it cause harm and shove aside those who are weaker? Almost two-thirds of respondents either fully (24.5%) or partially (39.5%) favour competition. The claim that competition is harmful is fully supported by 8.1% and somewhat supported by 18.8% of respondents.

Should income inequality be reduced through more equitable redistribution, or should income gaps be allowed to keep on widening on the grounds that they reward

initiative and personal effort? Responses to these questions should indicate whether Lithuanian society is more 'European' or 'American'. This poll doesn't give a clear answer, but the scale is tipping towards redistribution of wealth.

More than half of the respondents agreed either fully (22.9%) or somewhat (29.2%) that income should be redistributed more equitably, while more than 42% agreed either fully (12.2%) or somewhat (29.9%) with the suggestion that initiative and personal effort should be rewarded more generously. This latter view garners, most support from the youngest age group, the well-to-do, and those residing in major cities.

Is financial well-being all about hard work, or is it more a matter of luck and personal connections? Both statements receive full agreement from a nearly identical percentage of respondents, 15.4% and 15.9%, respectively. However, those somewhat agreeing with the claim that personal connections and luck are more important than hard work in building a good life outnumber those on the opposite side (34% and 25.9%, respectively). Young people, the most well-to-do, and those residing in major cities tend to show more support for the idea that financial well-being requires hard work. These demographic groups show the most support for the idea that increased well-being can benefit everyone, with a total of 57.6% agreeing either fully or somewhat with this assertion. Almost one-third (29.2%) either fully or somewhat agree with the idea that one can become rich only by exploiting others.



What type of society would you like to live in: one in which social equality is ensured (the preferred option of 48.4% of respondents, mostly the oldest, those living in rural areas, and those earning the least) or one that favours personal liberties (the preferred option of 42.7% of respondents, mostly young people, high earners, and those residing in major cities)? It must be noted, however, that the dichotomy in this question can be challenged, because striving for social equality in democratic states with free-market economies does not entail impinging on personal liberties. Some of the supporters of social justice are likely driven by nostalgia: to some, the Soviet order seemed socially more just, though this was most assuredly not the case, and the standard of living of all social groups was incomparably lower.

Despite their frustration with the public sector, a slight majority of respondents believe that in terms of wages, working conditions, social security and other criteria, the state or municipalities are better employers (51%). Private-sector employers are the preferred choice of 35.6% of respondents. Private-sector employers are favoured over the public sector only by the most well-to-do and those residing in major cities, with sympathies evenly split in the youngest age group. This may be attributable to the very different working culture and opportunities available in the private sector, where companies differ in size, origin of capital and opportunities for profit sharing. There were significant

differences with regard to municipalities, too. The public sector is the largest employer in the smallest municipalities, where businesses struggle to operate efficiently and to generate high-added value. This is why public-sector jobs offer more stability, social security and higher wages.

What fields would respondents prefer to work in or improve at? IT, foreign languages and professional development in their current job were each mentioned by more than one-quarter of respondents. Almost one-third of the oldest respondents didn't answer the question or didn't know, with figures of 3.9% and 6.7% among young people and the middle-aged, respectively. Lifelong learning is an area in which the state should take more initiative, as rapid technological progress (artificial intelligence), in particular, may force a large proportion of labour market participants to learn new skills. The need to continuously refresh their IT skills is of the highest importance to the youngest and middle-aged respondents and second to learning foreign languages among the oldest respondents.

Respondents find increasing social well-being as important as fostering economic growth, with both priorities garnering similar support (45% and 46.9%, respectively). Industrial development is prioritised by 41.2%, IT by 38.3%, and tourism by 25.6% of respondents.

# Immigration: Threats and opportunities

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As already mentioned, in the early 2010s, Lithuania experienced massive emigration, which 2.7% of respondents regard as the greatest internal threat. This topic also appears among the Lithuanians' top three wishes, though not prominently 1.6% dream of moving to another country, and an equal number wish that their children or grandchildren would move back to Lithuania.

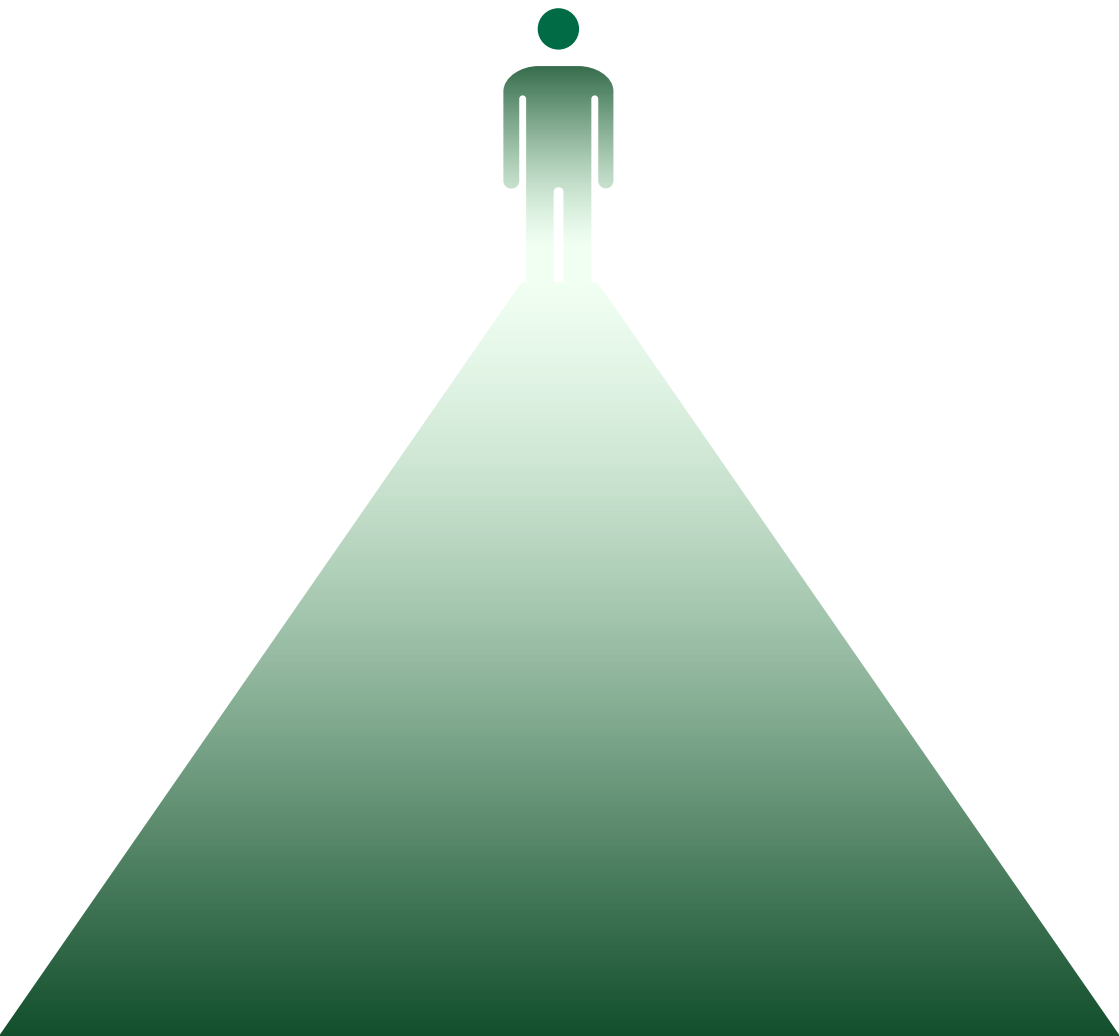
A much more recent challenge is immigration, which Lithuanians have started to encounter only in the past few years. Tens of thousands of Belarusians moved to Lithuania after the 2020 crackdown on protests in their home country, and then Lithuania experienced a wave of war refugees from Ukraine, supplemented by Russians fleeing the Kremlin regime's persecution. Another source of tensions is the organised flow of migrants mostly from Africa and the Middle East, coming via Belarus.

Immigration is perceived as the main internal threat by 3.1% of respondents, most frequently mentioned by those residing in major cities (5.1%), the highest earners (4.1%), and the youngest respondents (4.7%).

Why are residents of major cities the most anxious about immigration? It is because major cities, especially Vilnius, attract the highest influx of migrants seeking greater economic opportunities and better Russian-language education for their children. Lithuania was the most ethnically homogenous of the Baltic States, with ethnic Lithuanians comprising more than 80% of the population. The largest ethnic minority were Poles from the Vilnius region, who had been living there prior to the Soviet occupation. The number of Russian speakers further decreased after the restoration of independence, with the majority of those who remained successfully integrating and the Russian language largely disappearing from public life, even in Vilnius. However, it has reemerged with the new wave of migrants.

According to Vilnius City Municipality, more than 13% of Vilnius residents in 2024 were born outside Lithuania. Out of more than 636,000 Vilnius residents, 41,000 were born in Belarus, 24,000 in Ukraine, almost 21,000 in Russia, and 8,400 in the post-Soviet South Caucasus and Central Asian countries. This has caused an increase in rents (which are of particular importance to the youngest age group and may justify the





relatively high anxiety over immigration). Moreover, immigrants have filled the vacancies in the retail and service sectors, which has made them 'more visible'. That said, this has not resulted in economic tensions. Quite the contrary. Immigrants helped to meet existing demand by taking the jobs that Lithuanians themselves are increasingly less willing to do. Additionally, the newcomers themselves helped to grow the economy. According to economists' calculations, they increased GDP growth at least by two percentage points. Only a very small percentage (0.1%) of respondents viewed immigration as the greatest external threat rather than an internal one. This is probably attributable to decreased tensions on the border with Belarus and the implementation of the pushback policy, which achieved its intended effects but was problematic from a human rights point of view.

In one way or another, the topic of immigration is becoming increasingly present in public life. Does this mean that there is a growing public appetite for anti-immigration policies? Or is there, instead, simply a need for government and other institutions to do more to integrate newcomers? Right-wing populist parties will try to exploit this during the upcoming election. Scare tactics regarding the migration crisis in Europe have been used since as far back as the 2012 parliamentary election (with the Labour Party and its then-leader Valentinas Mazuronis as the prime example), but the crisis was largely unfelt in Lithuania, and the populists did not reap any political dividends from this rhetoric. Anti-immigration rhetoric is nevertheless not absent from this presidential election, and radical nationalist

forces may seriously attempt to escalate the issue in the parliamentary election this autumn. However, ethnic and national tensions appear at the very bottom of the list of internal threats, mentioned by only 1.3% of respondents, primarily from the youngest age group, the most well-to-do, and residents of major cities.

A considerably larger number of respondents (61.7%) believe that Lithuania should be a nation-state to the greatest possible extent, with a primary emphasis on the Lithuanian language and culture. This position is supported by more than half of the respondents in every demographic group. The idea that an ideal Lithuania should be a multi-national state with other languages and cultures co-existing alongside the Lithuanian language and culture was supported by 32.5% of respondents. This position garnered the most support among the youngest age group, the most well-to-do, and residents of major cities.

# Lithuania has never had it so good

When was Lithuania's golden age? While few, if any, would name any period of Lithuania's occupation as its golden age, both the still-romanticised era of the Grand

Duchy of Lithuania and interwar Lithuania compete for the title, albeit not against present-day Lithuania.

## Which historical period would describe the ideal Lithuania you would like to live in?

None of these time periods were good  
11 %

Don't know, no answer  
19 %

5 %  
Grand Duchy of Lithuania

5 %  
Republic of Lithuania (1918–1940)

12 %  
Independent Lithuania since 1990 until EU membership



A total of 42.6% of respondents voted for today's Lithuania, agreeing that the current period of development, which began with its 2004 EU accession, represents the era of the ideal Lithuania. In the group of the highest earners, this position was supported by more than half of the respondents (55%). Residents of major cities and rural areas take a similar view (40% each), with residents of mid-sized cities and towns supporting the idea more strongly (49%). What could explain this difference? One candidate explanation could be the greater visibility of 'hard' EU investments in mid-sized cities and towns: revitalised public spaces, new swimming pools, fountains and other infrastructure, as well as more successful renovations of residential buildings than in major cities.

A total of 12.3% of respondents, possibly including quite a few euro-sceptics, wouldn't need to travel far back in time to reach their ideal Lithuania: they view the period between 1991 and EU accession as Lithuania's golden age.

Third on the list is the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. While residents of the other two Baltic States often jest about Lithuania's 'imperial' past or perhaps about Lithuanians' unreserved pride in the country's distant

history, 5.1% of respondents regard this period as Lithuania's golden age, only slightly surpassing those who favour independent interwar Lithuania (4.9%). The period of Soviet occupation is preferred by 3.1% (6.7% in the oldest age group), the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth by 1.5%, and the period of the Tsarist Russian occupation by 1.3% of respondents.

One-tenth viewed all these periods as bad, and one-fifth didn't know or didn't answer.

What is Lithuania famous for around the world? The most popular answers were sports (42.4% of respondents), science (37.2%), and culture (23.1%). Men and women expressed slightly different priorities here, with men preferring sports and women favouring science.

How do Lithuanians see their relationship to the outside world? The majority identify as Lithuanian residents (45.3%), with 27.1% viewing themselves as autonomous individuals and 8.6% as EU citizens. Those with the closest ties to their local communities comprise 7.2% of respondents. A total of 4.9% of respondents view themselves as citizens of the world and 3.4% as citizens of the Baltics.

# You may say I'm a dreamer...

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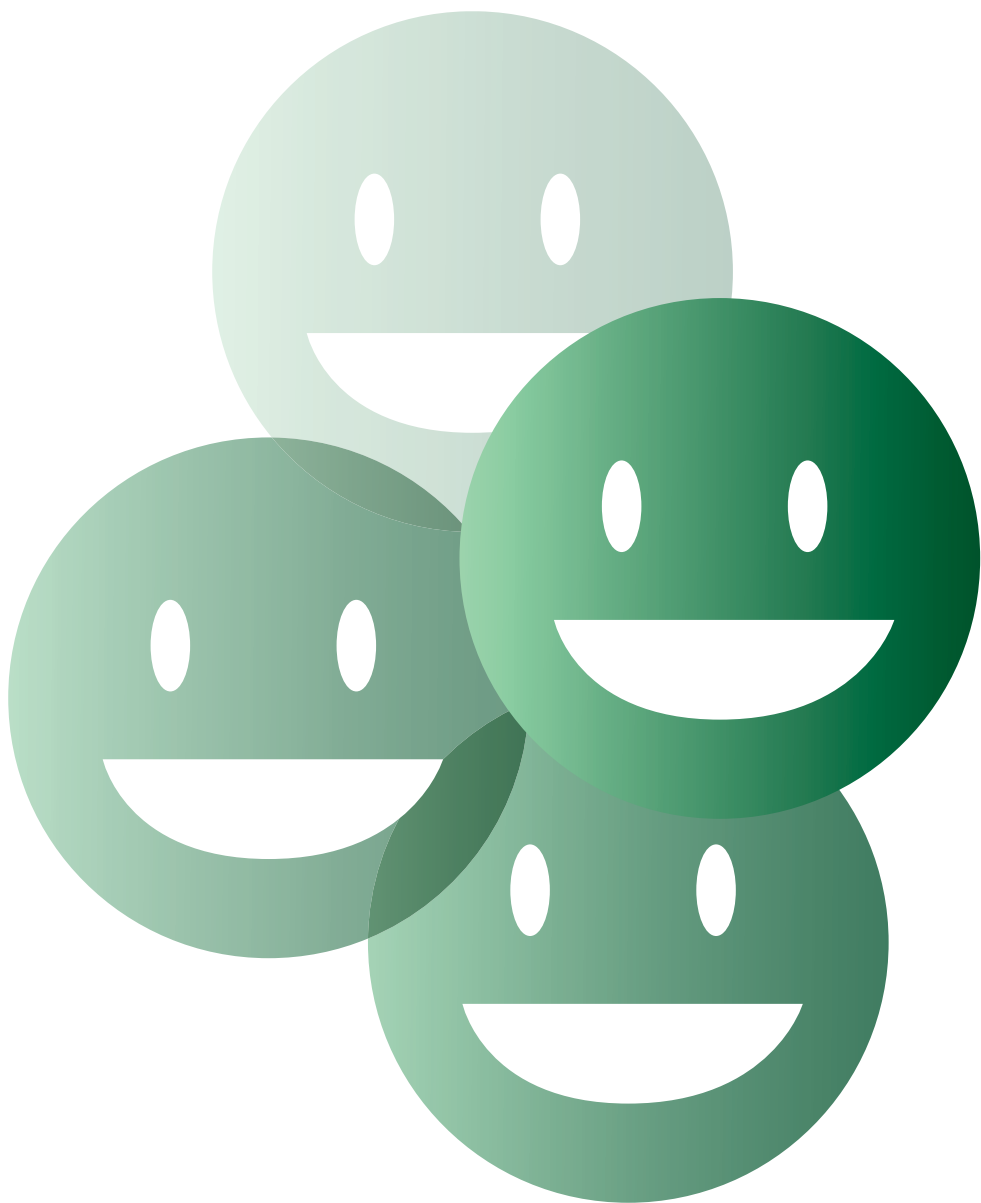
A smile is a rare sight on the streets of Lithuania; faces are as grim as the autumn sky; Lithuanians are supposed to be unhappy and lead Europe in alcohol consumption and suicide rates. Is this portrayal entirely true, or is it little more than a set of stereotypes based on a selective interpretation of facts?

In the World Happiness Report, published by the United Nations in March 2024, Lithuania ranked a respectable nineteenth out of 143. This marks huge progress over the past decade, given Lithuania's previous 71st place. Moreover, Lithuania surpassed not only the other two Baltic states but also countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States, all of which were popular destinations for those seeking a better life throughout various periods of Lithuania's history. However, the greatest resonance – if not a wave of happiness in its own right – was caused by another finding of this index, namely that Lithuanian young people are the happiest in the world.

The present poll by Baltijos Tyrimai confirms that Lithuania's population is quite happy. Only 0.5% of respondents view themselves as completely unhappy, with 17.8% indicating they aren't very happy. Although only 10.3% are completely happy, as many as two-thirds (66.8%) admit to being quite happy. Lithuanian young people are very happy indeed: 90% of respondents in the 18–35 age group said they are happy or quite happy. The figure is 10% lower in the middle-aged group and lower by a further 11% among the oldest respondents.

This poll also goes against the popular saying that money can't buy happiness. A total of 35.7% of those receiving the lowest incomes indicated they weren't very happy, compared with 17.7% among those earning mid-level incomes and 7.9% among the highest earners. Very happy people comprise 17.2% of the highest earners, compared with 6.7–7% in the other two groups. There are twice as many happy people (14.3%) among residents of major cities, but the proportions of quite happy people are similar, irrespective of the size of cities or towns and whether people live in rural areas.

The most intriguing question thus why: What makes Lithuania's young people so happy and even the happiest in the world? Most of them, just like the rest of Lithuania, have continuously experienced improving material well-being and haven't suffered dramatic crises (the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was less severe for young people and young families). Lithuania doesn't really have a youth unemployment problem, which is rather pronounced in Southern European countries. The country's labour market actively welcomes young professionals, fostering a palpable 'cult of youth' where priority is given to young individuals for well-compensated positions, particularly in the private sector. According to Swedbank data, 36% of Lithuania's young people earn salaries exceeding the country's average. While the quality of education in Lithuania is drawing increasing criticism (which gives some hope that the problem will be properly addressed in the near future), it is nonetheless true that higher education is widely accessible – it is



either free or incomparably less expensive than, say, in the US, where young people have to commit themselves to long-term financial obligations. Even though real estate prices in Lithuania have grown faster than in most other EU countries over the past two decades, the concurrent rapid increase in wages has empowered young families to purchase their own homes.

The material well-being of people in the older age group has improved considerably, largely because of the inclusion of a generation that came of age during the early years of independence. They were thus able to adapt to changing conditions and seize opportunities presented by privatisation and the transition to a free market economy. This demographic group has accumulated quite a lot of wealth by Lithuanian standards, despite the fact that their pensions, albeit increasing quite rapidly, still lag behind those in Western Europe. Compared with long-standing EU members, Lithuania's life expectancy and healthy life years are quite short, which decrease happiness in the older age group.

Another important component of happiness is the meaning of life. Among poll respondents, only 0.8% view their lives as utterly meaningless and one-tenth as quite meaningless. A total of 27.4% say their life is meaningful, with 53.8% of respondents viewing it as quite meaningful. Men and women gave similar answers, with young people, those earning mid-level incomes, and residents of major cities seeing their lives as meaningful more frequently than any other demographic group.

Some 16.4% were completely satisfied with their lives; 67.6% somewhat satisfied; 13.5% somewhat dissatisfied; and only 0.7% of respondents completely dissatisfied.

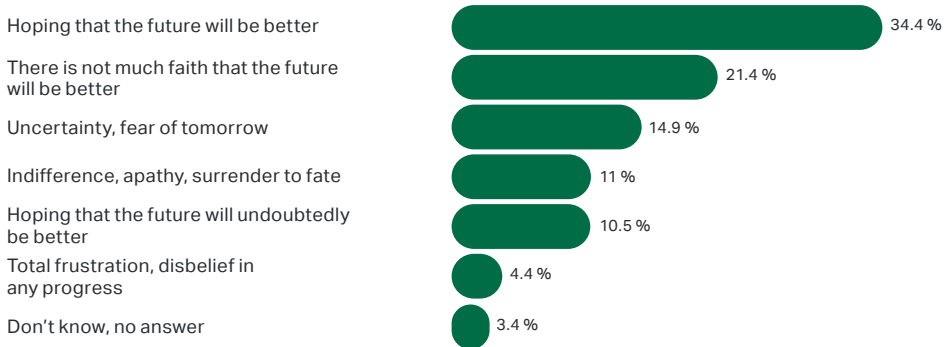
One in twenty respondents was completely satisfied with the standard of living in Lithuania, with the highest figures observed among women, middle-aged people, those earning lower incomes, and residents of rural areas. One-half of the respondents were quite satisfied with the standard of living in Lithuania, with high earners clearly leading other demographic groups in this respect.

A total of 47% of respondents from the oldest age group were either quite or completely dissatisfied with their own health, which may explain their lower level of happiness.

Security (low crime, public safety) is identified as one of Lithuania's biggest advantages, with three-fourths of respondents feeling safe or quite safe. However, 3% of respondents feel utterly unsafe, and 17% admit feeling quite unsafe. Poll results do not detail the type of unsafety in question (bullying, domestic violence, persecution on the grounds of sexual orientation, financial situation), which makes it difficult to draw any general conclusions. The number of women who feel unsafe is higher than that of men, with those living in rural areas feeling considerably more unsafe than any other demographic group.

One of the clearest sociological trends in Lithuania is a noticeably more positive view of people's own well-being than that of others. Respondents were asked to assess Lithuanians' overall view of the future. Only one-tenth of respondents thought it would be significantly more positive than theirs, with one-third perceiving it as somewhat more positive than theirs. However, 4.4% of respondents feel disappointed with the future, and nearly 15% feel uncertainty and fear of what tomorrow may bring.

# How would you describe the popular mood in the country? Which statement describes it best?



The current mood in the broader society is considered optimistic by 44.9% and pessimistic by nearly one-fifth of respondents. The sternest pessimists are men, people

earning low incomes, and those living in rural areas. Optimists are found most frequently among young people, the highest earners, and those residing in major cities.

## No one but me?

The year 2024 may be dubbed the year of political promises, with as many as three sets of elections taking place: presidential, parliamentary, and for the European Parliament. However, Lithuanians tend to view their happiness and dreams as more reliant on personal effort rather on the actions of the state.

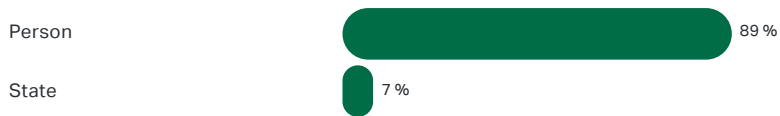
'Me personally' was the answer 52.5% of respondents gave to the question of who is responsible for their dreams coming true. Another 36.6% indicated that responsibility

lies more with themselves than with the state, with 5.7% expressing the opposite view and 0.8% placing responsibility squarely with the state. This indicates an interesting transformation of a post-Soviet society, and explaining its causes would require more data on why the role of the state appears to have become so insignificant in enabling people to attain personal well-being.

If their wishes require a lot of money or are otherwise related to material well-being, the main means of fulfilling them, according to



# Who is responsible for the dream to come true?



many respondents, is a well-compensated job and successful career, with a desire for a good job (27.7%) ranking second to travel among the youngest respondents. However, the number of people dreaming of starting their own business is significantly lower, amounting to 3.5% on average across different demographic groups. The entrepreneurial spirit is strongest among young people (6%) and the most well-to-do (6.8%), but not absent among those living in rural areas, either (4.3%, which is the highest number in the place of residence category).

When asked about action plans to make dreams happen, more than half of respondents said they have a step-by-step plan and were following it, with 5% hoping for help from their family and friends. But not everyone is quite as rational, with one-third hoping for good luck or a miracle, and slightly more than one-tenth waiting for God to step in.

Lithuanians are generally quite self-assured. Most respondents indicated they have either already achieved their goals or are confident they will be able to do so. Almost one-third said they were living at least as well as others, and another third believe they will get there eventually. Many said they either have an interesting job or will land one in the future (each stated by a third of respondents). More than one-third said they are able to do what they want and like, while 40% were convinced they will be able to do so eventually. That said,

only 9.7% indicated they had a prestigious job, with 29% expecting to land one in the future and one-third not (or no longer) considering it an important life goal. One-third said they had received a high-quality education, although one-quarter indicated they had not. Although the biggest dream among Lithuanians is travel, only seven in 100 said they were able to achieve it, although almost half of respondents were convinced they will manage to visit multiple countries. One in six respondents overall and almost one in three from the oldest age group said they have not been able to travel and no longer consider it a goal.

A total of 2.1% of respondents indicated they had achieved their goal of becoming rich, with the highest proportion (paradoxically) among those earning the lowest incomes (3.7%), older people (2.9%), and residents of major cities (2.5%). More than one-fifth of respondents hope to become rich, although 30% are doubtful they will and 40% certain they won't. A total of 1.4% of respondents view themselves as celebrities, and another 12.3% hope to become one. Two-thirds said they don't hope or want to become famous. A total of 3.6% indicated they've reached the peak of their professional career, with one-fifth still hoping to get there. More than half of the respondents either do not expect that or are no longer trying to achieve it.

# In lieu of a conclusion

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A society of optimistic, self-assured people who also take care of others, no longer worry about their basic needs, and dream mainly of travelling, having interesting jobs and raising well-adjusted children – what a truly positive picture of Lithuania, attesting to the fact that its society has been able not only to recover from the Soviet occupation but also to make breathtaking progress. Crucially, for a large portion of society this description is a result of self-reflection rather than external assessment, even if based on objective data. A positive view of the present may be linked to the fact that more than half of the respondents view war or military conflict as the greatest external threat. We often realise we something is dear to us only after it's gone or when faced with the risk of losing it.

# Research Design

## Technical characteristics of the survey

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**Population:** population of the Republic of Lithuania, aged 18-74 years.

**Sample size:** national representative sample of 1013 respondents was designed for this study with  $\pm 3$  % margin of error at a 95% confidence interval. The sample for this study represents the population of the Republic of Lithuania aged 18-74 from all geographical regions of Lithuania. The sample was created using statistical data provided by the State Data Agency on Lithuanian population. Response rate: 64%.

**Sampling methods:** proportional stratified multi-staged probabilistic sample. The data collection was carried out using face-to-face interviews at respondents' homes. For the sampling, the random route method was used and respondent selected using the last – birthday method. In order to ensure national coverage, a PPS sample of 1013 respondents was established. The data of the State Data Agency were used as a basis for weighting. Data were weighted using such variables as gender, age and type of the settlement.

**Time of survey:** The data for this study was collected from 15 to 25 March, 2024.

**For access to the entire dataset,** please contact Toms Zariņš:  
[toms.zarins@fes.de](mailto:toms.zarins@fes.de)

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Jolanta Steikūnaitė-Babarskė was responsible for Lithuania (FES Lithuania).

Toms Zariņš and Kristis Šukevičs were responsible for Latvia (FES Latvia).

Ülle Kesküla as well as Toms Zariņš and Kristis Šukevičs were responsible for Estonia (FES Estonia and Latvia).

Dr Reinhard Krumm was the initiator of this project and was responsible for the final editing of the publications for all three Baltic states.

# Notes

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