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CASE STUDY

EUPopLink Country report - Lithuania

[version 1; peer review: 1 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

Populism in Europe today takes different forms, but it often connects to Euroscepticism by portraying the European Union (EU) as distant from ordinary people and overly intrusive in domestic politics. Such discourse not only criticises the EU; it also deepens mistrust, turns political opponents into internal enemies, and makes democratic compromise seem weak or illegitimate. This report examines how Euroscepticism in Lithuania is linked to populism through the discourse of two populist actors, Remigijus Žemaitaitis and Petras Gražulis. Neither calls for Lithuania to leave the EU. Instead, both express soft or conditional Euroscepticism: they accept membership in principle, but oppose aspects of European integration that, in their view, limit national sovereignty, weaken national identity, or impose unwanted norms. The report treats both primarily as valence populists. They do not mobilise voters through a stable left-right ideology, but through anti-elite rhetoric, anti-corruption claims, and appeals to represent "ordinary people." In Lithuanian case, populism is framed as an antagonism between the "ordinary, good Lithuanian people" and "a corrupt, irresponsible government," and through "cultural wars within the state." Their populism does not fundamentally differ in type; the main difference lies in targets and intensity of their discourse. Gražulis is primarily associated with anti-gender politics, hostility towards LGBTQ+ rights, criticism of Pride events, and the defense of traditional family values. Žemaitaitis deploys a similar anti-elite logic in a more radical and authoritarian style: he frames political opponents as enemies of Lithuania, criticises EU's social liberal agenda, and is also known for antisemitic statements and sharp attacks on journalists, especially the Lithuanian public broadcaster, LRT. The danger of this discourse lies not in any realistic prospect of Lithuania leaving the EU, but in its wider social

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

effects: normalising distrust, intensifying polarisation, and weakening respect for democratic institutions from within.

Keywords
populism, euroscepticism, Lithuania, valence populism, populist actors, Gražulis, Žemaitaitis

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1. Introduction

The role of the European Union (EU) and European integration in national political and public debates in Lithuania has been significant since the state restored its independence in the 1990s. The accession of Lithuania to the EU in 2004 has been largely framed as a return to the European community and values, gaining pro-European consensus among mainstream political actors.[1–3] European integration continues to be a cornerstone of Lithuania's foreign and domestic policy orientation, also bringing security at focus while Russia's war in Ukraine continues to escalate. Euroscepticism has remained relatively peripheral in the Lithuanian political debate[4,5] thus making the country an exception among the EU member states.

Public attitudes towards European integration in Lithuania have been predominantly positive. Among the three Baltic States, the Lithuanian public were most supportive towards the membership in the EU.[6,7] Surveys consistently show high levels of trust in EU institutions among Lithuanians, often surpassing trust in national political institutions,[8,9] despite the financial crisis in 2008.[10] The legitimacy of the European integration project has not declined, with 67% percent of Lithuanians tending to trust the EU compared to the EU average of 51%.[9] While overall public pro-European sentiment remains strong, it is possible to trace concerns or critical perceptions of specific aspects of EU membership.[11,12] While the support is underpinned by tangible benefits such as access to structural funds, labour mobility, and security guarantees through broader Euro-Atlantic integration,[2,11] issue specific Euroscepticism can be found, for example, regarding perceived loss of national sovereignty, perceived disregard for the significance of smaller member states, or transfer of social values and policies, particularly gender equality or LGBTQ+ rights.[11,12]

The present country report was prepared as part of the EUPopLink COST Action[13] following the EUPopLink Theoretical Framework and guidelines.[14]

2. Populist Actors: P. Gražulis and R. Žemaitaitis as Representatives of Valence Populism

Lithuania's party system is characterized by moderate pluralism, dominated by traditional parties. This is evident from the results of the Lithuanian national parliamentary (Seimas) elections over the past five years. In 2020, the *Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats* (TS–LKD) won the Seimas elections (50 seats from 141), while the elections in 2024 were won by the Lithuanian *Social Democratic Party* (LSDP) (52 seats from 141).[15] On the other hand, it should be emphasized that in every election in Lithuania, new or renewed political forces – populist[16] or protest[17] parties – tend to collect a sizeable number of votes in national parliamentary elections. Populist actors in Lithuania are more successful in mobilizing voters not through ideological positions on economic and social issues, but rather through the persuasive communication of populist antagonism – the "ordinary, good Lithuanian people" versus "a corrupt, irresponsible government", or ongoing "cultural wars within the state",[18] depicting the ruling elite of the time as the "internal enemy." For this reason, Lithuanian researchers usually claim that populism in Lithuania is understood as both a political style of communication and a tool for winning elections, used by small and new political parties "to manipulate the public" to reach their goals.[19]

Lithuanian political parties have historically been weak in terms of their ability to maintain clear ideological positions. In general, there is a tendency to view politics in terms of personalities and factions rather than consistent ideological positions.[20] The most populist parties historically acted as outsiders to the party system, and some of them and their leaders disappeared from politics after national parliamentary elections (see Country reports in Ref. 21) until a turning point occurred in 2024. In the 2024 European Parliament elections populist parties in Lithuania crossed the 5% electoral threshold for the first time.[18] The leader of the *People and Justice Union* (centrists, nationalists, TTS), Petras Gražulis, became a Member of the European Parliament. The debate continues regarding how to label Gražulis, a prominent populist figure. On the one hand, his anti-elitist and anti-pluralistic statements can be associated with a far-right orientation. However, his use of radical ideas and symbols often serves merely as divisive rhetoric, aimed at attracting votes from those who perceive "truth" as a clear distinction between a good "us" and a bad ("corrupt") "them".

The rhetoric of "us" versus "them," which frames traditional political opponents as enemies within the country, has been effectively employed by another populist actor Remigijus Žemaitaitis. He formed a new political party called *Dawn of Nemunas* for the 2024 Lithuanian parliamentary elections. The party won 20 seats in parliament, finishing in the third place, and became part of the ruling coalition in the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania. It can be argued that the rhetoric of the charismatic populist leaders Gražulis and Žemaitaitis, who both experienced electoral successes, could most closely be related to the valence populism. Valence populism is characteristic of politicians who lack clear ideological positions, making it difficult to distinguish left- or right-wing arguments. Instead, populist actors rely on anti-elite rhetoric and refer to anti-corruption statements, advocating for the interests of "ordinary people"[22,23] (see the examples in following sections).

Remigijus Žemaitaitis, the leader of the party *Dawn of Nemunas*, which forms the current governmental coalition (established in August, 2025) in Lithuania [1]. Žemaitaitis first participated in Lithuanian parliamentary elections in 2008 with the party *Order and Justice.* In 2016–2018, he was one of the leaders of this political party.[17] Following the reorganization of the party *Order and Justice* in 2020, Žemaitaitis became the founder and chairman of a new political force – *Freedom and Justice.* However, in 2022, after publishing antisemitic statements on social media, Žemaitaitis was expelled from the party. "This decision of the board was provoked by Žemaitaitis' statements in the social space, inciting national discord and promoting hatred towards our fellow citizens, Jews," the party announced in a press release to the media in May 2023.[24] In the same year, 2023, Žemaitaitis initiated the founding of the political party *Dawn of Nemunas.*[25] This party has become an attractive alternative, especially, for voters in the regions who had grown disillusioned with traditional political forces.[26] His rhetoric emphasizes the conflict between "ordinary people," whom he claims to represent, and his opponents – the Lithuanian political elite (conservatives, liberals, democrats), international institutions, Western countries, European leaders, the LGBTQ+ community and the media, especially, Lithuanian national broadcaster.[27–29] Recently, his rhetoric started to extend beyond the standard framework of conflict between "the people" and "the elite," transitioning into direct attacks on democratic institutions (specifically, the media and the judiciary). He has also made his name for being outright antisemitic. This highlights a growing tendency toward radicalism – characterized by authoritarianism and illiberalism – suggesting that his political trajectory may be evolving toward populist radical right. However, Žemaitaitis is considered to be a mild Eurosceptic. The political party he leads, *Dawn of Nemunas*, expresses a critical attitude towards the EU and defends national identity. The party *Dawn of Nemunas* operates within Lithuania and is not affiliated with other populist forces in Europe.[27,30]

Petras Gražulis, Member of the European Parliament and Chairman of the *People and Justice Union* (centrists, nationalists). Gražulis was a member of the Lithuanian Parliament from 1996 to 2023, consistently winning mandates in single-member constituencies.[31] The turning point in his political career took place in the winter of 2023, when the Seimas removed him from the office through impeachment. The impeachment process was initiated because Gražulis voted on behalf of another Seimas member without authorization, thereby violating his oath and breaching the Constitution. Despite this political downfall, Gražulis managed to maintain public visibility by using the image of a politician persecuted by the systemic political forces. In the 2024 European Parliament elections, he was elected as the lead candidate of the *People and Justice Union* and joined the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) group.[18] Gražulis's political profile is characterized by the following features: hostility toward the LGBTQ+ community, the Istanbul Convention, "genderism", and sharp criticism of "Pride" events, defence of traditional family values, hatred of political institutions – the Seimas, the EU, the courts. Gražulis is also considered a mild Eurosceptic: he presents himself as a defender of the nation against symbolic external enemies – the elite, the government, and Western states [2].[32–36]

3. Positions on 'Europe' and the populism-Euroscepticism nexus

3.1 What is the general position of these populist actors on the issue of European integration?

The Euroscepticism of Lithuanian populist actors Žemaitaitis and Gražulis, along with their affiliated parties *People and Justice Union* and *Dawn of Nemunas*, centers on a rejection of the current direction and practices of EU integration rather than outright opposition to the EU membership. Their critique focuses on perceived encroachment of the EU institutions on the national sovereignty, cultural identity, and domestic policymaking. This marks their position as soft Euroscepticism.[37] Similarly, viewed through the lens of Vasilopoulou,[38] this stance aligns with "conditional Euroscepticism," wherein the principle of European cooperation is accepted, but specific policies and scope of integration are fiercely contested.

People and Justice Union presents the EU as an institution that has deviated from its original goals and now imposes unwanted ideological and political models. The party platform states in rather general terms: *"We reject the Brussels diktat and the forced imposition of ideological norms alien to the Lithuanian people, including gender propaganda and anti-family policies"*.[39] The party emphasizes that EU decisions should respect national sovereignty and proposes mechanisms to block or opt out of specific EU initiatives deemed harmful to national interests. However, Gražulis's cultural Euroscepticism has deepened over time. His early campaign against Lithuania's euro adoption framed it as *"a partial surrender of sovereignty"*, and he attempted to initiate a referendum to restore the national currency – the litas.[40] His recent European Parliament campaign is anchored in opposing *"moral decay"* allegedly emanating from EU institutions.[41]

Dawn of Nemunas is more programmatically aggressive in its critique of the EU, explicitly opposing several EU policy domains. Its program states that it *"rejects the EU Green Deal and related agricultural programs that increase social*

[1]By the time of publication, Žemaitaitis was no longer a member of the governing coalition. In June 2026, the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (LSDP) decided to terminate the coalition agreement with the Dawn of Nemunas, citing ongoing political tensions, reputational risks, and recurring controversies, and referring to Žemaitaitis's public statements and political conduct.
[2]This section includes data and text prepared jointly with collaborator Erika Nabažaitė.

exclusion and undermine rural development" and demands that *"EU legislation should not take precedence over the Lithuanian Constitution"*.[30] The party opposes both the shape (centralization) and specific policies (environmental regulations, migration, cultural liberalism) of the EU.

While neither actor promotes Lexit (Lithuanian exit from the EU), both have proposed referenda as democratic tools to resist the EU encroachment. *Dawn of Nemunas* calls for national referenda to approve or block binding EU policy decisions and even suggests the right to suspend Lithuania's EU obligations in certain areas.[30] International events have shaped these positions: Brexit is portrayed not as a model, but as a symptom of the EU's rigidity and failure to accommodate national will. During COVID-19, both actors criticized Brussels and the Lithuanian government for "undemocratic restrictions". In the wake of the Ukraine war, Žemaitaitis questioned sanctions alignment, suggesting that Lithuania should be free to resume trade with Russia if other member states were to do so.[42] Donald Trump's success in the elections is championed by Gražulis, who launched a symbolic *"Trump Headquarters"* in Vilnius, presenting Trump as a counterforce to the EU liberalism.[43] In a nutshell, these political actors articulate a consistently soft but intensifying Euroscepticism, targeting both structural and ideological aspects of EU integration.

3.2 To what extent and how have these actors framed their positions on Europe (and Euroscepticism) in an explicitly populist fashion?

Both *People and Justice Union* and *Dawn of Nemunas* frame their Euroscepticism within a populist antagonism between the *"Brussels elite"* and the *"Lithuanian people"*. This is most evident in their narrative of imposed ideology, cultural coercion, and betrayal of national interests. Gražulis regularly speaks of the EU elites as enforcers of *"anti-family ideology"* and *"moral rot"*,[41] blaming them for undermining Lithuanian traditions. He often uses religious and nationalist language, identifying Brussels as a secular-globalist threat to Christian civilization. Similarly, Žemaitaitis and *People and Justice Union* frame EU criticism as a *patriotic defense.* In his speeches, Žemaitaitis aligns with Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński, arguing that they are unfairly maligned by liberal media *"because they care about their countries' national identity"*.[44] The party casts its positions as the *people's common sense* versus the *elite's ideological zeal. Dawn of Nemunas'* platform also presents itself as defending *"Lithuanian sovereignty and civic resistance against ideological colonization"*, invoking a defensive narrative where Lithuanians must resist external pressures and reassert their right to define morality, family, and national interest.[30] These narratives are infused with populist tropes: elite betrayal, national rebirth, and referenda as direct expressions of popular will.

3.3 Is there a specific variant of populism particularly connected to their Euroscepticism?

While the Euroscepticism of these actors incorporates elements of the populist radical right (PRR) specifically nativism and authoritarianism[45] it remains functionally distinct, operating primarily within a valence populist framework. Ulinskaitė[18] notes that while their discourse increasingly reflects far-right (in) security narratives, particularly regarding the war in Ukraine, the classification remains complex. Rather than representing a traditional far-right ideology, *People and Justice Union* and D*awn of Nemunas* exemplify a syncretic approach. They couple nationalist identity and traditional morality with economic paternalism (e.g., tax exemptions for families). D*awn of Nemunas adds* a legalist angle, advocating constitutional primacy. Unlike pure PRR parties, these actors do not rely solely on ideological extremism. Instead, their appeal is primarily valence-based, focusing on anti-establishment claims of restoring competence and integrity. Consequently, despite clear indicators of radicalism, the lack of a consolidated far-right identity suggests they are best understood as radicalizing valence populists rather than traditional PRR actors.

4. Responses to euroscepticism and consequences

4.1 How have mainstream parties responded?

Mainstream Lithuanian parties have used a mix of dismissive, adversarial, and accommodative strategies. Initially, both Gražulis and Žemaitaitis were largely dismissed as fringe figures. As their popularity grew, center-right and liberal parties adopted adversarial stances, denouncing them for antisemitism, homophobia, and undermining democratic norms.[46] However, in 2024, the Social Democrats controversially shifted to accommodation, entering coalition negotiations and adopting up to 70% of the *Dawn of Nemunas*'s platform.[47] This alignment included such highly controversial commitments as halting the closure of regional schools and hospitals, reviewing electricity market liberalization, and increasing funding for roads infrastructure. This accommodation also extended to sensitive policy areas. Topics once uncontested under the pro-EU consensus – such as the EU Green Deal, LGBTQ rights, and migration – became focal points of negotiation. Consequently, coalition documents included explicit disclaimers allowing partners to diverge on these values, signaling a formalization of Eurosceptic dissent within the government.[48] This move provoked significant backlash. For instance, the President Gitanas Nausėda openly criticized the inclusion of Žemaitaitis- and Gražulis-aligned parties in coalition-building efforts, citing concerns about their positions on democracy and European values.[28] The center-left party – *The Union of Democrats "For Lithuania"* (*Demokratai Vardan Lietuvos)* – initially a coalition partner, publicly rejected cooperation with *Dawn of Nemunas*, condemning the party's extremist rhetoric and antisemitic associations.[27] Opposition parties, including

the conservatives and liberals, launched public campaigns framing the coalition as a capitulation to radical forces and a threat to Lithuania's Euro-Atlantic orientation.[27] Tensions in the governing coalition got even stronger as *The Union of Democrats "For Lithuania*" demanded political distancing from both Žemaitaitis and Gražulis, warning that their inclusion into the Government risks undermining Lithuania's international reputation and domestic democratic consensus.[27]

4.2 Are there concrete consequences or is it opportunistic?

The consequences of populist Euroscepticism in Lithuania have recently become more than symbolic, though they remain primarily rhetorical and instrumental rather than transformational. For the first time since accession to the EU, a Eurosceptic populist party *Dawn of Nemunas* entered the national government in late 2024. This marked a clear breach of the prior pro-EU consensus.[49,50] The governmental breakthrough of the *Dawn of Nemunas* sparked a noticeable shift in national debates – identity, sovereignty, and conditions attached to the EU directives (e.g. claiming veto power over green policies, calling for EU-wide referenda, challenging migration quotas). This was covered extensively in both domestic and international media, reflecting growing public attention to these topics.[50,51] Despite these agitation strategies, Lithuania's core stance has not fundamentally shifted. The new government, led by the *Lithuanian Social Democratic Party,* reiterated its commitment to the EU membership and support to Ukraine, including allocating a minimum of 0.25% of GDP annually for Ukraine aid.[49,52] Leadership of the conservative opposition also emphasized continuity in foreign policy.[53] Overall, Euroscepticism seems to function more like a mobilization tool – effective as a rhetorical device to attract and energize turnout, particularly among rural, conservative and economically anxious electorates – rather than a blueprint for disengaging from the EU.[48,51,54] In summary, while populist Euroscepticism in Lithuania has become politically consequential in shaping government formation, political rhetoric, and public debate it has thus far not produced a shift in Lithuania's positive underlying orientation towards Europe. The pattern, at present, aligns more with opportunistic positioning than with sustained political programmatic change.

5. Conclusion

Euroscepticism in Lithuania, historically a peripheral phenomenon, has evolved into a resilient political force primarily articulated by two key figures: Remigijus Žemaitaitis (*Dawn of Nemunas*) and Petras Gražulis (*People and Justice Union*). Although public opinion remains predominantly pro-European, these actors have successfully introduced Eurosceptic narratives into the mainstream political discourse. Despite limited electoral success compared to major parties, their influence has compelled mainstream institutions to confront sensitive issues regarding national sovereignty, democratic accountability, and cultural identity. The recent electoral traction of Žemaitaitis signals a rising interest among specific voter segments for alternatives that challenge established EU policies. In parallel, Gražulis's sustained activism ensures the continuous visibility of these critiques, resonating particularly with conservative and rural constituents. While distinct in generation and style, both politicians share a fundamental ideological goal: opposing deeper political European integration. Both politicians argue that EU policies often encroach upon Lithuania's sovereignty, a stance evidenced by their mutual scepticism towards the adoption of the euro and their fierce criticism of the EU's social liberal agenda.

On the other hand, their methods and their trajectories differ significantly in terms of populism. Gražulis employs a more absolutist and morally charged narrative, frequently depicting the Brussels administration as an ideological oppressor comparable to historical foreign occupations. In contrast, Žemaitaitis adopts a strategy that extends beyond standard populism. By aligning with the illiberal conservative models seen in Poland and Hungary, his rhetoric has begun to transcend the "people vs. elite" framework, transitioning into direct attacks on domestic democratic institutions, specifically the media and the judiciary. Ultimately, while Gražulis remains a provocative moralist, Žemaitaitis's shift toward authoritarianism suggests a political evolution from valence populism to populist radical right, anchoring a more radical narrative of sovereign defence within the Lithuanian landscape.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required for this study.

Data availability statement

No data are associated with this report.

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The strength of the article is definitely the detailed and expert description of the presence and style of populism in Lithuania and its connection to the criticism of the European Union. The article needs some contextualization, both in terms of setting it in the context of the Lithuanian party system and in terms of conceptualizing populism.

I suggest adding a brief information to the introduction of the article about how the authors deal with the relatively broad concept of populism. In the final part, the authors can (and perhaps will have to) connect their empirical findings more closely with the concepts they use.

Furthermore, a short paragraph describing the current Lithuanian party system, populist and non-populist parties, and their ideological and political profile would be of great benefit to any reader who is not familiar with the details of Lithuanian politics.

Is the background of the case's history and progression described in sufficient detail?
Partly

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for teaching or other practitioners?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Comparative politics

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.