

Party Whose Leader Is Known for Antisemitism to Join Lithuanian Government

A new coalition includes a party led by a politician notorious for antisemitic remarks, another blow to the longstanding refusal by Europe's mainstream parties to join with those seen as extremist.



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By Andrew Higgins

Andrew Higgins writes about political, economic and cultural issues in Europe's formerly communist eastern flank.

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Europe's fractious and increasingly fragmented politics shattered another taboo on Friday, when a mainstream party in Lithuania announced that it was forming a coalition government with a populist party led by a politician notorious for antisemitic statements.

Western embassies in Lithuania have been deeply alarmed by the prospect of such a coalition, and the move is certain to alarm the Baltic nation's NATO allies, Israel and Jewish groups.

It will be particularly difficult to swallow for Germany, which is leading NATO's efforts to strengthen Lithuania's defenses by sending it a brigade of nearly 5,000 troops, the first open-ended foreign deployment of German troops since the defeat of the Nazis in 1945.

The new coalition resulted from a parliamentary election last month in which the opposition Social Democrats finished first with 52 seats — far ahead of the governing conservatives, but short of the 71 seats needed for a majority. To form a government, they reached out to smaller parties in the hope of securing a majority.

On Friday, the Social Democrats' deputy leader, Gintautas Paluckas, who is on course to be prime minister, said his party had concluded an "agreement in principle" on a coalition that includes Dawn of the River Neman, a new party that the American Jewish Committee, the global advocacy group, has denounced as "explicitly antisemitic."

Gintautas Paluckas, right, who is on course to be prime minister, with the Social Democrats' leader, Vilija Blinkeviciute, in Vilnius last month. Ints Kalnins/Reuters

Dawn of the River Neman, which finished third in last month's election with 20 seats, is led by Remigijus Zemaitaitis, 42, a lawyer and former legislator. He gave up his seat in Parliament this year to avoid impeachment after the Constitutional Court ruled in April that he had violated his oath by making openly antisemitic statements relating to World War II and Israel.

Statements by him that the court condemned included a comment on social media that Israel's treatment of Palestinians made it easy to understand why people would violently target Jews. He has also claimed, against all evidence, that a June 1944 massacre by the Nazis in the Lithuanian village of at Pirciupiai was the work of "Lithuanian Jews together with the Russians."

He faces separate criminal charges for inciting ethnic hatred and approving or denying crimes proven under international law.

The Social Democrats had been under strong pressure to form a coalition government with several other small — and less toxic — parties. But personal rivalries prevented that, leaving Mr. Zemaitaitis as a kingmaker. Analysts said he was unlikely to be made a cabinet minister, but he will secure several ministerial posts for members of his party, whose name refers to the country's major river.

His party's inclusion in the coalition stirred outrage from centrists. "It is disappointing that this was done by a traditional party," said Vitalijus Gailius, vice president of center-right Liberal Movement, warning that Lithuania's international reputation would suffer.

Voting in Utena, Lithuania, last month. Ints Kalnins/Reuters

Lithuania's fractious politics are part of a wider trend across much of Europe, where mainstream parties traded power for decades but have in recent years lost out to upstart rivals at both ends of the political spectrum.

That has made it difficult to exclude politicians viewed as extremists, erasing a longstanding taboo on cutting deals with them. In the Netherlands, a party led by Geert Wilders, an often incendiary critic of Islam and immigrants, entered a coalition government this year after garnering the most votes in a parliamentary election.

The shift has also led to unstable minority governments. France's Parliament has been split into three rough blocs since snap elections that President Emmanuel Macron called in July. He rejected a coalition deal with a leftist bloc that won the most seats, and also shunned the far-right National Rally.

In Lithuania, where Nazi Germany's occupation led to the slaughter of about 95 percent of the more than 200,000 Jews living in the country before World War II, virtually nobody is denying the Holocaust.

But nationalist politicians have long sought to play down the role played by ethnic Lithuanians in the murder of Jews. They insist that such historical accounts were propaganda by the Soviet Union, which also invaded and annexed all three Baltic States in the 1940s, and later by Russia.

In addition, condemnation of Mr. Zemaitaitis by rival politicians, the courts and foreigners has played into a sentiment in the Baltic States that their countries have been unfairly branded as fascist collaborators because they resisted Stalinist rule, a view promoted for decades by Moscow.

Counting ballots at a polling station in Vilnius last month. Lithuania's fractious politics are part of a wider trend across much of Europe. Petras Malukas/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Mr. Zemaitaitis mostly avoided antisemitism during the election campaign, and focused on denouncing the two dominant parties, particularly Homeland Union, the main conservative party, as elitist and out of touch with voters. He promised tax breaks for large families and a bigger role for the state in business and finance.

Unlike right-wing populists elsewhere in Europe, like Prime Minister Victor Orban of Hungary, he has not demanded a halt to military support for Ukraine or voiced sympathy for President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia. But he has frequently lashed out at the United States and what he describes as its intrusive meddling.

Lithuania's mainstream parties have long condemned Mr. Zemaitaitis over his antisemitic remarks. But a move by Homeland Union to impeach him and strip him of his seat in Parliament backfired when he presented himself as a victim of cancel culture and formed his own party.

Claiming that Lithuania risks losing its sovereignty to foreign powers, particularly the United States, he responded to criticism by American Jewish groups last month by saying, "They are explicitly instructing the Lithuanian people to surrender, capitulate and

obey them!” He asked: “Will we allow U.S. Jews to continue to rule and threaten us?”

Dovid Katz, a Brooklyn-born authority on Yiddish who lives in Vilnius and edits an online journal, *Defending History*, said his Lithuanian friends were “shocked, dumbfounded and embarrassed” by voters’ support for Mr. Zemaitaitis.

But he added that he was himself “not altogether surprised that bottled-up, tired-old-playbook antisemitic tropes that have for many years been in the public domain” would “find a political champion in the form of a populist, young, handsome, seductive white male at this juncture in history.”

Tomas Dapkus contributed reporting from Vilnius, Lithuania.

Andrew Higgins is the East and Central Europe bureau chief for The Times based in Warsaw. He covers a region that stretches from the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to Kosovo, Serbia and other parts of former Yugoslavia. [More about Andrew Higgins](#)