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## PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY IN LITHUANIA, 1920–1927

### ITS POWER AND LIMITS


#### Abstract

The article examines the preconditions for the formation and functioning of the parliamentary system in interwar Lithuania. It delves into the reasons behind the short duration of parliamentary democracy, highlighting its main accomplishments and shortcomings, framed in the context of political ‘power’ and ‘limits’. The analysis suggests that post-First World War ideological divisions and political social radicalism prevented the formation of enduring political coalitions. One of the notable features of the parliamentary system was an overly optimistic perception of its inherent benefits. Lithuanian society placed an unwavering trust in the fairness of the legislature and its ability to govern the country by representing all societal factions, especially those which previously had no political rights. Parliamentarism was seen as the primary safeguard of democracy, believed to be able to resolve any crises that the country faced. As a result of these and other circumstances discussed in this article, the development of parliamentary democracy came to an end in the latter half of the 1920s.

**Keywords:** Lithuania, interwar period, parliamentarism, democracy, constitution, political parties, *coup d'état*, authoritarianism

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Between the two World Wars, Lithuania went through several phases of different forms of government. The Act of Independence of 16 February 1918 vested decision-making authority in a democratically elected parliament. However, parliamentary democracy did not begin to function until a few years later due to international circumstances, the state of war and the nation's undefined borders. Throughout the war with the Red Army, which lasted from 1919 to 1920, the Bolsheviks and some left-wing factions attempted to implement the idea of 'Soviet statehood'. However, following the War of Independence, the concept of a national state prevailed, leading to the establishment of parliamentary democracy (15 May 1920 to 12 April 1927).

On the other hand, parliamentarianism in Lithuania, as in some other countries in the region, lacked the potential to become a long-term political form of governance. Following the military-political coup of 17 December 1926, an authoritarian regime gradually established itself in Lithuania. It was often referred to as a 'velvet dictatorship' due to its relatively moderate nature<sup>1</sup>. However, after President Antanas Smetona dissolved the Lithuanian Parliament (Lit. *Seimas*) in 1927, the next elections took place only in 1936. The Fourth Lithuanian *Seimas* (1936–1940) was not a fully-fledged one and functioned only as a political institution supporting the executive.

The research subject of the article spans the years 1920–1927, encompassing four democratic elections and four parliamentary terms in Lithuania: the Constituent Assembly (1920–1922), the First *Seimas* (1922–1923), the Second *Seimas* (1923–1926) and the Third *Seimas* (1926–1927). It examines the unique features of modern parliamentarism and the most prominent political and social aspects of its formation and functioning. Additionally, it discusses the preconditions for the short-term nature of parliamentary democracy in Lithuania and sheds light on main achievements and shortcomings of parliamentarism, elucidating its political 'power' and 'limits'. The article aims to provide a synthesis of the 'successes' and 'failures' of Lithuanian parliamentarism in the 1920s. For this reason, the research is mainly based on Lithuanian historiography.

While not claiming to offer a comprehensive analysis of the historiography of parliamentarism in interwar Lithuania<sup>2</sup>, it calls attention to certain important aspects. Due to political constraints, no detailed studies of parliamentarism or its attributes, such as political parties, was undertaken in Lithuania from 1927 to 1940. The first academic study was carried out within the Lithuanian

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<sup>1</sup> Liudas TRUSKA, *Antanas Smetona ir jo laikai*, Vilnius 1996, pp. 305–334.

<sup>2</sup> The historiography of Lithuanian parliamentarism is presented in: Danutė BLAŽYTĖ-BAUŽIENĖ, Mindaugas TAMOŠAITIS, Liudas TRUSKA, *Lietuvos Seimo istorija. XX–XXI a. pradžia*, Vilnius 2009.

diaspora in the USA in 1975. The first line of inquiry on parliamentarism in interwar Lithuania covered the issues of elections, the composition of the *Seimas* and significant legal enactments<sup>3</sup>. Soviet historiography, on the other hand, identified the activities of ‘bourgeois parties’ and the political conflicts between them within the Lithuanian political landscape from 1920 to 1926<sup>4</sup>.

Contemporary historiography predominantly focuses on analysing individual parliamentary terms, examining the specifics of parliamentary proceedings. Most studies delve into the political dynamics among the *Seimas* factions, the intricacies of their negotiations on the formation of parliamentary coalitions, the specifics of the adopted legislation or the evolution of domestic and foreign policy. They draw comparisons between the political regimes of the First (1918–1940) and Second (contemporary) Republics of Lithuania<sup>5</sup>. It is highlighted that interwar Lithuania experienced martial law for a significant portion of its parliamentary period, thus allowing the ruling coalition to retain power<sup>6</sup>.

Explorations into the biographies of Lithuanian parliamentarians reveal that 92 percent of Lithuanians, almost 5 percent of Jews, 2 percent of Poles and 1 percent of Germans were elected to the *Seimas* in 1920–1922. In terms of age, as many as 30 percent of the members of the *Seimas* were under 30 years old, 42 percent were under 40, and only 14 percent over 50 years old. Education levels varied, with 16 percent of the *Seimas* members having primary

<sup>3</sup> Vanda DAUGIRDAITĖ-SRUOGIENĖ, *Lietuvos Steigiamasis Seimas*, New York 1975.

<sup>4</sup> *Klasės ir politinės partijos Lietuvoje 1919–1926 metais*, red. Regina ŽEPKAITĖ, Vilnius 1978, pp. 41–222.

<sup>5</sup> *1920–1922 metų parlamentinė patirtis: sprendimų politika, tikslai, aplinkybės. Konferencijos pranešimai*, Vilnius 2000; Mindaugas MAKSIMAITIS, *Parlamentarizmo teisinis reguliavimas Lietuvoje 1918–1940 metais*, [in:] *Parlamentas ir valstybinės valdžios institucijų sąranga*, red. Gediminas MESONIS, Vilnius 2008, pp. 35–70; D. BLĄŽYTĖ-BAUŽIENĖ, M. TAMOŠAITIS, L. TRUSKA, op.cit., passim; *Steigiamajam Seimui – 90. Pranešimų ir straipsnių rinkinys*, sud. Saulius KAUBRYS, Arūnas VYŠNIAUSKAS, Vilnius 2011; *Lietuvos III Seimas – 1926–1927 išbandymų metai: mokslinių straipsnių rinkinys*, sud. Saulius KAUBRYS, Arūnas VYŠNIAUSKAS, Vilnius 2013; *Lietuvos istorija. Nepriklausomybė (1918–1940)*, t. 10, d. 1, sud. Česlovas LAURINAVIČIUS, Vilnius 2013, pp. 466–538; Zenonas NORKUS, *Du nepriklausomybės dešimtmečiai. Kapitalizmas, klasės ir demokratija Pirmojoje ir Antrojoje Lietuvos Respublikoje lyginamosios istorinės sociologijos požiūriu*, Vilnius 2014, pp. 509–578; Artūras SVARAUSKAS, *Steigiamasis Seimas ir Lietuvos Respublikos kūrimas 1920–1922 metais*, Vilnius 2020; Audronė VEILENTIENĖ, *Išsaugoti Nepriklausomybę: Lietuvos Seimo veikla užsienio politikoje 1920–1927 metais*, Vilnius 2020; Algimantas KASPARAVIČIUS, *Lietuvos modernus parlamentarizmas 1905 (1918)–1940: raida ir problemos*, [in:] *Parlamentarizmas Lietuvoje*, sud. Arūnas GUMULIAUSKAS, Arvydas ANUŠAUSKAS, Česlovas JURŠĖNAS, Vytautas SINKEVIČIUS, Vilnius 2020, pp. 48–84.

<sup>6</sup> Krzysztof BUCHOWSKI, *Dyktatura parlamentarna w stanie wyjątkowym. Litewski Sejm w latach 1920–1927*, Przegład Sejmowy, 2019, nr 1, pp. 25–47.

or incomplete secondary education, 23 percent completing their secondary school, 28 percent completing their higher education, and 7 percent having incomplete higher education. Interestingly, 5 percent of the members of the Lithuanian *Seimas* in 1920–1922 held doctorates, while 6 percent had not completed primary education<sup>7</sup>. The qualitative qualifications of members in subsequent parliamentary terms (with the exception of the 1936–1940 *Seimas*) saw gradual changes. These characteristics significantly influenced the quality of parliamentary work and contributed to public disillusionment with parliamentary democracy in Lithuania.

The influence of the officers and soldiers participating in parliamentary elections, i.e. the impact of the army on political processes, is evident. Debates concerning this issue highlighted the views of different political parties on the granting of the right to vote to soldiers and allowing them to stand for the *Seimas* from political party lists<sup>8</sup>.

Research on the involvement of national minority groups in the Lithuanian Parliament from 1920 to 1927 highlights several aspects. Firstly, it elucidates the Lithuanian government's approach to the participation of national minorities in elections. Secondly, it underscores the persistent efforts of the representatives of the Jewish faction in the *Seimas* to maintain the national-personal autonomy of the Jewish community in the state. And thirdly, it delineates the efforts of *Seimas* members representing Polish and German national communities to seek autonomy (at least in the cultural sphere). These characteristics led to the expression of political polemics in the Lithuanian *Seimas*<sup>9</sup>.

This article adopts a different research approach. It describes the research topics based on an analysis of the preconditions for the emergence of parliamentarism, the manifestation of parliamentary democracy and the circumstances leading to its collapse.

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<sup>7</sup> Lietuvos Steigiamojo Seimo (1920–1922 metų) narių biografinis žodynas, sud. Aivas RAGAUSKAS, Mindaugas TAMOŠAITIS, Vilnius 2006, pp. 27–28; Lietuvos Respublikos Seimų I (1922–1923), II (1923–1926), III (1926–1927), IV (1936–1940) narių biografinis žodynas, sud. Aivas RAGAUSKAS, Mindaugas TAMOŠAITIS, Vilnius 2007, pp. 22, 26–30, 67–70, 130–134, 589–593.

<sup>8</sup> Kęstutis KILINSKAS, *Politikai su antpečiais. Civilinės ir karinės valdžios sąveika tarpukario Lietuvoje*, Vilnius 2022, pp. 67–112.

<sup>9</sup> Saulius KAUBRYŠ, *National Minorities in Lithuania: An Outline*, Vilnius 2002, pp. 94–118; idem, *Tautinių mažumų dalyvavimas rinkimuose į Lietuvos Respublikos Seimą 1920–1926 m.: kiekybinių charakteristikų projekcija*, Parlamento studijos, no. 4: 2005, pp. 125–143; Arkadijus BLIUMINAS, *Žydų frakcija Lietuvos Seimuose, 1920–1927 m.*, Vilnius 2003; Šarūnas LIEKIS, *A State within a State? Jewish Autonomy in Lithuania 1918–1925*, Vilnius 2003; Vladas SIRUTAVIČIUS, *Lithuanian Administration and the Participation of Jews in the Elections to the Constituent Seimas*, [in:] *Pragmatic Alliance: Jewish-Lithuanian Political Cooperation at the Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, ed. Vladas SIRUTAVIČIUS, Darius STALIŪNAS, Budapest 2011, pp. 181–205.

THE IDEA OF MODERN PARLIAMENTARISM  
IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

The notion of modern parliamentarism was first articulated during the early stages of the Lithuanian national liberation at the Vilnius Congress held on 4 and 5 December 1905, which later became known in public discourse as the Grand Diet of Vilnius (Lit. *Didysis Vilniaus Seimas*). During this gathering, a decision was made to pursue autonomy for Lithuania within the Russian Empire, centred around a parliament in Vilnius. However, due to constraints imposed by the Russian regime, this declaration remained unrealised. On the other hand, this resolution gave impetus to the creation of the attributes of modern parliamentarism, particularly the emergence of political parties. This period marked the onset of political programmes and ideological fragmentation within society, leading to a division in Lithuanian political thought between ‘moderates’ (conservatives) and ‘radicals’ (socialists). The first political parties emerged: the Social Democrats, Democrats, Christian Democrats, Party of National Progress (the Nationalists), Socialist People’s Party, Farmers’ Union and others.

The First World War had a major impact on the future Lithuanian parliamentarism. German occupation, which commenced in 1915, divided the Lithuanian political sphere into two factions. Some of the intelligentsia relocated to Russia in 1915, while others remained in German-occupied Lithuania. The two political camps operated in different environments. Due to the specific military system of the German occupation, the leaders of Lithuanian political parties in Vilnius and Kaunas were precluded from articulating the idea of statehood restoration until autumn 1917. In these areas, moderate political currents, such as the Nationalists and the Christian Democrats, predominated, focusing on social and cultural issues. Conversely, in Russia following the democratic revolution of the spring of 1917, Lithuanians found a more conducive environment to form parties and to develop a perspective for the future of Lithuania. Here, more radical political movements gained prominence. The most popular among them, the Socialists and the Christian Democrats, aligned more closely with socialist principles compared to their counterparts in German-occupied Lithuania. Moreover, unlike in Lithuania in 1917, Lithuanian political centres in Russia were developing the organisational structure of the parties, formulating comprehensive party programmes and visions for the future of Lithuania<sup>10</sup>.

The return of Lithuanian war refugees from Russia to Lithuania in the latter half of 1918, especially following the signing of the peace treaty between

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<sup>10</sup> *Lietuvių krikščionių demokratų partijos programa*, Petrapilis 1917, pp. I–VII.

Lithuania and Soviet Russia in July 1920, marked a significant shift in the political and party landscape. Political radicals began to dominate, and their influence was particularly strong as the Bolshevik forces invaded Lithuania in early 1919. It was the leadership of Lithuanian political parties returning from Russia that hastened the idea of convening the Constituent Assembly, despite the unresolved issue of territorial boundaries. One of the most important arguments for convening the parliament was to facilitate the implementation of the planned radical social reforms (notably the land reform), which required the general approval of the Lithuanian public as represented by the parliament. The urgency of the land reform did not stem only from the need to achieve social justice. The argument of reducing conflicts within society and countering the appeal of Bolshevism became equally important.

In German-occupied Lithuania, the regime became more relaxed in the autumn of 1917 due to shifting international circumstances. From 18 to 22 September, Lithuanians convened a conference where over 200 delegates from various regions of Lithuania elected a 20-member Lithuanian Council (Lit. *Lietuvos Taryba*), which became the first official Lithuanian political institution. Initially, it functioned as both an executive and a legislative body, serving as the precursor of the Lithuanian Parliament. The Council was tasked with the restoration of an independent democratic state and convening the Constituent Assembly in Vilnius<sup>11</sup>.

The Resolution of the Council of 16 February 1918 proclaimed the restoration of an independent Lithuanian state 'with democratic foundations and with Vilnius as its capital'. Additionally, it affirmed that 'the foundations of the State of Lithuania and its relations with other states must be definitively determined by the Constituent Assembly, which will be convened as soon as possible'<sup>12</sup>. Thus, the concept of parliamentarism emerged as a fundamental principle in the formation of the modern national statehood.

#### INTERWAR LITHUANIAN PARLIAMENTARISM:

#### CONSTITUTIONAL 'THEORY', ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL 'PRACTICE'

During the interwar period, Lithuania adopted four provisional constitutions (November 1918, April 1919, June 1920 and May 1928) and two permanent constitutions (August 1922 and May 1938). Although they were adopted

<sup>11</sup> A. KASPARAVIČIUS, *Lietuvos modernus parlamentarizmas*, p. 51.

<sup>12</sup> '[...] skelbia atstatanti nepriklausomą, demokratiniais pagrindais sutvarkytą Lietuvos valstybę su sostine VILNIUJE [...]'; 'Lietuvos valstybės pamatus ir jos santykius su kitomis valstybėmis privalo galutinai nustatyti kiek galima greičiau sušauktas Steigiamasis Seimas, demokratiniais būdais visų jos gyventojų išrinktas'; *Lietuvos Taryba skelbia Lietuvos nepriklausomybę*, Lietuvos aidas, 19 February 1918, no. 22, p. 1.

in different political contexts and established different political systems in Lithuania, all these constitutions contained chapters dedicated to the parliament.

Under the provisional constitutions (1918–1922), the political leadership of the nascent state was obliged to adopt and promulgate a law on the election of the *Seimas*. The 1919 legislation stipulated that the *Seimas* members were to be elected by universal, equal, direct and secret ballot. Bearing in mind that the territorial boundaries of the state had not yet been definitively established at that time, the first provisional constitution made an exception and allowed the work of the *Seimas* to commence with 2/3 of the representatives present<sup>13</sup>. The second provisional constitution of April 1919 reiterated these provisions and introduced the institution of the president. The Council of State held the authority to elect the President of the State on a temporary basis, pending *Seimas* election. Subsequently, these functions were reserved to the parliament. When the Constituent Assembly met in 1920, the third provisional constitution was hastily adopted, designating the Constituent Assembly as the ‘expressor of the sovereign power of Lithuania’ and stipulating that ‘the President of the Republic is elected by the *Seimas*’. It also specified that the chairman of the Constituent Assembly would act as interim president until the formal election of the president<sup>14</sup>.

The exclusive role of the *Seimas* in the state system is set out in the 1922 constitution, which stands as the first permanent and singular constitution defining a parliamentary democratic state system in Lithuania. Unlike other interwar constitutions, it meticulously outlines the functions of the parliament, encompassing legislation, taxation, budget approval, ratification of international treaties, the right to declare and terminate war, parliamentary control of the executive, and the appointment of top government officials. Among these functions, pivotal roles include the election of the President of the Republic and indirect participation in ministerial appointments<sup>15</sup>.

The distinctiveness of the parliamentary system in the 1922 constitution is reflected in its treatment of the terms ‘state’ and ‘republic’. The main state law of 1922 is called the Constitution of the State of Lithuania, but the text uses the term Constitution of the Republic. The constitution uses both terms interchangeably to emphasise the republican nature of governance.

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<sup>13</sup> *Lietuvos Valstybės Laikinosios Konstitucijos Pamatiniai Dėsniai*, Lietuvos aidas, 13 November 1918, no. 130, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> ‘2. Steigiamasis Seimas yra suvereninės Lietuvos galios išreiškėjas’; ‘7. Respublikos Prezidentą renka Steigiamasis Seimas’; ‘9. Iki Respublikos Prezidentas bus išrinktas, jo pareigas eina Steigiamojo Seimo pirmininkas’; *Laikinoji Lietuvos Valstybės Konstitucija*, Laikinosios vyriausybės žinios, 12 June 1920, no. 37, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Lietuvos Valstybės Konstitucija*, Vyriausybės žinios, 6 August 1922, no. 100, pp. 2–3.

Several factors underpin the precedence given to the *Seimas* over other public authorities. Firstly, in Eastern Europe, the democratic revolution after the First World War saw the reemergence or the formation of new nation-states by peoples who had previously suffered imperial oppression. The nation was given a mandate to govern the new states through democratic elections. In Lithuania, there was a prevailing belief in the unconditional righteousness of the legislature and its ability to govern the state with representation from all sections of society, especially the non-nobles and those who had previously had no political rights. The second reason for the constitutional dominance of the *Seimas* in the structure of government was the belief of the society in the parliament as the paramount guarantor of democracy, capable of resolving any state crises. The constitution did not provide for a constitutional court. Its functions were delegated to parliament. Because of this idealistic attitude and the concentration of power in the legislative institution, interwar Lithuanian constitutional law specialist Mykolas Römer (Michał Römer) called such a state system a 'Seimocracy'<sup>16</sup>, which hindered the stability of the state and fostered radicalisation of the society and confrontation between the political parties. This was one of the reasons for the transient nature of the constitution and parliamentarism. Consensus was difficult to find because of the qualifications of the *Seimas* members, more than two-thirds of whom were under the age of 40<sup>17</sup>.

During the period of parliamentary democracy, elections to the *Seimas* were held four times: on 14–15 April 1920, 10–11 October 1922, 12–13 May 1923, and 8–10 May 1926. The 1919 election law was of a 'temporary nature' and was intended for the first elections to the Constituent Assembly. Later, in 1922, a permanent law was adopted. While the two laws exhibited variances, they fundamentally delineated the electoral process for parliament in a similar manner. Ensuring equal rights of all nationalities, denominations and social classes to participate in elections was guaranteed, alongside provisions for gender equality. Citizens were eligible to vote at the age of 21 and stand for election at the age of 24. Given the specific circumstances of the struggle for independence between 1919 and 1920 and the authority of the army in society, officers were eligible for candidacy. In the elections to the Constituent Assembly in 1920, an exception was made for rank-and-file Lithuanian soldiers, who were granted voting rights by lowering the age limit to 17 years.

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<sup>16</sup> Mykolas RĖMERIS, *Lietuvos konstitucinės teisės paskaitos*, sud. Mindaugas MAKSIMAITIS, Vilnius 1990, p. 135.

<sup>17</sup> *Lietuvos Steigiamojo Seimo*, p. 28.



The elections to the Constituent Assembly took place later than those in Poland, Estonia and Latvia. Formally, international circumstances in the spring of 1920 permitted the elections to proceed. However, Lithuania lacked *de jure* international recognition at that time. The country grappled with the ongoing struggle for independence, i.e. it did not have peace with Poland, which in fact controlled 2/3 of the territory claimed by the Lithuanian government. As mentioned above, Lithuania did not have clearly defined state borders, and issues persisted regarding the status of Vilnius (Pol. Wilno) in the south-east and Klaipėda (Ger. Memel) in the west. Although the 1920 elections formally retained the constituencies of Vilnius and Klaipėda, intended to elect 229 representatives to the unicameral parliament, elections were never held in the Vilnius constituency during the parliamentary period. In the Klaipėda autonomous region, elections were only held for the first time in 1926. The *Seimas* consisted of 112 members in 1920, 78 in 1922 and 1923, and 85 in 1926. In the Fourth *Seimas*, which formally functioned during the authoritarian period, 49 representatives were elected in the 1936 elections.

The dominant political force during this period was the Christian Democrats, along with their affiliated organisations – the Labour Federation and the Farmers' Union, collectively forming a political bloc. The electorate of the Christian Democrats primarily consisted of the Catholic intelligentsia, the Labour Federation appealed to the Catholic proletariat (especially agricultural workers), and the Farmers' Union garnered support from the peasants and farmers. The second largest party in terms of the number of seats in parliament was the liberal-left political party, the Lithuanian Peasant Populist Union, which represented the confessionally 'neutral' part of society. The Social Democrats constituted the third parliamentary faction, although they faced challenges in gaining sufficient support due to the predominantly agrarian nature of Lithuanian society. The national communities of Jews, Poles and Germans formed separate political groups. Their primary objective in parliament was to represent the interests of their national communities and to raise the issue of national or territorial autonomy. Remarkably, until 1926, not a single representative of the Lithuanian Nationalists' Union, representing the conservative faction of the society, was elected<sup>18</sup>. This represented one of the paradoxes of the Lithuanian parliamentary period. In the conditions of parliamentary democracy, prominent leaders of the Lithuanian national movement from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Jonas Basanavičius), as well as the key figures in Lithuanian state politics of 1918 (Antanas Smetona and Augustinas

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<sup>18</sup> *Politinės partijos Lietuvoje 1918–1940 m. Dokumentų rinkinys*, sud. Mindaugas TAMOŠAITIS, Vilnius 2020, pp. 31–40, 109–119, 223–234, 373–380, 630–633.

Voldemaras), and leading Lithuanian public figures (Juozas Tumas Vaižgantas), who were affiliated with the Lithuanian Nationalists' Union, were unable to participate in the country's governance by way of elections. This was one of the reasons for their disillusionment with parliamentary democracy.

THE 'POWER' AND 'LIMITS'  
OF THE LITHUANIAN PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM

Throughout the parliamentary period, the *Seimas* played a pivotal role in establishing the foundations of Lithuania's restored national statehood. On 15 May 1920, during the inaugural session of the Constituent Assembly, the state system was established: Lithuania was declared a democratic republic. The precept of the Act of 16 February was thus implemented. During the parliamentary period, fundamental laws were adopted, leading to both *de facto* and *de jure* recognition of the state. Additionally, Klaipėda was integrated into the state of Lithuania with the status of an autonomous region.

However, certain political processes in Lithuania contributed to the transient nature of parliamentarism. On 15 May 1920, the Declaration of the Constituent Assembly established the State of Lithuania as a democratic republic<sup>19</sup>. Yet, on 17 December 1926, a military-political *coup d'état* interrupted the evolution of parliamentary democracy. The tradition of commemorating Republic Day was also discontinued. Following the coup, Lithuanian society was caught in a conflict of ideas between two political worldviews. Nationalists and supporters of the 'national government' were convinced that the most significant contributors to the restoration of the Lithuanian state and the consolidation of independence in 1918–1920 were the Lithuanian Council and the first president, Antanas Smetona, as well as the volunteer soldiers and the leadership of the Lithuanian army. The representatives of this opinion were convinced that the Constituent Assembly, and eventually the parliamentary system, symbolised the 'fragmentation' of society and represented an existential threat to the independence of the state that resulted from it. After the authoritarian rule of Antanas Smetona was established, 15 May was removed from the list of public holidays, alongside the day commemorating the adoption of the 1922 constitution by the Constituent Assembly. Instead, 16 February (1918), the Day of the Restoration of the State, remained the main public holiday<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore, nationalists celebrated the day of the 1926 *coup d'état*, 17 December. This meant that during the interwar period, Lithuania had not yet developed a tradition of seeing parliamentary democracy as a value.

<sup>19</sup> *Steigiamojo Seimo darbai*, Kaunas 1920, 1 sesija, 1 posėdis, 15 May 1920, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Vilma AKMENYTĖ-RUZGIENĖ, „Dvasios pakilimo dienos“: Lietuvos valstybės švenčių transformacijos 1918–1940 metais, *Parlamento studijos*, no. 24: 2018, pp. 78–83, 86–90.

The most significant task of the Constituent Assembly was the adoption of the first permanent constitution in 1922. Although the unconstitutionality of the authoritarian regime was constantly stressed by democratic forces, the drafting and adoption of the constitution by parliament in 1922 encountered significant hurdles and had far-reaching consequences. The ruling Christian Democrats and the opposition centre-left and minority groups disagreed on numerous fundamental issues. Initially, the Peasant Populists and Social Democrats contested the necessity of a presidential institution. Later, they relented but wanted the president to have only symbolic powers. There was no consensus between the ruling party and the opposition regarding the procedure for declaring a state of emergency in the country, the relationship between Church and state, the nature of the education system, the independence of the judiciary, the inviolability of private property, and the rights of national minorities<sup>21</sup>.

These issues prevented a compromise in parliament on the draft constitution. During the vote, the Social Democrats left the chamber, while the Peasant Populists and the Polish minority groups abstained. The constitution was adopted only with the votes of the Christian Democrats and the Jewish faction (despite the fact that the constitution narrowed the limits of their national personal autonomy). The non-elected party of Antanas Smetona (the Nationalists) did not participate in the drafting process. Thus, there was a lack of national political consensus in the adoption of Lithuania's first democratic constitution. In 1926, the coup plotters violated the constitution, prompting the new political leadership to draft and adopt a new one in 1928, subsequently replaced by another in 1938, establishing a presidential-type political regime<sup>22</sup>.

One of the first political crises during the parliamentary period in Lithuania was related to the presidential elections. Initially, left-wing parties within the Constituent Assembly opposed establishing this institution. However, they eventually relented. For some time, the idea of electing a president who was not affiliated with parliamentary parties and who could act as a mediator between the competing political camps was discussed. When no compromise was found, the speaker of the Constituent Assembly took office. By late 1922, the first elections to the First *Seimas* were marked by a crisis. The ruling Christian Democrats fielded the same candidate, but the opposition voted against. The problem arose because a dispute ensued over the interpretation of the constitution concerning who should be considered as the elected president. Article 41 of the constitution stated: 'The President of the Republic shall be elected by

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<sup>21</sup> *Lietuvos istorija. Nepriklausomybė (1918–1940)*, t. 10, d. 1, pp. 491–494.

<sup>22</sup> In the 1938 constitution, the term 'republic' was replaced by 'state'. The constitution provided that the president 'was not responsible for the acts of his power' and the presidential office term was unlimited. *Lietuvos Konstitucija*, *Vyriausybės žinios*, 12 May 1938, no. 608, pp. 237, 240.

secret ballot by an absolute majority<sup>23</sup>. The exact interpretation of 'absolute majority' – whether a simple majority (50 percent plus one vote), two-thirds, three-quarters, etc. – remained ambiguous. Moreover, disputes arose in the *Seimas* as to whether the presidential election required an 'absolute majority' of all the members of the *Seimas* or only an 'absolute majority' of the members present at the session. The election of President Aleksandras Stulginskis, nominated by the Christian Democrats, was contested by opposition parties.

With no constitutional court in place, the interpretation of the basic state law articles was left to the discretion of the *Seimas*. In 1922, the constitutional interpretation of the ruling majority prevailed. On 19 December 1926, during the first session following the coup, Antanas Smetona, the default candidate of the coup organisers, was elected president with votes from the Christian Democrats and the Nationalists. The left-wing parties boycotted the session, so the votes of the members of the *Seimas* present at the meeting were sufficient to deem the election 'legal'. This conflict created the preconditions for legitimising the effects of the coup.

The parliamentary system in Lithuania was hampered by the strong ideologisation of political parties. Neither the Right nor the Left alone were capable of ensuring a democratic political system. Nor were they capable of forming a parliamentary coalition that was even remotely sustainable. The coalitions of 1920–1922 and 1923–1924 were ephemeral and were usually formed only due to external factors, e.g. the Polish-Lithuanian military conflict in autumn 1920. Consequently, crises and frequent changes of government were common, but this mirrored a general trend in some of the parliamentary states in the region.

Despite the emergence of a political power trend in the parliament following the 1920 elections to the Constituent Assembly, the parliamentary system in Lithuania remained 'incomplete'. Between 1920 and 1926, the Nationalists (Lit. *Tautininkai*), representing the conservative wing of the political spectrum, failed to secure parliamentary representation. There was also a notable absence of political forces representing the interests of large property owners of large landholdings and industrial enterprises. Initially, until around 1923, parliament was characterised by ideological and social radicalism. Subsequently, the ruling Christian Democratic majority began to implement a more moderate, conservative social policy. This change had further consequences. Between 1924 and 1925, the Christian Democrats pursued policies in line with the party's worldview, resulting in an increased influence of the Catholic Church in public life. For example, religious instruction became compulsory in the

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<sup>23</sup> '41. Respublikos Prezidentą renka Seimas. Respublikos Prezidentas renkamas slaptu balsavimu absoliutine atstovų dauguma'; *Lietuvos Valstybės Konstitucija*, Vyriausybės žinios, 6 August 1922, no. 100, pp. 9–10.

education system, civil registration was not available in Lithuania, the clergy were involved in politics as party leaders, ministers, and speaker of the *Seimas*, etc. These developments fuelled a growing dissatisfaction with clerical tendencies within society<sup>24</sup>, with the parliamentary Christian Democratic Party bearing the brunt of criticism.

Perhaps the most controversial issue in this period was the maintenance of a permanent martial law regime. The Christian Democrats justified it by citing the military threat from Poland. However, the real reason was the desire to maintain political dominance. Several factors are relevant here, including the attitudes of political rivals and the public. In the first case, the continued maintenance of martial law was a source of dissatisfaction for the political opposition. It provoked political tensions. This was one of the reasons why, after the elections to the Third *Seimas* in 1926, no political force even considered the possibility of forming a coalition with the Christian Democratic bloc. The examples of the functioning of such a regime were quite drastic. The first President of Lithuania, Antanas Smetona, was arrested and imprisoned for several days for criticising the work of the Christian Democratic government. Leftist political organisations and national minorities faced restrictions on their freedom of assembly and agitation during elections. Press censorship was intensified. Members of the communist-oriented faction of the First *Seimas* (1922–1923) were subjected to a crackdown, and were placed in prison without trial. This prevented their participation in subsequent *Seimas* elections. Under the martial law regime, military commandants had not only police powers but also administrative authority, which enabled them to control social and political activities by imposing penalties which could not be appealed against in court.

Before the elections of 1922, 1923 and 1926, there was a surge in radical nationalist attacks on national minorities in Lithuania<sup>25</sup>. The perpetrators of these actions were never identified, although it was not difficult to do so. The motivation for these actions was political – to bolster support for the Christian Democrats among the electorate. In 1924, ministerial positions for Jews and Belarusians were definitively abolished in the government. Some party activists propagated the notion of the alleged threat posed by national minorities to the national identity of the Lithuanian state. This policy provoked tensions between Lithuanians and national minorities. During the authoritarian period,

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<sup>24</sup> Artūras SVARAUSKAS, *Krikščioniškoji demokratija Nepriklausomoje Lietuvoje. Politinės galia ir jos ribos (1918–1940)*, Vilnius 2014, pp. 206–226.

<sup>25</sup> Vladas SIRUTAVIČIUS, „Kova už lietuvių kalbos teises“, arba dar kartą apie „murzintojų“ bylą (*antisemitizmas ir jo raiška Lietuvos viešajame gyvenime 1922–1924 m.*), Lietuvos istorijos metraštis, t. 2: 2010, pp. 60–73.

on the initiative of President Smetona, any incitement to national discord was punishable by strict liability.

The inconsistency of foreign policy from 1920 to 1926 emerged as another destabilising factor for the parliamentary system. Foreign policy fell under the responsibility of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and individuals with the experience in diplomatic work predating the Constituent Assembly. However, the 1922 constitution granted the *Seimas* the right to determine the course of foreign policy, to approve international treaties, to declare war and make peace, and address territorial issues of the state. The *Seimas* was also tasked with approving trade treaties with foreign countries<sup>26</sup>. The events in Lithuanian foreign policy from 1920 to 1927 are not the primary focus of this article, but several principal aspects warrant attention. First of all, the strained Lithuanian-Polish relations or, more precisely, the absence of diplomatic relations and the military tension. In October 1920 to January 1921, these tensions led to the decision of the Constituent Assembly to temporarily reduce the number of members of the parliament to 7 (instead of 112). This institution was called the Little Diet (Lit. *Mažasis Seimas*). The decision was aimed at ensuring parliamentary continuity and facilitating the adoption of essential laws<sup>27</sup>. The remaining members of the parliament were instrumental in mobilising Lithuanian society during the military conflict. The basements of the parliament building in Kaunas became a storage place for donations intended for soldiers.

The composition of the *Seimas* was directly affected by the annexation of the Klaipėda region to Lithuania in 1923–1924, which increased the number of mandates. The political representation of national minorities in the parliament was strengthened by the election of German representatives in 1926. On the other hand, the dependence of Vilnius on Poland was not accepted by Lithuanians. The territories of Vilnius, Lida (Bel. Ліда), Białystok and Grodno (Bel. Гродна) were included in the electoral districts, despite the fact that elections were never held there. Parliamentary system, which is driven by gaining the support of the *vox populi* at election time, hindered diplomatic compromise with Poland. The mediation of the League of Nations proved futile. In 1921, the Constituent Assembly was forced to reject three drafts of the reconciliation between Lithuania and Poland by a Belgian diplomat due to pressure from the society<sup>28</sup>. In addition, the Cabinet of Ministers was forced to resign in 1925 after the public became aware of the secret negotiations with Poland.

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<sup>26</sup> Lietuvos Valstybės Konstitucija, pp. 7–8.

<sup>27</sup> Mindaugas MAKSIMAITIS, *Mažasis Seimas – ryškus epizodas Lietuvos parlamentarizmo raidoje*, Jurisprudencija, t. 17: 2000, pp. 5–13.

<sup>28</sup> Lietuvos istorija. Nepriklausomybė (1918–1940), t. 10, d. 1, pp. 348–354.

In parliament, diplomatic relations with the Vatican stirred controversy, primarily due to the 1925 concordat between the Holy See and Poland, which granted Vilnius to the Polish ecclesiastical province. Under public pressure, the Catholic-dominated *Seimas* severed diplomatic ties between Lithuania and the Vatican from 1925 to 1926. The majority of the parliament sought intercessors in the Vilnius case, shifting the focus of its foreign policy towards the East. This shift was evident with the visit of Georgy Chicherin, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the USSR to Kaunas from Moscow at the end of 1925<sup>29</sup>.

Finally, the external, i.e. Polish, factor (the absence of diplomatic relations between Lithuania and Poland) became one of the formal pretexts for some of the officers disappointed with parliamentary democracy to prepare and carry out a *coup d'état*. It was soon followed by the end of the development of parliamentarianism in Lithuania.

#### THE *COUP D'ÉTAT* OF 1926 AND COLLAPSE OF PARLIAMENTARIANISM

After the elections to the Third *Seimas*, no political party secured a majority. Although the Christian Democratic bloc remained the largest group, they failed to form the government. The Christian Democrats did not lose the elections arithmetically but politically. In other words, all the other parties with fewer seats (despite their opposing ideologies) joined forces against the Christian Democrats. The coalition consisted of the Peasant Populists, the Social Democrats, the Polish, Jewish and German factions, along with representatives of the Nationalist Union, who were elected to the *Seimas* for the first time.

The main problem of Lithuanian political life in 1926 was that the Christian Democrats were both too weak to win the elections to the Third *Seimas* and too strong to be defeated outright. In a country lacking the tradition and experience of parliamentarianism, the existence of an antiquated but still rather influential Christian Democrat political opposition 'wall' suggested that the formation of a fragmented government composed of left-wing, liberal, nationalist parties and national minorities would pose significant challenges. The political agenda of the new political coalition was divergent and difficult to reconcile, united only by the desire to overcome the Christian Democratic bloc. The Nationalists, for example, openly stated that they would only support the Left until the opening of the *Seimas*. The new coalition's paramount objective was the 'restoration of legitimacy', i.e. by lifting the restrictions on constitutional democratic rights during the Christian Democrats' rule and curbing the manifestations of clericalism. The Christian Democrats launched a broad campaign to discredit the coalition, which they called the 'godless government',

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<sup>29</sup> Vytautas ŽALYS, *Lietuvos diplomatijos istorija (1925–1940)*, t. 1, Vilnius 2007, pp. 83–107.

in the public sphere, which disrupted the constructive work in the parliament and plunged the country into political chaos. There were not enough people in Lithuanian society who believed in the superiority of parliamentary democracy over other forms of government. The Christian Democrats failed to secure a majority not due to prior restrictions on democratic rights, but rather because after six years of their dominance the public grew weary of their rule. In other words, it was not the one-party rule but a sense of exhaustion that prevented them from winning.

The rapid liberalisation policy pursued by the coalition was a significant misstep. Liberalism extended across various domains. First of all, the new government abolished the martial law regime. It lifted restrictions on public events and relaxed press censorship. Paradoxically, these measures unleashed the potential for anti-government agitation and other activities by anti-government political forces. The new government, trusting in the consciousness of the citizens, allowed the underground Communist Party to operate almost freely. Communists began to infiltrate trade unions. In 1926, Lithuania witnessed 109 strikes within six months – the highest number in the history of the interwar Lithuanian state<sup>30</sup>. The surge in the number of strikes was not due to a sudden deterioration in the material situation of the workers, but rather a shift in the political climate in the country. For the political opposition (the Christian Democrats), this was a pretext to play the Bolshevik threat card in the public sphere. The conservative agrarian society accepted this argument as a genuine peril. However, the Christian Democrats themselves later acknowledged the 'Bolshevization' argument to be inaccurate. Foreign diplomats also doubted that the Bolsheviks could pose a real danger to the state order in an agrarian state<sup>31</sup>. At the same time, the activities of right-wing radicals intensified, culminating in the publication of a pro-fascist newspaper, which advocated for the formation of a Lithuanian fascist political organisation (Lithuanian Fascists), a phenomenon witnessed for the first and last time during the interwar period. Unofficially, the Christian Democrats contributed to these radical activities<sup>32</sup>.

The Christian Democrats tried to discredit the left-wing government and incite public sentiments by escalating the alleged argument of the 'Polonisation of Lithuania.' This is how they interpreted the government's permission to establish private schools of the Polish national community in Lithuania. The brutal suppression of an anti-government demonstration by nationalist

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<sup>30</sup> *Lietuvos komunistų partijos istorijos apybraiža (1920–1940)*, t. 2, sud. Romas ŠARMAITIS, Vilnius 1978, p. 623.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew BONNELL, *America's Man in Kaunas, 1926–28: Notes from a Diary*, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, vol. 2: 1997, no. 3, p. 262.

<sup>32</sup> Algimantas KASPARAVIČIUS, *Kunigas Mykolas Krupavičius tarpukario Lietuvos politiniame diskurse*, *Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos metraštis*, t. 27: 2005, p. 455.



students in November 1926 fuelled the escalation. The demonstration in the centre of Kaunas was organised by students, mainly under the influence of the Christian Democrats and the Nationalists, to protest against what they considered to be the harmful policies of the leftist government. For the political opposition, this was yet another argument that the leftists were prioritising national minorities over Lithuanians.

A narrow but active group of officers (the initiators and executors of the future military-political coup of 17 December 1926) reacted sensitively to the heated political atmosphere. As early as in 1922, a group of officers with staunch nationalist sentiments was active in the Lithuanian army. They established the Secret Union of Officers (Lit. *Slaptoji karininkų sąjunga*) in the early 1920s due to their dissatisfaction with the lack of nationalistic commanders in the Lithuanian army. Over time, their grievances extended beyond military matters to encompass broader issues within the state, such as corruption, social exclusion or inefficient allocation of state funds<sup>33</sup>. Moreover, one of the main sources of their discontent became the ‘political battles’ between political parties and their factions in parliament. Political debates in parliament were seen as ‘dividing the unity of society.’ In other words, the parliamentary system became one of the main objects of discontent for the Secret Union of Officers. Soon after, the Union became close to the leader of the Nationalist Party, Antanas Smetona, who had not been elected to the *Seimas* in 1920–1926.

However, it is crucial to emphasise that the Secret Union of Officers, as the instigator of the coup, did not aspire to an independent political role. Their objection was solely to replace what they thought to be ‘inadequate’ politicians with individuals they considered ‘capable.’ In 1926 they gained a political foothold by rapprochement with Smetona. In the autumn of 1926, an unplanned military-political symbiosis emerged: certain nationalistic officers rejected parliamentarism and democracy as a viable form of governance, while the Nationalist Party leaders seized the opportune moment to take control of the state apparatus and to introduce a one-party, and subsequently, a one-man regime.

The attitude of Mykolas Sleževičius, the leader of the Lithuanian Peasant Populist Union and the head of government in 1926, towards the veterans of the War of Independence (1919–1920) had dire consequences. Sleževičius had previously led the Lithuanian government at the end of 1918 and the beginning of 1919. It was on his initiative that the first call for volunteers to defend the national statehood of Lithuania was published<sup>34</sup>. Furthermore, he had promised land reform and free land ownership to volunteer soldiers as a reward for their service. By 1926, some of the former volunteers had not yet

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<sup>33</sup> *Lietuvos istorija. Nepriklausomybė (1918–1940)*, t. 10, d. 1, p. 552.

<sup>34</sup> *Į Lietuvos piliėčius*, Lietuvos aidas, 29 December 1918, no. 165, p. 2.

received their land, while others felt deceived because they had not received the promised state support for their settlement. In 1926, they started to organise themselves into the Lithuanian Volunteer Army Union to advocate for their interests. They were not in favour of the leftist government and the political majority of the Third *Seimas*. When the Cabinet of Ministers, headed by Sleževičius, condemned the Lithuanian Volunteer Army Union as a 'reactionary' organisation<sup>35</sup>, the Christian Democrats and the Nationalists seized upon this opportunity to their advantage.

The last precondition for the coup was the military reform launched by the government. It was necessary because, despite the fact that Lithuanian society in the 1920s lived in constant fear of Polish military intervention, the Lithuanian army was limited in its capacity. In 1926, Sleževičius's cabinet failed to explain the need for reform properly. The Social Democrats in general promoted pacifist ideas and saw the reduction of the budget for the army as a natural consequence of their political agenda. The Christian Democrats and the Nationalists exploited this by explaining to the public that the leftist government had launched a 'purge' of the army's leadership in order to retire officers with a nationalist outlook. As a result, a large number of officers joined the Secret Union of Officers.

It was mainly for the above-mentioned reasons that the political atmosphere in Lithuania became extremely heated at the end of 1926. But this was not the reason for the coup. The Secret Union of Officers had contemplated a coup for years. It was not important for them to overthrow a government formed by any parliamentary political party. In 1925, they threatened the Christian Democrat government. The atmosphere of 1926 was just the right moment to put their plans into practice. It was a pretext for the coup, but not its direct cause. In 1926, the existence of a clandestine group of officers in the army was known to the Political Police, but Sleževičius's government underestimated the threat until the last minutes before the coup. It was assumed that the secret activities of some of the officers were merely ephemeral and that they were incapable of posing a real threat.

The coup took place in the run-up to the sixtieth anniversary of President Kazys Grinius's birth. On 17 December, a celebratory military parade was scheduled in Kaunas to honour the president. The army was mobilised in the city, a situation that the Secret Union of Officers leadership exploited. On the night of 16–17 December, they easily marshalled the troops led by coup-supporting officers into the streets of Kaunas. Despite the rumours of a coup in Kaunas circulating in the autumn of 1926, political circles dismissed them as

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<sup>35</sup> *Lietuvos istorija. Nepriklausomybė (1918–1940)*, t. 10, d. 1, pp. 466–553.

part of the anti-government spectacle by the Christian Democrats and the Nationalists. Smetona only learned of the coup on 16 December, i.e. a few hours before the officers gave the signal to act. Thus, the claim that the coup was orchestrated by Smetona and the Nationalists, dominant in Lithuanian historiography, is inaccurate. On the other hand, on 16 December, when Smetona learned that the Secret Union of Officers was going to hand over power to him after the coup, he did not hesitate, accepted and agreed to 'assume his duty'. Therefore, the coup and, even more so, the introduction of an authoritarian regime is also his responsibility.

The coup in Lithuania lasted only a few hours and there were no injuries or casualties. Strategic sites were seized and ministers were arrested and interned. Initially, the coup plotters did not intend to invade the parliament. They did not foresee that the session of the *Seimas* would be prolonged until dawn for the discussion of following year's state budget. The coup plotters received rumours that members of the *Seimas* had gathered for an unscheduled night session to discuss how to quell the attempt to overthrow the legitimate government. The Secret Union of Officers leadership therefore had to improvise. One of the organisers of the coup, together with a group of officers, at about 3 a.m. ordered to end the session. The speaker and the members of parliament were confused, and when they asked on whose behalf the orders were given, the officer replied, 'the dictator's'. When the speaker of the *Seimas* asked: 'What dictator?', the Secret Union officer improvised the answer: 'We know'<sup>36</sup>. Following these exchanges, the session was closed and the members of parliament dispersed.

After the coup, the *Seimas* remained in session until the spring of 1927. Initially, the left-wing parties boycotted the minority government formed after the coup by the Christian Democrats and the Nationalists, which had support from the officers. On 19 December 1926, Smetona was elected president by a minority of the *Seimas*. He took advantage of an attempted 'counter-coup' by members of left-wing parties. As a result, he dissolved the *Seimas* on 12 April 1927. Soon afterwards, the Nationalists forced their supporters, the Christian Democrats, out of government. In the spring of 1927, the period of authoritarian rule in Lithuania commenced.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The course of the coup and the 'legitimisation' of its consequences that soon followed, demonstrated the fragility of parliamentary democracy in Lithuania in the 1920s. Changes in the political system were typical for the other countries of Central and Eastern Europe and were not specific to Lithuania.

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<sup>36</sup> *Seimo Stenogramos. III Seimas, Kaunas 1927, 2 sesija, 63 posėdis, 16 December 1926, p. 36.*

On the other hand, although flawed, parliamentary democracy in Lithuania in the period from 1920 to 1926 left a discernibly positive mark on the development of Lithuanian statehood and the cultivation of civil society. During this period of political pluralism, Lithuania witnessed a proliferation of various associations and organisations, affording them the opportunity to engage in the governance of the state alongside citizens who took part in elections. The period of parliamentary democracy saw the emergence of a political spectrum in Lithuania, a trend that had been evolving from the beginning of the twentieth century. Through the adoption of fundamental state laws by successive parliaments and the diplomatic efforts of the Lithuanian state, coupled with the work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lithuania achieved *de facto* and *de jure* recognition, despite unresolved relations with Poland. Alongside the commemoration of the Restoration of the State (16 February), the tradition of the Republic Day (15 May) began to take shape.

However, no political compromise could be reached between the strongly ideologised political parties and parliamentary groups. The absence of potential to form more stable parliamentary coalitions impeded the establishment of conditions conducive to the functioning of a parliamentary democratic system.

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