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The pragmatic (post-)communist: Algirdas Brazauskas – the first secretary, president, and prime minister of Lithuania

Zarys treści: Algirdas Brazauskas należał do pokolenia, które dorastało w sowieckiej Litwie. Jako młody człowiek został członkiem partii komunistycznej, a następnie wysokim funkcjonariuszem partyjnym. W następnych latach podkreślał, że zawsze czuł się jednak bardziej Litwinem niż komunistą. W latach pieriestrojki Brazauskas zyskał opinię partyjnego reformatora i z poparciem Sajudisu został pierwszym sekretarzem Litewskiej Partii Komunistycznej. Doprowadził do zerwania łączności partii z KPZR. W 1990 r. był jednym z sygnatariuszy niepodległości Litwy, został także wicepremierem. Po rozpadzie ZSRR odzyskał znaczenie w litewskiej polityce. W latach 1993-1998 sprawował urząd prezydenta, a w latach 2001-2006 był premierem litewskiego rządu. Zmarł w 2010 r.

Abstract: Algirdas Brazauskas belonged to a generation that grew up in Soviet Lithuania. As a young man, he joined the communist party and climbed the ranks to become a top official. In later years, however, he avowed that he had always felt more a Lithuanian and less a communist. During the perestroika, he was perceived as a party reformer and, supported by the Sąjūdis, became the first secretary of the Communist Party of Lithuania, eventually breaking away from the CPSU. In 1990, he was one of the signatories of the act of Lithuanian independence and also became a deputy prime minister. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, he re-emerged as a leading figure in Lithuanian politics. From 1993 to 1998, he was the republic's president and, from 2001 to 2006, the head of Lithuanian government. He died in 2010.

Słowa kluczowe: Litwa, Związek Sowiecki, Komunistyczna Partia Litwy, pieriestrojka, Sajudis, pierwszy sekretarz, prezydent, premier, NATO, Rosja

Keywords: Lithuania, Soviet Union, Communist Party of Lithuania, perestroika, Sąjūdis, first secretary, president, prime minister, NATO, Russia

In March 1996, immediately prior to the official visit of the head of the Polish state in Vilnius, Lithuanian president Algirdas Brazauskas granted an interview to a Polish influential newspaper (*Gazeta Wyborcza*). The conversation was partly

devoted to Antanas Sniečkus, the communist leader of the Lithuanian Socialist Soviet Republic (LSSR) from 1940 to 1970. However, no mention was made of his responsibility for the brutal Sovietisation of the country, his unshaken loyalty to Moscow, and the considerable political adroitness that permitted him to stay in office despite the upheavals within the Kremlin. Brazauskas affirmed that Sniečkus was a peculiar communist, a very Lithuanian one, able to secure independence, of sorts, from his superiors in Moscow. He took care to develop the republic economically and to build infrastructure, prioritising Lithuanians and successfully stemming the tide of Russian-speaking migrants. “He looked for people like me, thirty-year-olds, brought us to Vilnius, gave us a flat, and told us to work no matter what the official Soviet policy said.” Thanks to Sniečkus, the ranks of the Communist Party of Lithuania (CPL, one of the branches of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, CPSU) swelled with artists, writers, and scientists. Such men flocked to join the party, because, if only they kept suitable pretences, they were not required to demonstrate ideological commitment but could count on its support. Brazauskas described his mentor as a very pragmatic individual, although one deeply rooted in traditional customs of the nation. In assessing the Lithuanian party, the president added that true communists accounted for three percent of its members, the rest being “normal people, normal Lithuanians.”¹

We cannot help feeling that the long-time communist Lithuanian autocrat profile sketched by Brazauskas was strongly idealised. It appears, however, that the president used the interview to discuss not only the reasons for his personal choices but also the history of his generation that entered into adulthood in Soviet times. Almost until the beginning of 1950s, Lithuania saw continued armed resistance, eradicated only with ruthless terror. Moreover, these times witnessed a far-reaching Sovietisation of the social and economic life. It was not until the death of Stalin that the communist system began to be assimilated, in some manner, by Lithuanian society. Buoyed by the relative liberalisation, communist party membership figures grew, giving it a more national character. Then, Lithuanians began to more widely take advantage of social and professional development opportunities available in the USSR. Many, especially among the younger generation who climbed into the ranks of intelligentsia through upward social movement, joined the party for reasons that had nothing to do with their beliefs. Party membership was usually the necessary condition for obtaining, among others, a desired post in state institutions, while a career in the party and state apparatus ensured a decidedly higher standard of life.²

¹ “Normalny Litwin, żaden komunista” [interview with Algirdas Brazauskas by Adam Michnik and Paweł Smoleński], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2 March 1996; V. Tininis, *Sovietinė Lietuva ir jos veikėjai*, Vilnius, 1994, pp. 250–263; for more, see id., *Sniečkus. 33 metai valdžioje*, Vilnius, 2000, pp. 284.

² *Lietuva 1940–1990: Okupuotos Lietuvos istorija*, ed. A. Anušauskas et al., Vilnius, 2005, pp. 445–450, pp. 63–64; S. Grybkauškas, *Sovietinė nomenklatūra ir pramonė Lietuvoje 1965–1985 metai*, Vilnius, 2011, pp. 111–138; A. Srebrakowski, “Komunistyczna partia Litwy. Swoi czy obcy?,”

Algirdas Brazauskas was born in 1932 in Rokiškis, a town in northwestern Lithuania. The future president graduated in engineering from the Kaunas University of Technology, and his career picked up pace after he joined the CPL in the late 1950s. He was first the lead engineer at the Kaunas Hydroelectric Plant construction site and then, after moving to Vilnius, became a high-ranking official in the economic division of the republic's administration. From 1965 to 1966, he was the minister of industry of LSSR, and later deputy head of the local Planning Committee. In the 1970s, he was elected to the CPL Central Committee and obtained a doctoral degree in economics in Moscow. In the 1980s, he was a Central Committee secretary in charge of industry and energy. According to his biographers, it was these years of party and administration career that moulded his most important personality traits: flexibility and the ability to compromise. He also revealed the skill of quickly winning over the people he met. Brazauskas tried to avoid confrontation, while not being influenced by ideological principles.³ One may risk saying that this period gave rise to certain traits of his mentality, peculiar for a party apparatchik among others. This was primarily the belief that everything can be "settled," agreeing to solve problems through non-formal conversations and leaving his subordinates to work out the details; or, even better, to make a decision personally, bypassing the bothersome official channels. In later years, while already a president and prime minister, Brazauskas on many occasions tried to apply similar methods in a democratic state of law.

In the mid-1980s, the new CPSU general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev initiated the so-called perestroika (rebuilding). The ultimate objective was to reform the increasingly inefficient communist system. The main slogans were openness, transparency (*glasnost*) in social and political life, and doing away with excessive bureaucracy, mismanagement, and administrative abuses, especially at the local level. An interim consequence was relaxing the censorship and mitigating the repressive nature of the system, leading to an increase in social activity. In the Baltic republics, including Lithuania, the wave of liberalisation brought demands for more independence from the powers in Moscow, and ultimately released the long repressed national feelings. Increased activity was seen in parts of the society previously outside the influence of the communist party, but the change in thinking also affected many party members. The rising tensions became the object of sharp interest of Moscow, and the conclusion was to defuse them by stepping up perestroika efforts. For this purpose, the establishment of social perestroika support movements was initiated in the Baltic republics. These movements were to be used to exert pressure on the conservative wing of the party apparatus that defied the CPSU general secretary's programme of reforms.

in: *Nie tylko Litwa. Geneza i przebieg upadku ZSRR w roku 1991*, vol. 1, ed. A. Srebrakowski, G. Strauchold, Łomianki, 2017, pp. 205–224.

³ S. Grybkaukas, M. Tamošaitis, *Epochoj virsmo sukuriuose: Algirdo Brazausko politinė biografija*, Vilnius, 2018, pp. 60 and 98.

The Reform Movement of Lithuania (*Lietuvos Persitvarkymo Sąjūdis*, or Sąjūdis for short) was organised in June 1988, led by the non-party musicologist Vytautas Landsbergis. Initially, the movement's programme was rather conservative on the national question. Greater autonomy of the republic in cultural matters, and especially economic independence while remaining part of the Soviet Union, appeared the upper bound of what could be achieved. However, the slogans of Sąjūdis and its increasingly mass character struck terror into the local conservative party apparatus. The only delegate of the republic's party elite who decided to enter into dialogue with members of the new initiative was the secretary for industry Algirdas Brazauskas. In the summer of 1988, he attended mass rallies held by Sąjūdis and had a keen sense of the prevailing mood. Asked to take the floor, he promised to strive for the republic's economic autonomy and showed understanding of demands to restore national symbols, even declaring that the Vilnius cathedral would be reopened for believers. He immediately won genuine recognition in society and was considered a party reformer. The Kremlin had a good opinion of him as well. In October 1988, supported by Sąjūdis, Brazauskas was elected first secretary of the CPL Central Committee.⁴

However, already in late 1988 and early 1989, even party members in Vilnius (as well as in Riga and Tallinn) became increasingly insistent on extending the sphere of freedom. Sąjūdis quickly grew in importance and became radicalised, becoming a specifically national movement. Soon, demands to restore the full sovereignty of the Lithuanian state appeared.

The first secretary of the CPL CC found himself between a rock and a hard place. Moscow increasingly pressured him to "cool down" the simmering Lithuanian pot, while on the other hand, in the second half of 1989 it was already apparent that the Soviet order was going through a crisis, clear evidence of which was the transformation of the former Central European satellites. In Lithuania, emotions awakened were not so easily pacified. Brazauskas could not, however, ignore the mood in the country, including in the party itself. Many of its members, whether prominent or rank-and-file, also sympathised with Sąjūdis. They expected the first secretary to clearly declare his support for the right side of the barricade. Decisive, if contrary, action was also expected from the more conservative wing of party activists.

Brazauskas wished primarily to keep the course of events under control. Listening to the voice of society, he decided to make a risky move which ultimately benefited his position. At the extraordinary reunion of the Lithuanian party in early December 1989, the first secretary put forward a motion to detach the CPL from the CPSU. In a ballot, the motion was supported by the decided majority of delegates. A new Political Bureau and Central Committee line-up was also elected,

⁴ A. Brazauskas, *Apsisprendimas 1988–1991*, Vilnius, 2004, pp. 45–54; Č. Laurinavičius, V. Sirutavičius, *Sąjūdis: nuo "Persitvarkymo" iki kovo 11-osios*, Vilnius, 2008, pp. 101, 164–166.

including, among others, Sąjūdis members.⁵ Accordingly, Brazauskas decided to openly side with the changes. He still believed, however, that the USSR would not allow events to unfold otherwise than towards gradual, perhaps long-lasting evolution of Lithuania into a semi-sovereign state. Brazauskas was not an opponent of independence, but he did not believe that it could be achieved soon. In the new situation, he expected that as the new leader of the independent CPL he would wield more bargaining power against Moscow. Therefore, he opposed any definitive political resolutions increasingly pushed towards at that time by Landsbergis.

The plenary session of the CPSU CC in Moscow immediately demanded that the resolutions of the Lithuanian party be annulled and asked Mikhail Gorbachev to intervene personally. During his visit in Vilnius in January 1990, the general secretary threatened far-reaching consequences.⁶ Brazauskas did not, however, intend to alter his strategy and insisted on more autonomy for the republic. Soon, the Presidium of the Lithuanian SSR Supreme Council (or the republic's interim parliament) elected him chairman, or formally the head of state. Taking advantage of changes in Soviet law, the Supreme Council (whose sessions were not televised at that time) decided to liquidate the former monopoly of the communist party in Lithuanian representative bodies, courts, and authorities. The historic flag and anthem were restored, and a parliamentary election announced, to be run according to a new, democratic electoral law.

During the campaign, Brazauskas avowed that the main objective of his party was to gradually win economic emancipation, leading to full independence and restoration of the Lithuanian state thereafter. He recommended prudence in dealings with Moscow, reminding that Soviet troops were stationed in Lithuania. Sąjūdis, stressing national and emancipatory slogans, this time clearly balked at cooperating with CPL. It turned out that its leaders had a better understanding of the populace's mood. The elections, carried out on 24 February 1990, resulted in an absolute victory for Sąjūdis. While CPL candidates, Brazauskas among them, won 40 seats, the majority of them declared their intention to go over to Sąjūdis. Ultimately, out of 133 seats, as many as 96 were held by members or supporters of the movement. Brazauskas entered into a contest with Landsbergis for the key position of the Supreme Council chairman. According to some observers, the defeat of the CPL first secretary was ultimately brought about by the fact that, in his election speech, he again favoured a prolonged, staged growth towards emancipation and warned about the disastrous economic consequences in case of sudden separation from the USSR, while his rival proposed immediate independence

⁵ *Lietuvos suvereniteto atkūrimas 1988–1991 metais*, ed. Česlovas Bauža, Vilnius, 2000, pp. 217–219.

⁶ Gorbachev suggested, for example, that if Lithuania attempted to leave the USSR, she may lose Klaipėda. He reminded that the Klaipėda region was incorporated into the USSR by resolutions of the Potsdam conference, and that it was up to Soviet authorities to decide its future fate, cf. A.E. Senn, *Gorbachev's Failure in Lithuania*, New York, 1995, pp. 73 and 115; Č. Laurinavičius, E. Motieka, N. Statkus, *Baltijos valstybių geopolitikos bruožai XX amžius*, Vilnius, 2005, p. 173.

without waiting for the consent of Moscow.⁷ On that very day, 11 March 1990, at its afternoon session the Council passed the *Act of the Re-Establishment of the State of Lithuania*.⁸ The document was signed by 124 deputies, among them Brazauskas, who, while not hiding his scepticism, was fully aware that he had no option but to append his signature to the act. The head of the CPL openly demonstrated his annoyance with being sidelined and refused to take the post of the deputy chairman of the Supreme Council. He also did not want to become the prime minister in the new government. Eventually, he was coaxed into taking the role of a deputy minister competent in matters of economy. Hoping to prevent sanctions, he also took upon himself to mediate with the USSR.⁹ The post of prime minister was taken by Kazimira Prunskienė, one of Sąjūdis founders and a former CPL activist.

From that moment on, the Lithuanian political scene was dominated by a single actor: the leader of Sąjūdis Vytautas Landsbergis, who became the face and symbol of the Lithuanian struggle for independence. Yet in 1990 the success was far from certain. Moscow reacted by imposing an economic blockade and bolstering the Red Army contingent in the republic. Lithuanian politicians, including Brazauskas, failed to cajole Gorbachev into an agreement. The tension was growing and, because of Soviet provocation, disturbing and even armed incidents multiplied in the streets of Vilnius. There was no prospect of international support. In early January 1990, when the Lithuanian government announced steep increases in food prices, riots broke out in the capital. The leaders of Sąjūdis then accused prime minister Prunskienė, as well as Brazauskas, of acting in the interest of Moscow. The cabinet was dissolved, and a few days later, Soviet special forces intervened in Vilnius, with fourteen people shot and run over by tanks as a result. While Gorbachev officially denounced this action, blaming the commanders of the local garrison, and the army returned to the barracks, the tension in the republic did not abate. A few months later, when the Yanayev putsch in Moscow collapsed in August 1991, the independence of Lithuania (and other Baltic states) was recognised by the USSR and the international community.

Due to his willingness to compromise with the Kremlin, even at the price of concessions, during the confrontation with the USSR Brazauskas was pushed almost to the margins of Lithuanian politics and was not offered a place in successive governments. He maintained his position only in his own party, whose ranks, however, melted with each week. Already in December 1990, another extraordinary

⁷ *Lietuvos suvereniteto atkūrimas 1988–1991 metais*, pp. 238–239; the text of both speeches can be found in the minutes of the session: Lietuvos Respublikos Aukščiausioji Taryba – Atkuriamasis Seimas, session 2, 11 March 1990, <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAK/TAIS.251075> (accessed 29 January 2020).

⁸ *Aktas dėl Lietuvos nepriklausomos valstybės atstatymo*, <https://www.lrs.lt/datos/kovo11/signatarai/aktas.htm> (accessed 29 January 2020).

⁹ W. Bereś (with J.J. Komar), *Okińczyc, wileński autorytet. Opowieść o wolnej Litwie*, Warszawa, 2015, pp. 143–144.

reunion of the CPL decided to definitely break away from communism. The party was renamed as the Lithuanian Democratic Labour Party (LDLP, *Lietuvos demokratinė darbo partija*), pledging its support to the ideas of democratic socialism. Its elected chairman was, obviously, Brazauskas.

Once Lithuania regained her independence, a systemic and economic transformation was launched. Some Sąjūdis activists called to break away with the past and radically strip public life and economy of any traces of communism. The LDLP post-communists were saddled not only with the sins of the past era. Considerable controversy was also sparked by the so-called enfranchisement of the nomenclature, in which certain LDLP party members who still had large influence in state institutions and enterprises, especially outside large cities, were involved. Charges were also levied at Brazauskas, and an unsuccessful attempt to deprive him of his Vilnius flat was made. Finding itself under fire, the LDLP closed ranks around the chairman.

The party and Brazauskas himself benefited from internal dissent in Sąjūdis. Once the movement had achieved its strategic objective, it began to fall apart. Conflicts, previously suppressed, now exploded with redoubled force, and the leaders engaged into violent ideological and personal disputes. The position of Landsbergis, increasingly accused of arrogance and power-grabbing, was waning. The conflict led to a number of factions, often unwilling to compromise and flouting nationalist rhetoric, splitting off from Sąjūdis. The attitude towards national minorities, especially Poles, was growing worse.¹⁰ Fostering historical resentments had an additional negative impact on relations with Lithuania's neighbours. The highest authorities fell victim to repeated political crises, and accusations of links to the former communist security service were levied even against the recent heroes of the independence struggle.

Brazauskas's predictions concerning the economic consequences of breaking away from the East were also fulfilled. Russia, the successor state of the USSR, demanded that Lithuania pay market prices for supplied energy fuels and cut off supplies at a whim due to pretended arrears in payment. She also threatened to cut off the former Soviet republic from its former economic environment. Fuel prices rose, and interruptions in the supply of electricity and hot water became the norm. The Lithuanian governments tried to save the day by taking out loans in the West. The problems in trade with Russia and the emerging property transformation in economy resulted in unemployment and lower standards of life.

¹⁰ The main but not only cause of dislike towards the Polish minority were attempts to establish Polish national and territorial autonomy in the Vilnius region undertaken while Lithuania was regaining her independence. For more on the drivers of Lithuanian policy towards this minority during Sąjūdis rule, see V. Sirutavičius, *Lietuviai ir lietuvos Lenkai, Lietuva ir Lenkija 1988–1994 metais*, Vilnius, 2017, pp. 229–280; in Polish literature, the events of 1989–1991 in the Vilnius region were discussed at length by B. Jundo-Kaliszewska, *Zakładnicy historii. Mniejszość polska w postradzieckiej Litwie*, Łódź, 2019, pp. 123–272.

Sajūdis's insistence on closing down collective farms turned out to be politically costly. The objective was to restore private ownership of land, but since the decision was implemented almost overnight, it encouraged abuse, disturbed local social and economic networks, and put off countryside Lithuanians who might have supported the new government. Despite undoubted achievements (for example, negotiating an agreement to withdraw post-Soviet troops from Lithuania), in 1992 support for the Landsbergis cabinet was increasingly eroding. The joy of having regained independence gradually subsided, while the high costs of transition led to growing discontent.

Alarming political symptoms appeared already in April 1992, when, on the initiative of Sajūdis MPs, a referendum was held to restore the office of president and equip it with wide-ranging competences. The universal belief was that the post was being readied for Landsbergis. Feeling the rising dissatisfaction of Lithuanians, the LDLP leader called on them to stay at home. The referendum was ultimately held on 23 May 1992, but the number of votes in favour did not exceed the required 51% of eligible voters. The result thus remained non-binding, which was commonly interpreted as the personal debacle of the Sajūdis leader and a success for Brazauskas's post-communists. Wishing to mobilise his supporters, Landsbergis carried through the Supreme Council a decision to shorten its term and call new parliamentary elections.¹¹

The autumn elections were preceded by an aggressive Sajūdis campaign, utilising anti-Soviet motives, threatening the return of communism and suspended evacuation of Russian troops should Landsbergis lose. LDLP was strongly condemned because of its pedigree, even though pre-election polls did not see it as a winner. The Brazauskas party, in turn, based its campaign on stressing the negative costs of social and economic reforms. Sajūdis was primarily charged with the growing pauperisation of society and blamed for the lower quality of life. The nostalgia for the social security of the recently passed era was used to the hilt. Brazauskas personally visited dilapidated collective farms and small towns and appeared sympathetic to the lot of the common people, promising to "correct the errors," "remove the losers from power," and "continue the course" with the help of proven experts. He also stressed the need for "more pragmatic" relations with Russia, as Lithuania's economy was still dependent on her. As if by design, immediately prior to the elections the supply of Russian oil and gas was again cut off, playing into the hands of the LDLP leader (with some commentators even speculating that Moscow thereby demonstrated its support for Lithuanian post-communists).¹² The results of the elections, held in two rounds in late October and

¹¹ "Gegužės 23-osios referendumas: atsitiko tai, ką galima numanyti – trečiojo Sajūžio kūdikį Lietuva pagimdė negyva," *Lietuvos Rytas*, 26 May 1992; "Rinkimai dar nepaskelbti, o rinkėjais jau abejojama," *Lietuvos Rytas*, 26 June 1992.

¹² "Sutartys su Rusija pasirešytos, gal greit bus ir naftos," *Lietuvos Rytas*, 13 October 1992.

early November 1992, were truly surprising. The Brazauskas party won 73 seats out of 141, while Sąjūdis had to contend with a mere 30.

In parallel with the first round of parliamentary elections, Lithuanian citizens approved the draft of the new constitution in the referendum. Among other provisions, it restored the historical name of the parliament (*Seimas*), members of parliament and the office of president. At the first session of the new Seimas, Brazauskas was elected speaker and also acted as an interim head of state.¹³ In December, a leftist government was established.

In the upcoming presidential elections, Brazauskas was already a clear favourite. Initially, five challengers for the office appeared. One of the contenders was to be Landsbergis, who eventually withdrew, calling to vote for Stasys Lozoraitis, a distinguished activist in exile and the then ambassador of Lithuania to the United States. Ultimately, only Brazauskas and Lozaraitis – the latter supported by almost all political factions except LDLP – managed to collect the 100,000 signatures necessary to register a candidate. In his campaign, Brazauskas relied on his proven, “man-next-door” message, stressing the troubles of “normal people” occupied with everyday affairs. Responding to resurfacing allegations of communist past, he explained that he had devoted his whole life to the country, just like the rest of his fellow countrymen who did not leave their motherland and had to live in the USSR. In this way, he suggested that his opponent, who had lived outside Lithuania since 1939, had no inkling of her current problems, especially the most important economic worries. In contrast, Brazauskas posed as an expert in economic matters. He affirmed that the key to rebuilding the economy was to revive economic relations not only with Moscow, but also with Kiev and Minsk. During his pre-election rallies, he sometimes deliberately spoke unrefined Lithuanian vernacular; he also looked for support among national minorities and everyone disappointed with Sąjūdis rule.¹⁴

The American-style campaign of Lozoraitis, invoking patriotic, liberal, and Catholic values, failed to convince the majority of Lithuanians. The election took place on 14 February 1993 and confirmed the dominance of the post-communist left; with a turnover of over 78%, Brazauskas received 61% of votes to Lozoraitis’s 38%. It is symptomatic that the former first secretary won everywhere except in the bulwark of Sąjūdis and the political right, Kaunas.

The presidential inauguration took place in late 1993 in the Seimas. The first, programmatic speech of Brazauskas was more conciliatory compared to his tone during the campaign. He appealed to all political factions for agreement and

¹³ Lietuvos Respublikos Seimo Stenogramos, session 1, 25 November 1992, <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAK/TAIS.235315> (accessed 31 January 2020); “Pirmasis Seimo posėdis: iškilmių daina su ateitis ir praeitis priedainiais,” *Lietuvos Rytas*, 26 November 1992.

¹⁴ “Iš A. Brazausko, kandidato į Lietuvos Respublikos Prezidentus, programos,” *Respublika*, 28 January 1993; “A. Žuko klausimai išrinktam LR Prezidentui A. Brazauskui,” *Respublika*, 17 February 1993.

cooperation for the good of the country. He also declared that his internal and foreign policy would be first of all pragmatic.¹⁵ Before the solemn mass that was to conclude the celebrations, a curious incident took place that shows well how the president viewed his pragmatic attitude. A group of intransigent protesters who supported Sąjūdis successfully blocked the main doors to the Vilnius cathedral. Undaunted, Brazauskas used an inconspicuous side entrance and the ceremony resumed.¹⁶

The provisions of the constitution vested the president with the highest ceremonial role, but his ability to affect everyday affairs was minor.¹⁷ As demonstrated by subsequent practice, all depended on the personality and ambition of those who held the presidential office and the relations of the head of state with the parliamentary majority and the government. Immediately after his win, Brazauskas renounced his position as leader of the ruling party and accepted the resignation of the government according to the constitution. He then entrusted the post of prime minister to Adolfas Šleževičius, his successor in the position of LDLP leader. The basic law gave the president relatively wide, though vaguely formulated, competences in foreign policy. Yet, in this area Brazauskas initially did not feel too confident. In his relations with the West, he was obstructed by his past as a communist secretary, poor fluency in foreign languages, and a lack of international contacts and experience. To compensate, the first secretary believed himself to be an expert on post-Soviet reality. In an interview, he stressed: "I have thirty years of experience with the Moscow bureaucracy, I know how things work there."¹⁸ Before the elections, Brazauskas declared general support for the pro-Western course, but in the campaign and during the first month after election he frequently hinted that Lithuania should be looking for her own, original road to Europe and not solicit unconditional acceptance from the West.¹⁹

¹⁵ Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, Iškilmingasis posėdis, Skirtas Lietuvos Respublikos Prezidento priesaikos ceremonijai, 25 February 1993; <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAK/TAIS.235611> (accessed 2 February 2020). Comments of the first day of the presidential term stressed that Brazauskas was Lithuania's fourth president but the first whose inauguration took place in Vilnius (the previous ones, during the interbellum, being held in Kaunas).

¹⁶ *Prieš 20 metų Lietuvos prezidentu tapęs Algirdas Brazauskas neturėjo rūmų ir nenorėjo apsaugos*, <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/istorija/pries-20-metu-lietuvos-prezidentu-tapes-algirdas-brazauskas-neturejo-rumu-ir-nenorejo-apsaugos-582-306764> (accessed 2 February 2020).

¹⁷ *Lietuvos Respublikos Konstitucija*, <http://www3.lrs.lt/home/Konstitucija/Konstitucija.htm#NESI-JUNGIMO> (accessed 2 February 2020); A. Lukošaitis, "Prezidentas Lietuvos politinėje sistemoje: vietos ir galio paieškos," *Politologija*, 2, 1998, pp. 38–53; J. Zieliński, "Prezydent Republiki Litewskiej," in: *Prezydent w państwach współczesnych*, ed. J. Osiński, Warszawa, 2009, pp. 357–400; T. Godlewski, "Udział prezydenta Republiki Litewskiej w ustawodawstwie," *Przegląd Prawa Konstytucyjnego*, 3, 2014, pp. 23–36.

¹⁸ Quoted from: A. Lieven, *Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence*, New Haven, 1993, p. 268.

¹⁹ The fullest expression of his views on this issue was made in a lecture for foreign diplomats accredited in Lithuania. The president stated then that "our country should take advantage of her

In the spring of 1993, right-wing Sąjūdis activists founded a new conservative party called the Homeland Union (*Tėvynės Sąjunga*) that took over most seats held by the movement in the Seimas. This faction, which since then became the main opposition power, was led by Landsbergis. From the beginning of his term, Brazauskas was closely watched and critically assessed by the opposition, especially with regard to foreign policy. The president was immediately reproached that his alleged pragmatism, combined with equivocal declarations about promoting the policy of neutrality and undertaking closer cooperation with former Soviet republics, could in fact weaken the drive to integrate with the West in favour of tighter links with the post-Soviet Community of Independent States. The recall of Lozoraitis from his ambassadorial post in the United States was cited as an example of disturbing tendencies. The right paraded the ominous vision of Lithuania becoming dependent on Moscow once again. Brazauskas became the target of violent attacks of opposition politicians and was even accused of willingness to retain Soviet troops in the country.²⁰

Their rhetoric, openly hostile to post-communists, sparked an open rebellion. In late July 1993, a group of about 140 volunteers from the paramilitary SKAT²¹ formation first refused to pledge allegiance to the president, and then escaped with arms to a forest near Kaunas. The leader of the troop later alleged that he had intended to assassinate Brazauskas and topple the government. The situation was quite dangerous, because the Lithuanian army and police were still at the formative stage. The reasons for the crisis were actually social and criminal, but the rebels sent emissaries to canvass support from right-wing politicians. Some members of the opposition and journalists hesitated to condemn the rebellion, and even justified it. Ultimately, it was not until the end of September that

geographical location and act as a 'bridge' between the Western world and the post-Soviet East." A. Brazauskas, *Penkeri Prezidento metai*, Vilnius, 2000, pp. 213–219. According to researchers, however, his proposal of neutrality might have been a tactical manoeuvre. The former USSR troops were still stationed in the country, a fact readily used by Moscow to exert pressure on Lithuania. The Kremlin did not conceal its aversion to the unanimously pro-Western policy of the Baltic states. In the spring and summer 1993, the efforts to withdraw foreign troops were the absolute priority of Lithuanian diplomacy, but success was far from certain. In these circumstances, Brazauskas's prudence in declaring the choice of Lithuania's future orientation was more understandable. E. Nekrašas, "Kritiniai pamąstai apie Lietuvos užsienio politiką," *Politologija*, 2, 2009, p. 125; K. Paulauskas, *Kieno saugumas? Kuri tapatybė? Kritinės saugumo studijos ir Lietuvos užsienio politika*, Vilnius, 2010, p. 121.

²⁰ A. Račas, "Prezidento kritikuotas užsienio reikalų ministras atsistadynti neketina," *Lietuvos Rytas*, 18 June 1993; "Prezidentas garantavo Krikščionių demokratų partijos vadovams, kad politika Rusijos atžvilgiu nesikeičia," *Lietuvos Rytas*, 2 July 1993; R. Sakalauskaitė, A. Račas, "Susitavimas dėl Rusijos kariomenės: pasijutusi apeita, derybu delegacija nori patikslinti Prezidento poziciją, o Prezidentas – delegacijos įgaliojimus," *Lietuvos Rytas*, 10 July 1993.

²¹ Savanoriškoji Krašto Apsaugos Tarnyba (SKAT) was a paramilitary formation consisting of volunteers, established during the January 1991 crisis. In later years SKAT became part of the Lithuanian armed forces as KASP (Krašto Apsaugos Savanorių Pajėgos).

the authorities managed to convince the members of the seditious band to lay down arms.²²

The volunteers rebelled at a key juncture in Lithuanian history; therefore, speculation abounded as to whether their defiance might have been a diversion (for example, Landsbergis publicly blamed the Russian special services). August 1993 was, after all, the final date by which Soviet troops were to be withdrawn. In the spring, however, Moscow began to demand that the evacuation deadline be postponed. In reply, not only the right-wing opposition but also members of Lithuanian authorities jointly stressed that Russia owed reparations to Lithuania for the time the country was part of the USSR. Seimas experts assessed the Lithuanian claims at USD 146 billion. The visit of the Lithuanian president to the Kremlin, scheduled for 5 August 1993, was supposed to clear the air, but Brazauskas asked for the meeting to be postponed, ostensibly under public pressure. Moscow's reaction to news from Vilnius was firm. By a decision of Russian president Boris Yeltsin, the evacuation of troops from Lithuania was suspended, and the blame was put squarely on the Lithuanian authorities. In these circumstances, Brazauskas decided to take the initiative without looking back on the government and Seimas. The tension in relations with Moscow was defused only following "a direct and sincere" telephone conversation between the Lithuanian president and Yeltsin on 30 August 1993. The politicians agreed that Russian troops would indeed leave Lithuania by the agreed date, seen off with honours by official delegations, orchestras and "a sea of flowers."²³ Brazauskas announced the good news in a radio speech. On the next day, the last Soviet units departed Lithuania. The general feeling of contentment was attended by renewed accusations against the president, who supposedly waived the compensation or at least confirmation of the fact that Lithuania was occupied from 1940 to 1991. Brazauskas countered that if not for the compromise he had negotiated, foreign troops would still be stationed on Lithuanian territory.²⁴ Publicly, however, he never referred to the Soviet period as occupation.

²² The investigation produced inconclusive results, and later years witnessed a number of unexplained assassinations and terrorist acts commonly associated with the volunteers' rebellion. E. Digrytė, "A. Butkevičius: savanorių maištas - inspiruotas politikų," *Delfi.lt*, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/abutkevicius-savanoriu-maistas-inspiruotas-politiku.d?id=11828239> (accessed 3 February 2020); L. Vireliūnaitė, "Dvidešimt metų po Jono Maskvyčio organizuoto Pakaunės savanorių maišto: atsakymų į svarbius klausimus vis dar nėra," *15min.lt*, <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/istorija/dvidesimt-metu-po-pakaunes-savanoriu-maisto-582-357811> (accessed 3 February 2020).

²³ A. Brazauskas, *Penkeri Prezidento metai*, pp. 276–277.

²⁴ Brazauskas liked to stress that in withdrawing Soviet troops Lithuania was ahead even of Germany and Poland. He contrasted the Lithuanian success with the situation in other Baltic countries, which the Soviet military left only in the summer of 1994 (and some facilities, such as the radar station in the Latvian town of Skrunda or the nuclear submarine base in the Estonian port of Paldiski, remained in Russian hands even longer). For a broader discussion, see: K. Buchowski, "Kwestia wycofania armii rosyjskiej z państw bałtyckich w latach 1991–1994," in: *Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia w procesie transformacji i integracji. Wymiar bezpieczeństwa*, ed. H. Chałupczak, M. Pietraś, J. Misiągiewicz, Zamość, 2016, pp. 161–172.

The summer of 1993 in Lithuania was closed by the pilgrimage of the head of the Catholic Church, Pope John Paul II, who naturally met with Brazauskas. The papal visit (most Lithuanians are Catholics), the introduction of a national currency in June and bringing the evacuation of Soviet troops to a successful end were commonly viewed as presidential achievements. However, near the end of the year Brazauskas was faced with taking a decision of key importance for the future of the state. Russia saw the emergence of a constitutional crisis, which in late September and early October led to a conflict between President Yeltsin and some Supreme Soviet deputies. Both sides mobilised their supporters, and Moscow became the arena of bloody struggles. Yeltsin's ultimate win confirmed his rule but also bolstered his supporters among the military who were reluctant to make further concessions to the West. As a result, the mood of political relations with pro-Western states of the former Soviet bloc and former union republics that distanced themselves from the Kremlin changed. Russia began to strongly assert that she recognised especially the territory of the latter (the so-called near neighbourhood) as her sphere of vital influence and would not hesitate to resort to armed intervention, if necessary. The former Baltic states were expressly named as the potential target.

The events in Moscow were closely followed in Vilnius. Even though the Russian threats were levelled mostly at Latvia and Estonia, which the Kremlin charged with discriminating against the Russian minority, the Lithuanians were keenly aware of the danger. In addition, Moscow insisted on regulating military and civilian transit through Lithuanian territory to the Kaliningrad Oblast on terms favourable for her. In early November 1993, the long-awaited visit of Brazauskas to the Kremlin and his meeting with Yeltsin took place. The Russian president quite unexpectedly proposed to settle transit issues. In return for Lithuanian concessions, he offered economic agreements favourable for Vilnius. Brazauskas saw them as an enticing offer, especially considering the economic troubles his country was facing. An agreement package was signed during the visit of the Russian prime minister to the Lithuanian capital in mid-November.²⁵

The opposition, however, sounded an alarm, noting that in the context of recent events in Russia, linking strategic security arrangements to temporary economic arrangements was particularly unfortunate. The agreements did not guarantee a satisfactory resolution in any matter while perpetuating the dangerous state of Lithuanian dependence on Russia. This course of events raised doubts about the future of the newly regained independence. Parties that emerged from Sąjūdis began a campaign to convince the president and government to engage in efforts to have Lithuania join NATO. According to the right, the current rulers

²⁵ Č. Laurinavičius, R. Lopata, V. Sirutavičius, "Rusijos Federacijos karinis tranzitas per Lietuvos respublikos teritoriją," *Politologija*, 4, 2002, pp. 17–18; G. Vitkus, *Diplomatinė aporija. Tarptautinė Lietuvos ir Rusijos santykių normalizacijos perspektyva*, Vilnius, 2007, pp. 40–41.

did not guarantee that this objective would be pursued with due care, and Brazauskas even clearly discounted it. Yet, while pursuing Brazauskas's idea of being a "bridge" between the East and West, Lithuania could indeed become easy prey for neo-imperial Russian aspirations. A clear stimulus also came from Riga and Tallinn. At the Baltic states summit in the capital of Estonia in mid-December 1993, the presidents of Latvia and Estonia, Guntis Ulamnis and Lenart Meeri, spoke in favour of beginning coordinated efforts to join NATO and the European Union, even though Russian troops were still stationed in these countries. They urged Brazauskas to take the same position.²⁶

The decision was made in late December. The representatives of all parties in the Seimas, the head of diplomacy, and the president and his advisers held a number of consultations on foreign policy strategy. The arguments used in the debate by the opposition finally convinced Brazauskas, which led to a gradual rapprochement of positions. Finally, on 22 December 1993, a debate on foreign policy directions attended by the head of state took place in the Seimas. The president clearly spoke in favour of taking a pro-Western course. The Seimas adopted a resolution in which the executive was recommended to submit a formal motion to join NATO, and later also the European Union.²⁷ In early January 1994, the president granted this wish. Adopting a new strategy meant a complete realignment of the views of Brazauskas, who concluded that taking a different stance would be favourable for the country. The evolution was crucial: from that time on, the president became the chief advocate and face of Lithuanian endeavours for European and trans-Atlantic integration. He did not slacken his efforts despite the fact that in the 1990s the prospects for Lithuanian membership, especially in NATO, appeared very distant, among others because of Russian objections. Both in debates against home opponents and in addresses at international fora, Brazauskas tirelessly argued that Lithuania was not considering an alternative and would consistently strive to reach the set goals. Sometimes, this exposed the Lithuanian president to slights. For example, in April 1996 his speech at the Bulgarian parliament was boycotted by the ruling post-communists. In this way, they protested against the pro-NATO and anti-Russian policy of Lithuania.²⁸

Yet Lithuanian right-wing parties also had to considerably reorient their views on state interests. This was especially apparent as regards ties with Poland. Despite the persistent efforts of Warsaw, by the end of 1993 no compromise vision of neighbourly relations was produced.²⁹ The official diplomatic relations were at

²⁶ "Trys prezidentai paragino NATO atsigręžti į Rytų Europą," *Lietuvos Rytas*, 16 December 1993.

²⁷ Lietuvos Respublikos Seimo Stenogramos, session 56, 22 December 1993, https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAK/TAIS.237050#zyma_3s56podisk (accessed 3 February 2020).

²⁸ "Prezidentas: Alternatyvos NATO narystei nėra," *Diena*, 2 September 1995; "Bulgarių Vyriausybė ignoravo A. Brazauską," *Respublika*, 12 April 1996.

²⁹ K. Sidorkiewicz, *Od trudnego sąsiedztwa po strategiczne partnerstwo. Polska wobec Litwy w latach 1990-2004*, Elbląg, 2014, pp. 19–53.

most acceptable, and periodically even cool. The Lithuanian authorities were in no hurry to enter into an agreement with their neighbour. The right, heirs to Sąjūdis, usually treated the stubborn policy towards Poland as a mission. Wielding emotional arguments, they successfully blocked and denounced competing visions as acts of national treason. The left remained on the defensive or assumed a similar narrative. The differences boiled down to tactical nuances. Even after the triumph in parliamentary and then presidential elections, Brazauskas and other LDLP leaders saw achieving an agreement with Poland as necessary but not top-priority, and not worth risking another quarrel with Sąjūdis. Among the ruling class, as in the entire society, those who desired to overcome prejudices and achieve a historical breakthrough in Lithuanian–Polish relations were in the minority. It was not until the aforesaid compromise in foreign policy that a change took place. The Lithuanian political elites concluded that the shortest road to the West led through Poland, not only in the literal geographical meaning. The decisive step was taken by the formerly adamant right-wing parties. Relying on Warsaw was, however, treated by Vilnius as a price to be paid for achieving a much more serious objective.

The consequence was resuming work on a treaty on good neighbourly relations with Poland, followed by an agreement signed by presidents Brazauskas and Wałęsa in April 1994 in Vilnius. Soon after, while visiting Poland in February 1995, Brazauskas proposed a far-reaching intensification of political, economic, and military cooperation.³⁰ The shift in Lithuanian attitude was welcomed by Poland. A period of clearly warmer relations, revived cooperation and even “strategic partnership” in relations between the two countries began. Brazauskas was on an especially good footing with the new Polish president, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, elected in November 1995, like him a scion of post-communist left who converted to a pro-Western leaning.³¹

On the international arena, the Lithuanian president held up his country as a mature democracy meeting Western standards. Not all initiatives undertaken in the West were unequivocally viewed in a positive light on the domestic scene, however. Having regained her independence, Lithuania restored the citizenship of or otherwise honoured a group of exiles and veterans of anti-communist resistance. It turned out their ranks included individuals accused of participating in the extermination of Jews during the years of Nazi occupation. Despite outrage from Jewish organisations and some governments, the Lithuanian authorities were slow to react. The right-wing nationalists and a not inconsiderable part of society treated former guerrilla fighters as heroes whose deeds during the war could

³⁰ A. Brazauskas, *Penkeri Prezidento metai*, pp. 309 and 314; V. V. Sirutavičius, *Lietuviai ir lietuvs Lenkai, Lietuva ir Lenkija*, pp. 393–424.

³¹ A. Valionis, E. Ignatavičius, I. Bričkovskienė, “From Solidarity to Partnership: Lithuanian-Polish Relations 1988–1998,” *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, 2, 1998; B. Jankowski, *W dziesięciolecie traktatu polsko-litewskiego*, Suchy Las, 2004, pp. 41–42.

not be unequivocally judged without taking into account the convoluted context of these times. Many Lithuanian politicians and even intellectual figures considered the attitude towards the past as the measure of current patriotism. The unclear situation was a major stain on Lithuania's image and could unfavourably affect plans to integrate with the West. Brazauskas, aware of the danger, decided to take the initiative in his usual way and make the first move to reduce the tensions. Already in April 1994, speaking at the Council of Europe forum, he promised that his country would stop honouring and begin sentencing the perpetrators of crimes upon Jews. In late February and early March 1995, the Lithuanian president visited Israel. The visit's schedule included touring the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem. The entrance was blocked by a group of Lithuanian Jews saved from the Holocaust. Brazauskas walked up to one of the protesters, and embraced and kissed him. On the next day, speaking in the Knesset, he apologised for the Lithuanian contribution to the extermination of Jews during the Second World War. He also promised to work together with Israeli experts in prosecuting war criminals. While well received internationally, the president's speech was criticised at home, his opponents arguing that it smeared the good name of the nation.³² Only in later years did the Lithuanians begin to discuss the more infamous pages of their history.

Switching to a uniformly pro-Western policy inevitably meant worse relations between Lithuania and Russia. Brazauskas was traditionally well received at the Kremlin, where he was treated as a pragmatic politician, and had good contacts with Yeltsin. Regardless of his personal sympathies and views, the Lithuanian president did not, however, shirk from decisions objecting to falsifying history and neo-imperialist Russian policy. For example, in May 1995, he joined the presidents of Latvia and Estonia in refusing to go to Moscow to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of Second World War. His approach to strategic issues was similar: in agreement with his Baltic partners, he rejected the proposal to join the Community of Independent States on behalf of Lithuania.³³ The Russian president tried to pry Lithuania away from Baltic solidarity. During Brazauskas's visit to the Kremlin, Yeltsin suddenly proposed entering into a border treaty. The Lithuanian leader unhesitatingly signed the agreement. The situation was especially peculiar, because Lithuania was the first post-Soviet republic with which Russia had entered into a similar accord, and negotiations between government teams of experts had not yet finished. Brazauskas again waved aside any doubts. In doing this, he followed the adage "accept but do not countersign"; in November 1997, presidents of the three Baltic states jointly rejected the offer of Russian security guarantees

³² "Speech by the President of the Republic of Lithuania Mr. Algirdas Brazauskas, Delivered at the Knesset in Jerusalem, at 4 p.m., 1 March 1995," in: *Selection of Documents on Jewish Heritage and Problems*, ed. E. Zingeris, Vilnius, 1997, pp. 15–20; T. Lane, A. Pabriks. A. Pura, *The Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania*, New York, 2002, pp. 155–156.

³³ "Baltijos šalyms nenori į NVS," *Respublika*, 21 May 1996.

in return for abandoning efforts to join NATO. The Russian Duma retaliated by suspending the ratification of the Lithuanian border treaty.³⁴

Cooperation with Estonia and Latvia has traditionally been treated as one of the pillars of Lithuanian national interest. The Baltic cooperation in the 1990s was also strongly supported politically by the United States. Yet not all was fair and rosy, especially in dealings between Lithuania and Latvia, and Brazauskas inadvertently precipitated one of the more serious crises. The affair concerned the delimitation of the maritime border between the two countries. Lithuania did not want to agree to Latvian proposals on this issue, while Latvia put pressure on her neighbour, wishing to exploit oil deposits on the Baltic shelf. In May 1995, during a bilateral Lithuanian–Latvian summit in Maišiagala, Brazauskas and prime minister Šleževičius, without consulting anyone, preliminarily accepted Latvian claims that later became the basis of the Maišiagala memorandum stating the postulated course of the border. The president's signature of the memorandum caused a political outcry. The right-wing opposition protested, accusing Brazauskas of wilfully acting contrary to national interest. The head of diplomacy, Povilas Gylys, also reacted sharply, charging the president with entering into an unfavourable agreement without consultations with his ministry. In a speech in the Seimas on 30 May, Brazauskas tried to downplay the matter, alleging that his initiative was only the first step in discussing the course of the border. Ultimately, following many months of disputes that smacked of scandal, he was forced to withdraw his signature.³⁵

While the president was not officially a member of any party, in actuality he had extensive influence in LDLP, affecting the work of the government and the Seimas. Usually, Brazauskas's authority was enough, but during his conflict with the minister caused by the so-called bank scandal he was forced to resort to constitutional measures as well. In late December 1995, the Lithuanian national bank decided to suspend the activities of two large commercial banks. Two days earlier, prime minister Šleževičius and another member of the government had withdrawn considerable private deposits from them. It also turned out that they earned interest at rates twice that of other customers. In early 1996, the affair was leaked by the press, and the opposition immediately clamoured for the prime minister to step down. Šleževičius refused and avowed his innocence. Instead, the foreign affairs and defence ministers resigned, unwilling to work together with the discredited head of government. In a year of a parliamentary election, the ruling party found itself on brink of secession. The president had to step in. Brazauskas did not accept the resignation of either minister and firmly demanded the dismissal of the prime

³⁴ "Sienos sutartis Dūmoje įstings," *Respublika*, 6 November 1997.

³⁵ Lietuvos Respublikos Seimo Stenogramos, session 38, 30 May 1995, https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAK/TAIS.239966#zyma_6s38poPrez (accessed 6 February 2020); A. Račas, "Maišiagalos memorandumas: apsigave Lietuvos išėitius," *Lietuvos Rytas*, 27 May 1995; for more see: V. Kašauskienė, *Lietuvos Respublikos vyriausybės. Jų kaita ir veiklos bruožai 1990–2007*, Vilnius, 2007, pp. 296–299.

minister. Šleževičius, sure of LDLP support, decided to challenge the president and once again refused. The president was forced to formally motion the Seimas to dismiss the prime minister. While LDLP MPs disagreed on the issue, the majority joined the opposition in voting for the motion.³⁶ The cabinet fell, and the president quickly installed another head of government. Party unity was preserved, and the crisis was apparently over. However, the two-month squabble was a blow to post-communist popularity. Only Brazauskas used the impasse to improve his image and strengthen his political authority.

The bank scandal greatly contributed to the severe defeat of the former Brazauskas party in parliamentary elections held in October and November 1996. As expected, parties originating from Sąjūdis triumphed, and LDLP won only 12 seats.³⁷ Landsbergis was elected speaker of the Seimas, and the right-wing coalition appointed a government. A difficult period of cohabitation followed. The post-communists became the target of numerous accusations. The right tried to implement a scrutiny procedure, hoping to keep former party apparatchiks and employees, as well as communist secret service agents, away from public life. Allegations of aiding the secret service in the past became a powerful weapon in fighting political opponents. The president, too, was torn to shreds. He was accused, for example, of not showing enough progress in efforts to quickly join NATO. The relations between the parliamentary majority and the president were, as usual, overshadowed by his past, but also his ties to Moscow. When the new balance of power crystallised, the president could no longer influence the parliament and council of ministers directly and increasingly voiced his displeasure with the overly restricted competences of the head of state. The last months of the presidential term, ending in early 1998, were filled with quarrels about how to interpret the constitution. In late 1997, while still popular personally, the discouraged Brazauskas unexpectedly announced that he was not going to run for re-election and intended to abandon politics.³⁸ The decision was a major surprise. Despite a few blunders, his presidential term was generally viewed in a positive light, both at home and abroad. Comments suggested that with Brazauskas gone, the Lithuanian political scene would become more diversified, no longer polarised and dominated by him and Landsbergis.

The office of president was contested by seven candidates. Prior to the election, Brazauskas backed Artūras Paulauskas, who was loosely connected to the

³⁶ Lietuvos Respublikos Seimo Stenogramos, session 75, 8 February 1996, <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAK/TAIS.240252> (accessed 6 February 2020).

³⁷ The Homeland Union (conservatives) led by Landsbergis won as many as 70 Seimas seats out of 141. The Christian Democratic party led by Algirdas Saudargas won 16 seats, and the formerly marginal Lithuanian Centre Union (*Lietuvos centro sąjunga*) of Romualdas Ozolas – 13 seats. Twelve seats were won by LDLP and Democratic Labour (*Lietuvos socialdemokratų partija*) that invoked its pre-war heritage.

³⁸ S. Grybkauskas, M. Tamošaitis, *Epochų virsmo sukuriuose*, pp. 323–330.

left. While Paulauskas won the first round, in the second (4 January 1998) he lost to Valdas Adamkus, a homecoming exile from the USA. Between 1998 and 2000, the Lithuanian political scene saw major shifts. Support for the right-wing government increasingly waned. Movements contesting the former scheme in which power was wielded either by a right-wing bloc or the post-communist left grew in influence. Paulauskas established a party called New Union (*Naujoji sąjunga*) with a social and liberal programme. Another rising star was Rolandas Paksas, who in 1999 held the office of prime minister for a few months and then headed the Lithuanian Union of Liberals (*Lietuvos liberalų sąjunga*).

From his political retirement, Brazauskas still kept a close watch on events in the country. Before the parliamentary election in the autumn of 2000, the former president saw an opportunity for the left and tried to return to politics. He lent his name to a coalition of left-wing parties founded on LDLP and social democrats. The campaign was based on Brazauskas's still huge popularity; the former president posed in photos together with parliamentary candidates but did not run himself. Posters with his visage were plastered all over the country. Trying to win over left-minded voters, the coalition did not shirk from populist, and even anti-European slogans. The October 2000 parliamentary election brought success and 51 seats for the left.³⁹ Despite the hopes of Brazauskas, who counted on becoming prime minister, a slight parliamentary majority was formed by the parties of Paulauskas and Paksas. Both leaders were clearly afraid of being sidelined if they entered into an alliance with the left. Immediately after the election, the embittered Brazauskas announced that he was going back into retirement. He soon changed his mind, however; aware that the majority in the Seimas was fragile, he decided to wait until it crumbled. In early 2001, he oversaw the consolidation of left-wing factions and became the chairman of the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (LSDP), in which LDLP formally merged with the social democrats.

The unstable Seimas majority indeed lasted just for a few months. In June 2001, the government fell, and Paulauskas soon came to terms with Brazauskas to establish a new governmental coalition. This time, the former president took the post of prime minister.⁴⁰ His political comeback was impressive, and his credit among the public once again high. In addition, Brazauskas clearly felt more at home as the head of government. He appeared less entangled with ceremonial duties and was able to focus on issues that actually fascinated him, especially current economic policies. He made most decisions in this respect personally, just as he liked. His confidence in his own competences, combined with a lack of prejudices, sometimes induced him to take steps viewed as equivocal from both the political and the

³⁹ In addition, the New Union won 39 seats, the Lithuanian Union of Liberals 34, and the Homeland Union 9.

⁴⁰ Lietuvos Respublikos Seimo Stenogramas, session 109, 3 July 2001, <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAK/TAIS.141143> (accessed 7 February 2020).

ethical point of view. Already in the 1990s, Brazauskas was suspected of lobbying for Russian corporations. As prime minister, he openly favoured certain Russian companies that wished to enter the Lithuanian market (he was, for example, in favour of a takeover of the Mažeikiai oil refinery by Lukoil), a sentiment he was censured for by the opposition and president Adamkus.⁴¹

Finally, in late 2002, the key decision to admit Lithuania to NATO was made. The issue of acceding to the European Union was also being successfully finalised. A presidential election was also planned for the turn of 2002/2003. Brazauskas's associates urged him to run for president, but he preferred to remain head of the government. The presidential race was unexpectedly won by Paksas, who defeated the incumbent president in the second round. Following the election, the Lithuanians were getting ready to celebrate their membership in NATO and the EU, but the turn of 2003/2004 brought a political scandal that temporarily overshadowed even these historic events. President Paksas was accused of contacts with the Russian mafia and then, following a prolonged and tense political quarrel, impeached by the Seimas. Prime minister Brazauskas initially avoided taking a clear stance, but ultimately decided to speak against Paksas.⁴²

In June 2004, a pre-term presidential election took place, resulting in Adamkus regaining the office. In turn, the parliamentary October election returned a Seimas that was even more diversified politically than before. The left only won 20 seats this time.⁴³ While Brazauskas managed to glue together a parliamentary majority and retain the post of prime minister, he had to invite populist groups to join the government. In terms of image and political influence, his most costly move was to compromise with the Labour Party, which had the most seats in parliament and was led by Viktor Uspaskich, a businessman and politician of Russian origin. The party and his leader was mired in suspicions of unclear political and business contacts with and connections to Moscow. In 2005–2006, Lithuania was shaken by a series of scandals involving political leaders of the ruling coalition, several ministers, and even the prime minister himself. The media disclosed that the long-term partner and then wife of Brazauskas reaped benefits from the privatisation of a Vilnius hotel thanks to decisions of her husband. There were also new threads linking this affair to funds from the Russian Lukoil company.

⁴¹ V. Kašauskienė, op. cit., pp. 573–579.

⁴² Lietuvos Respublikos Seimo Stenogramos, session 484, 11 March 2004, <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAK/TAIS.228429> (accessed 7 February 2020).

⁴³ The unexpected winner was the populist Labour Party (*Darbo Partija*) with 39 seats. The Working for Lithuania coalition brought together by Brazauskas's LSDP took 20 seats, and Palauskas's New Union 11. The conservatives won 25 seats this time, and the Liberal and Centre Union (*Liberalų ir centro sąjunga*), established in 2003, 18 seats. The Seimas was rounded out by adherents of former president Paksas from the Order and Justice (*Tvarka ir teisingumas*) faction and a party led by Pruskienė that soon renamed itself the Lithuanian Peasant and Greens Union (*Lietuvos valstiečių ir žaliųjų sąjunga*).

Interrogated by the prosecutor's office and whipped by the media, Brazauskas was unable to take a clear stand against the allegations. He still tried to distance himself from Lukoil, agreeing to sell the Mažeikiai oil refinery to PKN Orlen, as suggested by president Adamkus.⁴⁴ However, the prime minister's popularity among the public waned drastically. Even the LSDP began to look for another prospective leader. Additionally, strife grew between Brazauskas and Uspaskich in the government. In May/June 2006, the Labour Party left the coalition when its leaders were accused of corruption. Faced with another scandal, the government resigned. In the next year, Brazauskas stepped down as party leader and announced his definitive retirement.⁴⁵

This time, the “Brazauskas era” in Lithuanian politics had finally come to an end. The former communist apparatchik, president and prime minister left the scene in disgrace. He was charged especially with actions undertaken at the last stage of his career, castigated for populism, ethically doubtful alliances with political swindlers, reaping private benefits, and bringing the country to political and economic stagnation. There were even suggestions that he had squandered his lifetime achievements and become a tarnished legend. Yet his name could in no way be erased from Lithuanian history textbooks. The negative emotions gradually began to erode, and popular memory increasingly refocused on the age of perestroika and Brazauskas's presidential term, appreciating the role he had played back then. The former president still had his circle of faithful adherents. He was called “the man who took Lithuania out of the Soviet Union” and the “Lithuanian oak” (*Lietuviškas qžuolas*, in reference to his stout frame). Even while alive, the first biographies of his were written, stressing mainly his achievements.⁴⁶ When he succumbed to cancer in 2010, the church hierarchy did not agree to holding the funeral ceremony in the Vilnius cathedral. Nevertheless, his burial at the Antakalnis Cemetery in Vilnius gathered thousands. His name was given to the Kaunas Hydroelectric Plant and a junior high school at Kaišiadorys.

In 2018, a well-researched biography of Brazauskas, written by Saulius Grybkauskas and Mindaugas Tamošaitis, was published. The book immediately became a bestseller despite its academic nature and critical views. Reader demand persuaded the authors to write a polished and expanded edition, released in 2019 under the telling title of *A Man Who Linked Epochs*.⁴⁷ Both publications recalled the personage of the former first secretary, president, and prime minister and provided an opportunity for heated polemics. Brazauskas is still remembered in Lithuania.

⁴⁴ Ž. Damauskas, “PKN Orlen liko paskutini bariera,” *Lietuvos Rytas*, 10 June 2006; I. Chalupiec, C. Filipowicz, *Rosja, ropa, polityka czyli o największej inwestycji PKN ORLEN*, Warszawa, 2009, p. 239.

⁴⁵ S. Grybkauskas, M. Tamošaitis, *Epochų virsmo sūkuriuose*, pp. 350–351.

⁴⁶ G. Ilgūnas, *Algirdas Brazauskas: politinė biografija*, Vilnius, 2009, p. 542.

⁴⁷ S. Grybkauskas, M. Tamošaitis, *Žmogus, jungęs epochas. Algirdo Brazausko politinė biografija*, Vilnius, 2019.

Abstract

The article is devoted to Algirdas Brazauskas, president (from 1993 to 1998) and prime minister (from 2001 to 2006) of Lithuania. While Lithuania remained part of the USSR, Brazauskas pursued a career in the Communist Party of Lithuania (part of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) as a top official and member of the nomenclature. He belonged to a generation for which membership in the communist party was the only road to professional advancement and a career. Brazauskas insisted that among party members only a few percent were “true” communists. The others, like him, worked for the good of the country by using whatever opportunities they had. During the perestroika, he was perceived as a party reformer and, supported by the Sąjūdis, became the first secretary of the Communist Party of Lithuania, eventually breaking away from the CPSU. In 1990, he was one of those who signed the act of Lithuanian independence and also became a deputy prime minister. However, after the collapse of the USSR he was politically sidelined. In 1992, his post-communist party won the parliamentary elections, taking advantage of a crisis in the Sąjūdis government. In 1993, he became president, and his presidential term is generally viewed in a positive light. In line with the constitution, as president he dealt mostly with foreign policy. With his term ending, he declined to run for another, reacting badly to criticism of his limited competences. After a brief retirement spell, he organised a left-wing coalition and returned to power as prime minister. Leading the government fulfilled his expectations, because he was able to focus on economic and administrative issues. His achievements are, however, negatively viewed.

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