VILNIUS, Lithuania — Lithuania is holding a presidential election on Sunday at a time when [*Russian gains on the battlefield in Ukraine*](https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-mykolaiv-da3c0d9f26580eefeeb5752636442330) are fueling [*greater fears across all of Europe*](https://apnews.com/article/poland-belarus-lithuania-wagner-7743d53fd33b43a90d07e777fe4e17f9) about Moscow's intentions, but particularly in the [*strategically important Baltic region*](https://apnews.com/article/poland-estonia-russia-nato-putin-bf0bc50554182f9c9bd5ea9b1a5cf2ef).

The popular incumbent, [*Gitanas Nausėda*](https://apnews.com/article/lithuania-president-reelection-gitanas-nauseda-be14c9d4b410bb3b9192876bcb9ba62d), is favored to win another five-year term. But there are eight candidates running in all, making it unlikely that he or any other candidate can win the 50% of the votes needed to win outright on Sunday. In that case, a runoff would be held two weeks later on May 26.

The president's main tasks in Lithuania’s political system are overseeing foreign and security policy, and acting as the supreme commander of the armed forces. Those duties and the nation's strategic location along [*NATO's eastern flank*](https://apnews.com/article/nato-20th-anniversary-expansion-a5425f7fddd176804d4992e0ce2fd105) amid a larger [*geopolitical standoff between Russia and the West*](https://apnews.com/article/russia-putin-president-inauguration-ukraine-355bd36a2e833800187af848dc24a7dc) add heft to the role despite Lithuania's relatively small size.

There is great concern in Lithuania, and in neighboring Latvia and Estonia, about [*Russia's gaining momentum in Ukraine*](https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-fortifications-8a72981dfdb755de6f8011b13f4d062e). All three Baltic states declared independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union and took a determined westward course, joining both the European Union and NATO.

Nausėda, a moderate conservative who turns 60 a week after Sunday's election day, has been a strong backer of Ukraine, a position shared across most of the political spectrum. During his time in office, Lithuania has also given refuge to many who have fled an [*authoritarian crackdown in neighboring Belarus*](https://apnews.com/article/alexander-lukashenko-belarus-democracy-poland-sviatlana-tsikhanouskaya-4328a58942f748a362c6b036d44450a1) and increased [*repression in Russia*](https://apnews.com/article/navalny-russia-opposition-putin-8554f74e229c451f96956939b05d2a99).

Nausėda, a former banker who entered ***politics*** with his successful presidential run in 2019, is seen as the “safe choice for voters of almost all ideological persuasions," said Tomas Janeliūnas, an analyst at Vilnius University's Institute of International Relations and Political Science.

Among his main opponents are Ignas Vėgėlė, a populist lawyer, and Prime Minister Ingrida imonytė.

Not all voters view Nausėda as the safer option.

Asta Valanciene, a teacher from Vilnius, said that she would vote for imonytė because of the prime minister’s longer experience in ***politics*** than newcomer Nausėda.

“I would rather give her a chance than witness another five years of this random guy in office. I simply trust professionals,” Valanciene said.

A former finance minister, imonytė became prime minister in 2020 after a failed presidential run in 2019, with Nausėda winning that election with 66% of the votes in the runoff.

Vėgėlė gained popularity among some Lithuanians during the COVID-19 pandemic by harshly criticizing the lockdown and vaccination policies of the current government.

A second-place win for Vėgėlė could propel him to a prominent role in national ***politics*** before Lithuania's parliamentary election this fall — and would be a sharp blow to the prime minister, said Rima Urbonaitė, a political analyst at Mykolas Romeris University in Vilnius.

“For first place, everything is almost clear, but it's hard to say who else would get into the second round. Nausėda’s chances of reelection are high. However, this time, second place becomes very significant,” Urbonaitė said.

While both Nausėda and imonytė are strong advocates of greater military spending and big supporters of Kyiv, several other candidates call aid to Ukraine an invitation for Russia to invade Lithuania.

Vėgėlė's comments on the issue of aid to Ukraine have sometimes been vague, and he has mocked those who advocate increasing defense spending to 4% of gross domestic product, double NATO's target.

A referendum is also on the ballot Sunday. It asks whether the constitution should be amended to allow dual citizenship for hundreds of thousands of Lithuanians living abroad.

Lithuanian citizens who adopt another nationality currently must give up their Lithuanian citizenship, creating vulnerabilities for a nation whose population has fallen from 3.5 million in 1990 to 2.8 million today.

If it passes, the parliament would be able to amend the 1992 Constitution so people who have acquired Lithuanian citizenship by birth will be able to keep it if they acquire citizenship of another country "friendly to Lithuania."

A similar attempt to change the fundamental law failed in 2019 because turnout was below a required 50% of registered voters to be valid.