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## CASE STUDY

### Endangered Lithuania

Vilmante Kumpikaite-Valiuniene<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract

*Due to a decreased birth rate and increased emigration, Lithuania's population fell from 3.5 million to 2.8 million during the period 1990 - 2017. This paper presents a picture of the endangered Lithuanian population conditioned by high emigration flows. Four emigration waves and their reasons during the 27 year period in Lithuania are discussed. Economic and social conditions have only shown a slight change for Lithuanian citizens. In addition, no option of dual citizenship is available for emigrants. These reasons, as well as the Brexit consequences, have an impact on the emigration rates and Lithuania's endangerment generally.*

**Keywords:** emigration; migration waves; demographic situation; Lithuania; Brexit.

#### Introduction

*“A great emigration necessarily implies unhappiness of some kind or other in the country that is deserted” (Thomas Malthus).*

Lithuania is a small country in the Baltic region of northern-eastern Europe, with 2.8 million inhabitants in an area of 65,300 square kilometres. It is a very homogeneous country, with 86.67 per cent of the population being Lithuanians (Statistics Lithuania 2016), bordered by Poland, Belorussia, Latvia and Russia (Kaliningrad district). Lithuania gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1990, and this fact caused crucial changes in all areas of Lithuania and its citizens.

It should also be noted that in the case of Lithuania, the fertility rate is 1.63 (Eurostat, 2017a), which is not sufficient for a natural increase in the population size. It is forecasted that the number of babies born in the period of 2017 - 2021 will decrease by approximately 800 - 1000 babies every year in Lithuania (Pukenė, 2018). In addition, Lithuania registers the highest rate of suicides amongst the EU Member States and is the fifth in the world in this respect (Eurostat, 2017b; Petr, 2015). Suicide has been a significant social national issue that started after Lithuania regained independence in 1990. When living conditions changed, people felt unsafe and stopped expecting the conditions to improve, which negatively influenced the demography of Lithuania.

Official statistics demonstrate that the general number of inhabitants in Lithuania is decreasing the most in comparison with all the other EU members in the last decade (European Commission, 2015). The European Commission (2015) states that Lithuania will continue to be endangered and

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<sup>1</sup> Vilmante Kumpikaite-Valiuniene, Professor in Human Resources Management, School of Economics and Business, Kaunas University of Technology, Kaunas, Lithuania. E-mail: [vilmante.kumpikaite@ktu.lt](mailto:vilmante.kumpikaite@ktu.lt).

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its population will decrease by 14 per cent in the years to 2030 and by 38 per cent by 2060, predicting only a population of just 1.8 million inhabitants by that time.

The Lithuanian population has reduced by almost 24 percent during the period 1990-2017. A reduction of 177,000 was due to generally decreased births (11.6 babies per 1000 citizens in 1994, 8.8 babies in 2004, 10.4 in 2014 and 10.1 in 2017 (Statistics Lithuania, 2019)), rapid decline and slow increase of life expectancy after independence (72.08 years in 1988, 68.53 years in 1994, 71.96 years in 2004 and 74.52 years in 2014 (World Bank, 2018), whereas drop of 708,000 occurred because of emigration (Migration in numbers, 2018). Therefore, emigration is a very serious issue of discussion for Lithuania; consequently, this paper seeks to highlight the main reasons and causes of the four emigration waves of Lithuania in the last 27 years and to identify why this process is continuing.

## **The impact of emigration on Lithuania's demographic situation**

Lithuania has a population of less than 2.8 million, with one of the highest rates of emigration in the European Union over the last 27 years. Due to the loss of population, especially because of emigration, the number of citizens in Lithuania has been decreasing every year since 1990, with the total number of citizens being reduced by almost 1 million (see Figure 1). However, only approximately 55 per cent of Lithuanians leaving the country declared their migration after 1990 (Ranceva and Rakauskiene, 2013); therefore, real emigration is much higher.

Emigration has especially increased in the last decade. Statistical data (Statistics Lithuania, 2016) shows that almost 150,000 citizens emigrated from Lithuania during that period. Today, around 80 per cent of current Lithuanian residents have migrants in their close social environment (family, friends, relatives, etc.) due to every 6<sup>th</sup> citizen leaving Lithuania (Statistics Lithuania, 2016).

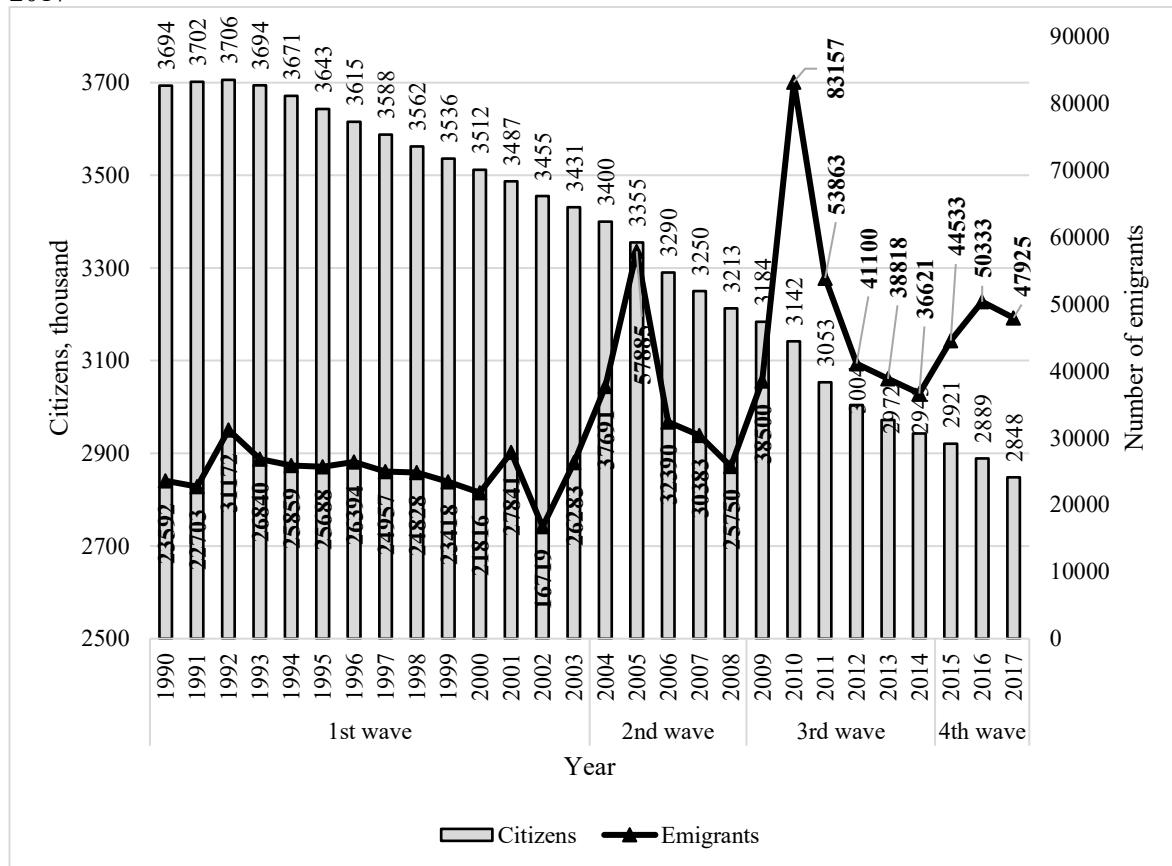
Twenty-seven years ago the situation was totally different: as Lithuania was under Soviet occupation up until 1990, it had closed borders and emigration was almost impossible. Immigration from other Soviet Republics was dominant and the population of Lithuania grew every year. However, when Lithuania gained its independence in 1990, its national borders opened and the mobility of people commenced. Net migration became negative in 1990 in Lithuania and it has remained this way since then.

Nearly one in six 20-40 year old residents have departed from Lithuania over the past decade (Ranceva and Rakauskiene, 2013). Around 73 per cent of all emigrants are in the age group 15-44 (Statistics Lithuania, 2018), with only 38.7 per cent of the remaining Lithuanian population belonging to this age group. Because of emigration and the low fertility rate, the average age of citizens in Lithuania is 43 years (39 years for males and 47 for females) (Statistics Lithuania, 2018). This big difference in the average age of women and men is connected with their different life expectancy, which was 70.7 years for males and 80.83 years for females in 2017 (World Bank, 2019), and this indicator is influenced by several issues. Firstly, men take less care of their health as it used to be understood as a feature "of weakness" (Kalediene and Petrauskiene, 2000). Moreover, Brereton *et al.* (2008) noted that males are more affected by unemployment than females. Therefore, in the case of Lithuania, they smoke and consume alcohol more and their death rate due to alcohol consumption is much higher (Grigoriev *et al.*, 2010). Thirdly, males die much more often because of external causes, and the major external cause of death of middle-aged males in Lithuania is suicide (Kaminski, 2014). For example, the most common cause of death for both genders was circulatory system diseases (63.4 per cent for females and 48.1 per cent for males); the second cause of death was malignant neoplasms (17.3 per cent for female and 22.8 per cent for male); and the



third most frequent cause of death was external causes, which accounted for 7 per cent of all deaths in 2017 (Causes of death 2017, 2018). “In 2017 the mortality of males due to external causes was 2.6 times higher than that of females“ (Causes of death 2017, 2018: 190).

**Figure 1.** Changes in the numbers of citizens and international emigration in Lithuania during 1990-2017



Note: Designed by the author

Source: Statistical Office of Lithuania 2017, 2018 [www.stat.gov.lt](http://www.stat.gov.lt)

In addition to the loss of young population, another highlighted problem of emigration is what has been classed as “*abandoned children*” or simply “*emigrant children*”; this term is being used and refers to the hundreds of children left behind by parents who have gone abroad to work (Thaut 2009). There are many cases where parents have left their children to the care of grandparents, older sister or brother, other relatives or even neighbours. Generally, these children are left at the age of 13 and above. According to the data from the State Child Rights Protection and Adoption Service (Sipavičienė and Stankūnienė, 2013), the number of registered children living with relatives or neighbours was 916 in 2007 and 2,247 in 2014. There are many examples of when parents abroad got divorced, created new families and the children left in Lithuania become unwanted. “*Emigrant children*” lack love and attention, therefore suffer from behavioural disorders (Thaut, 2009) and other serious problems such as depression, aggression and even delinquency. Therefore, another



avenue of investigation could be the influence on the society and what attitudes for family and society these unwanted children will have in the future.

## **Four emigration waves**

The emigration period of 27 years, starting from 1990 based on migration rates (see Figure), could be divided into four stages and classed as four emigration waves of modern Lithuania (Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė, 2017, 2019):

1. Post-independence decade (1990-2003);
2. Accession to the EU and the economic prosperity period (May 2004-2008);
3. Economic crisis and accession to the Schengen zone (2009-2014);
4. Difficult economic conditions since Russian sanctions, joining the Eurozone and the Brexit referendum impact (2015-present date).

Based on the push-pull emigration analysis (Kumpikaite-Valiuniene, 2017), economic factors remained the most influential ones during the Lithuanian independence period, and the importance of economic factors increased during all four emigration waves. The study highlighted low wages as the most important factor in all four emigration waves, and the percentage of respondents selecting this factor increased with each subsequent wave. In addition, higher income was the main economic factor that attracted people to move to another country of their preference. This factor was identified as an important one by more than 55 per cent of respondents and its importance increased during all waves since the independence of Lithuania. Wage differences and price policy were indicated as other important economic push factors, which caused people to leave Lithuania, and with each wave an increasing number of emigrants would choose them as a reason for their leaving (Kumpikaite-Valiuniene, 2017).

### **The first emigration wave: Post-independence decade (1990-2003)**

Lithuanians mostly started to migrate in 1992 and 1993, when people faced labour market challenges, the transformation into a free economy and change in the political system. In the planned economy during the Soviet occupation, all citizens of working age had jobs and the unemployment level was therefore equal to zero per cent. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Lithuania took the path of rapid economic reform to change their economy and the societal readjustment that the Lithuanian government was trying to accomplish harmed people's lives and their work (Kaminski, 2014: 23). Factories and enterprises were closed, people lost jobs and unemployment rates started to increase rapidly. Official calculations of the unemployment indicators only started in 1994 (Sipavičienė and Stankūnienė, 2013). In 1994, the unemployment rate was 14 per cent but increased up to 17.1 per cent in 1995. "Business strategy" with the advancement of the market economy started at that period: Lithuanian citizens went abroad with short commercial cross-border visits, bought goods and resold them in Lithuania. Later the purpose of migration started changing. Based on a study carried out in 1993-1996, Sipavičienė (1997) noted that people took "economic" or even "survival" strategy and started looking how to earn the most.

Even though the transition from communist to democratic system started creating new norms and values (Cao and Zhao, 2010), the personal value system that formed during the Soviet occupation still existed, and therefore not having a job was considered very shameful, stigmatic and unacceptable (Stankunas et al, 2006). As a result, many Lithuanians started using alcohol to deal with being unemployed and the other mentioned problems (Kaminski, 2014). Consequently, the prevalence of mental diseases increased by 34.5 per cent during the period 1998-2003 (Stankunas



et al., 2006) and the rate of suicides started to increase, reaching a peak of 38.9 suicides in 2004 (70.0 among males and 12.7 among females per 100,000 inhabitants) (Eurostat, 2017b).

The most attractive country for emigration, as in the previous historical periods 1899-1914 and 1920-1940 (Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė and Žičkutė, 2016), became the USA. Besides, the USA, due to language (Lithuanians mostly studied English and German) and distance issues, the UK and Germany became other attractive destination countries during the period of 1990-2003. However, the majority of emigration cases were illegal and this continued until Lithuania joined the European Union in May of 2004, when the second emigration wave started.

### **The second emigration wave: Accession to the EU and the economic prosperity (May 2004-2008)**

Lithuania joined the EU along with nine other countries on 1st May 2004, during an historic expansion of the EU. Therefore, the possibility to migrate became easier, although the majority of older EU member states still had restrictions on free labour movement from the new member states. However, the UK, Ireland and Sweden opened their borders and allowed the new member countries to access their labour market. These changes made it possible to get jobs and to enter EU countries legally, which in turn increased the mobility of Lithuanian citizens. Consequently, the destination countries of Lithuanians' changed, and the UK became the number one destination, with the USA demoted to second place. Ireland also became attractive for Lithuanian emigrants and became the third most popular destination country for Lithuanian citizens. The popularity of these countries increased because of the distance, expenses, language and legality to enter them.

The year 2005 was a peak of emigration, with a total of 57,885 citizens leaving Lithuania in that year. Consequently, the unemployment rate decreased, yet in 2005 employment was still 8.2 per cent in Lithuania. More than 28 per cent of emigrating people were long-term unemployed. Stankunas et al., (2006) noted that unemployed people started having a strong feeling of marginality, helplessness, dependency and not belonging among others, and this influenced their emigration. People initially used the "survival" strategy, which in time changed to the strategies of "ensuring the livelihood of retirement", "better education" and "career".

Qualified and not qualified employees left during the period 2004-2008. However, the percentage of educated emigrants has been increasing in comparison with the previous wave. In 2007, each second emigrant (1:2) aged 15 and older had not been working before their departure. Each eighth emigrant (1:8) within this age group was a professional (teacher, lecturer, doctor, etc.), while each tenth (1:10) was a craft and related trades worker, service worker or a shop and market sales worker (salesperson, cashier, etc.) (Demographic Yearbook, 2007).

Emigration started to decrease from 2006, when welfare improved in Lithuania and, corresponding to the findings of Curran and Saguy (2013), the outflow of migrants had a positive influence on the growth of wages in the home country. This phenomenon continued for three years until 2009, and during the periods of relative economic prosperity, the number of migrants annually was around 25 thousand. However, when the economic crisis reached Lithuania in 2009; the third emigration wave started.



### **The third emigration wave: Economic crisis and accession to the Schengen zone (2009-2014)**

Lithuania joined the Schengen zone in 2008 and obtained the possibility of free mobility inside many European countries, as this zone had officially abolished border controls at their mutual borders. No visas or even passports are requested for travel in the Schengen zone for its members.

In addition, the economic crisis occurred in Lithuania in 2009, although slightly later than in the majority of countries. The crisis caused an imbalance in wages, consequently unemployment levels jumped and people started seeing emigration again as a “survival” strategy and began to leave the country. All these issues together made an impact on the third emigration wave. This wave is known for its huge emigration rate (see Figure), which was as high as 83,000 in 2010. However, this number also increased due to a new law announced, based on which all permanent residents of the country had to pay compulsory health insurance. Therefore, many people who had not declared their departure earlier did this in 2010 and 2011.

Reviewing the study of Kumpikaite-Valiuniene (2017), 55.4 per cent of respondents selected low wages as the most important pushing factor in the period 2009-2014. Personal life conditions were mostly connected with monetary possibilities of life, and they were selected as the second most important push factor. These factors of importance also increased during each emigration period. In addition, emigration could be explained by a feeling of injustice. Žičkutė (2013), based on Burkhauser et al. (1996), proposed criteria, analysed social classes, stated that the middle class should include those inhabitants whose income exceeded the poverty risk line by 2-5 times and noted that Lithuania’s distribution in inequality increased rapidly during 2007-2011. Žičkutė (2013) stated that 40 per cent of the population belonged to the middle class in 2007 and just 9 per cent in 2011. In addition, 90 per cent of Lithuanians resided in a lower social class in 2011.

According to Kumpikaite and Zickute’s (2013) study of 2011, in order to decrease the emigration rate in Lithuania, the unemployment rate had to decrease to at least 8.5 per cent, which meant decrease in the level of Gini coefficient to 30. However, the Gini index of 33 in 2011 increased to 37.9 in Lithuania, similar to such countries as Tanzania in 2011 and Laos in 2012. The Gini index for Lithuania was the highest among all the EU countries, followed by Romania, Bulgaria, Latvia and Estonia. According to Pridemore et al. (2007), after the adoption of new economic and social systems, equilibrium had to return and emigration should have decreased. However, in the case of Lithuania, only the unemployment rate decreased, from 15.4 per cent to 9.1 per cent. Therefore, the economic criteria did not show a better situation and the emigration rates remained at the current level.

Destination countries during the period 2009-2014 also changed, with the UK, Ireland and Germany as the leaders and moving the USA to the fifth place; with adding Norway as a “new” destination country, which became even more popular to emigrate to than the USA.

### **The forth emigration wave: Difficult economic conditions since joining the Eurozone and Brexit referendum results (2015-present date)**

Reviewing the migration rates of 2015 and 2016 (see Figure), it can be seen that there was a growth in emigration rates during those years, when 36,621 citizens left the country in 2014 and 44,533 citizens left Lithuania in 2015 (Statistics Lithuania, 2018), which was an increase of almost 10,000 more than in 2014. In addition, the emigration flow continued to increase and reached 50,333 citizens in 2016 (Statistics Lithuania, 2018), whereas in 2017 it slightly decreased to 47,925 emigrants (Statistics Lithuania, 2018). These trends of 2015-2016 were particularly alarming, as



they identified that a new emigration wave from Lithuania started and that Lithuania had still not given sufficient well-being for its citizens.

This new emigration situation could be explained by several reasons. Firstly, since March 2014, the EU has imposed restrictive measures against Russia, and in relation to this, the Kremlin made a ban on import of food and agricultural products from the EU and the US. These impact of such sanctions on Lithuania was the most serious in comparison to all the EU, as it affected Lithuanian meat and dairy producers, processing plants and carriers (Maldeikienė, 2018). Even though the majority of organizations rearranged their markets and processes, some of them needed to fire employees, which also was the cause of increased emigration in 2015.

Secondly, Lithuania joined the Eurozone on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2015. As a consequence of Euro involvement, prices of goods and services increased a lot, whereas wages predominately did not change, especially for people getting lower than average salaries. Lithuania had the third lowest minimum wage in the EU in 2015. For example, comparing the minimum wage in Luxemburg (1,923 Eur) and Lithuania (325 Eur) (Eurostat, 2015), the difference was almost 6 times. In addition, the minimum wage in Lithuania was the lowest among the Baltic States, as well as lower than in its neighbouring country Poland. In addition, Statistics Lithuania (2015) provided data that around 19.4 per cent of employees only received the minimum wage in Lithuania in 2014. Therefore, the main emigration reasons for this wave remain economic ones (Science Newsline, 2017). In addition, as the study of Kumpikaite-Valiuniene (2017) highlighted, 67.4 per cent of emigrants left Lithuania because of too low a wage after 2015 and again could be called the “surviving strategy”.

In addition, it could be noted that 27.3 per cent of Lithuanian residents lived at the risk of poverty<sup>2</sup> in 2014, followed by their neighbour country Poland (24.7 per cent) and Estonia (26.0 per cent). This statistic increased up to 30 per cent in 2017 (Eurostat, 2017a). Kumpikaite-Valiuniene’s study (2017) stated that 22.8 per cent of Lithuanian respondents, who moved in 2015 left the country because of a wish of changes, demonstrating that people were tired of living in such conditions. Additionally, this is the first time that emigration did not correlate with any economic indicators of Lithuania. Officially, GDP and wages are increasing and unemployment is decreasing (Unemployment level decreased from 9.7 per cent in January of 2015 to 5.9 per cent in the second quarter of 2018 (Statistics Lithuania, 2018), however emigration rates grew in 2015 and 2017. Besides the mentioned reasons, another issue that has influenced emigration in 2016 was the UK Brexit referendum on 23rd June 2016 and its decision to leave the EU. Lithuanians considered this fact as the last chance to emigrate and moved to the UK, while emigrants brought their family members from Lithuania in 2016 and 2017.

Statistics show that emigration flows started decreasing in 2018, which was the first time when immigration was higher than emigration (in June and July of 2018) since Lithuania joined the EU in 2004. For many years, about 70-80 per cent of immigrants were returning Lithuanian citizens, and this proportion fell to 50 per cent in 2017 (Migration in numbers, 2019). It is because the number of labour immigrants from Ukraine and Belarus increased. Lithuanians mostly returned from the main destination countries, which constituted 48 per cent from the UK and about 24 per cent from Ireland, Norway and Germany in 2017 (Migration in numbers, 2019). The rates of emigration could have decreased because most people willing and/or having the abilities to leave had already left. Additionally, due to Brexit and an unclear future, the UK started losing its attractiveness as the main destination country for Lithuanians.

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<sup>2</sup> The at-risk-of-poverty rate is the share of people with an equivalised disposable income (after social transfer) below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold, which is set at 60 % of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers (Eurostat, 2019)



## **Possible Brexit impact on Lithuanian demography in the near future**

Apart from the already mentioned emigration flow changes from Lithuania to the UK due to Brexit, there are other considerations that are likely to have much bigger impact on the endangerment of Lithuania. According to Statistics Lithuania (2016), 147,100 residents migrated to the UK during 2004-2015. This is 40.2 per cent of declared net migration during that period and accounts for 5.1 per cent in comparison with all the population of Lithuania.

Standard & Poor's (2016) and the Economist (2016) noted that Brexit will have the largest impact on Lithuania as compared to other Eastern European countries. This will occur because of the largest Lithuanian diaspora living in the UK. The Brexit situation led to more Lithuanians moving to the UK in 2016 and 2017 and to many Lithuanian emigrants seeking to get citizenship of the UK. However, according to the Lithuanian constitution, dual citizenship in Lithuania is granted exceptionally<sup>3</sup>, similar to Singapore (Mathew and Soon, 2016).

The suggestion of dual citizenship has surfaced multiple times in discussions and debates. However, the only way to allow such an option is a change of constitution. For this purpose, a referendum on dual citizenship will be organized. It will take place together with the first and second rounds of the 2019 presidential elections. 50 per cent of Lithuanian electors should participate and vote in the referendum. Currently, more than 2 million 538 thousand electors are registered in Lithuania (680 thousand of them are in emigration). Therefore, changes to the constitution about dual citizenship seem hard to achieve.

Statistics of Lithuania shows that the majority of immigrants to Lithuania are returning Lithuanian citizens from abroad. However, because of Brexit and no option of dual citizenship, the number of re-emigration may not increase in the near future and Lithuania will lose more of its citizens.

## **Conclusion and discussion**

This case study presents and problematizes the endangerment of the Lithuanian population due to not stopping the emigration process.

Due to low wages, high social inequality and dissatisfaction with the political situation, emigration from Lithuania continues. Therefore, politicians should make important decisions related to economic and social changes, which should help to decrease the economic and social inequality and poverty rates. In addition, dual citizenship is also not allowed; and as a result, this factor has a very negative impact on the endangerment of Lithuania.

Governmental elections occurred in Lithuania in November of 2016. Citizens were active and demonstrated their wish for changes with their votes. The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union won the election with the largest selected number of its members; a vast increase in members in comparison with all the other political parties since the elections in 1996. The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union took a leading position in the Government for the first time not only in the history of Lithuania but also across the entire EU. Citizens waited for new changes, political decisions for the improvement of the economic and demographic situation in Lithuania.

However, in more than two years of government, almost no changes have been seen concerning emigration and the prevention of its reasons. Presidential elections are approaching in May of 2019. Almost none of the nine candidates speak about the demographic and emigration problems in

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dualcitizenship.com/countries/lithuania.html>





Lithuania and the means to change the situation, the exception being Vygaudas Ušackas, a Lithuanian diplomat, former foreign minister and EU Ambassador to Russia, in his election program entitled “A Winning Lithuania” (Gritėnas, 2018).

It is not known who will win and how the President and Government will behave. However, if they close their eyes to this situation and do not fulfil their promises to satisfy the expectations of their electorate for change, then emigration will continue in the numbers of the last few years. Therefore, according to the famous joke, Lithuania will be able to announce: “*The last person, leaving from Lithuania, do not forget to turn off the light in the airport, please.*”

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