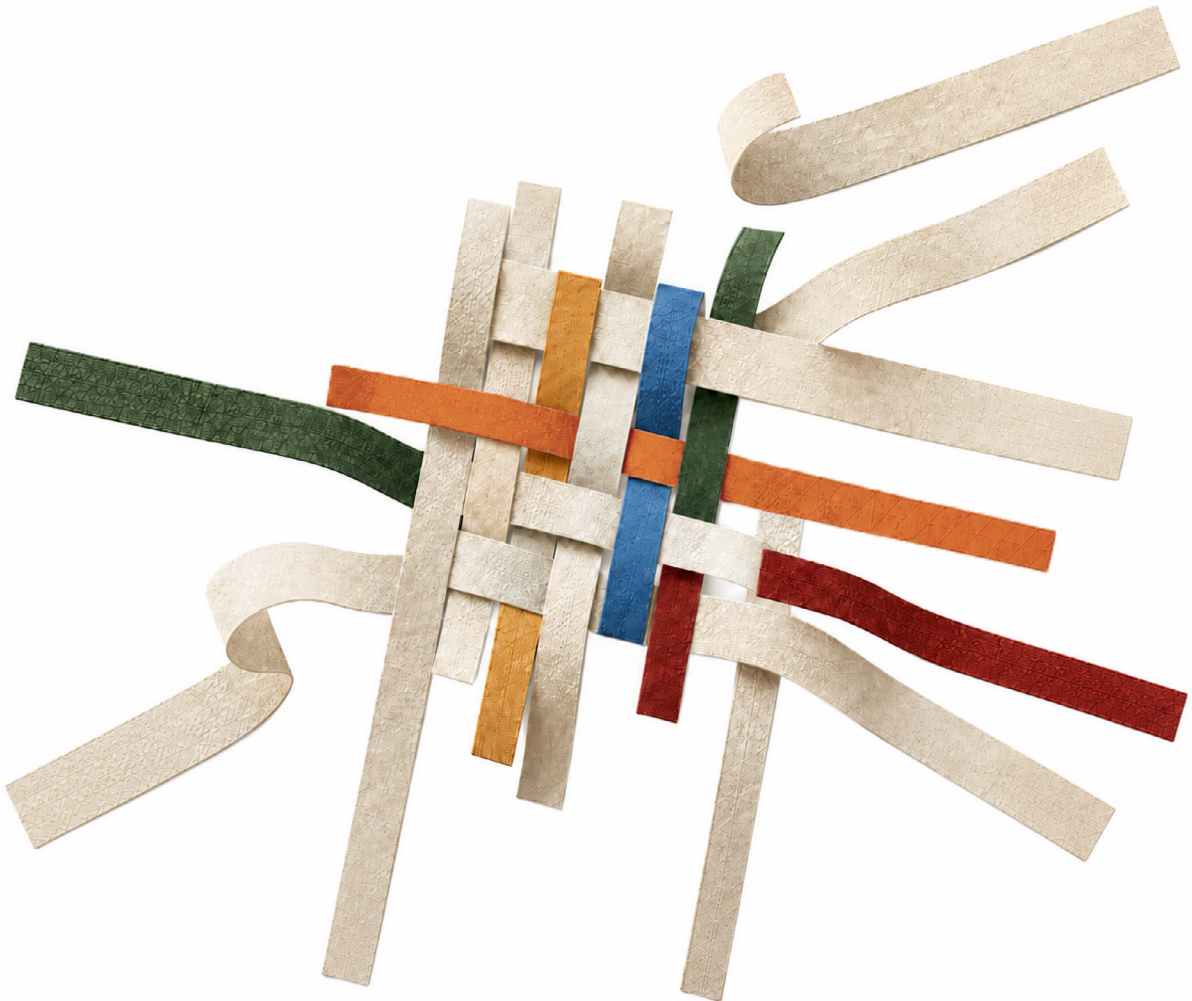




Wilfried
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The Legacy of Tradition: The Making of Lithuania's Centre-Right

Justinas Dementavičius



Credits

The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party, dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values.

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About the Martens Centre



The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, established in 2007, is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP). The Martens Centre embodies a pan-European mindset, promoting Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values. It serves as a framework for national political foundations linked to member parties of the EPP. It currently has 30 member foundations and one permanent guest foundation in 25 EU and non-EU countries.

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About the author



Justinas Dementavičius is a political scientist based at Vilnius University and a researcher specialising in the history of ideas and political ideologies, especially Lithuanian Christian Democratic and conservative political thought. His academic work focuses on modern political thinking, party ideology, and the relationship between national and transnational political imagination. He is the author of several scholarly books and numerous peer-reviewed articles examining Lithuanian political thought, centre-right ideology and the intellectual foundations of the Lithuanian state.

Executive summary



This study examines the ideological development of the Lithuanian centre–right, focusing on the Homeland Union—Lithuanian Christian Democrats (Tėvynės sąjunga—Lietuvos krikščionys demokratai, TS–LKD) and the ideological imagination that underpins it. Like many other centre–right political parties in Eastern and Central Europe, it differs from its Western counterparts due to its strong emphases on anti-Communism, national identity, reform and statehood. But unlike many post-Communist parties, the TS–LKD has achieved institutional stability, electoral success and ideological moderation, avoiding the drift towards populism or radicalism.

The central claim of the study is that Lithuanian centre–right ideology plays an important part in this success, because it was formed through the interaction of classical Christian Democratic intellectual traditions, Soviet-era experiences, and the deliberate choice to integrate the political ideas of seminal European political actors and intellectuals. The study demonstrates how intellectual tradition, historical experience and the conscious individual choices of key political agents played a central role in shaping this distinctive ideological imagination.

Historically reconstructing some core ideas, the study finds that the ideological coherence of the Lithuanian centre–right emerges from a conscious synthesis of competing principles rather than commitment to a single doctrine. A persistent internal tension exists between two strands: a more national, traditionalist conservatism and a more liberal, moderate Christian Democracy. This tension is captured in the TS–LKD’s attempt to balance values such as freedom and responsibility, individual dignity and community, and national identity and European integration.

Several intellectual traditions underpin this synthesis. First, following the direction indicated by Leo XIII, Christian Democratic thinkers in the twentieth century, primarily Jakštas, established the primacy of the human person, grounding politics in dignity, moral responsibility and the common good. Following Jakštas and the French personalist tradition, the inter-war philosopher Šalkauskis developed the idea of a ‘synthetic’ worldview, emphasising moderation and the integration of diverse perspectives. Later, his pupil Maceina used the concept of ‘integral democracy’ to expand democracy beyond mere political institutions to include economic, cultural and moral dimensions, prioritising the person over the state, the market and cultural rules.

The study shows that, despite the fact that these ideas were developed in exile after the occupation of Lithuania by the Soviet Union, the Soviet experience did not so much erase as transform Christian political



thought. The centre–right’s strong emphasis on freedom, truth and moral responsibility can be traced in dissident movements such as the Catholic underground. These movements articulated freedom not only as political liberty but as freedom of conscience and a commitment to truth, shaping the moral core of post-independence conservatism and Christian Democracy.

In the first decades of independence, the party leadership also played a decisive role in shaping the ideological imagination of the centre–right. Figures including Vytautas Landsbergis contributed to a reformist understanding of conservatism, in which tradition is not static but reinterpreted through historical consciousness and choices to create the world which would have existed had there been no Soviet occupation. Meanwhile, Andrius Kubilius helped to institutionalise a form of ‘statist conservatism’ that supports strong but limited state institutions that serve individuals and communities. And this seems to have become a lasting concept in contemporary conservative thought, despite criticisms from the left and the far right.

The study concludes that the distinctiveness of Lithuania’s centre–right lies in its ability to balance continuity and change, the personal and the communal, and morality and freedom. This ideological flexibility, combined with a strong commitment to key principles, while trying to avoid ideological dogmatism, may explain the resilience of the Lithuanian centre–right and its political success.

Keywords Centre–right – Lithuania – Christian Democracy – Conservatism – Political ideology – Party identity



Introduction



The political identity and politics of the Lithuanian centre–right appear distinctive when compared both to similar parties in ‘old’ Western Europe and to those in the ‘new’ Central and Eastern Europe. Its historical development differs from that of Christian Democratic and moderate conservative parties in the West because it experienced the challenges posed by the Communist regime. As a result, during the regime changes of the final decade of the twentieth century, political actors were required not only to learn how to operate according to the new rules of political life, but also to (re)interpret what it meant to be a conservative or a Christian Democrat. The content of these ideologies had to be rediscovered, transformed into a politically relevant vision and articulated as a legitimate political choice. It would be an exaggeration to claim that all of this was achieved entirely from scratch, but the tradition was less a continuation than a conscious ideological (re)construction. It is therefore no accident that the emergent dominant centre–right political force in Lithuania was not the Lithuanian Christian Democratic Party (Lietuvos Krikščionių Demokratų Partija, LKDP), which had operated during the inter-war period, but the newly formed Homeland Union (Lithuanian Conservatives) (Tėvynės Sąjunga (Lietuvos konservatoriai), TS(LK)), mostly based on Sąjūdis, the Lithuanian pro-independence movement. As a result, Lithuania’s centre–right, to some extent similar to other centre–right parties in the region, was strictly anti-Communist and emphasised the nation-state tradition, thus being much more right-leaning than its counterparts in the West, which were sympathetic to internationalism, pluralism and a democratic political culture.

At the same time, the Lithuanian centre–right forces also stand out when compared with the development of similar parties elsewhere in post-Communist Europe. Over the past three decades, the Homeland Union (since 2008 united with the LKDP as the Homeland Union—Lithuanian Christian Democrats (Tėvynės sąjunga—Lietuvos krikščionys demokratai (TS–LKD)) has consistently remained a significant political party. It has built effective party institutions that have enabled it to succeed in elections, either forming a government or acting as the largest opposition party. Thus, it has been successful compared to other post-Communist Baltic state centre–right parties. This stability has been achieved while avoiding the ideological drift towards the radical right or populism that has characterised comparable movements in the region (e.g. the Hungarian Civic Alliance/Fidesz in Hungary or Law and Justice/Prawo i Sprawiedliwość in Poland). It is precisely these political outcomes, which have emerged despite shared structural conditions, that invite closer examination of Lithuania’s centre–right distinctiveness: (a) its relative electoral success, (b) its firm party institutionalisation, and (c) its ideational coherence and moderation.



An analysis of these three political dimensions could result in several avenues of questioning. However, the present study focuses on the ideational self-understanding and intellectual genealogy of the TS–LKD, examining (a) the specificity of its political ideology in contemporary political debates, and (b) in what sense its core political ideas are an integral part of the Lithuanian and European (centre–right) political tradition. Thus, methodologically, the study is inspired by the morphological analysis of ideology,¹ alongside approaches from conceptual and intellectual history.² The main goal, therefore, is not only to provide an interpretation of the party’s key political ideas, but also to present them as historically and politically grounded.

Seeking to present an overview of Lithuania’s centre–right intellectual history, in terms of both Christian Democratic and moderate conservative thought, the story begins with the currently most influential centre–right party, the TS–LKD, before stepping back through time and concluding by linking the party’s ideological self-understanding to the first LKDP programme of 1905. In doing so, the study seeks to move beyond several assumptions prevalent in existing scholarship on Lithuania’s centre–right.

The first reassessment concerns historical continuity: discussions about the TS or the LKDP often imply that there has been a lack of ideological inheritance, and conservatism is sometimes treated as a novel ideological orientation specific to post-1990 Lithuania. While this may be accurate at the institutional level, the study demonstrates that forms of ideological continuity can be identified. The second argues that ideological entanglement should be understood not only temporally but also spatially: the ideological imagination of Lithuania’s centre–right must be situated within broader European debates on Christian Democracy and conservatism. Finally, I will demonstrate that conceptual choices were important not only in constructing a distinctive identity, but also in enabling it to function effectively as party politics capable of responding to the challenges of the time. This ideological reconstruction proceeds through seven analytical episodes, each presenting important intellectuals and examining their texts and ideas. These texts either actively shaped or illuminated the distinctiveness of centre–right thought at a particular historical moment.

¹ See M. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008).

² See, among others, M. Richter, ‘Begriffsgeschichte and History of Ideas’, *Journal of History of Ideas* 48/2 (1987); R. Koselleck, *The Practise of Conceptual History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).



On conservatives, a conservative party and the tension between conservatism in Lithuania

In the 2024 Lithuanian parliamentary elections, the TS–LKD ran under the catchy slogan, ‘Protect and Nurture’ (*Ginti ir auginti*). As explained by the electoral manifesto, the slogan sought to capture Lithuania’s current ethos, which was what the TS–LKD promised to continue to champion after its 2020–4 term as the largest party in the governing coalition: national defence and economic growth.³ Nevertheless, political scientists, commentators and, presumably, even party members themselves had limited faith in the slogan’s magical power. Over Lithuania’s 30 years of independence since the collapse of the Soviet Union, no political party had managed to win two consecutive parliamentary elections. However, when it comes to the TS–LKD’s self-understanding, the slogan was genuinely significant. It pointed to the central axis of Lithuania’s centre–right identity: both the elements that divide it and the effort to reconcile them in one utterance.

This tension between the hard policy of national defence and the soft policies of social progress became evident immediately after the electoral defeat. As a result, Gabrielius Landsbergis, who had led the party since 2015, resigned. During the elections for a new leader, the slogan highlighted the existence of two factions, two directions of development. In the corner to the right was Laurynas Kasčiūnas. His concept was widely perceived as an alternative path for the TS–LKD, one that would distance it from the 2020–4 coalition with the liberals. His public profile—hawkish, anti-immigrant, critical of liberalism and emphatic about national identity—made him a symbol for the TS–LKD’s possible return to ‘national conservatism’. In the left corner, the most realistic alternative was ex–prime minister, economist Ingrida Šimonytė. Like Landsbergis, she was associated with coalitions with liberal forces, and her public image often implied liberal views. This ‘liberalism’ manifested as greater moderation on issues such as the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating

³ TS–LKD, *Ginti ir Auginti. TS-LKD manifestas ateities Lietuvai* [Protect and Nurture. Manifesto of the TS–LKD for the Future of Lithuania] (2024).



violence against women and domestic violence, legal recognition of same-sex marriage and other similar topics which have become the front lines in the contemporary culture wars in the Baltic countries.

This competition highlighted the two types of conservatism in the TS–LKD: one Christian Democratic and one associated with the Homeland Union. Given the debates that have sometimes escalated into accusations of ‘liberalism’ on one side and reactionary traditionalism on the other, the central question is what holds these different versions of the right together? One answer may lie in the joint party programme, adopted in 2008, which establishes common principles and concerns. The programme was adopted to overcome the challenges facing the centre–right at the time: the popularity of the LKDP had declined, and the TS(LK) had lost two terms in a row to leftist and populist forces. Thus, the programme emerged as a pragmatic attempt to unify the centre–right forces, emphasising an intention to combine conservatism and Christian Democracy, alongside commitments to respect each partner’s identity and history.⁴ But the tension between ‘protecting’ and ‘nurturing’ was still present. On the one hand, the programme adopts a distinctly moralising tone. It stresses that ‘moral [meaning responsible and conscientious] politics is not only possible but vital for Lithuania’, and that government decisions must not contradict ‘the imperative of building a moral society’.⁵ On the other hand, the programme ultimately centres on responsible individual freedom, the recognition of inherent human dignity and concern for its realisation in everyday life.⁶

In this way, the TS–LKD presents itself as a force that not only unites different strands of the right but also balances opposing ideological poles—avoiding the extremes of individualistic freedom that originate from liberalism and the collectivistic rigorism of nationalism. This balancing between liberalism and nationalism has always been there to challenge the party. National identity has long been a central concern for both components of the party, with both critical of the USSR as an empire that sought to erase the national consciousness. Narratives of freedom, both collective and personal, were also important elements in the critiques of the USSR. These were especially pronounced in the TS, whose ideologue Mečys Laurinkus even suggested, in 1993, that liberal conservatism was the preferred party orientation, because this path ‘could become a bridge between people holding liberal views that lie on the margins of politics and a society inclined

⁴ TS–LKD, *Tėvynės Sąjungos-Lietuvos krikščionių demokratų programa. Politinės veiklos pagrindai* [Programme of the Homeland Union—Lithuanian Christian Democrats. Basis for Political Action] (2008).

⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁶ Ibid., 5. Throughout this paper, quotations from Lithuanian texts have been translated into English by the author.



towards paternalism'.⁷ Both tendencies, defence of national identity and personal freedom, were therefore incorporated and moderated in the TS through appeals to conservative pragmatism: defending not abstract ideas, but the concrete principles and values perceived as the most threatened at a given historical moment. The same, in a way, was true for the LKDP—its first political programmes emphasised both national culture and, largely following the readings of Western Christian Democrats, the primacy of the person.

The ideological choices of the two parties had two effects. One was that their unification was successful. The united party won; the principles of moderate individualism and nationalism became grounding ones; the party's concern for abstract, but clearly expressed, core ideas (state security, common good, orientation towards Europe etc.) became an important part of its self-perception. However, this came at an ideological cost. This focus fuelled criticism from the right over the TS–LKD's alleged liberalisation and from the left for being too paternalistic. As a result, liberal principles are usually affirmed only with immediate qualifications: freedom, but also responsibility; an individual, but also a community; freedom of conscience, but also morality in terms of commitment to classical and Christian virtues. On the other hand, nationalistic rigidity is often criticised as a populist approach and detached from any realistic capacity to deliver positive policies in both security and the economy. In this sense, the TS's (and, later, the TS–LKD's) fixation on detailed programmes, which are often more comprehensive and coherent than those of most Lithuanian parties, especially populist ones, represents an attempt to demonstrate responsibility in political decision-making.

Seen in this context, the slogan 'Protect and Nurture' acquires a new ideological meaning: to protect not only the state or society from internal and external threats, but also one's ideas from ideological rivals—Social Democracy, liberalism, the radical right and populism. And furthermore, to nurture not only the state and social institutions, but also one's own worldview, continually referring to the core principles upon which the centre-right can propose new initiatives. Conservatism and Christian Democracy thus seek not merely to encompass multiple traditions but to continually reinterpret and enact them under changing political conditions and despite internal competition between party factions. To some extent, this ideological unity is sustained by fear of even worse alternatives, seen in both the West (the pro-Russian alternative right and left, right-wing populism) and the East (authoritarianism, and the political, cultural and economic influence of Russia).

⁷ M. Laurinkus, 'Kokia konservatyvioji pasaulėžiūra ir politika perspektyvi Lietuvoje?' [Which Conservative Worldview and Politics Are the most Promising in Lithuania?] in M. Adomėnas (ed.), *Libertas et pietas. Lietuviškasis konservatizmas. Antologija 1993-2010* [*Libertas and Pietas. Lithuanian Conservatism. Anthology 1993–2010*] (Vilnius: Demokratinės politikos institutas, 2010), 94.



Andrius Kubilius: community and statist conservatism

The official website of the TS–LKD hosts not only conventional electoral programmes, resolutions and party statements, but also a set of authored texts that constitute an important part of the party’s ideological identity. The earliest of these authored contribution belongs to Andrius Kubilius, who, as the TS’s party chairman in 2008, played a crucial role in unifying the Lithuanian centre–right. In this text, one can already identify elements that Kubilius repeatedly emphasised in his numerous articles, as well as in the electoral programmes which he helped to draft. These elements include the concepts of the conservatives being the ‘party of common sense’;⁸ ‘statist conservatives’, who are primarily concerned with economic prosperity and security; and ‘revolutionary conservatives’, who seek to restore and entrench European values. These ideas were first systematically reflected upon and articulated in one of Kubilius’s earliest attempts to come to terms with what it means to be a conservative—*Konservatyvioji bendruomenė* (Conservative Community).⁹ First published in 1995, only a few years after the party’s founding, this text sought to clarify what adopting the self-designation ‘conservative’ entailed. It was published in the context of the 1996 municipal and parliamentary elections, which the TS won decisively, defeating the scandal-ridden Democratic Labour Party of Lithuania (Lietuvos demokratinė darbo partija, LDDP), before forming a coalition with the LKDP. Kubilius was the principal author of the programmes for those elections, and this text can be seen as providing a conservative ‘soul’ for otherwise largely technical documents.

The choice of community as the central object of reflection is, indeed, readily intelligible. Even though community does not appear as a core concept of conservatism in Michael Freeden’s seminal work, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, it becomes indispensable as a counter-concept to liberal individualism. Moreover, community acquires particular significance in post-Soviet states, where it can be conceptualised as an intermediary between the free individual and the potentially totalising state. This

⁸ DELFI, ‘Kubilius: konservatoriai yra sveiko proto partija’ [Kubilius: Conservatives Are the Party of Common Sense], 1 October 2023.

⁹ A. Kubilius, *Konservatyvioji bendruomenė* [Conservative Community] (Vilnius: Demokratinės politikos institutas, 2006).



intermediary function is, in turn, celebrated across a broad canon of conservative thought, from Edmund Burke to Roger Scruton's invocation of 'little platoons'.¹⁰ If one were forced to identify a single principle that conservatism seeks to cultivate, it would undoubtedly be community and collective action.

Such an emphasis on community often obscures the fact that, in conservative interpretations, community always means a concrete community and invariably implies differing understandings of communities as socially meaningful formations. This observation leads to two distinct conclusions. First, it suggests that conservatism necessarily varies 'in terms of the historical and cultural circumstances of the nation-state in which it occurs'.¹¹ Second, and no less importantly, recalling the often misinterpreted statement attributed to Margaret Thatcher that 'there is no such thing as society',¹² one may ask: if not society, then what? Rather than offering an overly liberal response centred on abstract individuals, one can follow communitarian or personalist traditions and speak of persons who are always embedded in concrete communities. Such communities are always plural: local, professional, cultural, worldview-based, national and so forth. To defend community in this sense is to defend the entire spectrum of possible social relations.

While this may be regarded as a foundational element of Western conservative political thought, in 1995, only a few years after Lithuania had regained independence, it may well have sounded like a discovery. Given prevailing (post-)Soviet interpretations of conservatism, it likely did. At the time, conservatism was primarily understood as an anti-Soviet ideology and practice, a nostalgic attachment to the pre-Soviet past, a narrow nationalism and authoritarianism. So from the left and liberal perspective, it was framed as a threat; but from that of nationalists and advocates of strong leadership, strong authority was embraced as a necessary dimension of conservative identity. In this context Kubilius's text can be read as contrasting sharply with these interpretations and as an attempt to articulate an interpretation of conservatism grounded in Western tradition.¹³ Thus *Konservatyvioji bendruomenė* constitutes an authentic attempt to articulate his personal relationship with conservatism and, simultaneously, to introduce conservative ideas to his party colleagues. As Kubilius himself later acknowledged, for those raised during the Soviet era, these ideas were largely unfamiliar.¹⁴

¹⁰ E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 47.

¹¹ A. Vincent, *Modern Political Ideologies* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 61.

¹² M. Thatcher, 'Interview for *Woman's Own*' (31 October 1987).

¹³ The text contains extensive references to canonical authors he had read (e.g. Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville) and their interpreters, such as Nisbet and Russell Kirk.

¹⁴ Author's interview with A. Kubilius, Vilnius, 16 April 2018.



The text can therefore be described as a manifesto for Lithuanian conservative thought, seeking above all to present a desirable face of Lithuanian conservatism, one that would address several pressing challenges. Conservatism had to avoid association with the ideological indoctrination so typical of the Soviet regime, it had to be conserving yet compatible with national renewal; and it had to support a unified state while safeguarding individual freedom. Community thus became the key concept of the text, functioning as a means of navigating between these complex choices. The conservative community was to be something fundamentally different from the (post-)Soviet community. One of the central moves in this counter-conceptualisation was the rejection of the omnipotent state. Western democracy was invoked as an alternative, with decentralisation (strengthening communities and ensuring their autonomy) presented as its essential feature. The emphasis on local self-government and small communities was, in itself, provocative, undermining the entrenched image of Lithuanian conservatism as primarily statist and nationalist: the focus was not on the state, as it was usually presented, but on small communal formations within which the individual acts. Among the entities that conservatives are called upon to protect are churches, guilds and families—elements that together form the fabric of society.¹⁵ Even the nation is primarily construed as a cultural unit rather than as a political subject. It is instead one community among others. Indeed, nationalism is explicitly criticised for its denial of the concrete individual through its claims to ‘absoluteness’.¹⁶

At the time of publication, the major adversary of conservatism, also grounded in an image of strong collectivism, was Communism. The text’s critique was mostly directed against the Soviet past and the polemic with the then-governing LDDP, which had been rebranded as the Lithuanian Communist Party (Lietuvos Komunistų Partija). Despite having overseen liberalising market reforms, privatisation and the dismantling of centralised state institutions, the LDDP was criticised for its conception of the state’s role and its treatment of society as a single communal person. In this (post-)Soviet tradition, natural social traditions and structures were destroyed, creating an atomised mass society without any concern for the public good. As Kubilius put it, when ‘the state totally regulates the social life, it tramples the spirit of community, and concern for the community is carried out of obligation to obey authority rather than from an internal need to care for one’s own community’.¹⁷

¹⁵ Kubilius, *Konservatyvioji bendruomenė*, 25–7.

¹⁶ Ibid., 23.

¹⁷ Ibid., 8.



While individualism might appear the natural opposite to collective totalitarianism, Kubilius explicitly engaged the Western conservative critique of liberal individualism in the name of common interest. Thus, the task became one of navigating between not two, but three poles (nationalism, socialism and liberalism), seeking a balance between the individual, the community and the nation-state. Kubilius unequivocally insists that ‘the state’ (elsewhere described as a ‘faceless, abstract, all-powerful machine’¹⁸) must interfere as little as possible in matters of economy, society and morality, and must instead do everything possible to strengthen and expand the functions of families, local communities and voluntary associations,¹⁹ with the goal of strengthening ‘transparent and independent state institutions that serve all citizens equally and justly’,²⁰ but not of being strong for the sake of it. Here, the strong state is understood not as an expansive state, but as an effective political authority serving the person, who is always embedded in and depicted as belonging to a concrete community. It is therefore unsurprising that the institutional reform of the state, to make it strong and responsive, but limited in its power, constitutes one of the central tasks of statist conservatism.

Vytautas Landsbergis: history and reformative conservatism

Considering the implications of Kubilius’s *Konservatyvioji bendruomenė*, one could suggest that the text speaks not only of the abstract concept of communities, but also of the conservative party itself as a community obligated to serve other communities by taking responsibility for the state. Kubilius consistently emphasised this identity, thereby functioning not only as an institutional leader but also as an ideologue. But such strong concern about the party’s ideas had characterised the party from its inception, and Kubilius was translating the ideas of the first party chairman, Vytautas Landsbergis, into the language of Western conservatism. It was Landsbergis who had encoded concern for the state and sensitivity to historical time and political space into the party’s DNA. In 2000, reflecting on the party’s origins, Landsbergis noted: ‘It

¹⁸ Ibid., 30.

¹⁹ Ibid., 42.

²⁰ Ibid., 30.



is important (and perhaps even more important) to understand the first word: Lithuanian Conservatives. Therefore, I will not speak in political–scientific or textbook definitions of conservatism, because we are not a textbook party created according to some scheme; we are precisely a party of this land, of this time, when it is needed. This was finally understood seven years ago, in the spring of 1993’.²¹

The need for an institutionalised political force with a clear and coherent programme emerged after 1992, following the crushing defeat of the candidates associated with Sąjūdis in the parliamentary elections. It was necessary to establish an institutionalised organisational structure for effective electoral competition, but in doing so there was an attempt to extend the promise of Sąjūdis—to be not merely a *parting* force, but to form a union: Homeland Union. The party was expected not only to unite communities within Lithuania, but also to unite time itself—to weave past, present and future into a single narrative and to provide an interpretation of historical time.

The decisive role in shaping the content of Lithuanian conservatism was played by Vytautas Landsbergis, undoubtedly the most authoritative figure in the newly formed party. At the time, he reflected that ‘Lithuania is still at a crossroads; this is an unstable, dangerous, and exhausting condition, from which there are two spiritual and psychological exits. Either depression, or a different spiritual orientation: an orientation towards resolve and creativity . . . towards economic revival, the restoration of well-being in Lithuania.’²² This statement reveals one of the central paradoxes of conservative thought in Eastern and Central Europe—despite its professed intention to ‘conserve’, it functions as a transformative force. This does not even take the form of the Western Burkean narrative of incremental change,²³ but is rather a call for the radical rejection of a (corrupt) past and the pursuit of a (bright) future. But how can a commitment to preserving the past be reconciled with deliberate transformation efforts, particularly when those efforts involve rejecting what previously existed?

The answer lies in a specific interpretation of history and tradition that can already be discerned during the years of the Sąjūdis movement (from 1988 onwards) and that was later continued by the TS and its first chairman, Landsbergis. Landsbergis himself begins his ‘political autobiography’ *Lūžis prie Baltijos* (The

²¹ V. Landsbergis, ‘Tėvynės sąjunga (Lietuvos konservatoriai) šiandien: vertybės ir praktinė veikla’ [Homeland Union (Lithuanian Conservatives) Today: Values and Practical Activities] in Democratic Politics Institute Conference, *Politikos metmenys (1). Demokratinės politikos instituto konferencijos tekstai* [Policy Outline (1). Texts of the Democratic Politics Institute Conference] (Vilnius: DPI leidybos grupė, 2000), 64.

²² V. Landsbergis, ‘Įkurta Tėvynės Sąjunga’ [Homeland Union Was Founded], in M. Adomėnas (ed.), *Libertas et pietas. Lietuviškasis konservatizmas: antologija 1993–2010* [*Libertas and Pietas. Lithuanian Conservatism. Anthology 1993–2010*] (Vilnius: Demokratinės politikos institutas, 2010), 38.

²³ Paradoxically, such a step-by-step reform was proclaimed by the ex-Communist and later Social Democratic leader Algirdas Mykolas Brazauskas.



Breakthrough by the Baltic) with the story of his family's history and his grandfather Gabrielius Landsbergis, a Polish-speaking nobleman who joined the Lithuanian national revival, thus interweaving his personal life with his family life, and his family life with the history of Lithuania. However, his own personal experience showed that history is political. In Soviet Lithuania, Landsbergis devoted himself to research into the most famous national composer and painter, Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis. In the hyper-politicised environment of the Soviet Union, art was political, and his research could have been criticised as ideologically inappropriate. It is therefore unsurprising that when Sąjūdis began to form in mid-1988, Landsbergis took part in the process, criticising the state's cultural policy and disorienting interpretations of history, before attempting to introduce a more accurate version. It was his speech, delivered in Kaunas on 16 February 1989, to commemorate Lithuanian Independence Day which marked the return to that history.²⁴

The speech interpreted historical time from its very first words and opened with a retelling of the memories of Petras Klimas, who had been one of the signatories of the Act of Independence in 1918. These reflections were presented as lessons of wisdom, worth applying 'in our own time'.²⁵ This allowed Landsbergis to reflect on the present, most notably through a critique of untruth and of words repeatedly invoked yet distorted in meaning: democracy, sovereignty and nation. He concluded with a call directed to the future, articulated not as an uncompromising demand for independence, but rather as a 'path of searching for the future' that must be undertaken by the nation itself.²⁶

These remarks condense and present the broad spectrum of nuances in Landsbergis's conception of history. First and foremost is the importance of historicity itself, because 'history is a matter of nature'.²⁷ For Landsbergis, one is always born into history and lives within it; everything human is intrinsically temporal. For this reason, history cannot be left solely to historians, because it is not merely a narrative but an action, and everyone has the opportunity to become a participant in its making. History must therefore be intimate, grounded in an honest understanding of 'who I am'. Landsbergis describes this as follows: 'I first and foremost

²⁴ V. Landsbergis, 'Nepriklausomybės akto pamokos. Apie naują savimonę' [Lessons From the Act of Independence. On a New Self-Consciousness], in V. Landsbergis, *Iš signatarų balkono ir kitur: Vasario 16-oji, 1989-2017* [From the Signatories' Balcony and Elsewhere: 16 February 1989–2017] (Vilnius: Lietuvos nacionalinė Martyno Mažvydo biblioteka, 2018), 12–13.

²⁵ Ibid., 12.

²⁶ Ibid., 13.

²⁷ R. Lopata, *Politikai ir istorija. Algirdo Brazausko ir Vytauto Landsbergio istorijos sampratos* [Politicians and History. Algirdas Brazauskas' and Vytautas Landsbergis' Conceptions of History] (Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2010), 13.



drew upon what I saw in my immediate surroundings and could recount as memories, behind which the history of the state or society may perhaps loom'.²⁸

The second aspect, which guards against radical subjectivism, is the insistence that one of the central tasks of relating history is truth-telling. As Landsbergis explains by contrast:

Augustine, perhaps even Jesus, traces humanity's path toward the Kingdom of God ('I am the way'). People should become ever wiser and better, so that while still living on earth, they might become worthy of the Kingdom of God. Because this is a path of progress, of improvement, of searching for truth, one moves forward rather than treading in one place.²⁹

It is essential to eliminate so-called historical silence or, as Landsbergis put it, one must have the ability to return to 'oneself' amid the 'cultural ruins' created by the Soviets.³⁰ One of the politician's most important missions, therefore, is not to dictate the content of truth, but to create the conditions for truth-telling, which is the only way forward.

Through this approach, a third aspect becomes visible: historical transcendence, the capacity to unite everything in a conscious moment of the present. On the one hand, history is a space of past experience from which one must learn. Landsbergis insists that 'politicians are powerless . . . if they do not know the history of their country'.³¹ This knowledge is foremost tied to documentation and to preservation of the 'historical facts', which can then be mobilised to fulfil the current political needs of a state. The narration of history today is not merely historical but performs a fundamentally normative function. Quoting Bertrand Russell, Landsbergis notes that 'memories are not only facts of the past; they are facts of the present'.³² In other words, past, present and future must be woven into a meaningful personal narrative, albeit meaningful only insofar as it is grounded in a clear commitment to chosen principles.

²⁸ V. Landsbergis, *Lūžis prie Baltijos: politinė autobiografija* [Breakthrough by the Baltic: Political Autobiography] (Vilnius: Vaga, 1997), 9.

²⁹ V. Landsbergis, *Bus geriau: pokalbiai su žurnalistu Ryčiu Zemkauskū* [It Will Get Better: Conversations With Journalist Rytis Zemkauskas] (Vilnius: Dominicus Lituanus, 2016), 60.

³⁰ V. Landsbergis, *Atgavę viltį* [Regaining Hope] (New York: Pasaulio lietuvių bendruomenė, 1991), 18.

³¹ A. Bumblauskas and V. Landsbergis, 'Tūkstanmečio pokalbiai' [Millennial Conversations] [video], *lrt.lt*, 27 September 2009, 41:10–41:25.

³² Landsbergis, *Bus geriau*, 22.



At first glance, the emphasis on personal, truthful remembrance might seem to reject everything associated with the Soviet Union, the empire of collective lies and distortions. Yet here, too, Landsbergis's position is more nuanced. The Soviet Union was also a concrete lived experience, a historical fact. What becomes crucial is the interpretation of this experience, which might be described as a layered history and the route of the untaken path. With regard to the first notion, despite a principled critique of Communist ideology, the existence of the Soviet Lithuania is acknowledged as a fact requiring reflection. Individuals navigate this reality in different ways: by adapting, by seeking non-systemic or anti-systemic positions, or by becoming marginalised. All of these experiences must be recognised and rethought in the new Lithuania. As Landsbergis puts it: 'Let the best of earlier Lithuanian intellectual traditions, the bitter and harsh historical experience, and the ideas of modern times that open a global horizon merge into the self-awareness of the Lithuanian people. The road to our desired future is the road of elucidating the future.'³³

The second notion derives from a teleological conception of history, which views historical development as an attempt to move towards an ideal that has not yet been realised. History may repeat itself in a certain sense, but it is misleading to understand this repetition as 'cyclical'. Rather, it reflects a moral interpretation in which nations and individuals are always forced to choose between good and evil. This repetition does not form a cycle but is an unavoidable condition of perpetual choice, a constant crossroads. The untaken path always remains as a possibility: the Lithuania that could have been, had there not been the other, evil (Soviet) Lithuania. Landsbergis's 1989 speech was a call to begin constructing that alternative Lithuania. This reconceptualisation aligns conservatism less with nostalgia and more with what could be termed restorative reformism: a mode of political action oriented towards a rupture with the corrupt present in the name of a historically grounded, but not yet realised, normative ideal of a possible future.

Sajūdis, the TS(LK) and the TS–LKD have been and continue to be understood as historically responsible, conscious and active historical subjects. It is no coincidence that even today, issues of history, de-Sovietisation and the articulation of a truthful collective historical narrative occupy prominent places on the political agenda. At the same time, what renders the centre–right reformist is the absence of hostility to change: innovation is framed as rejection of the old Soviet system, read as corrupt, in the name of the nation-state, read as progressive. Unlike cyclical or purely linear models of historical time, this conservative framework adopts a

³³ Landsbergis, 'Nepriklausomybės akto pamokos'.



teleological but non-deterministic understanding of history. History is oriented towards the normative horizons dictated by the truth-seeking Sajūdis, such as freedom, dignity and political independence, but these ends are neither guaranteed nor mechanically produced by historical processes. Instead, history unfolds through recurring moments of moral choice, in which societies confront the alternatives of better or worse futures.

The Soviet Catholic underground: freedom and Christian liberty

I have argued that the origins of the contemporary Lithuanian (and to some extent Eastern and Central European) centre–right lie in (a) a critique of the Soviet regime as a force that distorted historical truth, and (b) an effort to construct an authentic historical narrative of one’s own society. In calling for such a (re)thinking, Vytautas Landsbergis criticised the ‘imposed unnatural life, unfreedom as everyday spiritual coercion’.³⁴ He proposed an alternative whose ‘name may be solidarity or love of a neighbour, uniting tolerance with love of truth and freedom’.³⁵ The return of these enduring ideals was conceived as a way of creating the best version of one’s political community and, implicitly, of oneself: ‘a normal political process and normal political life are beginning or will begin in Lithuania. . . . [D]emocracy could actually be assessed based on specific content—based on people, how they treat each other and how they tend to abide by the country’s laws.’³⁶

To the more attentive reader, these statements may appear conceptually disorienting. Alongside ideas traditionally associated with the conservative political imagination (such as an emphasis on the state and appeals to ‘normality’) or concepts with clear Christian cultural connotations (e.g. truth and moral responsibility), there are notions commonly attributed to liberal political thought: the rule of law, the importance of personal choice and tolerance. Particularly striking is the elevation of ‘freedom’ to a core political concept, which renders the TS an atypical conservative force, often criticised for being too committed to liberty. However,

³⁴ V. Landsbergis, ‘Doras darbas’ [Decent Work], speech at the 3rd Lithuanian Sajūdis Congress, 17 December 1991, personal archive of Landsbergis.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.



this ideological imagination should be understood not merely as a posture adopted by the newly emerging conservatives or as an imitation of the West, but as the public re-emergence of ideas of freedom that had been suppressed by the Soviet regime.

The clearest manifestation of this hidden reality can be traced to two significant events in 1972: Romas Kalanta self-immolating while shouting ‘Freedom for Lithuania’³⁷ and the start of the publication of the underground periodical, *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* (Lietuvos Katalikų Bažnyčios kronika, *LKBK*). Both events can be understood as echoes of the broader struggle for freedom in the region and as a reaction to the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968 and the self-immolation of Jan Palach. Even the title of the *LKBK* imitated that of the *samizdat* periodical *A Chronicle of Current Events*, which was first published in 1968 by Russian dissidents. As Sigitas Tamkevičius, the long-time editor of the *LKBK*, recalled, the Prague Spring sparked a growing resolve to defend freedom.³⁸ This was embodied, among other examples, through Tamkevičius organising a petition in 1969 to demand easier access to seminaries and, in 1970, the founding of an underground seminary. This increased activism was soon followed by repression, which directly contributed to the creation of the *LKBK* and shaped its content: the trials and persecutions were widely documented in its early issues. As a result, Catholic *samizdat* became an island of freedom which represented an oppressed, but spiritually free people.

The story of one such persecution included in the periodical was that of a nun, Nijolė Sadūnaitė. Given that monasteries were de facto banned, Sadūnaitė joined underground religious communities and became closely connected to several priests who supported uncontrolled religious activity, including Tamkevičius. In 1974 she was arrested for retyping the *LKBK* for wider dissemination. Her trial took place in 1975 and was subsequently reported in the *LKBK* itself as an example of religious persecution. Anticipating imprisonment and exile, Sadūnaitė used her final statement as a manifesto about her relationship with the regime, faith and freedom. In this statement, she made it clear that the core struggle of the *LKBK* was ‘for freedom and dignity, for the right to freedom of conscience, which is guaranteed to all citizens, regardless of their beliefs, by the [Soviet] Constitution, by law and by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights’.³⁹ Within this tension between the individual and the Soviet institutions, between the desire to live freely and the constant threat of enslavement, Soviet authorities were

³⁷ J. A. Swain, ‘Commemorating the “Living Torch of Freedom”: Searching for a Usable Past in Romas Kalanta’s 1972 Self-Immolation’, *Ab Imperio* 2 (2015), 162–82.

³⁸ Author’s interview with Sigitas Tamkevičius, Kaunas, May 2018.

³⁹ *LKBK*, ‘Nijolės Sadūnaitė teismas’ [The Trial of Nijolė Sadūnaitė], 17 (1975).



implicitly accused of violations of truth and tendencies to hypocrisy, moral degradation and brute force.⁴⁰ For Sadūnaitė, to be free meant to be free for 'the word of truth', for conscience, and for religious belief and its practice; she accused the state of seeking to 'enslave' people through 'physical and spiritual tyranny'.⁴¹

What, then, did the Catholic underground and non-Soviet everyday tradition mean by 'freedom'? First, freedom was understood as personal liberty. In a typically Thomistic framework, the spiritual and physical dimensions of the human person were distinguished, allowing limited recognition of the physical freedom that existed even within the Soviet system; Soviet citizens, as embodied beings, could still act freely to some extent. However, Catholic writers articulated an idealistic conception of freedom, closely aligned with freedom of conscience. This personal consciousness constituted genuine freedom: the capacity to become who one truly chooses to be without state interference. In this sense, even adherence to Communist ideology could be considered a free act. The fundamental difference between the Communist and the Christian lies in the former's enforcing nature and in the latter's decision to live according to God's will: 'God demands that man be the ruler of the world, not a slave to worldly goods. Man cannot be a slave of the world, a slave of the state, a slave of the machine. Man must be free, free to be in God'.⁴²

While acknowledging the formal equivalence of religious and atheistic worldviews, this devotion to God also enabled a critique of Communist convictions, grounded in the claim that 'there is something greater than freedom—Truth. They [the Catholic dissidents] could not tolerate the lies that are so prevalent in our society today, and they fought for the truth, for which they lost their freedom';⁴³ 'it is the truth that will set you free', not the other way around. Consequently, a strong demand for freedom of confession emerged, along with encouragement of citizens to resist the state-imposed injustice. This position not only defined the civic duties of Catholics but also established a hierarchy between obedience to the state and obedience to the Church: 'Where there is a contradiction between God's law and the state's law, one must obey God'.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² L. Povilonis, 'Mintys iš pamokslo' [Thoughts From a Sermon], *Rūpintojėlis* 3 (1977), 101.

⁴³ *LKBK*, 'Laisvai mąstyti gražu, bet dar gražiau mąstyti teisingai' '[It Is Beautiful to Think Freely, but It Is Even More Beautiful to Think Rightly]', 59 (1983).

⁴⁴ *LKBK*, 'Juozo Zdebskio, Prienų kunigo, byla 1971 m. dėl vaikų katekizavimo' [The Case of Juozas Zdebskis, Priest of Prienai, in 1971 Regarding the Catechisation of Children], 1 (1972).



This position extended even to debates about national freedom. When confronted with the question of whether freedom of faith or freedom of the nation was more important, priority was often given to the former. As late as 1988, shortly after the public articulation of national independence aspirations, it was written in the *LKBK*: 'It is our deep conviction that neither flags nor the slogan "Freedom for Lithuania" will bring real and full freedom. History knows many cases in which local authorities were worse than the occupiers. We must be worthy of freedom. Therefore, we call upon all our compatriots at home and abroad to turn to God . . . Sin is the greatest slavery of a nation'.⁴⁵ The state, any state, was perceived as a potential oppressor, whereas the community was understood as a space in which personal freedom could be cultivated.

These conceptions can partially be described as purely practical. They were developed under conditions in which authentic engagement with Western, especially Christian, traditions was severely restricted. But they also manifested a living tradition (as in Sadūnaitė's case) and were a repetition of inter-war self-understanding (through readings of the inter-war Catholic intellectuals). The underground press also enabled the development of a deeper understanding by incorporating the works of Lithuanian Catholic thinkers based in Western countries, reproducing their texts via *samizdat*. These texts, rooted in the personalistic tradition, emphasised the primacy of the person and personal freedom over the state or the collective. They all were defenders of a *truly free* person who distrusts an ideologised state, regardless of whether that ideology is liberalism or nationalism, and especially if that ideology is all-enslaving Communism.

Antanas Maceina: democracy and integral democracy

To be a Christian Democrat in late twentieth-century Lithuania, much like being a conservative, meant committing oneself to freedom and rejecting unfreedom. This negative relationship with the lived Soviet reality was articulated across the entire spectrum of political choices: Soviet internationalism was to be

⁴⁵ *LKBK*, 'Sovietinėse respublikose' [In Soviet Republics], 78 (1988).



replaced with nationalism and Europeanisation, the planned economy with a free-market economy, cultural uniformity with pluralism and an authoritarian one-party regime with multiparty democracy. Thus, despite all their modern prejudices, Lithuanian Christian Democracy and conservatism were, first and foremost, ideologies that spoke of democracy as a regime of/for political freedom.

Yet Christian Democracy, like any democracy modified by an adjective, is not concerned with democracy in its 'pure' sense—that is, democracy understood as a minimal set of institutional requirements and as a rule of the people. To qualify democracy with an adjective means to specify, direct and transform the very essence of democracy, while simultaneously debating an existing narrow, procedural understanding. Such projects propose principles intended to restrain the pure will of the *demos*. Christian Democracy is no exception. As early as 1901, Pope Leo XIII described Christian Democracy as something to be understood in a particular way, primarily as social action undertaken on behalf of the most disadvantaged.⁴⁶ A century later, the re-emerging LKDP would understand democracy as the aspiration to liberate every human being from every form of oppression and to enable each person to realise their dignity in accordance with conscience. Behind this understanding lay a desire to reclaim a lost heritage, 'the Lithuania that did not exist',⁴⁷ a lost vision of 'integral democracy' (*pilnutinė demokratija*).

The programme *J pilnutinę demokratiją* (Towards Integral Democracy)⁴⁸ was published in 1958 by Catholic émigrés who had fled to the West and sought to articulate political principles for a potentially independent Lithuania. In one sense, their vision was utopian: in the early years of Khrushchev's rule, there were virtually no illusions about the restoration of Lithuanian independence. Nevertheless, the work marked an attempt to define the political orientation of young Catholic intellectuals.⁴⁹ The principal author of most of the ideas articulated in this text was Antanas Maceina—one of the most influential and, at the same time, most controversial Lithuanian philosophers of the twentieth century. At various stages of his life, he was labelled a

⁴⁶ Pope Leo XIII, *Graves de Communi Re* (18 January 1901).

⁴⁷ K. Girnius et al. (eds.), *Lietuva, kurios nebuvo. Pilnutinės demokratijos svarstymai ir vertinimai* [The Lithuania That Never Was. Considerations and Assessments of Integral Democracy] (Vilnius: VU leidykla, 2016).

⁴⁸ Friends of the Lithuanian Front, *J pilnutinę demokratiją: svarstymai apie valstybės pagrindus* [Towards Integral Democracy: Considerations on the Foundations of a State] (Detroit: Lietuvos fronto bičiulių leidinys, 1958).

⁴⁹ It was not entirely original, rather representing the continuation of an established tradition. The programme elaborated upon earlier programmes drafted by the same intellectual circle, such as *J organiškiosios valstybės kūrybą* (Towards the Creation of an Organic State) in 1936 and *J reformuotą demokratiją* (Towards a Reformed Democracy) in 1943.



socialist, a fascist sympathiser, a conservative and a liberal. Above all, though, he was a Catholic intellectual. As he later wrote, ‘religion is too strong an element in me for me not to think about it and not to let it guide my decisions in matters of life’.⁵⁰

J pilnutinę demokratiją is only one of many, though the most comprehensive, of Maceina’s political contributions. It elaborated on reflections initiated as early as 1947 on the relationship between democracy and economic, cultural and political orders, advocating an expansion of democracy far beyond its formal institutional conception. It also resonated in a global context in which Christianity was increasingly seen as compatible with democratic institutions: Pope Pius XII’s 1944 Christmas message had already presented democracy as a desirable ideal, and Christian Democratic parties were viewed as a potential non-socialist alternative in post-fascist Europe. Maceina was also familiar with and had positively assessed personalism and the democratic theory developed by Jacques Maritain. On the other hand, the text also had a polemical intention. Beyond the common effort to balance individualist and collectivist ideologies, it also criticised the tradition of the LKDP, arguing that the party distorted the ideals of both Christianity and democracy.⁵¹

This critique was grounded in a strict understanding of democracy that was in line with European Christian Democratic thought. First, democracy was to encompass all major spheres of social life—not only politics, but also economic and cultural life. Also, it had to overcome the mistakes of liberal democracy—radical individualism and the subordination of state institutions to partisan interests. Liberal democracy, though valuable insofar as it elevated democracy as a principle, had forgotten the ‘common good of the nation and the state’.⁵² For this reason, collectivism and authoritarianism emerged as reactions to liberalism. However, this did not mean that national or class rule was superior. As Maceina argued, ‘in liberalism the individual enslaves and destroys the individual; in socialism, class persecutes class; in nationalism, nation fights

⁵⁰ A. Maceina, *Antano Maceinos laišškai prel. Pranciškui Jurui* [Antanas Maceina’s Letters to Prelate Pranciškus Juras] (Vilnius: Lietuvos Katalikų mokslo akademija, 1997), 157.

⁵¹ See J. Dementavičius, ‘Cultural Versus Political Christian Democrats: Debating the Idea of (Christian) Democracy in Lithuanian Exile’, in W. Kaiser and P. H. Kosicki (eds.), *Political Exile in the Global Twentieth Century. Catholic Christian Democrats in Europe and the Americas* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2021).

⁵² A. Maceina et al., ‘Į organiškiosios valstybės kūrybą’ [Towards the Creation of the Organic State] in K. Girnius et al. (eds.), *Lietuva, kurios nebuvo. Pilnutinės demokratijos svarstymai ir vertinimai* [The Lithuania That Never Was. Considerations and Assessments of Integral Democracy] (Vilnius: VU leidykla, 2016), 80.



against nation. From forced discord and egoism, we move towards global discord and universal egoism.⁵³ Maceina's ambition as a political theorist was to find a way out of this social antagonism, and his answer lay in integral democracy.

The fundamental principle of integral democracy claims: 'In democracy, the person is the supreme principle of life, which everything serves, but which itself serves as a means to nothing. . . . The foundation of democracy is the primacy of the person over the collective, over the thing, and over the idea'.⁵⁴ As the person is central to this conception and to Maceina's political theory at large, true democratic life requires that the person stands above (a) groups of people, (b) things and (c) ideas. At the same time, all secondary social formations, such as family, community, the state and the international order, must serve the person.

Politically, for Maceina, democracy did not simply mean parliamentary institutions or popular sovereignty. Its foundational principle was the dignity of every person and the natural equality arising from it. From this personal dignity follows the autonomy of all associations and the principles that the liberal tradition typically regards as democratic. If these were denied, individuals would exploit one another, or nations would enslave other nations. 'The essence of democratic freedom,' he wrote, 'is that it is freedom for all, not only for particular estates, groups or individuals'.⁵⁵ Thus, in true political democracy, the person precedes the collective, and, by extension, any institutional structure created by the collective, including the state.

Second, Maceina argued that democracy must also affirm the primacy of the person over material things, thereby criticising systems that make wealth the primary goal. Mammon came to dominate Mammon came to dominate for Maceina because, to possess wealth, a person must recognise the autonomy of things and ultimately serve them. Thus, wealth is not merely the possession of a thing; it is service to the thing'.⁵⁶

⁵³ A. Maceina, 'Tautinis auklėjimas' [National Education], in A. Maceina, *Rašta. Pedagogikos filosofija* [Writings. Philosophy of Pedagogy], vol. 8 (Vilnius: Mintis, 2002), 225.

⁵⁴ A. Maceina, 'Demokratijos principai' [Principles of Democracy] in K. Girnius et al. (eds.), *Lietuva, kurios nebuvo. Pilnutinės demokratijos svarstymai ir vertinimai* [The Lithuania That Never Was. Considerations and Assessments of Integral Democracy] (Vilnius: VU leidykla, 2016), 269.

⁵⁵ A. Maceina, 'Pilnutinės demokratijos pagrindai' [Fundamentals of Integral Democracy], in K. Girnius et al. (eds.), *Lietuva, kurios nebuvo. Pilnutinės demokratijos svarstymai ir vertinimai* [The Lithuania That Never Was. Considerations and Assessments of Integral Democracy] (Vilnius: VU leidykla, 2016), 316.

⁵⁶ A. Maceina, *Saulės giesmė: šventasis Pranciškus Asyžietis kaip krikščioniškojo gyvenimo šauklys* [The Song of the Sun: Saint Francis of Assisi as a Herald of Christian Life] (Brooklyn, NY: išleido M. Juras, 1954), 119.



Accordingly, integral democracy reversed this relationship: just as political democracy proclaims the primacy of the person over the state, social democracy demands the primacy of the person over the economy.

Finally, the person must take precedence over ideas, even those ideas that define integral democracy or Christianity itself. Maceina resolved this apparent paradox by affirming the freedom of conscience, including the freedom to err. Democracy must ensure that ideas are freely chosen and sincerely professed, while in totalitarian systems, ideas are imposed. Thus, integral democracy in the realm of ideas manifests as freedom of conscience, which Maceina regarded as the most fundamental freedom, since coercion in matters of belief constitutes the gravest violation of a person's spiritual core.⁵⁷ As an alternative, he proposed 'cultural democracy', or what he termed 'non-worldview politics':⁵⁸ the conviction that the state has no authority in matters of worldviews and must merely guarantee their coexistence, refraining from enforcing any single ideology.

At the time, these claims were radical as they criticised not only liberal and collectivist regimes but also Christian Democracy itself. If politics is dedicated to achieving the common good, any appeal to a single group's interests (even if this is the Christian Democrats' focus on Christians) would undermine democracy's universality. Similarly incompatible is any attempt by a worldview-based party to organise the entire life of the state according to its principles. Finally, Christian and political action are fundamentally opposed in nature: the Christian acts through the word, the politician through force. When so-called Christian politics employs coercion, it distorts Christianity's essence.

This conviction that parties should act while ignoring their worldview was heavily criticised by the LKDP. As far as it was concerned, Christian politicians were obligated to integrate Christian teaching into political life, as it alone was deemed truly democratic. Furthermore, the party's model emphasised paternalistic elements, natural hierarchies and inequality: those who care and those who must be cared for.⁵⁹ Finally, the two camps, the movement close to Maceina, *Lietuvos fronto bičiuliai* (Friends of Lithuanian Front, LFB) and the LKDP, diverged on the role of the state and political power, with the Christian Democrats arguing that good order was to be achieved through deliberate political action, since 'the Church had always taught that Catholic

⁵⁷ Maceina, 'Pilnutinės demokratijos pagrindai', 326.

⁵⁸ A. Maceina, 'Kultūrinė demokratija' [Cultural Democracy], *Aidai* 8 (1948).

⁵⁹ M. Krupavičius, 'Kas yra krikščioniškoji demokratybė?' [What Is Christian Democracy?], Lithuanian Institute of History, F54-649, 647.



political action must be Catholic'.⁶⁰ Over time, this historical tension seemed to diminish as neither group had real influence in Lithuania as a whole before 1989—in a way, we can see the existence of a Christian Democratic politics without its own polity. Only after independence did these programmes regain relevance: the LKDP in exile renewed ties with the re-established LKDP in Lithuania, while the intellectuals following Maceina continued their cultural work. Thus, two Christian Democratic currents remained relevant: a more moralising, nationalist, 'hard' type and a more open, personalist, 'soft' one, which differed in ideological rigidity and tolerance of progressive ideas. Despite their differences, both articulated a vision of broad democracy, a democracy meant to encompass all spheres and all people.

Stasys Šalkauskis: a synthetic worldview and (geo)political life in between

As mentioned above, throughout his entire life, Antanas Maceina was described in strikingly divergent terms. Yet, if one were to ask Maceina which tradition his democratic imagination truly continued, the answer would likely point not to an ideology, nor even to Christianity, but to a person—Stasys Šalkauskis. Šalkauskis was Maceina's academic mentor, guiding him through university life and introducing him to the mode of philosophical inquiry that shaped his intellectual trajectory. Maceina not only developed Šalkauskis's philosophy of culture but also extended his political ideas. This continuity is most clearly visible in the very vocabulary of political theory. The term '*pilnutinė demokratija*' (integral democracy) is, in fact, a borrowing from Šalkauskis's projected but never completed political treatise of the same name. This was explicitly acknowledged by the authors of *J pilnutinę demokratiją*, who, among their inspirations, cited Šalkauskis's 1926 essay 'Momento reikalai, principų reikalavimi' (The Demands of the Moment, the Requirements of Principle), which was written in the aftermath of the Christian Democrats' electoral defeat and devoted to clarifying what genuinely Christian Democratic conduct ought to mean.

⁶⁰ M. Krupavičius, 'Prel. Mykolo Krupavičiaus žodis Vytautininkams' ['Prel. Mykolas Krupavičius Word to the Vytautininkai], in A. Škiudaitė (ed.), *Lietuviai krikščionys demokratai išeivijoje: 1946–2008 m.* [Lithuanian Christian Democrats in Exile: 1946–2008] (Vilnius: Baltijos kopija, 2013), 85.



From the perspective of intellectual history, Šalkauskis's project was not an isolated intellectual invention. Even the term integral (*pilnutinis*) was a reference to the French *intégral*, likely encountered in *L'Esprit*, the journal edited by Emmanuel Mounier to which Šalkauskis subscribed. Through this channel, interpretations of Christian personalism reached Lithuania, offering an attractive way to confront modernity in a Christian manner. But by that time, Šalkauskis had already internalised a European Christian social imagination, having recently returned from philosophical studies at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. Fribourg was a significant intellectual hub for Lithuanian Catholics seeking a Western education. Founded in 1889 with the involvement of Pope Leo XIII, the university provided a papal programme aimed at reconciling theology with modern science and encouraging Catholic social and intellectual engagement. This project drew participants from across the Catholic world, and Šalkauskis was one of them. It was in Fribourg that Šalkauskis underwent what might be described as an intellectual Christianisation in a Western European sense. The transformation was both symbolic and literal: he arrived in Switzerland from the depths of the Russian Empire. His later self-description as a 'spiritual child of Fribourg'⁶¹ primarily refers to this intellectual reorientation—from the mystical Christianity of the East, represented by influential Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, towards a more rationalist, Thomistic understanding.⁶²

This intellectual orientation crystallised two fundamental elements of Šalkauskis's social thought. The first was a profound belief in ideas and the transformative power of worldviews. His dictum 'doctrine first, action later'⁶³ encapsulates this conviction. Doctrine here does not mean a rigid set of rules but rather a reflective process of forming and cultivating one's worldview as a lens through which the world is interpreted.⁶⁴ Crucially, Šalkauskis insists that worldview is irreducibly personal. Collective entities do not possess worldviews, as they lack both sensory experience and rational consciousness. Culture, while expressed through individuals, always exceeds any single individual's creative capacity. Worldview, by contrast, is the personal relationship to the living world. This distinction encodes a normative demand: individuals are required to cultivate themselves in accordance with their worldview commitments.

⁶¹ K. Jagėlienė (ed.), *Dvasiniai Fribūro vaikai: Fribūro universiteto lietuviai ir jų reikšmė Lietuvai: katalogas* [Spiritual Children of Fribourg: Lithuanians at the University of Fribourg and Their Significance for Lithuania: Catalogue] (Vilnius: Bažnytinio paveldo muziejus, 2019).

⁶² S. Šalkauskis, 'Kunigas Dambrauskas, mano mokytojas ir kritikas: abipusis susirašinėjimas' [Priest Dambrauskas, My Teacher and Critic: Mutual Correspondence] in S. Šalkauskis, *Raštai* [Writings], vol. 3 (Vilnius: Mintis, 1993), 403.

⁶³ S. Šalkauskis, 'Ateitininkų ideologija ir josios realizavimas gyvenimo praktikoje' [Ideology of Ateitininkai and the Realisation of It in the Practice of Life], *Židinys* 11 (1929), 315.

⁶⁴ S. Šalkauskis, 'Pasaulėžiūra ir filosofija' [Worldview and Philosophy], in S. Šalkauskis, *Raštai* [Writings], vol. 1 (Vilnius: Mintis, 1990), 59.



The second element is the conviction that the diverse manifestations of reality can, and must, be synthetically integrated into a coherent worldview. For Šalkauskis, a worldview is integral when it strives to encompass all phenomena and relate them meaningfully to reason, morality and aesthetics. Any attempt to absolutise one dimension at the expense of others constitutes a distortion and the ‘fundamental errors and one-sided tendencies’⁶⁵ of worldview formation. A fully integral vision must also grapple with transcendence and religion. Christianity, in Šalkauskis’s account, uniquely aspires to such comprehensiveness by integrating nature, culture and grace in a harmonious whole.⁶⁶

Yet, Šalkauskis is far from naive. He acknowledges the finitude of human cognition and the impossibility of fully realising integrity in real existence. The ideal remains regulative rather than attainable. Precisely for this reason, an integral worldview is marked by reflexivity and an awareness of its own limitations, necessitating continual self-correction. This principle operates on both the personal and the political levels. Personally, it grounds the Christian Democratic virtue of moderation: fidelity to principles without blindness to reality and active engagement in the world constrained by moral limits. Politically, the central principle of how to act is to aim for an all-encompassing synthesis.

One of the clearest manifestations of this approach appears in Šalkauskis’s (geo)political interpretation of Lithuanian identity. For Šalkauskis, Lithuania was a kind of synthesis, because of its existence ‘in between’. It stands between national particularity and Christian universality, between change and tradition, between collective individuality and personal agency, and between Russia and Europe as two civilisational poles. However, for Šalkauskis, this liminality is never relativistic. It is oriented towards a chosen truth that has not yet fully unfolded in history but serves as a constant point of reference. Thus, geopolitically situated between East and West, Šalkauskis chose Europe, acknowledging Russia’s influence; culturally committed to Lithuanian national causes, he insisted that nationalism must itself be Christianised; seeking Lithuanian progress, he repeatedly argued that progress must be built upon the foundations of tradition.

All this results in a somewhat complicated relationship with ideology as a worldview from Šalkauskis’s perspective. On the one hand, there is a fear of the strict logic of ideas and the rules of principles. On the other hand, it is precisely the conservatives, not to mention the Christian Democrats, who demand the

⁶⁵ S. Šalkauskis, ‘Pilnutinio ugdymo gairės’ [Guidelines for Integral Education], *Romuva 2* (1922), 69.

⁶⁶ S. Šalkauskis, ‘Krikščioniškoji politika ir gyvenamoji valanda’ [Christian Politics and the Current Hour], *Romuva 1* (1921).



abstract ideas and principles, implying that such ideas are clear to everyone and that those grounding principles must be followed. Despite everything, life ‘in between’ required defining the world and the time, and choosing the best possible action in accordance with the remaining principles. Šalkauskis’s thinking is a way to remind us of this, and to encourage us to live as if aiming to join the community of saints—probably in vain, but with hope for a better world.

Adomas Jakštas-Dambrauskas: personhood and theocratic politics

In Lithuanian intellectual history, Stasys Šalkauskis is most often remembered as a teacher—an educator of those who would later teach the diaspora and inspire underground Catholic intellectual life. This retrospective image, however, overlooks the fact that Šalkauskis himself was embedded in an intellectual lineage and shaped by authoritative figures. One among them was Adomas Jakštas-Dambrauskas, a priest who was not only involved in formulating the origins of the first LKDP programme but also influenced an entire generation of Catholic intellectuals. His cultural activity was remarkably wide-ranging. However, his greatest historical significance lies in his role as editor of the influential journal *Draugija* (Fellowship). As an apologist seeking to reconcile Catholicism with secular intellectual life and moderate progressivism, Jakštas emerged as a formative figure in shaping the core principles of Christian political imagination (person, nation, social responsibility, principles of good politics etc.) and in critiquing secular political imaginations. This should not be surprising, because conservatism itself is commonly understood as having emerged from critical responses to the Enlightenment, liberalism and, latterly, socialism.

In Lithuania, as in much of Central and Eastern Europe, the tension between political Catholicism and modern ideologies was configured somewhat differently than elsewhere. Unlike in Western Europe, a middle path was sought not primarily between liberalism and socialism, but between liberalism and a form of conservatism associated with the anti-liberal imperial Russian political ideology of ‘orthodoxy, autocracy and



nationality',⁶⁷ which was anti-Catholic, anti-republican and anti-Lithuanian. Rejecting this Russian conservatism did not render acceptable the secular, often anti-Christian, radically emancipatory and revolutionary forms of Western liberalism or socialism. Lithuanian Christian Democrats thus found themselves navigating between the Scylla and Charybdis of modernisation and traditionalism, individual freedom and its denial, revolution and stagnation, forced religiosity and secularisation. It was within this constellation of tensions that the LKDP programme was formulated in 1904.

Formally, the authorship of this programme is attributed to three figures. The principal author was a young priest, another alumnus of Fribourg University, Pranciškus Būčys. Būčys sought the approval of established authorities, one of whom was Adomas Jakštas-Dambrauskas, who the younger clergy referred to as the 'Pope of Lithuania'. Jakštas, at the time, was seen as a modern priest who believed that 'religion and science are two friendly and mutually beneficial treasures, important for nations and for all humanity'.⁶⁸ Jakštas tried to demonstrate that Catholicism was not merely the religion of the 'simple folk' but could coexist with an intellectually rigorous, scientifically engaged modern world. He was echoing Pope Leo XIII and his attempts to reconcile modernity with the Thomistic tradition. One of the key concepts of this reconciliation was that of the human person, which led to early interpretations of (Lithuanian) Christian personalism.

This understanding of personhood rests on three principles: first, that God creates the human being; second, that the human being is created in God's image; and third, that the human being, as an inhabitant of the world, possesses not only a spiritual but also a material nature. The combination of these principles resulted in a particular political programme. The first principle grounds Christian universalism and the need for unity: if God is the Father of all, then all are brothers and sisters.⁶⁹ Hence, Jakštas's vision of international order presupposes universal fraternity. The Church, he argued, best embodies this ideal, uniting social classes and nations alike. This universalism implies a form of patriarchal social order that Jakštas describes

⁶⁷ A. Зорин, Кормя двуглавого орла... литература и государственная идеология в России в последней трети XVIII-первой трети XIX века [Feeding the Double-Headed Eagle... Literature and State Ideology in Russia in the Last Third of the Eighteenth and First Third of the Nineteenth Centuries] (Moscow: Novoje literaturnoje obozrenije, 2004), 337–74.

⁶⁸ P. Būčys, '[vadas]' [Introduction], in A. Jakštas, *Mokslas ir tikėjimas: populiarių apologetikų straipsnių rinkinys* [Science and Faith: A Collection of Popular Apologetic Articles] (Kaunas: Žinijos bendrovė, 1930), 6.

⁶⁹ A. Jakštas, 'Katalikiškojo pacifizmo dėsniai' [The Laws of Catholic Pacifism] in A. Jakštas, *Raštai* [Writings], vol. 1, ed. A. Rybelis (Vilnius: Mintis, 1995), 333.



as theocracy, though not in the sense of clerical rule, but rather in the sense of the primacy of God as the source of all authority and laws.⁷⁰

The second principle, being created in God's image, grounds not only human dignity but also a demand for conscious self-transformation. Jakštas, following Polish philosopher Józef Maria Hoene-Wroński, located this likeness to God primarily in human creative capacity. Created in the image of the Creator, the human being is called to complete God's creative work as a co-creator.⁷¹ This likeness is not automatic but potential: all are images of God, yet similarity must be actively pursued. Hence, the creative person is obligated to seek truth, goodness and beauty. For Jakštas, evil is understood as being distant from God. To move away from God is to diminish one's likeness to Him, choosing error, immorality and ugliness. True slavery, therefore, is subjugation to passions, intellectual laziness and weakness of will, and 'a state governed by morally corrupt, unfair, lazy representatives cannot have a bright future'.⁷²

The third element of Jakštas's personalism carries clear political implications. By emphasising creativity, freedom, imagination and rational striving, he distinguishes the human person from the natural world that is governed by necessity. Jakštas maintains the duality of the human being as both the individual (natural, instinctual) and the person (spiritual, creative).⁷³ As an individual, the human being belongs to the earthly city; as a person, to the divine city. Politically, this distinction undergirds the principled moralism that the LKDP attempted to institutionalise, while always having in mind that the ultimate goal is *a truly free* person.

Even today, with Jakštas largely forgotten, the primacy of the person has not disappeared from the ideological imagination of the Lithuanian centre-right. The 1904 programme inspired later party programmes, including the 1918 programme of Mykolas Krupavičius, and shaped the entire LKDP tradition. Šalkauskis and his pupils would carry forward the emphasis on the person. This personalist framework enables criticism of both collectivist totalitarianisms and radical individualism in modern-day Lithuania, affirming that only (Christian) democratic principles can liberate the human being enslaved by the extremes of modern civilisation, whether of the right or the left. That being said, the conservative interpretation of the human being that has

⁷⁰ A. Jakštas, 'Kas yra teokratija?' [What Is Theocracy?], in A. Jakštas, *Raštai* [Writings], vol. 1, ed. A. Rybelis (Vilnius: Mintis, 1995).

⁷¹ A. Jakštas, 'Žmogaus paslaptis' [The Mystery of Man], in A. Jakštas, *Raštai* [Writings], vol. 1, ed. A. Rybelis (Vilnius: Mintis, 1995), 80.

⁷² Ibid., 81.

⁷³ Ibid., 95.



dominated the post-Soviet period might best be described as that of a person who does not (or no longer) acknowledge(s) God. Secular idiom would claim, 'Lithuania will be better when people are better to one another'. However, even there, the theological source remains present even where it is no longer explicitly acknowledged. It is a political theology not of friend and enemy or good and evil, but of love, hope and dignity.



Conclusions and recommendations



I began by asking what allows the Lithuanian centre–right—specifically the conservatives and the Christian Democrats—to be seen as distinctive. Undoubtedly, the answer lies in history, which, like the Lithuanian state itself, is marked by ruptures and attempts to reconstruct and build institutions anew. This distinctiveness represents a conditional political success, and not one that has necessarily been replicated by other centre–right forces in post-Soviet Europe. Over the course of the post-Soviet years, the TS–LKD emerged and has remained the main centre–right political force in Lithuania, coexisting with the principles of liberal democracy without major tension.

This study, however, has advanced the argument that one key element of the Lithuanian centre–right’s distinctiveness lies in its ideological imagination and tradition. Viewed from this perspective, the initial question can itself be reframed: *how does the tradition of the centre–right imagination, combined with efforts to become part of the European centre–right party family, also entail attempts to be national and traditional?* In reconstructing and historicising the ideological imagination of the TS–LKD, I took several steps backwards, focusing on several key ideas and the intellectuals who developed them. These can be seen not as simple steps, but as lessons learned from Lithuanian centre–right thought.

First, as Jakštas reminds us, the centre–right began with a concern for the human being—not as an abstract individual, but as a concrete and dignified person. Such sincere concern for the Other has the potential to transcend both individual and collective particularities, serving the common good beyond oneself. Jakštas taught that, despite the daily frustrations of such commitments, one can believe, hope and act, thus changing and potentially transforming the political landscape.

Second, Šalkauskis emphasises that, at its deepest level, the human being expresses itself and engages with the world through a culturally and historically concrete worldview. Any perspective is always partial, and can only be transcended by adopting an in-between stance. The individual not only expresses culture but exists amidst different forms of cultural expression and choice. Geopolitically, this may mean choosing between East and West; politically, between tolerance and coercion. To clearly articulate where a party stands is to try to consciously understand the grounding principles and political choices of a person and of a movement—a mode of being that Lithuanian centre–right parties have consistently pursued.

Third, Maceina encourages us not merely to rethink democracy but to understand its foundations and apply them even in domains where democratisation is seldom discussed. For him, democracy is first and



foremost not rule by the people, but rule for the people. Seen in this way, any act of governance, control or subjugation must be evaluated against this principle. His discussion with the LDKP also reminds us that such an idea can be interpreted in multiple ways, even provoking polarisation. Institutionally, however, this does not mark the end of an idea but its expansion into different spheres.

Fourth, the totalitarian experience teaches us that freedom remains a core concept of the centre-right imagination, but in tandem with a duty to serve the truth, which gives it direction. One might ask, ‘What is truth?’ and imply that it lies with the powerful. However, Lithuania’s underground experience reminds us that living in truth entails striving for truth, without forcing others to do the same. While this may seem futile, historical experience shows that networks of support and shared effort can, over time, contribute to the reformation of any regime.

Fifth, openness to change does not imply abandoning tradition; rather, it entails rethinking it. Appealing to tradition does not limit the possibility of transformation but can provide the foundation for revolutionary change. Landsbergis, through both his thought and life, embodies a change inseparable from memory. He also reminds us that dedicated politicians play a vital role in consolidating movements, initiating reforms and embedding desired changes.

Sixth, just as we can reflect on history, we can reflect on the importance of institutions. Emphasising the state does not mean denying the community or the individual. For Kubilius and the TS–LKD, the state has always been a tool to empower communities and individuals. This entails caring for the entire institutional hierarchy, from the individual and family to the state and supranational institutions. Kubilius’s example, and his efforts to articulate the party programme, demonstrate that a reflective leader can inspire his or her party community.

Finally, ideology matters. Not only for its functions within the political system, helping voters to choose, but also as a tool for party mobilisation. Debates over a party’s proper ideological direction can revitalise it, prompting members to rethink their chosen ideas and decisions. In this sense, inclusivity is enhanced: prioritising one agenda over another is not merely an elite decision, but part of a broader public discussion. The TS–LKD was born from the debates of citizens, and it has embedded this culture of dialogue—both internally and with opponents. Perhaps this is precisely what makes Lithuanian conservatism adaptable and resilient, constantly evolving yet always based on principles.



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This paper examines the intellectual foundations of Lithuania's centre-right tradition, focusing on the Homeland Union–Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS–LKD) and the ideas that have shaped its political identity. Unlike many centre-right parties in post-Communist Europe, the TS–LKD has combined electoral success, organisational stability and ideological moderation while avoiding a sustained drift toward populism or radical nationalism.

The study argues that this success is rooted in a distinctive ideological synthesis. Lithuanian centre-right thought emerged from the interaction of three traditions: European Christian Democracy, the experience of Soviet occupation and resistance, and the political choices of key leaders and intellectuals. Rather than adhering to a single doctrine, it developed through a continuous effort to balance competing principles: freedom and responsibility, individual dignity and community, national identity and European integration.

The paper reconstructs this intellectual genealogy through the ideas of influential figures including Adomas Jakštas-Dambrauskas, Stasys Šalkauskis, Antanas Maceina, Vytautas Landsbergis and Andrius Kubilius. Together, these thinkers contributed concepts that remain central to Lithuanian centre-right politics: the primacy of the human person, the common good, integral democracy, freedom of conscience, historical responsibility and the role of strong but limited state institutions.

The analysis shows that Soviet rule transformed rather than erased Lithuania's Christian political tradition. Dissident movements and the Catholic underground preserved ideas of truth, freedom and moral responsibility that later became foundational to post-independence conservatism and Christian Democracy.

Ultimately, the Lithuanian centre-right's resilience derives from its capacity to reconcile continuity with change, preserving core principles while adapting them to new political challenges.



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