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Estonia is a Woman – Kaja Kallas, the Iron Lady in Estonian Politics

Abstract: The aim of the article is to analyse the political situation in Estonia at the time of Prime Minister Kaja Kallas. Kallas, as a young, dynamic and ambitious lawyer, and now primarily a politician, sets a new direction for leadership. There are many challenges and difficulties on the Estonian political scene, but Kaja Kallas has been successful to carry out her tasks since January 2021. The article is an attempt to analyse the situation on the Estonian political scene from the time of the first cabinet of Kaija Kallas, through the government crisis of June 2022, to the parliamentary elections of March 2023. The leader of the Reform Party perfectly copes with challenges, fights for people and their rights.

Key words: Estonia, Kaja Kallas, parliamentary elections in Estonia, Prime Minister of Estonia, leadership

Introduction

Estonia, like the other Baltic republics Lithuania and Latvia, had to overcome a very long and arduous path to gain international recognition as an independent and democratic country. Thanks to its consistently implemented national and international policies and effectively rebuilt state institutions, Estonia has become one of the leaders in the region of Central and Eastern Europe and has successfully seized the opportunity to return to the map of Europe in 1991 (Pettai, 2021, pp. 243–250). In order for the country to develop well, it needs a strong leader who will take care of its citizens and determine the priorities of the state's policy. Toomas Hendrik Ilves¹ in one of his speeches in 2013 pointed out that Estonians are no longer racing against their freedom, and the proper quality of life and strengthening democracy depend on them (*President Toomas Hendrik Ilves priiuse põlistumise päeva...*). Estonia can be proud of its actions and achievements, and hope and freedom will endure (Pettai, 2021, pp. 247–252).

The aim of the article is to analyze the political and social situation in contemporary Estonia under the rule of the first female prime minister in the country's history – Kaja Kallas. The article poses the following research questions: Is the policy pursued by Kaja Kallas significantly different from its predecessors? What factors caused Kaja Kallas to earn the nickname of the Iron Lady?

Kaja Kallas comes from a family where politics has played a significant role. Her father, Kiim Kallas, served as Prime Minister for the Estonian Reform Party from January 2002 to April 2003, and after the country regained independence, he became Minister of Foreign Affairs and then Minister of Finance. Kaja Kallas received a thorough education, she graduated from the University of Tartu in law, then graduated from the Estonian Business School in Tallinn (*Republic of Estonia, Kaja Kallas*).

¹ Toomas Hendrik Ilves served as President of Estonia from 2006 to 2016.

In the 2011 Riigikogu elections, at the age of 34, Kallas won her first parliamentary seat for the Reform Party, which won the March elections under the leadership of Adrus Ansip (*Rządząca koalicja wygrała...*, 06.03.2011). Kallas was a very active parliamentarian from the beginning, since 2011 she was the chair of the Economic Committee. In 2014, she was elected to the European Parliament,² where she actively represented the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe and served as Vice-Chair of the MEPs European Parliament. Despite her numerous successes in European politics, Kaja Kallas decided to return to national politics, in the parliamentary elections in March 2019 she obtained a parliamentary seat for the second time, a success she repeated four years later, winning over 31,000 votes. votes (*Partia premier Estonii Kai Kallas triumfuje...*, 06.03.2023). Voter turnout is also increasing with each election, which is confirmed by the fact that Estonians want to decide on the future and elect their representatives. It is not without significance that since the local elections in 2005. Estonia allows remote voting. Recent parliamentary elections have shown that more than half of the electorate chose this form of voting³ (*Kuidas läks erakondadel*, 2023). Despite her young age, Kaja Kallas entered Estonian politics with a decisive step, consistently building her electoral capital and experience in Estonian and European politics. Although she gained a wealth of experience in the legal profession, she decided to get involved in politics and continue the family tradition. Even though she was often compared to her father and criticised, she did not give up and became a politician recognized in Estonia and abroad (Otocky, 2019).

1. Kaja Kallas' first cabinet

The beginning of 2021 was a special year for Estonian domestic politics. In January 2021, President Kersti Kallujald entrusted Kaja Kallas, the leader of the Reform Party, with the mission of forming a government. Although the reformists won the March 2019 Riigikogu elections, at that time, Kallas was not given the mission to form a government. The centrists, led by Jüri Ratas, signed a coalition agreement with the Conservative People's Party (EKRE) and the Fatherland (Isamaa), winning a majority in the 101-seat parliament. Although there were many conflict scenarios, in the end Jüri Ratas was given the portfolio of Prime Minister, although the situation was very tense and very uncomfortable for Kaja Kallas herself, she began to cooperate with the new cabinet (*Kallas: oleksin...*, 26.03.2019).

The situation was reversed when Jüri Ratas resigned as Prime Minister of Estonia on 14 January 2021 (*Estonia's government...*, 14.01.2021). The immediate cause of the resignation was the corruption crisis among the highest representatives of the Centre Party, Prime Minister Ratas, taking responsibility for his cabinet, resigned.⁴ On 25 Jan-

² In 2014 Estonia had 6 seats in the European Parliament, in the 2020 elections the number of seats increased till 7 seats.

³ In 2023, more than 313 thousand. of voters voted remotely.

⁴ The General Secretary of the Centre Party, Mikhail Korb, was accused of illegally crediting one of Tallinn's developers. For more information, see: M. Konarski, *The corruption scandal in Estonia. Nationalists will be fired from the government*, "Polityka", 24 January 2021, <https://www.polityka.com>.

uary 2021, a majority of Riigikogu members supported Kallas' candidacy for the post of Prime Minister, and the next day, Kaja Kallas became Prime Minister of Estonia for the first time. Kallas' cabinet had strong support from Kersti Kaljulaid, the president of Estonia, who had already hoped to form a coalition of the Reform Party and the Centre government led by the first-ever female prime minister after the reformists won the parliamentary elections in 2019. It should also be emphasised that although the electoral coalition could count on 59 votes from the Estonian Riigikogu, a larger group of parliamentarians supported the government of K. Kallas⁵ (Hyndle-Hussein, 2021). Immediately after taking over as Prime Minister, Kallas indicated the key directions for her cabinet, including the efficient coordination of activities related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the availability of vaccines. In addition, an important issue was climate naturalness and the adoption of a realistic schedule of activities with a final date of 2050. The new prime minister also pointed to the need to achieve and maintain financial balance, and pointed out that stability in the eurozone is paramount for Estonia. Kallas also did not omit the issue of implementation with Russia, she firmly pointed out that sanctions against the aggressor, who is opposed to the opposition, including Alexei Navalny⁶ (*Kallas to European...*, 27.01.2021).

Kaja Kallas had to face many new problems, in her actions she focused primarily on people and the protection of the individual. An important element of the new Prime Minister's activities was to build and strengthen an open and civil society. The protection of personal freedom, tolerance, equality and social responsibility were the overarching goals of Kallas's policy. The new government also failed to cooperate with the Estonian Conservative People's Party (EKRE), which was perceived by liberal reformists as a clearly anti-European and nationalist party, with an anti-immigrant attitude. Therefore, the former coalition partner could not count on co-forming the new government. Initially, it might have seemed that the coalition of the Reform Party and the Centre Party had a chance to lead Estonia to the next parliamentary elections, and the broadly understood security of citizens and the country would be an unflagging priority of the government. Kaja Kallas clearly declared that openness and safety means ensuring that adults can work and children and young people can safely receive education in kindergartens and schools. The new prime minister also strongly emphasised the need to strengthen the policy of children and young people, pointed to the need to legalise same-sex marriages, strengthen the digitisation of Estonia and strengthen environmental processes. Rising unemployment and the changing economic environment were also important issues, as well as the Kremlin's regular actions, the aim of which was primarily to exert an increasingly stronger influence on Estonian foreign policy (*Kaja Kallas and the liberal...*, 2.02.2021).

Despite the fact that the coalition of reformists and centrists became a fact, Kaja Kallas did not spare her coalition partners bitter words. In 2019, Kallas pointed to the numerous

pl/tygodnikpolityka/swiat/2099773,1,afera-korupcyjna-w-estonii-nacjonalisci-wyleca-z-rzadu.read, 09.06.2023.

⁵ The government of Kaja Kallas received 70 votes in support, 30 MPs expressed their opposition with 1 abstention.

⁶ Kaja Kallas expressed her firm stance on Crimea just over a year before Russia's attack on Ukraine, which took place on February 24, 2022.

scandals for which the Ratas government was responsible. As the most important issues, she pointed primarily to the declining image and weakening reputation of the country, she also did not ignore the fact that many social groups were overlooked and disregarded, she pointed to women, the Russian minority and environmentalists. The most serious battle was fought over values, the rule of law and respect for the principles of democracy. On the other hand, the Reform Party's proposal concerning education in Estonian and, more specifically, the abolition of bilingual education, aroused considerable controversy. Kaja Kallas strongly pointed out that the lack of fluency in the official language by representatives of a large group of national minorities, especially ethnic Russians, strongly limits the chances of young people to get a good education, and consequently to take up a well-paid and stable job. According to Kallas, careful education in Estonian from the pre-school stage is the key to success so that children and young people can compete on an equal footing in the future for university places and interesting career opportunities. At the same time, she emphasized that the aim of the Reform Party is not to limit access to the culture and language of national minorities or to liquidate schools for national minorities. However, the proposed project did not receive the support of the majority, EKRE and Homeland did not support the initiative, which was consequently rejected (Otocky, 2019). An important signal for the public and international opinion was the composition of the first government of Kaja Kallas, among the 14 ministers 6 women were appointed, who took up portfolios in ministries strategic from the point of view of the functioning of the state, i.e. the ministries of justice, finance or foreign affairs, as well as the ministries of social protection, education, research and culture⁷ (Chmielewski, 2021).

2. The collapse of the coalition and the second government of Kaja Kallas

In June 2022, the government coalition collapsed. Kallas dismissed seven ministers from the Centre Party. The crisis in the government coalition had been growing since the beginning of 2022, and tensions in the government between centrists and reformists were increasing. The fact is that a coalition with the Reform Party was not the solution expected by the Centre Party, even though the ministerial portfolios were equally distributed among the members of both parties, the centrists felt the dominance of the reformists under the leadership of a leader Kaja Kallas. The personal ambitions of the previous Prime Minister Jüri Ratas, whose resignation was a direct repercussion of the corruption crisis in January 2021, were also significant. However, Ratas did not disappear from Estonian politics, as he became the chairman of the Estonian Riigikogu (Chmielewski, 07.06.2022). Prime Minister Kallas was faced with a new attempt to form a cabinet, the solution of maintaining a minority government was unrealistic. Coalition talks have begun, which have shown the activity of the Centre Party and

⁷ In the first cabinet of Kaja Kallas, on behalf of the Reform Party, Maris Lauri was appointed Minister of Justice, Liin Kersn was appointed Minister of Education and Research, Keit Pentus-Rosimannus was Minister of Finance and Signe Riisalo was Minister of Social Affairs. On behalf of the Centre Party, Eva-Maria Liimets took over the chair of Minister of Foreign Affairs and Anneli Ott the chair of Minister of Culture, who was replaced in November 2021 by Tiit Terik.

its willingness to quickly take over the reins of power. The conservative-liberal party Isamaa⁸ proved to be particularly strategic for the future coalition, as it held coalition talks with both the Centre Party and the Reform Party. In the end, Kai Kallas managed to form a coalition government, which was sworn in by President Alar Karis on July 18, 2022.

The new government was formed by agreement between the three parties of the Reform Party, the Social Democratic Party, and the Fatherland, and the ministerial posts were distributed, as in the case of the first Kallas cabinet, equally for each grouping. The reformists of the previous government kept their ministries, and in the end the new government led by Kaja Kallas had seven women, including the prime minister (Jaakson, 2022). One of the most important arrangements of the new coalition partners was to increase the amount of funding for families with children and to increase the tax-free amount. Reforms related to the energy sector, education, with particular emphasis on its estonisation, and science have been planned for the next term of office (Chmielewski, 15.07.2022). An important area undertaken by Kallas was the security of the country. “Estonia is and will be protected,” the Prime Minister repeatedly said during her speeches (*Kaja Kallas: Eesti on kaitstud ja...*, 22.09.2022). A visible initiative that the reformists support is the project proposed by the Fatherland to limit the right to exercise the right to vote in local elections for the country’s residents, the change is to apply primarily to citizens of the aggressor states of Russia and Belarus. However, the implementation of the proposed changes is not self-evident (*Reform gets behind...*, 19.09.2022). The proposed changes could not be implemented until the next parliamentary elections, which took place in March 2023. The new government dinner also failed to reach a compromise on this issue. There is no doubt, however, that the leader of the Reform Party, Kaja Kallas, has been building her position in Estonian and international politics. In 2022, Western European media hailed Kaja Kallas as the “Iron Lady” and a leader who grew both fangs and claws, although she had to fight very hard and repeatedly to maintain her position (Truc, 2022).

3. Winning the parliamentary elections in 2023

Although the polls initially did not give a certain victory for the Reform Party, the electoral success of 2019 was repeated. The reformists, led by Kaja Kallas, won the support of more than 31% of the voters, which gave into 37 seats in the 101-seat Riigikogu.⁹ Six political parties entered parliament, with the Reformists in the Riigikogu joined by representatives of the Conservative People’s Party (EKRE), opinion polls gave them more support than they finally received at the ballot box, the Centre Party, Estonia 200, the Social Democrats and the Fatherland.¹⁰

⁸ Isanaa was founded in 2006 and it was the successor of the Homeland Union, which was established in 1995.

⁹ In the parliamentary elections in March 2019, the reformists won 34 seats, with less than 29% of the vote.

¹⁰ In the parliamentary elections of 5 March 2023. The EKRE party won 17 seats, the Centre Party 16 seats, Estonia 200 – 14 seats, the Social Democratic Party – 9 seats, Fatherland – 8 seats. Voter turnout was 63.5%. It was the first election in Estonia’s history in which the majority of votes were cast electronically.

The unrivalled winner of the March elections was Kaja Kallas. The leader of the Reformists won almost 32,000 votes¹¹ (Popławski, 2023). On April 12, 2023. The Riigikogu gave Kai Kallas a mandate to form her third government (Chmielewski, 2023). A day earlier, on 11 March 2023, the Prime Minister presented the coalition parties with which the Reformists will form the government. The coalition agreement was signed with the Estonia 200 Party and the Social Democratic Party. In her speech, the leader pointed out that the agreement concluded between her party and the coalition partners is a well-worked out platform for compromise, among the most important areas she pointed out that Estonia's independence is paramount, then she referred to the issues of public finances, the health care sector, as well as common values. Kallas also did not omit the topic of the war in Ukraine caused by the Russian aggressor, the war has changed the goals and challenges of many countries, including Estonia. The Prime Minister indicated increasing financial resources for the state's defense as one of the priority goals of her cabinet. Among other areas, Kaja Kallas also mentioned the urgent need to reduce and, as a reform of education (*Kaja Kallas esines Riigikogu es...*, 11.04.2023).

Solutions that protect the environment and climate are a priority for all three parties, and the Reform Party clearly supports accelerating the initiation of green policies in the country. Attention is also paid to social issues, strengthening integration and equal rights for all groups, including national minorities, sexual minorities, as well as equality between women and men, including equal pay and child care rights (Kuczyńska-Zonik, 2023). The new Estonian government consists of twelve ministers, headed by Kaja Kallas, and is two ministries smaller than the previous cabinet. The reformists have six ministries, the Estonia 200 Party and the Social Democrats have three ministries each, as in every Kallas government there are women and there are currently five women in the government (Chmielewski, 2023). The new government of Estonia is facing challenges, although the coalition has only just begun its functioning, it is not the end of the fact that the partners are not unanimous on many issues, it should be pointed out above all the proposals to introduce changes to the electoral procedures, the introduction of a car tax¹² (*Report: Estonia...*, 19.09.2021). Additional complications are introduced by high inflation and the unstable economic situation, the Kallas government is forced to implement a policy of "tightening the belt". All these factors make changes to the currently adopted inter-party agreements necessary (Chmielewski, 2023).

Summary

Since January 2021, when Kaja Kallas took the prime minister's chair, people in Estonian politics have started talking about women in politics. For almost ten months, women held the highest positions in the country, President Kersti Kaljulaid and Prime

¹¹ In the 2019 elections, Kaja Kallas won just over 20,000 votes. votes and it was also a record result at the time. In the 2023 elections, Mihhail Kõlvart, a representative of the Centre Party, was second after K. Kallas.

¹² Estonia is the only EU member state where no car tax is levied.

Minister Kaja Kallas¹³. In addition, it should be pointed out that Kallas invited women to her offices (Otocki, 2021). The Prime Minister's choices have always been very well thought out, she always focuses on competence and professionalism. In the actions taken by Kaja Kallas, it can be seen that she focuses on society and the individual, she tries to look for solutions that will unite and not divide Estonians. June 20, 2023 The Riigikogu passed a law to legalize gay marriage (*Historic decision: Estonia legalizes...*, 20.06.2023). Kallas has repeatedly pointed out that the good of a person is the most important, the adopted law does not take anything away from anyone, and gives people the right to legalize relationships, which they did not have previously. Kaja Kallas is a leader who strongly encourages and motivates Estonians to act. The leader emphasizes in her speeches that Estonians have always done very well and have achieved a lot. She also points out that by being guided by their minds and hearts, the Estonians are able to help others and build a better and stable future for next generations. The Estonian Iron Lady, as Kallas is called by the Western European and American media, is strong and consistent, she is a leader who on a European scale and her decisions are accurate and worth following. After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, 59% of Estonians had a positive opinion of the government's actions, up from 35% (Chmielewski, 08.12.2022). Today, Estonia has the face of Kaja Kallas, a leader who has both fangs and claws, but above all fights for the people and for a better the state and the people.

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¹³ A similar situation occurred in Finland in 2003, when Tarja Halonen was president and Anneli Jäätteenmäki was prime minister.

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Estonia jest kobietą – Kaja Kallas, żelazna dama estońskiej polityki

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza sytuacji politycznej w Estonii w czasie premier Kai Kallas. Kallas jako młoda, dynamiczna i ambitna prawniczka, a teraz przede wszystkim polityczka wytycza nowy kierunek przywództwa. Na Estońskiej scenie politycznej wiele jest wyzwań i trudności, jednak Kai Kallas udaje się skutecznie od stycznia 2021 r. realizować powierzone jej zadania. Artykuł jest próbą analizy sytuacji na scenie politycznej Estonii od czasu pierwszego gabinetu Kai Kallas poprzez kryzys rządowy z czerwca 2022 r., aż do wyborów parlamentarnych z marca 2023 r. Liderka Partii Reform doskonale radzi sobie z wyzwaniem, walczy o ludzi i ich prawa.

Słowa kluczowe: Estonia, Kaja Kallas, wybory parlamentarne w Estonii, premier Estonii, przywództwo

