



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Estonia External Relations briefing:  
Going regional, continental and global...**  
**E-MAP Foundation MTÜ**

### **China-CEE Institute**

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## Going regional, continental and global...

### A region-bound ties and the European continent-wide dimension

On 13-14 September 2018, Estonia took part in the Latvia-hosted 14<sup>th</sup> Informal Meeting of the so-called *Arraiolos Group*. As from 2003, the latter convention represents an informal meeting of presidents of the EU's Member States. Taking from a report, the presidents of Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia, Estonia, Italy, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Finland, and Germany met at the *Rundāle Palace*, a baroque architectural masterpiece, to have a comprehensive discussion on the future of Europe<sup>1</sup>. This year, as specified by the Estonian President's official web-portal, the event was bound by a debate on "development the resistance of society, fighting the threats and propaganda of hybrid war and finding a balance between applying soft and hard force"<sup>2</sup>. In a certain way, this particular event can be inter-linked with a high-profile meeting, which almost immediately followed it – this time, it was the Lithuanian capital city Vilnius, which was hosting a major meeting between Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, and the Baltics' leaders of the executive branch of power.

*En route* to visit a German-led NATO multinational battalion in central Lithuania,<sup>3</sup> on 14 September, the German Chancellor met with Dalia Grybauskaitė, the President of Lithuania, as well as Estonian and Latvian Prime Ministers. Heading to Vilnius for the meeting, Jüri Ratas, the Estonian Prime Minister, noted that

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<sup>1</sup> 'Presidents of 13 EU member states to arrive in Latvia this week to discuss the future of Europe'. 13 September 2018. Available from [\[https://www.baltictimes.com/presidents\\_of\\_13\\_eu\\_member\\_states\\_to\\_arrive\\_in\\_latvia\\_this\\_week\\_to\\_discuss\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_europe/\]](https://www.baltictimes.com/presidents_of_13_eu_member_states_to_arrive_in_latvia_this_week_to_discuss_the_future_of_europe/)

<sup>2</sup> 'President Kaljulaid will today take part in the meeting in Latvia of the heads of state involved in the Arraiolos Group'. Available from [\[https://www.president.ee/en/media/press-releases/14540-president-kaljulaid-will-today-take-part-in-the-meeting-in-latvia-of-the-heads-of-state-involved-in-the-arraiolos-group/index.html\]](https://www.president.ee/en/media/press-releases/14540-president-kaljulaid-will-today-take-part-in-the-meeting-in-latvia-of-the-heads-of-state-involved-in-the-arraiolos-group/index.html)

<sup>3</sup> 'Merkel to meet with Baltic MPs in Lithuania'. 8 September 2018. Available from [\[https://www.baltictimes.com/merkel\\_to\\_meet\\_with\\_baltic\\_mps\\_in\\_lithuania/\]](https://www.baltictimes.com/merkel_to_meet_with_baltic_mps_in_lithuania/)

*[Estonia is] united with Germany through trust in our mutual communication and in the EU and NATO. It is fertile ground for developing digital projects in depth. The aim of our cooperation is both noble and ambitious – to save the environment, money, and time while increasing the wellbeing and safety of our people.*<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the Baltic trio's meeting with the German Chancellor had a more specific – region-focused – agenda. **Firstly**, as reported, Chancellor Merkel underlined that the EU would be maintaining its sanctions against the Russian Federation until it sees that a progress had been made in implementing the Minsk agreement in regards of finding a positive resolution of the conflict in Ukraine<sup>5</sup>. It has been argued by many experts in the field of international relations that the aforementioned conflict represents nothing less than an aggression of Russia against Ukraine. In the context of the talk, Angela Merkel stated that “[b]efore the Minsk agreement has been implemented or progress has been made in that regard, we will not consider lifting the sanctions on Russia”<sup>6</sup>. **Secondly**, Chancellor Merkel expressed her understanding of what was described as “the Baltic countries’ criticism over the expansion of the Nord Stream gas pipeline”, while insisting that “the project made economic sense” and ensuring the Baltic States that “Ukraine remain an energy transit country”<sup>7</sup>. Most probably, the Vilnius discussion was one of the final ones where the Nord Stream-related issues will be brought up as a matter of serious talk. It is a well-reported fact that the United States would strongly prefer the EU to start purchasing their liquefied natural gas (LNG), but there is a likelihood that, as

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Ratas to meet with Merkel in Vilnius’. 14 September. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/861272/ratas-to-meet-with-merkel-in-vilnius>].

<sup>5</sup> ‘Merkel, in Vilnius, vows to keep sanctions on Russia, but defends Nord Stream’. 15 September 2018. [[https://www.baltictimes.com/merkel\\_in\\_vilnius\\_vows\\_to\\_keep\\_sanctions\\_on\\_russia\\_but\\_defends\\_nord\\_stream/](https://www.baltictimes.com/merkel_in_vilnius_vows_to_keep_sanctions_on_russia_but_defends_nord_stream/)].

<sup>6</sup> ‘Merkel, in Vilnius...’.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Merkel, in Vilnius...’.

argued by *Forbes*, “there are not many legal avenues left to block” the project, making it practically “unstoppable”<sup>8</sup>.

### **A global agenda of the Estonian President**

In terms of realising an ambitious agenda on external relations and public diplomacy, September has been more than just a busy month for Kersti Kaljulaid, the Estonian President. After having visited Georgia and participated in the aforementioned *Arraiolos Group*’s meeting in Latvia, President Kaljulaid went to Ukraine to meet with President Petro Poroshenko as well as some of the representatives of the country’s political opposition, including the former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko. The Estonian President’s message to the Ukrainian leader was worded out in an explicit manner:

*In Estonia we observe very closely the efforts made by Ukraine to become a more European and open society. Ukraine must take specific steps to show that the changes are, in fact, working. It is neither us nor the European Union that needs these steps; these steps are necessary for Ukraine and its people. The establishment of a court of corruption is one of these steps and we hope that it will become a success in its operations. However, protection of the interests of foreign investors is still weak in Ukraine and this slows down development of the Ukrainian economy. [...] We will help to keep the war in East Ukraine and the Russia-supported annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in focus internationally. Europe must not become worn down, give up its principles and return to normal relations with the aggressor.*<sup>9</sup>

On the same day, President Kaljulaid participated in the *Yalta European Strategy* (YES) conference where, together with Tony Blair and Niall Ferguson,

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<sup>8</sup> Dave Keating, ‘Russia’s Controversial Nord Stream 2 Pipeline May Now Be Unstoppable’. 5 September 2018. Available from [https://www.forbes.com/sites/davekeating/2018/09/05/as-of-today-russias-controversial-nord-stream-2-pipeline-is-already-underwater/#753c7b251e1c].

<sup>9</sup> Kersti Kaljulaid in ‘President Kaljulaid to Poroshenko: Ukraine must demonstrate specific steps taken to implement reforms’. 17 September 2018. Available from [https://www.president.ee/en/media/press-releases/14542-president-kaljulaid-to-poroshenko-ukraine-must-demonstrate-specific-steps-taken-to-implement-reforms/index.html].

she was a part of the panel on ‘Digital Society and the State of the Future’,<sup>10</sup> discussing future developments and sharing some of pioneering Estonian experiences on e-governance. Then, diving into the area of public diplomacy, the Estonian President went to the Ukrainian city of Dnipro to become one of about 16.8 million people who went on the streets of their villages and towns in 122 countries on the Estonia-initiated World Cleanup Day, also known as the *Let’s Do It* campaign<sup>11</sup>. Cleaning the streets of a major Ukrainian city of 1 million people, President Kaljulaid made international headlines, with many reputable international media sources reporting on it.

Having the People’s Republic of China as her next destination, Kersti Kaljulaid was on her way to the Asia-Pacific region, making the first trip to China made by an Estonian Head of State since 2005. In her speech, during the meeting with President Xi Jinping, the Estonian leader underlined the significance of the moment:

*For us, China is the most important trading partner in Asia. On the one hand, they appreciate the good quality of our food, while e-commerce has strongly emerged also, which offers interesting challenges and points of co-operation for both countries.*<sup>12</sup>

Remarkably, the Estonian President’s message sent via Twitter had even a stronger connotation: “Glad to meet president Xi in Beijing on my official visit! Relations between China & Estonia are all time high. Discussed trade relations, e-commerce & also our UNSC candidacy.”<sup>13</sup>

The important meeting in the framework of the presidential visit, this time it was in Tianjin, was with the Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang who, due to his heavy involvement into the 16+1 cooperational framework, is no stranger in the context of China-Estonia interactions. During the discussion, President Kaljulaid

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Agenda’ in 15<sup>th</sup> Yalta European Strategy Annual Meeting. Available from [<https://yes-ukraine.org/en/Yalta-annual-meeting/2018/agenda>].

<sup>11</sup> ‘Over 16 mln people have joined World Cleanup Day’. 17 September 2018. Available from [[https://www.baltictimes.com/over\\_16 mln\\_people\\_have\\_joined\\_world\\_cleanup\\_day/](https://www.baltictimes.com/over_16 mln_people_have_joined_world_cleanup_day/)].

<sup>12</sup> Kersti Kaljulaid in President Kaljulaid met in Beijing with the Head of State of China, Xi. 18 September 2018. Available from [<https://www.president.ee/en/media/press-releases/14549-president-kaljulaid-met-in-beijing-with-the-head-of-state-of-china-xi/index.html>]

<sup>13</sup> Kersti Kaljulaid. Available from [<https://twitter.com/KerstiKaljulaid/status/1042004423587897344/photo/1>].

confirmed that “Estonian and Chinese companies are already working closely together, in the field of e-trading, the start-up sector, the food industry and for example in the construction of timber houses, where an Estonian firm has opened a factory in China, increasing its production capacity significantly”<sup>14</sup>.

Such a hyperactive network-building approach that has been mastered by the Estonian President is already helping the Estonian Republic to get its voice heard in many capitals. From being just a well-respected personality who was almost unknown outside of Estonia, Kersti Kaljulaid has become a political heavyweight not only in the Baltics, but also in the European arena, possessing a prospect of having a dazzling international career later on. Remarkably, it has happened in less than two years, since she was elected as the President of the Republic back in October 2016.

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<sup>14</sup> Kersti Kaljulaid in ‘President Kaljulaid discusses economic cooperation with Chinese prime minister’. Available from [<https://www.president.ee/en/media/press-releases/14557-president-kaljulaid-discusses-economic-cooperation-with-chinese-prime-minister/index.html>].