



Weekly Briefing

**Estonia External Relations briefing:
A Strasbourg business, an echo of the past, and the Asia-Pacific
theme continued
E-MAP Foundation MTÜ**

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A Strasbourg business, an echo of the past, and the Asia-Pacific theme continued

For Estonia, an extremely diverse range of news and developments has framed this month up – even a ‘normal’ EU-related *routine* had an important strategic ‘twist’, not to mention the other happenings that highlighted the country’s international outlook.

The European Parliament’s plenary session

By no means was it the Estonian Prime Minister’s ordinary trip to Strasbourg, since, on 3 October 2018, Jüri Ratas went to the Grand Est region of France to take part in the European Parliament’s plenary session. On the way to the EU’s parliamentary institution, Ratas adopted a strategy-oriented mode, noting that “[t]he European Union cannot assume that its values and interests are self-evidently protected”¹. At the plenary session, the Prime Minister was more specific, stating that the EU

*must have credible framework vital for our common future, like the national spending of 2% of our GDP to keep Europe safe or aiming at expenditure level of 3% of GDP on research and innovation. [...] Our long-term focus should be on prevention of crime and illegal activities at our borders. A high level of border and customs surveillance ensures security throughout Europe. Common standards and investments into both technical and operational features in border surveillance are required. [...] At the same time, NATO will remain the bedrock of collective defence in Europe and our aim should be a mutually reinforcing relationship between the EU and NATO.*²

¹ Jüri Ratas in ‘Ratas to speak at European Parliament plenary session’. 3 October 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/866071/ratas-to-speak-at-european-parliament-plenary-session>].

² Jüri Ratas in ‘Ratas to European Parliament: Feeling of unity crucial to future of EU’. 3 October 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/866178/ratas-to-european-parliament-feeling-of-unity-crucial-to-future-of-eu>].

From 1 December 2009, when the *Treaty of Lisbon* had entered into force, the European Parliament was trying to re-develop itself from a largely decorative attribute of European democracy into a highly important body within the EU-bound decision-making system. The post-Lisbon European Parliament has a significantly enhanced scope of legislative, supervisory and budgetary capacities as compared to its predecessors in the pre-Lisbon times. Therefore, especially in the light of the next elections to the European Parliament that are scheduled for the end of May 2019, the leaders of the EU's Member States are making numerous attempts at solidifying the *intra*-EU forces to outline the enormous entity's perspectives on internal reforms and further developments.

Certainly, a populist vs. policy-oriented debates have become a distinguishing feature of the European Parliament these days, and, it could be suggested that the EU's leadership in different Member States as well as the European Commission are visibly working 'overtime' to re-focus the parliamentary body towards discussing a more constructive agenda, i.e. defence and security, research and innovations, digitalisation and infrastructure. This is where, during the plenary session, Jüri Ratas was strongly supported by Andrus Ansip, the European Commission's Vice-President who holds the Digital Single Market portfolio. In the context of the discussion, Ansip, the former long-serving Prime Minister of Estonia (2005–2014), noted:

*Estonia is [...] leading the way through its participation in Permanent Structured Cooperation. Its planned project with Finland, Latvia and others to develop unmanned land systems is a perfect example of how we can achieve more by working together and how we can bring digital solutions to the battlefield to save lives. And we need to back this up with the resources to match. As part of our proposals for a new long-term European budget, we have designated €13 billion for the European Defence Fund.*³

³ Andrus Ansip in 'Speech by Vice-President Ansip at the European Parliament plenary session for the debate on the Future of Europe, with Estonian Prime Minister Jüri Ratas'. 3 October 2018. Available from [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/ansip/announcements/speech-vice-president-ansip-european-parliament-plenary-session-debate-future-europe-estonian-prime_en].

The process that leads towards the 2019 elections to the European Parliament is arguably indicating the contours of the next EU-wide agenda that will be converted into a ‘to do’ list for the next European Commission as well as the new lot of members of the EU’s parliamentary body.

The former US Ambassador in Estonia speaks out

In July 2018, when James D. Melville, Jr., the then US Ambassador to Estonia had resigned before his successor was even known (not to mention – appointed), many commentators in the Baltics as well as a good deal of reputable international sources immediately attributed the fact of resignation to the senior-level diplomat’s disagreement with “a string of controversial comments President Donald Trump made about U.S. allies in Europe”⁴. In the process of delivering the groundbreaking news to the public, the diplomat’s private Facebook post was repeatedly cited, and this fact had made the news-related narrative (together with the actual reasoning behind the decisive move) appearing somewhat semi-official.

It took until October 2018, when, in his interview to *The Washington Post*, Melville, Jr. gave a detailed answer to all possible ‘whys’ in regards of his decision to step down as Ambassador last summer. Quoting the former diplomat who, before he had resigned, had 33 years of service, some of the main reasons are as follows:

The alliances we have built and the friends we have made all around the globe look to the United States for leadership and guidance as we, together, tackle the world’s challenges. [...] There should be no question that we are more effective and powerful when we work in concert with our allies and

⁴ Robbie Gramer, ‘U.S. Ambassador to Estonia Resigns in Disgust After Trump Anti-Europe Rants’. Foreign Policy. 29 June 2018. Available from [<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/29/u-s-ambassador-to-estonia-resigns-in-disgust-after-trump-anti-europe-rants-nato-european-union-diplomacy-transatlantic-alliance/>].

partners. [...] *Arrogance does not suit the US well, [...] [and] 'America First' is a sham.*⁵

On a far less generic note, Melville, Jr. outlined his vision on what his country should be aiming at in the field of foreign policy making:

*There is an old proverb that says, 'If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together'. That is the principle the United States has followed for decades and, while there are still many problems to be grappled with, it is why the world is as peaceful and prosperous as it is. [...] I am extremely uncomfortable with the trade policies the United States is pursuing. [...] I also believe it is a historic mistake to cozy up to Russian President Vladimir Putin. [...] Russia and its corrupt, authoritarian government are a threat to the rules-based order and the fundamental values and interests of the United States and its allies.*⁶

In his conclusion, the former US Ambassador reflected on his time in Estonia, where he was serving from December 2015, being appointed for the role by then US President Barack Obama:

*When you serve as US ambassador to a foreign capital, you represent your country, of course. But you are also the personal representative of the president. Professionalism demands that career foreign service officers – like career military officers – follow the orders and pursue the policies of our elected civilian leadership. If you cannot do that, the honourable and right thing to do is resign. That is what I did in July, when I stepped down as US ambassador to Estonia.*⁷

Arguably, the above extensively cited interview will leave a profound legacy within the framework of inter-relations between Estonia and the United States. At least, it will be remembered in many years to come.

⁵ James D. Melville, Jr. in 'Former US ambassador to Estonia speaks out about reasons for stepping down'. 4 October 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/866451/former-us-ambassador-to-estonia-speaks-out-about-reasons-for-stepping-down>].

⁶ Melville, Jr.

⁷ Melville, Jr.

President Kaljulaid and her ultimate discovery of the Asia-Pacific

The September 2018 briefing on external relations had already specified the current Estonian President's intention to broaden the country's international outlook. However, a truly unique combination of speed and efficiency, with which Kersti Kaljulaid is making progress, deserves to be analysed in a more precise manner and, possibly, across several briefings.

After visiting Georgia, Ukraine, China, and then, upon her return to Europe, Armenia (all in September-October period), President Kaljulaid was on an ultimate quest to fully discover the Asia-Pacific. The Republic of Korea, Australia, Vanuatu, Fiji, and New Zealand were visited one after another, and each of these visits were **the first ever** made by an Estonian Head of State to the aforementioned five countries. Employing a 'lightning-type' of effective diplomacy that has already become the President's 'trade-mark' in foreign policy making, Kaljulaid managed to cover a high number of clusters in the field, from supporting public diplomacy initiatives and societal ideas to promoting her country's know-hows in the digital world and learning plenty on the climate change debate.

In the Republic of Korea, while becoming an honorary doctor of EWHA Womans University⁸ and an honorary citizen of Seoul, Kersti Kaljulaid attended the World Knowledge Forum, the Asian continent's largest opinion leaders' conference⁹. In Australia, the Estonian President was at the opening ceremony of the Invictus Games in Sydney¹⁰ and, later on, met with the Governor-General of Australia, Sir Peter Cosgrove¹¹. In Vanuatu, Kaljulaid had a number of meetings with the country's top politicians, including President Tallis Obed

⁸ 'President Kaljulaid became an honorary doctor of a South Korean university'. 10 October 2018. Available from [<https://www.president.ee/en/meedia/press-releases/14601-president-kaljulaid-became-an-honorary-doctor-of-a-south-korean-university/index.html>].

⁹ 'Kersti Kaljulaid in South Korea'. 9 October 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/867631/kersti-kaljulaid-in-south-korea>].

¹⁰ 'President Kaljulaid at the Invictus Games: I am proud of the team representing Estonia'. 21 October 2018. Available from [<https://www.president.ee/en/meedia/press-releases/14632-president-kaljulaid-at-the-invictus-games-i-am-proud-of-the-team-representing-estonia/index.html>].

¹¹ 'President Kaljulaid met with the Governor-General of Australia'. 21 October 2018. Available from [<https://www.president.ee/en/meedia/press-releases/14633-news-in-pictures-president-kaljulaid-met-with-the-governor-general-of-australia/index.html>].

Moses and Prime Minister Charlot Salwai, emphasising Estonia’s willingness “to share its experiences in building up a digital society”¹² with the nations of the South Pacific. In Fiji, the Estonian President also met with the country’s leadership, – President Jioji Konousi Konrote and Proime Minister Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, – underlining that “[t]he strong and visible presence of Fiji in the UN sets a good example to other smaller nations”¹³.

Finally, in New Zealand, Kaljulaid has a number of intensive discussions on the level of the ministers as well as with Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and the Governor-General of New Zealand Dame Patsy Reddy. The meeting with the Kiwi Prime Minister, perhaps, could be singled out from all talks and discussions the Estonian President had in the region – a particular level of synergy between the two sides was evidently noticed. Kaljulaid started with a statement on the fact that “Estonia and New Zealand share similar values and are making active preparations for future challenges, ranging from digital society and artificial intellect to climate change”, but finished off on a very personal and informal note – the Estonian President gifted Prime Minister Ardern two Lotte and Bruno dolls, from a popular Estonian children’s cartoon, saying:

*I know that you recently had a daughter. Lotte sets a good example for Estonian girls, as she has never heard that, for example, girls should not equal to boys in karate, inventing machines or making a trip to the Moon.*¹⁴

Considering the Estonian President’s plan to fly to the United States straight after her trip to New Zealand is over, it will result in a true circumnavigation of the Earth completed by Kersti Kaljulaid. Now, her presentations at the CityLab 2018 (Detroit, MI) and Columbia University (New York City, NY) are awaited by more people. The same is applicable in regards

¹² ‘President Kaljulaid on Vanuatu: climatic change represent a security threat that endangers whole nations’. 23 October 2018. Available from [<https://www.president.ee/en/meedia/press-releases/14640-president-kaljulaid-on-vanuatu-climatic-change-represent-a-security-threat-that-endangers-whole-nations/index.html>].

¹³ Kersti Kaljulaid. Twitter. 24 October 2018. Available from [<https://twitter.com/KerstiKaljulaid/status/1055053610277580800>].

¹⁴ Kersti Kaljulaid in ‘Kersti Kaljulaid meets NZ prime minister in Auckland’. 26 October 2018. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/872257/kersti-kaljulaid-meets-nz-prime-minister-in-auckland>].

of the outcome of her prospective meetings with the UN Secretary General António Guterres, and the ambassadors of the Francophone countries and the African Union (New York City, NY).¹⁵ After all these developments, the Estonian application to become the UN Security Council non-permanent member in 2020-2021 has never been looking more solid.

¹⁵ ‘Kersti Kaljulaid meets NZ prime minister in Auckland’.