



Weekly Briefing

**Estonia political briefing:
Saying ‘good bye’ to the outgoing President, local elections
and the country’s political landscape
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Saying ‘good bye’ to the outgoing President, local elections and the country’s political landscape

Indeed, it was quite an era... Without any reasonable doubts, in both academic and practical terms, she has made a difference. Five years ago, Kersti Kaljulaid, a personality-compromise as well as President-neophyte, assumed her full range of constitutional responsibilities as Estonia’s Head of State. It is hard to speculate on what the then outgoing Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, a multi-disciplinary professional and very recognisable personality on the international stage, was thinking about when the symbol of Estonian presidential power – the presidential chain with the country’s Coat of Arms – was getting taken from him to be handed over to the then President-elect who was more known in Brussels and Luxembourg rather than at home. However, by the end of Kaljulaid’s high-profile duties, one could argue that she has evidently matched the Ilves’ level of international visibility, if not uplifted it.

It is very well understood in the country that the post of the Estonian President is largely ceremonial, but Kersti Kaljulaid, arguably, managed to exercise her constitutional power in full. A scholarly commentary from Professor of Comparative Politics Vello Pettai (*Tartu University*) clearly underlines this point, noting that “[n]ot only was Kaljulaid’s gender an important milestone, but also her elocution and straightforward style” and adding that the *Riigikogu* “might have expected to get a serious-minded analyst and administrator [however], she also knew how to take a stand against the [G]overnment, which ‘proved fatal for her re-election prospects’”¹. Another scholar, Dr. Maarja Lühiste (*Newcastle University*), while specifying the theme that, surprisingly for Estonia praised for its firm and sincere stance of gender equality, some the members of the Estonian parliament used the way to speak about the President to be depended on her gender, noted the following:

There were periods where she lacked some of the respect a president should enjoy from other politicians. Especially from right-wing parties. I find it difficult to imagine that when Mart

¹ Vello Pettai as cited in ‘Feature: Five years of Kersti Kaljulaid’, *ERR*, 16 October 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608322160/feature-five-years-of-kersti-kaljulaid>].

Helme was [M]inister of Interior, he would have called a male president ‘an emotionally heated man’, which he did to Kaljulaid.²

Leaving behind her super-eventful five presidential years, Kaljulaid has plenty to remember – the initial year when her ‘foundation studies’ to be a capable President were getting gradually ‘done and dusted’, the valuable experience of working with four different Governments (briefly, with the Second cabinet of Taavi Rõivas, both cabinets of Jüri Ratas, and the inaugural governmental coalition of Kaja Kallas), the success of working on and then the joy of seeing the positive outcome of Estonia’s bid to become a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, the initiation of global discussion on the interlinkage of cybersecurity, artificial intelligence and e-governance, and, certainly, her sweatshirt with ‘*Sõna on Vaba*’ (‘Speech is free’). Of course, the Kaljulaid presidential era had some low points as well – it could be stated that her not so well-prepared meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2019 was one of those events, which could be seriously questioned in terms of necessity and outcome. However, in general, her foreign policy-associated activity can be objectively described as dazzling. In Kaljulaid’s presidential capacity, she “has met with 59 [P]residents, eight monarchs, the Pope and an emir”, while making 138 foreign visits³.

Anyhow, where to for Kersti Kaljulaid from here? If no international appointment is offered to her before December 2022, there is a likelihood that the former President is to re-enter Estonian politics from the parliament’s side – by 5 March 2023, a new *Riigikogu* (as well as Estonian Government) needs to be formed, and Kersti Kaljulaid can establish her own political party or be welcomed by an existing one. Alternatively, she can easily run a serious think tank or a particular policy-focused centre of excellence to utilise her still as a European bureaucrat-turned-operational strategist. Time will show, but, in her own style, Kaljulaid formulated her future plans, answering questions during a pre-departure interview:

I’m not going anywhere in that sense either. I plan to continue to support all those areas that have been close to my heart, in achieving goals, and perhaps also in directing the spotlight where our society needs support. [...] After all, why can’t I be a youthful grandmother? I also

² Maarja Lühiste as cited in ‘Feature: Five years of Kersti Kaljulaid’.

³ ‘Experts: President Kaljulaid’s foreign policy was successful’ in *ERR*, 2 September 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608324491/experts-president-kaljulaid-s-foreign-policy-was-successful>].

have four rather small grandchildren who would definitely like to see their grandmother more than has been possible so far.⁴

In any case, having the obvious downhill of the *Centre Party* and the pandemic-generated relative political uncertainty, the next parliamentary elections in Estonia will, with necessity, be bringing plenty of ‘retrenchments’ and new faces into the *Riigikogu*. Until it happens, the country’s political ‘field’ was ‘re-cultivated’ by the October 2021 local elections, and its outcome was literally ‘tectonic’ for some of Estonia’s counties. On a concrete note, out of 1,074,046 voters who were eligible to cast their ballots, 587,361 voted at the municipal elections (including 273,620 who used the online facility)⁵. The data shows that nearly a half of those who voted expressed their support “either the *Center Party* or election coalitions”, but the ‘centrists’ “lost its hegemony over the capital by a hair, securing 38 mandates in the 79-seat city council”⁶. In fact, it was predicted by different analysts and pollsters that the changes were coming for the party that had “an absolute majority in Tallinn [maintaining it to be] the same for more than a decade”⁷. In addition, the *Centre Party* “suffered a crushing defeat in the border city of Narva, with Katri Raik’s Election Coalition taking 15 of the 31 mandates, leaving *Center*, that has traditionally ruled in Narva, with just 10”⁸.

In order to encourage (provoke?) prospective negotiation over the inevitable coalition for the capital city’s governing council, Mayor Mihhail Kõlvart (*Center*) instigated the other political parties (the ‘reformists’, the *EKRE*, *Pro Patria*, *Eesti 200*, and the ‘social democrats’) to think of forming a grand-coalition without the ‘centrists’⁹. Most probably, Kõlvart, a highly sophisticated politician, had already counted his chances in regards of being approached by a particular party that would want to form the next Tallinn local government with the ‘centrists’, but he boldly wanted to ‘test the waters’ as well as the nerves of the politically concerned public. Closer to the end of October, it became clear that the *Centre Party*, together with the ‘social

⁴ Kersti Kaljulaid as cited in ‘Kersti Kaljulaid: I will continue in public life post-presidency’, *ERR*, 1 September 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608325094/kersti-kaljulaid-i-will-continue-in-public-life-post-presidency>].

⁵ ‘According to specified information, voter turnout at local elections was 54.7%’ in *Valimised*, 19 October 2021. Available from [<https://www.valimised.ee/en/according-specified-information-voter-turnout-local-elections-was-547>].

⁶ ‘Center’s Pyrrhic victory and domination of election coalitions’ in *Postimees*, 19 October 2021. Available from [<https://news.postimees.ee/7364953/center-s-pyrrhic-victory-and-domination-of-election-coalitions>].

⁷ Helen Wright, ‘Local elections 2021: Don’t expect the unexpected’ in *ERR*, 11 October 2021. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/1608362226/local-elections-2021-don-t-expect-the-unexpected>].

⁸ ‘Center’s Pyrrhic victory and domination of election coalitions’.

⁹ ‘Center’s Pyrrhic victory and domination of election coalitions’.

democrats’, are to remain in power in the country’s capital city. The latter political movement is led in Tallinn city council by Raimond Kaljulaid, the paternal half-brother of the now former President of Estonia as well as the former high-profile member of the *Centre Party* who decided to leave them after the ‘centrists’ expressed their desire to establish the national level-governmental coalition with the *EKRE* in 2019¹⁰. Interestingly enough, the same *Social Democratic Party* made a coalition with the ‘reformists’, and *Pro Patria* to govern Tartu, the country’s second largest city.

At the same time, evidently, the local elections-associated political campaign had a hidden winner – the *EKRE*. A credible poll showed that, on 27 October, these ultra-populist conservatives were leading the list of major political parties in Estonia with 24.7 per cent of support, followed by the ‘reformists’ (the current Prime Minister’s party) who are at the level of 23.6 per cent¹¹. The struggling ‘centrists’ are supported by 19.6 per cent of the prospective electorate, while the relatively new political party, *Eesti 200*, enjoy 12.5 per cent of what can be turned into real votes in 2023¹². If these figures had represented an outcome of the parliamentary elections, the current governmental coalition (the ‘reformists’ plus the ‘centrists’) would not have received the needed votes to run the country together. Of course, the pandemic is the cause for many operational discrepancies, and no democratic Government in the world is surviving without losing any popularity. At the same time, the aforementioned results of the latest poll indicated a serious problem for the Prime Minister and her cabinet. In such a context, it is worth quoting Jaak Aaviksoo, a prominent Estonian academician and former high-level politician, who made the following statement on the current status quo:

Estonia has a functional constitutional state where executive power is exercised by the government. We need common action to rise to major challenges and overcome difficulties, and ensuring that unity – through rules, enforcement of those rules and necessity-based decision-making – is precisely what ruling is. I expect a lot more good governance from our government.¹³

¹⁰ ‘Center, SDE Tallinn city government talks to go on until at least next week’ in *ERR*, 28 October 2021. Available from [https://news.err.ee/1608384455/center-sde-tallinn-city-government-talks-to-go-on-until-at-least-next-week].

¹¹ ‘Party ratings: Isamaa closing gap on SDE’ in *ERR*, 27 October 2021. Available from [https://news.err.ee/1608383171/party-ratings-isamaa-closing-gap-on-sde].

¹² ‘Party ratings: Isamaa closing gap on SDE’.

¹³ Jaak Aaviksoo, ‘More good governance, please’ in *ERR*, 5 November 2021. Available from [https://news.err.ee/1608392126/jaak-aaviksoo-more-good-governance-please].