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Leadership by women in power in the Baltic States and their role in policymaking

Abstract: The text focuses on the political leadership of women elected as presidents of the Baltic States. The selection of the research sample is dictated by the geopolitical location and common historical experience as well as the election of women to the office of president after 1991. An answer was sought to the question of the style of exercising power and relations with states (the USA, China, and Russia) that tried in the past and are currently trying to influence politics in the region.

Keywords: women's leadership, women in politics, Baltic states, Russia, USA, China

Streszczenie: Tekst koncentruje się na przywództwie politycznym kobiet wybranych na prezydentów państw bałtyckich. Dobór próby badawczej jest podyktowany położeniem geopolitycznym i wspólnym doświadczeniem historycznym, a także wyborem kobiet po 1991 r. na urząd prezydenta. Poszukiwano odpowiedzi na pytanie o styl sprawowania władzy i układanie relacji z państwami (USA, Chiny i Rosja), które próbowały w przeszłości i próbują obecnie wpływać na politykę w regionie.

Słowa kluczowe: przywództwo kobiet, kobiety w polityce, państwa bałtyckie, Rosja, USA, Chiny

Introduction

Since ancient times, women have fought for their rights and, above all, for the ability to access the public sphere. Although the position and participation of women in politics have changed in recent years, the dominance of men is undisputed at all levels of government. Women are forced to overcome blockades, which are referred to as “glass

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ceilings, sticky floors, or glass walls” and are designed to keep women in lower positions¹. Women are an underrepresented group in politics, they are much less likely to choose a career related to politics and less likely to become leaders of political parties, ministers, prime ministers, or presidents. Among the factors that influence the lack of insufficient representation of women in politics are, above all, institutional, historical, cultural, and social determinants².

The turn of the 20th and 21st centuries brought visible changes in the increase in women’s participation in politics. Nevertheless, women’s participation in power is often perceived through the prism of the social role assigned to them. Women are perceived as more empathetic, trustworthy, and at the same time having stronger communication skills. When analysing women’s leadership, one should not overlook the priorities that are aimed at strengthening women’s communities by respecting equal rights for women and men, improving medical and social care, strengthening education, and combating domestic violence³. They are thought to be more likely to choose a cooperative or inclusive leadership style. Meanwhile, women in politics are well-versed in economic, legal, and international issues, and perceiving their role only through the prism of a caregiver caring for the immediate environment is wrong⁴. Women’s political leadership is often based on strong authority, based on a solid education and extensive professional experience in the public and private sectors.

The advancing processes of European integration, the open debate on women’s participation in politics, and the adoption of quotas by countries regarding the presence of women and men on electoral lists are conducive to greater participation of women on the political scene in individual countries. There have been few women at the helm of states, so their leadership in government positions is not sufficiently studied. It is necessary to identify executive female leaders in order

- 1 E. Kancik, *Przywódstwo polityczne kobiet, przykład prezydentury w Europie*, “Forum Politologiczne” 2013, no. 15, pp. 365–387.
- 2 D. Toshkov, G. Cretti, *Who is Afraid of More Women in Politics, and Why? An Analysis of Public Opinion in 28 European Countries*, “Journal of Women, Politics & Policy” 2020, pp. 1–19; M. Fuszara, *Kobiety w polityce*, Warsaw 2007; M. Fuszara, *Citizenship, Representation and Gender*, “Polish Sociological Review” 2010, no. 4, pp. 367–389.
- 3 M. Cowper-Coles, *Women political leaders: the impact of gender on democracy*, London 2021.
- 4 E. Kancik, *Przywódstwo polityczne kobiet...*, p. 383.

to know what style of government they represent, how they lead, and how they can lead the state and society.

The text focuses on the political leadership of women elected as the presidents of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The selection of the research sample is dictated by the geopolitical location and common historical experience⁵ as well as the election of women to the office of president after 1991.

According to *A Dictionary of Political Thought*, leadership is defined as the ability to inspire confidence in the correctness of goals, courage in achieving them together, and obedience in facing various threats⁶. Answers were sought to answer questions about the circumstances in which a woman took office in a given state, about the style of exercising power, and relations with leading powers (the USA, China, and Russia) that have tried in the past and are currently trying to influence politics in the region. Two levels of political leadership were analysed – international and national. The starting point for the deliberations is the research hypothesis that the election of women to the office of president in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia did not weaken the position of these countries in the international arena.

The following research methods were used: decision-making, which consists of considering the examined issue and related political processes from the point of view of the decision-making centre, which is the office of the president. The institutional and legal method, which was used to analyse and interpret the information describing the institution of the office of the president and its activities in the analysed period, proved to be helpful. Also important was the historical method, which allowed examining the history of the president's political activity, establishing cause-and-effect relationships, and explaining the political processes taking place on a local and global scale. Equally important is the biographical method, which refers to the analysis of documents of a personal nature. A broadly understood meta-analysis of publications, reports, and data on the subject of research as well as a comparative method consisting in detecting similarities and dif-

5 B. Jundo-Kaliszewska, A. Frykowska-Włodarska, *National and Ethnic Minorities and the Image of the State in International Public Relations: A Comparative Study of Lithuania and Estonia*, "Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe" 2021, no. 19, pp. 177–204.

6 Compare: M. Hartliński, *Przywódtwo polityczne. Wprowadzenie*, Olsztyn 2012, p. 59.

ferences in the context of holding the office of president by women in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia also turned out to be justified. The motivation to reflect on the title issue is the topicality of the subject and the ongoing debate on the underrepresentation of women in high political positions.

1. Dalia Grybauskaitė – the “Iron Lady” from Lithuania

In May 2009, the non-partisan candidate Dalia Grybauskaitė, unknown to the wider public and poorly rated in the polls, won the first round of the presidential election in Lithuania⁸. On May 17th, 1,391,960 (51.71%) eligible voters took part in the elections. Grybauskaitė received 950,407 votes (68.21%)⁹. She was ahead of six candidates¹⁰, and her election was a kind of revolution – the post-Soviet, patriarchal, and still conservative society chose a childless and unmarried woman as the leader of the state. On the one hand, the leader’s ties with the first president of Lithuania, Algirdas Brazauskas, were pointed out, and on the other, the support of the outgoing president Valdas Adamkus, who “anointed” Grybauskaitė as the “president of the new millennium”. The politician’s European experience was also important¹¹.

7 M. Kacewicz, *Dalia Grybauskaite – żelazna dama z Wilna*, <https://www.newsweek.pl/swiat/dalia-grybauskaite-zelazna-dama-z-wilna/8t6zv8p> [10.01.2024].

8 According to the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania of 1992, the president is the leader of the state and represents it (Article 77). According to Article 84, it has broad powers in representing the state and shaping policy in the international arena and limited competencies in domestic policy. The term of office is 5 years. The president is elected by universal, equal, direct, and secret ballot. One person may hold office no more than twice in a row (Art. 78).

9 Algirdas Butkevičius – candidate of the Lithuanian Social Democrats (lt. Lietuvos socialdemokratų partija) won 162,665 votes (11.68%).

10 She defeated, among others, the “Amber Lady” of Lithuanian politics – Kazimira Prunskienė, the first Prime Minister of Lithuania after the declaration of independence in 1990.

11 From 1994 to 1995, he was an Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in the Lithuanian Representation to the EU. Since 1996, he has been the Minister Plenipotentiary at the LR Embassy in the USA. In the years 1999–2000, he was Deputy Minister of Finance and Chief Negotiator in talks with the IMF. In 2000–2001, he was Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Head of the Lithuanian Delegation in the EU Accession Negotiations. In 2001, he was appointed Minister of Finance of LR. On 1 May 2004, he was appointed Commissioner for the Budget of the European Commission. Source: *Curriculum Vitae Minister of Finance of the Republic of Lithuania Dalia Grybauskaitė*, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/hearings/commission/2004_enlarg/pdf/cv_grybauskaite_en.pdf [10.01.2024].

The President spoke about multi-vector, balanced, and pragmatic management of international relations, with particular emphasis on Lithuanian national interests¹². This meant rapprochement with the leading players of Western Europe – Germany and France, the Scandinavian countries, the Baltic states, and even Belarus¹³. Significant achievements in this area include the signing of a strategic partnership agreement in the area of security with France¹⁴.

In foreign policy, the president emphasised the reduction of dependence on the US and, as part of the “policy of openness”, pointed to the need for constructive dialogue with Russia. Although in February 2010 she justified the Kremlin’s refusal to invite her to the Victory Day celebrations in Moscow¹⁵, in the summer of 2010, she resigned from a meeting with President Barack Obama in Prague¹⁶ because of the U.S. decision to “reset” relations with Russia and the issue of CIA prisons. The situation changed after the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014 when relations with Washington began to be strengthened again.

Between 2011 and 2018, relations with Poland deteriorated¹⁷. Among the reasons for this were the change of government in Warsaw, the strengthening of Polish relations with Russia, and the lack

- 12 Compare: K. Buchowski, *Prezydentka Republiki Litewskiej Dalia Grybauskaitė*, “Czasopismo Naukowe Instytutu Studiów Kobietych” 2017, vol. 3, no. 2, p. 98; T. Janeliūnas, *Changes and adjustment in the foreign policy of Lithuania during Dalia Grybauskaitė’s presidency*, “Journal of Baltic Studies” 2021, no. 52, pp. 221–244.
- 13 In 2009, the President of Belarus, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, paid a visit to Lithuania. “*Wilno: Dalia Grybauskaitė spotkała się Aleksandrem Łukaszenką*”, https://www.money.pl/archiwum/wiadomosci_agencyjne/iar/artykul/wilno;dalia;grybauskaitė;spotkala;sie;aleksandrem;lukaszenka,148,0,533652.html [10.02.2024].
- 14 Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybės ir Prancūzijos Respublikos Vyriausybės susitarimas dėl bendradarbiavimo gynybos ir saugumo srityje, <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.1CB8A9F1E91B> [10.02.2024].
- 15 E. Samoškaitė, *Kodėl taip pasikeitė D. Grybauskaitė*, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/kodel-taip-pasikeite-d-grybauskaitė-66777372> [10.02.2024].
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 After the Smolensk tragedy in 2011 and after the change of power in Poland, relations began to deteriorate. In 2010, the Law on National Minorities of RL was terminated and an educational law unfavourable to minorities was introduced. See more: D. Ulbinaitė, *Nustokim krūpčiot. Prezidentė Dalia Grybauskaitė*, Vilnius 2019; B. Jundo-Kaliszewska, *Orientacja na teraźniejszość. Warszawa w optyce Wilna w stulecie niepodległości Litwy*, <https://obserwatorniedzynarodowy.pl/2018/02/28/orientacja-na-terazniejszosc-warszawa-optyce-wilna-w-stulecie-niepodleglosci-litwy/> [28.02.2018].

of compromise on both sides regarding the rights of the Polish minority in Lithuania¹⁸.

Domestically, Grybauskaitė ran for election under the slogan of fighting corruption, which, as she said, was “spreading like a cancer in the country”¹⁹. She was also a strong advocate of the introduction of the euro in Lithuania²⁰ and declared that she would improve the state’s economic condition. It pursued a tough policy towards national minorities. The president’s intransigence, both internally and externally, was supported by a large part of the Lithuanian electorate.

After the annexation of Crimea, it called Russia a “terrorist state”²¹ and became involved in international and military activities for Ukraine²². Her tough attitude against Moscow could have provoked a witch-hunt in the 2014 presidential campaign²³. Despite this, she won the election again²⁴. The aftermath of deteriorating relations with Russia was the strengthening of relations with China. In 2018, the president paid a visit to the PRC and met with the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping²⁵. She did not raise the issue of human rights, which exposed her to criticism at home. She also did not meet the Dalai Lama that same year. This was the first time since 1991 that a Lithuanian leader did not grant an audience to the Tibetan leader. Grybauskaitė said that China remains “an important interna-

18 See more: B. Jundo-Kaliszewska, *Spór o prawo do imienia i nazwiska jako element kształtujący świadomość historyczną i europejską mniejszości polskiej na Litwie. Wybrane aspekty*, [in:] T. Chłopecki, P. Fiktus (eds.), *Studia z myśli polityczno-prawnej oraz historii prawa*, Łódź 2023, pp. 101–125.

19 D. Grybauskaitė: *korupcija plinta kaip vėžys*, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/dgrybauskaite-korupcija-plinta-kaip-vezys-47479985> [10.01.2024].

20 Lithuania joined the euro area in 2015.

21 In an interview with Lithuanian Radio, Grybauskaitė stated that Ukraine is fighting for peace for the all of Europe, see more: *Rosja odpowiada na litewską krytykę o sytuacji na Ukrainie*, <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/artykuly/836935,rosja-odpowiada-na-litewska-krytyke.html> [23.01.2024].

22 P. Porošenka *po susitikimo su D.Grybauskaite: Lietuva kovojačiai Ukrainai tiek ginkluotės dalis*, <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/p-porosenka-po-susitikimo-su-d-grybauskaite-lietuva-kovojanciai-ukrainai-tieks-ginkluotes-dalis-56-468679> [28.02.2018].

23 More: B. Jundo-Kaliszewska, T. Lachowski, *Odzyskanie niepodległości przez państwa bałtyckie w świetle procesu rozpadu ZSRS oraz następcze rozliczenie okresu sowieckiej okupacji. Wybrane aspekty natury prawnej i politycznej*, “Władza Sądzenia” 2021, no. 20, pp. 109–127; R. Janutienė, *Raudonoji Dalia. Nuslėptieji Daliaus Grybauskaitės biografijos puslapiai*, Vilnius 2020.

24 She won the second round of the election with 57.87%.

25 The Lithuanian leader was particularly keen to open up the Chinese market to Lithuanian producers of food and laser technologies.

tional partner of Lithuania”. Her narrative towards Beijing changed only after she left office, culminating in her visit to Taiwan in 2023. In 2017, Politico named Grybauskaitė among those who influenced the “shape and change” of Europe²⁶. She retained her reputation as an efficient and consistent politician after retiring from active politics, remaining as a commentator²⁷ on life at home and abroad. In 2021, the politician was tipped to be the future head of NATO, and in 2023, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg praised Grybauskaitė’s leadership²⁸ during the Manfred Wörner Medal ceremony, listing the reduction of Lithuania’s dependence on Russian energy, an increase in Lithuanian defence spending, and the country’s hosting of a multinational NATO battlegroup. Ahead of the 2024 presidential election, the Lithuanian media speculated whether the former president would decide to run for a historic third term²⁹, and the collection of signatures for a petition³⁰ asking her to run in the elections began. There is no doubt that the first female president of Lithuania strengthened the country’s image in the international arena and remained an important figure on the Lithuanian political scene.

2. Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga – The Great Lady of Latvian Politics

In 1999, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga became the president of Latvia, which came as a surprise because her candidacy was initially not considered. After six votes, the Latvian parliament could not elect a new president, so it was decided to support a compromise candidate who was not affiliated with any political party, had no political experience, and came from an *émigré* background³¹. The newly elected president spent

26 K. Buchowski, *Prezydentka...*, p. 112.

27 She runs a profile on the social network “X”: Dalia Grybauskaitė, https://twitter.com/Grybauskaite_LT [23.12.2023].

28 *NATO Secretary General lauds President Grybauskaitė at Manfred Wörner Medal ceremony*, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_216485.htm [15.01.2024].

29 A. Radczenko, *Grybauskaitė wystartuje w wyborach?*, <https://kurierwilenski.lt/2023/08/30/grybauskaite-wystartuje-w-wyborach/> [15.01.2024].

30 *Kreipimasis į Lietuvos Prezidentę Dalią Grybauskaitę, prašant dalyvauti Lietuvos prezidento rinkimuose*, <https://www.peticijos.lt/visos/83691/kreipimasis-i-lietuvos-prezidente-dalia-grybauskaite-prasant-dalyvauti-rinkimuose/> [15.01.2024].

31 Latvia is a parliamentary republic. The head of state is the president, elected by the Saeima for a 4-year term. The president is not a fully executive body. However, its role is not entirely ceremo-

most of her life in Canada, where she worked as a professor of psychology at the University of Montreal, also engaging in social issues and issues of Latvian identity and culture among Latvian émigré intellectuals. After retiring in 1998, she returned to Latvia, where she was appointed director of the Latvian Institute in Riga³².

One of her first decisions as president was to have the Saeima reconsider the law on the state language, which was due to the fear that the current law could harm Latvia's chances in negotiations for accession to the European Union³³.

In the sphere of foreign policy, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga maintained a Western-oriented course, criticising both Russia's opposition to Latvia's accession to NATO and NATO's resistance to admitting the Baltic states. At the time of the election of Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga as president, Latvia was facing a difficult situation. The prospects for accession to the EU and NATO were uncertain. In 1998, Latvia was not invited to start negotiations, unlike Estonia, because Latvia was seen as the weakest link among the Baltic states in terms of military, administrative, and socio-economic development, being one of the most corrupt in the region³⁴. Therefore, the president's main task was to carry out the necessary reforms, enabling the start of accession negotia-

nial. According to the Latvian constitution, the president shares executive power with the cabinet and the prime minister. However, it does not bear political responsibility for the performance of its duties. Its orders are null and void without the countersignature of a member of the cabinet – usually the prime minister. *Konstytucja Łotwy Biblioteka Sejmowa*, https://biblioteka.sejm.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Lotwa_pol_010711.pdf [15.12.2023].

32 *Vīķe-Freiberga Vaira*, <https://www.memoiresdeguerre.com/2022/01/vike-freiberga-vaira.html> [15.12.2023]; *Populārākajai prezidentei Vīķei-Freibergai – 80*, <https://nra.lv/politika/230250-popularakajai-prezidentei-vikei-freibergai-80.htm> [15.12.2023].

33 After regaining independence in 1991, Latvia introduced a restrictive citizenship strategy, granting citizenship only to those who had it before the Soviet occupation and their descendants. As a result, about one-third of Latvia's population – mostly Soviet citizens who arrived during the Soviet period – were given the status of “non-citizens”. In the 1990s, the Exclusive Citizenship Act was criticised by international organisations such as the United Nations, the EU, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe. Under international pressure, Latvia has introduced changes to facilitate access to citizenship for those who do not previously hold it. See. More: A. Kuczyńska-Zonik, *Obcokrajowcy na Łotwie: czy to prawdziwy problem?*, https://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bw-meta1.element.ojs-doi-10_11649_5n_1438 [9.12.2023].

34 *Latvijas vieta pasaulē Ārlietas, drošība, cilvēktiesības*, <https://www.vestnesis.lv/ta/id/158495> [20.12.2023].

tions with the EU, which resulted in Latvia's accession to the organisation in 2004³⁵.

The second priority of the President's activity was membership in NATO, therefore, it has actively lobbied to persuade the Americans to accept Latvia and the Baltic states into the alliance. As a result, Latvia was invited to join NATO at the Prague summit in 2002. This was accompanied by a reform of the armed forces and an increase in the budget for national defence. Even the harshest critics were forced to admit that Latvia had never had such a strong and convincing representative of national interests in the world³⁶.

Relations with Russia have been and still are an important issue in Latvia's policy³⁷. By regaining its independence, the Latvian state sought to limit Russia's influence and strengthen its Latvian identity, while maintaining economic relations. However, relations with Russia have been dominated by a number of conflicts concerning, for example, the withdrawal of Russian troops from Latvia, differences on NATO and EU issues, the matter of the status of the Russian-speaking population, and the need to clarify the history of the Soviet occupation³⁸.

During her presidency, Viķe-Freiberga continued Latvia's relations with China, which began in 1991³⁹. In 2002, Chinese leader Jiang Zemin paid his first-ever visit to the Baltic state, which contributed to the development of bilateral relations in the fields of technology and transport⁴⁰. In 2004, the President of Latvia visited China, which resulted in the deepening of political dialogue, the activation of economic relations, and cultural and tourism cooperation⁴¹.

35 *Latvija Eiropas Savienībā*, https://latvia.representation.ec.europa.eu/par-mums/latvija-eiropas-savieniba_lv [21.12.2023].

36 *Vairas Viķes-Freibergas paveiktās TOP 8 prezidentes amatā*, <https://www.lsm.lv/vienmer-prezidente/raksts/top8-paveiktas> [21.12.2023].

37 See more: N. Muižnieks, *Latvian-Russian Relations: Domestic and International Dimensions*, Latvijas Universitāte, 2006.

38 *Valsts prezidentes Vairas Viķes-Freibergas*, <https://www.vestnesis.lv/ta/id/12521> [23.01.2024].

39 China was one of the first countries to recognise and establish diplomatic relations with Latvia in 1991.

40 *Jiang Pledges New China-Latvia Ties*, http://en.people.cn/200206/11/eng20020611_97551.shtml [15.01.2024]; *Latvijai ir būtiska Ķīnas atbalstošā nostāja*, <https://www.vestnesis.lv/ta/id/63096> [15.01.2024].

41 *Valsts prezidente dodas valsts vizītē uz Ķīnu*, <https://www.tvnet.lv/6215294/valsts-prezidente-dodas-valsts-vizite-uz-kinu> [18.01.2024].

In 2003, Viķe-Freiberga was re-elected for a second term. She was so popular that she was the only candidate for the presidency. She was elected on the first ballot and no one dared to question her authority in Latvia or abroad⁴². She focused the next four years of her presidency mainly on strengthening Latvia's influence and image in the world. She actively worked on building relations with the leaders of the major powers, including U.S. President George W. Bush and French President Jacques Chirac as well as strongly supporting U.S. policy in Iraq. One of her greatest achievements in the field of Latvia's contacts with Western allies was organising the NATO summit in Riga in November 2006. Viķe-Freiberga, valued for her political courage and perseverance, was considered a moral authority in Latvia.

Desiring an open dialogue with Russia⁴³, she was the only Baltic head of state to respond to President Putin's invitation to participate in celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Allied victory on 9 May 1945 in Moscow. A decision for which she has been criticised by a significant part of Latvian society as well as politicians from the Lithuanian and Estonian states. At the same time, however, while in Moscow, she asked Vladimir Putin to apologize for the occupation of the Baltic states, which irritated the Russians⁴⁴.

During Vike-Freiberg's second term in office, she became more involved in domestic politics and decided to limit the political and economic power of the oligarchs. She was active in the legislative

- 42 V. Pasaule, *Stāsts par to, kā latvieši pagājušajā gadsimtā meklēja prezidentu*, <https://jauns.lv/raksts/gviri/554700-ieskats-sena-un-nesena-pagatne-ka-latviesi-sev-mekleja-un-atrada-prezidentus> [9.01.2024].
- 43 From Latvia's accession to the EU and NATO in 2004 until 2006–2007. Latvian-Russian relations stagnated and no significant progress could be seen. From 2006 onwards, a pragmatic approach to Latvian-Russian relations could be observed, with each country putting emphasis on resolving mutually beneficial issues. M. Cepurītis, *Latvijas un Krievijas attiecību attīstība kopš Latvijas iestāšanās Eiropas Savienībā un NATO*, <https://www.rsu.lv/zinatniskie-raksti/latvijas-un-krievijas-attiecibu-attistiba-kops-latvijas-iestanas-eiropas> [23.01.2024].
- 44 R. Cottrell, *This Latvian leader is made of the right stuff*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/this-latvian-leader-is-made-of-the-right-stuff/> [12.01.2024]; T. Taurētājs, *Kā Latvijas prezidenti "flirtēja" ar 9. maiju un Krievijas imperiālistu*, https://talavastauraetajs-com.translate.google/ka-latvijas-valsts-prezidenti-flirtēja-ar-9-maiju-un-krievijas-imperialismu/?_x_tr_sl=lv&_x_tr_tl=pl&_x_tr_hl=pl&_x_tr_pto=sc [12.01.2024]; *Vike-Freiberga: Latvijas un Krievijas attiecības uzlabosies pēc prezidentu vizītēm*, <https://nra.lv/latvija/36609-vike-freiberga-latvijas-un-krievijas-attiecibas-uzlabosies-pec-prezidentu-abpusejam-vizitem.htm> [12.01.2023].

field and worked to strengthen the self-confidence of Latvians⁴⁵. Her government also focused on dialogue related to European history, social problems, more values, and the strengthening of democracy. In 2006, she became the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for UN Reform Envoy.

Varia Viķe-Freiberga was an extremely popular president with 85% support⁴⁶. She was considered one of the most visible European leaders, compared to Margaret Thatcher and Madeleine Albright. Her effective leadership strengthened Latvia's position in the international arena. Her immense confidence, ambition, and ability to take risks led her to run for the post of UN Secretary-General⁴⁷. Still active in public, the president sharply criticised the Russian seizure of Crimea in 2014. Concerned about the security of Europe's borders, she called for investments in defence and, following Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022, she called on Western countries to impose sanctions, stop buying Russian oil, and join Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine to the EU⁴⁸. In 2005, she was ranked 48th in Forbes' ranking of the world's most powerful women⁴⁹.

After the end of Vaira Viķe-Freiberga's presidency, she remained internationally active; from 2014 to 2020, she was president of the Club of Madrid, the largest forum of former leaders, it is a member of 31 international organisations. She has been awarded 34 Orders of Merit and 19 honorary doctorates as well as many other awards. She has published 17 books and is the author of numerous articles and chapters⁵⁰.

45 P. Raudseps, *Vaira Viķe-Freiberga, latviešu politiķe un sabiedriskā darbiniece, psiholoģe, Latvijas Valsts prezidente*, <https://enciklopedija.lv/skirkliis/115184-Vaira-V%C4%AB%C4%B7e-Freiberga> [18.01.2024].

46 S. Rosenberg, *Personības Vaira Viķe-Freiberga*, <https://www.redzidzirdilatviju.lv/lv/collections/160421/136/> [19.01.2023], *Vaira Viķe-Freiberga*, Columbia University World Leaders Forum, <https://worldleaders.columbia.edu/directory/vaira-vike-freiberga> [18.01.2024].

47 *Ārpolitikas zvaigzne*, <https://www.lsm.lv/vienmer-prezidente/raksts/arpolitikas-zvaigzne> [20.01.2024].

48 A. Steward, *Former Latvian president and Montreal professor on Putin: 'He's a narcissist and a psychopath'*, <https://globalnews.ca/news/8673073/vaira-vike-freiberga-latvia-ukraine-putin/> [22.01.2024].

49 *The Most Powerful Women*, https://images.forbes.com/lists/2005/11/Latvia_Country_1.html [8.12.2023].

50 *Vaira Vike – Freiberga European Academy of Diplomacy*, <https://diplomats.pl/member/vaira-vike-freiberga/> [27.01.2024].

3. The presidency of compromise – Kersti Kaljulaid

The election of Kersti Kaljulaid as President of Estonia was a real political compromise. Thomas Hendrik Ilves was succeeded as President of Estonia after three failed votes in the Riigikogu in August 2016. In the end, 81 representatives from the 101-seat parliament supported the candidacy of Kersti Kaljulaid as the first woman in history to take office as president of the state⁵¹. On 10 October 2016, Kaljulaid was sworn in as President of Estonia⁵². The experience she gained as an economic advisor in the government of Marta Laara⁵³ and as a member of the European Court of Auditors as well as her membership in the conservative Patriotic Union, made Kaljulaid a good candidate for the office of president. The then Prime Minister of Estonia, Taavi Rõivas, supported the election of the College of Voters, arguing for the democratic election of a good president⁵⁴.

During her presidency, Kersti Kaljulaid had to face very strong criticism, both at home and abroad, for her attempt to establish diplomatic relations with Russia. The fact is that the visit of the President of Estonia to Moscow has provoked very broad and unfavourable comments. What is more, Kaljulaid did not consult regarding her visit to the Kremlin with the presidents of Lithuania and Latvia, thus seriously violating the “Baltic solidarity”. The meeting between Tallinn and Moscow in the rank of presidents was the first since 2011, and since 2014, Estonia has not made any attempts to establish further contacts with Russia, which was directly caused by the annexation of Crimea. Moreover, from a diplomatic point of view, the meeting did not affect relations between the two countries, as no binding decisions were taken. Despite the widespread criticism, Kaljulaid defended her position, pointing out that the meeting with Vladimir Putin was of great impor-

51 According to Article 79 of the Estonian Constitution of 1992, the president of the country is elected by the Riigikogu, and in the absence of a head of state in three rounds of voting, the president is elected by the College of Electors. The election of the president at the Riigikogu level requires a two-thirds vote of the members of the Assembly.

52 *President Kersti Kaljulaid takes the oath of office, 10.10.2016*, <https://news.err.ee/119336/president-kersti-kaljulaid-takes-oath-of-office> [15.05.2023].

53 Mart Laar served as Prime Minister of Estonia twice, in 1992–1994 and 1999–2002.

54 Reformierakond: häälid pidasid, *EKRE: jätsime sedelid tühjaks*, <https://www.err.ee/574846/reformierakond-haaled-pidasid-ekre-jatsime-sedelid-tuhjaks> [18.05.2023].

tance for the internal situation of Estonia, and more specifically for the almost 25% of the population of Russian nationality. Furthermore, the president has shown Estonian and international public opinion that she is a politician who is not afraid to talk about difficult topics⁵⁵.

From the beginning of her presidency, her concern for the Russian national minority was clearly visible in the decisions taken by the president. In a 2017 television interview, she announced that she planned to move her office for a month to Narva⁵⁶, a city on the Estonian-Russian border dominated by people of Russian origin. The information provided by the President was of great symbolic significance and showed that the largest national minority in Estonia, Russians, were important. The President also referred to her previous visits to the city⁵⁷.

Kersti Kajlulaid's presidency is also marked by the development of relations with China. In 2018, the President met with President Xi Jinping, who openly expressed his country's readiness to cooperate in the international arena. Xi Jinping stressed that every country, regardless of its size, builds an international community and no one can be deprived of this right. During the visit, there was no shortage of open declarations aimed at strengthening Estonia's position in the international arena, and the Chinese leader also indicated his readiness to strengthen Sino-Estonian relations⁵⁸. In addition, it should not be overlooked that as part of strengthening cooperation, Estonia supported and joined the 17+1 format, the aim of which was to strengthen relations between Beijing and Central and Eastern Europe. Time has shown that no concrete actions have been taken as part of the proposed initiative, and more and more countries have

55 A. Kuczyńska-Zonik, *Prezydent Estonii rozmawiała w Moskwie o stosunkach dwustronnych*, "Komentarze IEŚ" 2019, no. 23, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/prezydent-estonii-rozmawiala-w-moskwie-o-stosunkach-dwustronnych/> [18.05.2023].

56 After Russia's annexation of Crimea, Narva was seen as Moscow's next possible target. The city is 87% inhabited by ethnic Russians. For more information, see: K. Popławski, *Tarmo Tammiste: Narwa jest następną, ale nie będzie następnym Donieckiem*, *Przegląd Bałtycki*, 21 May 2018, <https://przegladbaltycki.pl/7538,tarmo-tammiste-narwa-jest-nastepna-ale-nie-bedzie-nastepnym-donieckiem.html> [20.05.2024].

57 K. Popławski, *Prezydent Estonii na miesiąc przeprowadzi się do Narwy*, *Przegląd Bałtycki*, 28 December 2017, <https://przegladbaltycki.pl/6673,prezydent-estonii-miesiac-przeprowadzi-sie-narwy.html> [16.05.2023].

58 *President Xi meets Estonian counterpart*, *Xinhuanet.com*, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-09/18/c_137477149.htm [10.02.2024].

withdrawn from membership⁵⁹. However, the increase in trade should not be overlooked, in 2018 exports from Estonia to China amounted to 184 million EUR⁶⁰.

During her presidency, Kersti Kaljulaid made eight working visits to the United States, primarily visiting Washington and New York. The most important topics discussed during the meetings were, above all, issues related to defence and assistance to victims of armed conflicts⁶¹. In 2020, Estonia became a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the first time⁶², which allowed it to pursue important interests from the country's point of view and to continue in the direction adopted by previous governments.

Despite the fact that international affairs, and especially relations with Russia, have strongly involved President Kaljulaid, domestic policy and the integration of national minorities have always been her overriding goal. The President fought for the overarching values of human rights and Estonia's international presence⁶³. An important moment in Kaljulaid's presidency was her cooperation with Prime Minister Jüri Ratas from the Centre Party, however, the situation was further complicated by EKRE's coalition partner, the Estonian Conservative People's Party, which completely diverged from the president's assumptions as a politician with decidedly pro-European views. The fact is that the Estonian Centre Party, which has Russian roots, strongly sought the votes of the Russian-speaking minority, which in turn approached the Estonian Conservative People's Party with a very wide margin of trust. At the same time, a new party, Estonia 200, appeared

59 D. Héjj, *Współpraca Chin z Europą Środkową. 17+1 skurczył się do 14+1*, Dziennik Gazeta Prawna, 17 August 2022, <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/swiat/artykuly/8519307/chiny-europa-srodkowa-17-plus-1-litwa-lotwa-estonia.html> [10.02.2024].

60 *Perspektywy współpracy państw bałtyckich z Chinami*, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Perspektywy_wspolpracy_panstw_baltyckich_z_Chinami [11.02.2024].

61 *President Kersti Kaljulaid starts working visit to USA*, Err News, 28 June 2021, <https://news.err.ee/1608259800/president-kersti-kaljulaid-starts-working-visit-to-usa> [13.02.2024].

62 A. Kuczyńska-Zonik, *Prezydencja Estonii w Radzie Bezpieczeństwa ONZ*, "Komentarze IEŚ" 2020, no. 202, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/prezydencja-estonii-w-radzie-bezpieczenstwa-onz/> [12.02.2024].

63 T. Otocki, *Tõnis Saarts: Dla Kersti Kaljulaid nacjonaliści z EKRE reprezentują wszystko to, co obce*, Przegląd Bałtycki, 18 October 2019, <https://przegladbaltycki.pl/13604,tonis-saarts-dla-kersti-kaljulaid-nacjonalisci-z-ekre-reprezentuja-wszystko-to-co-obce.html> [16.05.2023].

on the Estonian political scene, eventually led by Kristina Kallas⁶⁴, but voters who had previously supported the Centre Party did not transfer their votes to the reformists and the new party⁶⁵.

Kersti Kaljulaid did not have support in the 2021 presidential election. The Centre and Reform parties supported the candidacy of Alar Karis, who had served as the director of the Estonian National Museum since 2018⁶⁶. During her presidency, President Kaljulaid strongly emphasised the importance of human rights, the principles of the rule of law, and freedom of expression, which were crucial for her as the country's president. After the end of her presidency, during the GLOBSEC Forum in Bratislava, she said "I am never silent when our security is threatened, when our freedoms are threatened, or when those weaker than us are treated unfairly"⁶⁷. Kersti Kaljulaid said the same words when she was sworn in as President of Estonia in 2016. The first female president of Estonia has made her mark on the country as well as internationally.

Conclusions

Women in the highest positions of state are often nicknamed "Iron Lady". They are characterised by strength, determination, consistency, willingness to take risks, and far-sightedness in building a strategy for the development of the state and its image⁶⁸. In Central and Eastern Europe, this nickname is even stronger due to the deep-rooted patriarchal system, the high level of under-representation of women in politics, and external threats.

64 Kristina Kallas has served as Minister of Education and Research since April 2023 in the third government of Kaja Kallas. (similarity, surname, accidental). In the elections on 4 March 2023. Estonia 200 entered the Riigikogu for the first time, winning 13.3% of the votes. For more information: B. Chmielewski, *Estonia: Partia Reform wygrywa wybory parlamentarne*, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, 6 March 2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2023-03-06/estonia-partia-reform-wygrywa-wybory-parlamentarne> [17.05.2023].

65 T. Otocky, *Tõnis Saarts...*

66 A. Kuczyńska-Zonik, *Wybory prezydenckie w Estonii: możliwe scenariusze*, "Komentarze IeŚ" 2021, no. 433, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/wybory-prezydenckie-w-estonii-mozliwe-scenariusze/> [20.05.2023].

67 GLOBSEC 2022, <https://forum2022.globsec.org/speakers/kersti-kaljulaid/> [20.05.2023].

68 M. Musiał-Karg, *Żelazne damy polityki*, [in:] B. Secler (ed.), *Kobiety we współczesnym świecie. Rola i miejsce kobiet w życiu politycznym*, Poznań 2010, pp. 115–128.

Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are consistently building their position and strengthening international relations in the European and global arena. Although they often had to face similar problems such as the reconstruction and strengthening of democratic processes after years of dependence on the USSR, the regulation of national minorities, the strengthening of the position of national languages, or the regulation of relations with Russia, the countries have developed individual models for the implementation of domestic and international policy. In 2004, these countries joined the European Union and NATO, thus confirming their belonging to the Western world⁶⁹.

The achievement of the goals and challenges facing these young democracies would not have been possible without strong political leadership and wise, consistent, and prudent political decisions. What unites the Baltic states is also the presence of women in the executive authorities. Women presidents: Dalia Grybauskaitė, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, and Kersti Kaljulaid, although they were heads of state at different times, continuously strengthened their position in the international arena, while at the same time caring for the internal affairs of their states. Each of the leaders had their own model of governance, looking for solutions that would be effective and safe, especially during such difficult and cold relations with Russia, which was a factor that brought the Baltic states closer together⁷⁰. Partnership in relations with the United States and an attempt to open up to China are two important points on the map of political activities for Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

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⁶⁹ J.W. Lamoreaux, D.J. Galbreath, *The baltic States as 'small states': negotiating the 'east' by engaging the 'west'*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43212804> [20.02.2024].

⁷⁰ C. Matthews, *The Baltic States' Relations with Russia*, "Global Insight" 2020, no. 1, <https://globalinsight.journal.library.uta.edu/index.php/globalinsight/article/view/16/6> [21.02.2024].

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