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Estonia's prime minister: An ascendant woman

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“August is the month to watch,” said Estonia’s 44-year-old prime minister during a recent visit to Washington. The guns of August 1914 announced the beginning of what was called the Great War until an even worse one began nine days after the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact of Aug. 23, 1939. However, Kaja Kallas radiates serenity during lunch near Lafayette Square across from the White House.

She does not think Russia’s late-summer military exercises near Estonia, scheduled by the man she calls “the bully next door,” presage aggression. She does, however, think it prudent to consider that Vladimir Putin’s revanchist ambitions might not be confined to Ukraine.

Indeed. Six months after absorbing German-speaking Austria, and four days before the Sept. 30, 1938, Munich conference, Hitler vowed that Czechoslovakia’s Sudeten region, home of many ethnic Germans, would be his “last territorial demand.” Six months after he acquired the Sudetenland at Munich, he swallowed the rest of Czechoslovakia, then turned his attention to “protecting” ethnic Germans in Poland. He said he could not “renounce” the “10 million Germans” living in regions contiguous to Germany. And the war came.

Igor Stravinsky, the Russian composer, said of Poland, perilously positioned between Russia and Germany: “If you pitch your tent in the middle of Fifth Avenue, it is quite likely you will be run over by a bus.” Poland has often been run over: Between 1795 and 1918 it disappeared from the map of Europe. Estonia, too, has had a hard history.

Before becoming part of the Russian empire in the 18th century, Estonia was ruled by Denmark, some German knights and Sweden. The 1918 collapse of the Russian empire gave Estonia 22 years of independence, until it was absorbed by the Soviet Union. This annexation, which ended when the Soviet Union did in 1991, is one reason more than one-fourth of Estonia’s population is Russian.

Estonians surely noticed that in a June 30 broadcast, Putin stressed Ukraine’s “linguistic affinity” with Russia, which he said has always treated Ukraine “with great love.” Stalin’s engineered 1932-1933 famine killed approximately 13% (3.9 million) of Ukraine’s population.

Estonia is less than 80% the size of West Virginia; its population of 1.3 million is approximately equal to that of the Richmond, Va., metropolitan area. Nevertheless, this smallest of the three Baltic states has three kinds of international importance: It is one of the 27 members of the European Union, which requires unanimity for important decisions, such as the proposed new global corporate tax, which Estonia does not yet favor. Estonia is a NATO member contiguous to a Russia wielded by Putin's gangster government. And Estonia reminds Europe of its greatest gift to world politics: the classical liberalism whose apostles include Adam Smith (d. 1790), Raymond Aron (d. 1983) and Estonia's current prime minister, whose mother and maternal grandparents experienced the complete negation of this liberalism.

Kallas' mother was 6 months old when she and her parents, who were just prosperous enough to be considered discordant with socialism, were deported to Siberia. During the three-week journey in an unheated cattle car, other deportees dried her diapers with the heat of their skin. Kallas, who has read Friedrich Hayek's anti-statism classic "The Road to Serfdom" (1944), lived under Soviet serfdom as a teenager.

She remembers how another European prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, when considering a policy proposal, would ask about it, "What would the market say?" Kallas says of Thatcher, "She had very many things right."

Forty-two years after Thatcher became the first female non-royal head of a European government, Estonia is part of a regional pattern of ascendant women: Five of them are prime ministers under 47. In addition to Kallas (whose finance and foreign ministers are women), there are Finland's Sanna Marin, 35; Denmark's Mette Frederiksen, 43; Lithuania's Ingrida Simonyte, 46; and Iceland's Katrin Jakobsdottir, 45.

Norway's prime minister, Erna Solberg, is 60. In addition, Estonia's president is Kersti Kaljulaid, the president of the European Commission is Ursula von der Leyen, and Angela Merkel is ending 16 years as Germany's chancellor. Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, favors Scotland's independence.

Christine Lagarde, head of the European Central Bank, has joked that if Lehman Brothers had been Lehman Sisters, the collapse that triggered the 2008 financial crisis might not have happened. Sexual chauvinism aside, the Cato Institute's freedom rating places Estonia eighth among 162 nations (Venezuela is 160th), and Freedom House gives Estonia a sparkling grade of 94 out of 100. The United States gets 83.