PRIME MINISTER’S ROLES AND SOURCES OF AUTHORITY IN CABINET DECISION-MAKING: THE CASE OF ESTONIA

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INTRODUCTION

Background of the study

The decision-making process of central government is one of the most often discussed in most post-Communist countries. The transition period in many Central- and East-European countries is not finished, and the final settings of governmental structures have not yet been determined (Coombes and Verheijen 1997: 172). Every single government designs its own decision-making mechanisms and that is why the roles of actors participating in policy making can dramatically change.

Governments are in a perpetual state of transformation, and the decision-making process has acquired a broader meaning involving, administrative branches of government, in other words, support structures as well. Coordination of different activities has become the government's most crucial role and, furthermore, government support structures are actively involved in coordination task (Velthut 2000: 6). Analyzing common points between support structures and cabinet in decision-making and coordination processes could be a fruitful way for investigating politico-administrative relations in the core executive.

Delimitation of the study

This study is focusing on the politico-administrative relations in the highest echelons of the government, more precisely, on the role of the leader1, and his or her support structures. It would be interesting to explore the roles of the leader, and those circumstances that determine them, in other words leader’s sources of authority. The theoretical background of the leader’s sources of authority is explained to create a pattern by which leader’s roles could be analyzed. The aim of the article is not to scrutinize all of the possible variables affecting a leader’s role; rather it will focus on Estonian Prime Minister, and therefore, more generally on the leader’s role in a coalition government.

Empirically, the study rests upon the decision-making process of the Estonian government in office (II government of Mart Laar). The formal side of the Estonian government is constituted in legal acts, in the framework of which each government

1 By the term “leader”, the author refers to the head of executive, such as the Prime Minister, like in many European countries, included Estonia.
can settle its own working traditions. The main differences between governments are
rested in the decision-making process, and consequently, the leader’s roles as well.
Analyzing the legal acts cannot be sufficient for understanding the logic of functioning
of the government; therefore, to create a broader understanding of this process,
following article includes interviews with several prominent politicians, civil servants
and, representatives of government support structure. All of the interviewed requested
that their names be concealed. As Estonian governments are multiparty coalitions with
the characteristics of collegial cabinets, this paper uses the term “government” to
mention the collegial cabinet, or the council of ministers.

The Estonian current coalition is a minimal winning - the coalition is comprised of
social democrats (Moderates), conservatives (Pro Patria) and liberals (Reform Party).
The Estonian party system has, during the last few years, gone through important
transformations with numerous amalgamations. Following the last minority government
(Mart Siimann’s regime during 1997-1999), which had serious problems with decision-
making, the current government (in office since March 1999) set the strengthening of
political leadership as its priority (Coalition Agreement). Three changes have taken
place that vividly shows the realization of that priority. First, chancellors of ministries
(administrative leader of each ministry) were removed from the Government Sessions.
Secondly, the ministers’ political support structure was increased by the addition of
several advisors. Finally, the Prime Minister utilized government support structures as
his management tool in government. These changes have made ministers very
dependent on the government and their parties. The growing politicizing of ministries’
top civil servants has decreased the ministers’ abilities of policy making, due to their
relative detachment from administration (Sootla, Kasemets, Velthut 2000).

Therefore, the main objective of this study is to analyze the roles and sources of
authority of the Prime Minister in coalition government, and find out the mechanisms,
how the leader can use government support structures as his tools.
1. AUTHORITY AND ROLES OF THE LEADER

One can make the difference between formal (mostly constituted in legal acts, consequently entitled in this study “formal-legal sources of authority”) and informal sources of authority; the latter are more or less defined by the leader her or himself. Pfeffer has divided the latter into structural and individual sources of authority (Buchanan and Badham 1999: 48). Authority consists of two parts: power and political behavior.

*Power* concerns the capacity of individuals to exert their will over others. According to Pettygrew and McNulty, power is thus an ability “to produce intended effects” in line with one’s perceived interests. Astley and Sachdeva have added that it is needed “to overcome resistance on the part of other social actors to achieve desired objectives or results” (Ibid.: 11). Power can be viewed as a latent capacity, as a source, or a possession; it presumes a certain position of prerogatives (Ibid.).

*Political behavior* is, however, the practical domain of power in action, created by the use of techniques of influence and other tactics. Political behavior concerns the ability to “get things done your way” (Ibid.). Political behavior presumes that a person is able to establish his or her own power. As Mintzberg argues, the “basis of power is not enough. The individual must act” (Ibid.).

By the notion “source of authority” two aspects of power are implied in the current study: potential use and actual use of power available to the Prime Minister.

1.1. Formal-legal sources of authority

The main characteristic of these sources of authority is that these are public – known to everyone. In Estonia, sources of authority deriving from legal acts are too general, and constitute only the basics of the framework in which each leader can develop his or her own style. It has been taken into consideration, that a leader’s authority is balanced with other types of authorities (for instance comparing to the other members of government, or generally executive in relation to legislative). At the same time this balance includes restrictions for the leader; for instance, the government’s decisions are signed by the State Chancellor, relevant minister and Prime Minister, not only be the leader. Laver and Shepsle (1994: 6) have identified two legal factors that give a leader
more power comparative to other ministers; these are analyzed in the context of the Estonian government.

First, many constitutions give the Prime Minister much more extensive rights and responsibilities than to ordinary ministers. In Estonia, it is mostly the right and duty of the Prime Minister to chair Government Sessions. The most important points are that:

- The Prime Minister has a right to supplement the agenda on his own discretion, therefore, evading the State Chancellery.

- The Prime Minister has a “summing-up” function. During Government Sessions, the leader has a right to sum up discussion or put the previous debate into his words (even if his conclusion does not reflect the actual substance of the discussion), and it not a good manner to question the leader’s “summary”.

- The Prime Minister (as well as related minister, Minister of Justice and Minister of Finance) has a right to postpone decisions (The Regulations of the Government of the Republic).

Secondly, majority of government formation procedures constitutes the Prime Minister as a formateur, and in many countries the Prime Minister has a right to place and relieve ministers to or of their post so long as the Prime Minister maintains confidence of the parliament. However, many researchers have pointed out that a coalition government sets a variety of limits to the Prime Minister as a formateur (Blondel 1982: 60, 77; Blondel et al. 2000: 13; Laver and Shepsle 1994:21).

For the Estonian Prime Minister as a formateur, it is hard to press through his or her own personal preferences because of two reasons: the President must give his or her approval to composition of government, and coalition parties must agree with it. After the last general elections, all three coalition parties had very equal results (18-18-17 seats). Accordingly every party received equally 5 ministerial posts. The composition of government therefore was formed on a party basis; portfolios were divided between parties and each party decided its ministers. In reality, the parties have a greater impact than the Prime Minister in the formation of government. As a party leader, the Prime Minister can strengthen his or her position, but at the same time the parties as whole, set limits to the Prime Minister’s authority in composing the government (Müller 1994: 20).
1.2. Structural and individual sources of authority

Buchanan and Badham (1999: 48) make a difference between structural and individual sources of authority. In the following paragraph their classification is used to analyze Estonian Prime Minister’s sources of authority.²

**Structural sources of authority** show the leader’s position and roles in his or her organization, or government, in its wider sense, including the cabinet and its support structures to embrace important actors in the decision-making process. Organization is viewed as a room, in what, and a tool, with which the Prime Minister can use his or her sources of authority.

As revealed by the analysis of formal-legal sources of authority, the Estonian Prime Minister is the chairman of the Government Session or *primus intra pares*. Consequently, formal position alone offers nothing distinct; therefore it is very hard to estimate its importance as a source of authority. Accordingly it could be fruitful to analyze the following indicators to demonstrate how the Prime Minister has used his formal position in increasing his power. In other words, to analyze the practical aspects of *primus intra pares*.

a) The ability to cultivate allies and supporters creates unanimity in organization and prevents the arousal of adversarial feelings and inner opponents. Above all, it is necessary to find supporters among crucial participants of the decision-making process. The current Estonian Prime Minister does not introduce his ideas independently, but instead solicits the support of his party. Different tactics can be discussed about how the Prime Minister guarantees fulfillment of his preferences in administration. He can use “neutral expertise” or government support structures as his spokesperson, for instance. According to the interviews, the Prime Minister never discusses questions with related ministers before Government Session, which is further indicator that he avoids strong control over the cabinet.

b) The Prime Minister’s centrality in governmental activities. Engaging the activities concerning the whole organization, the Prime Minister’s central role derives from his leading position. The media focuses its attention on him, and he has the privilege of representing the entire government. A good example of using his

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² Buchanan and Badham’s classification has been changed in this study by grouping similar indicators to illustrate better the real effect of every source of authority.
central position is the fact that he took the European Union and administrative reform issues under his direct control.

c) Access to and control over information and other sources. The Prime Minister’s position in the communication network is a vivid example of his superiority relative to other ministers. Information flows are run through the Prime Minister’s Bureau. Two pervasive units also provide the leader’s good position in the information network: the Bureau of Public Administration and the Bureau of European Integration (will be discussed more deeply in the following paragraphs).
It is in the interests of the Prime Minister to maintain popularity among the public. Therefore, he has to find effective channels to forward his messages and promote his agenda (Laver and Shepsle 1994: 6). His party and government support structure are further providing him with assistance with this task.3

d) The Prime Minister’s role in solving critical problems. The Prime Minister is indispensable as the one who combines different interests; he is the creator and the maintainer of harmony inside the government. The main task is to guarantee survival and success of the government (Cutting and Kouzmin 1999: 486). However, the cabinet as a whole, or Coalition Council, is the solver of broader political problems, not the Prime Minister personally.

**Individual sources of authority** derive from the Prime Minister’s personality; their emergence is not dependent on the organization or legal acts.

a) **Energy and endurance** demonstrate the leader’s ability to focus energy and to avoid wasteful efforts, being able to concentrate on important issues. Governments of today have to deal with different and very complicated problems, and the Prime Minister’s role is to monitor these activities. As one who is concerned with conflicts, the Prime Minister is valuable in removing conflict from the cabinet and further preventing potential conflicts. It is further evidence of the Prime Minister’s natural leadership abilities that more complicated problems are delegated to the Coalition Council, to attain broad support for resolutions.

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3 During the last year, Mart Laar’s and also government’s as a whole popularity among the public has considerably decreased: Prime Minister’s from 47 % in March 2000 to 22% in April 2001, and Governments’ from 53% in March 2000 to 28% in April 2001 (Saar Poll 2001). The Prime Minister is now trying to restore his support; one example is hiring a personal press advisor a couple of weeks ago.
b) **Sensitivity and empathy** become important in testing different alternatives, and perceiving the root of a conflict to avoid the development in cleavages or disruption in government.

c) **Flexibility** and selecting varied means to achieve a goal is necessary in case of deadlocks, and when the Prime Minister desires a specific result. The amount of alternatives also expresses the Prime Minister’s ability to control the government’s support structures.

d) **The ability to perform as a “team-member”, even “subordinate” to win colleagues’ favor is crucial to come into accord and to avoid resistance. The Prime Minister’s effort to prevent his dominance is also significant; consequently only very subtle mechanisms can be used to add to his power.**

Pfeffer declares that for reaching maximal authority, both structural and individual power sources are needed (Ibid.: 49) While activating formal sources, individual sources of authority become crucial. The Prime Minister’s individual ability to use formal sources of authority and to employ them in his interests develops his or her **leadership style**. For emergence, a leader utilizes his formal-legal sources of authority, which he strengthens or weakens through individual sources. But the environment of action, or structural sources of authority, compliments those advantages deriving from formal-legal and individual sources. For example, the source “Prime Minister’s centrality in government’s activities” is created by combination of the Prime Minister’s status of the *primus intra pares*, and his interest in two crucial areas (the European Union and administrative reform).

The Estonian Prime Minister does not have extensive formal-legal sources of authority; therefore, the emergences of other sources of authority are crucial in defining leader’s genuine power. Dunleavy and Rhodes consider the growing use of informal sources of authority as a tendency of the government’s shift towards a leader-centered cabinet (1990: 8).
1.3. The roles of the leader

After introducing the sources of authority, it is possible to derive the main roles of the leader.

The Prime Minister as a symbol of teamwork in government. Dunleavy and Rhodes have identified a way leader can emerge: the Prime Minister’s privilege to define “government’s ethos”, aura or leading beliefs, which actually generate predictable and final solutions for majority of policies (1990: 8) In this sense ethos means building consensus as an important precondition for all to maintain power. The Prime Minister keeps his eye on potential conflicts and attempts to avoid their growing into cleavages between coalition partners. For ministers, the Prime Minister is a guarantee for survival and cooperation in government (Sootla, Kasemets, Velthut 2000: 14).

The Prime Minister as a Chief. Most of the interviewed saw the Prime Minister as guard over government’s activities, and considered this chief role to be a legitimate one. An example of this role is that there is an agreement to give the Prime Minister the most complicated areas to supervise, which in turn, influences large part of other policies as well. Mart Laar has smoothly succeeded in combining his fields of interest with the key area of the cabinet’s policy: the European Union and administrative reform. Both are crucial matters for coalition parties, and therefore, his chief role is widely recognized. In this point the Prime Minister can strongly rely on government support structures.

The Prime Minister as a Pilot. The Prime Minister can affect the outcomes of politics via two central areas. His advantages comparing to other ministers emerge clearly; the Prime Minister has additional sources of authority in the shape of support structures. Primarily, the Prime Minister’s support structure includes an availability of advisors and expertise. Furthermore, one cannot exclude the control of leading interest groups and the Prime Minister’s party (or all coalition parties) sponsors. The Prime Minister makes use of the government formal support structure: the Bureau of European Integration and the Bureau of Public Administration. Officially, both have only the role of collecting and mediating information, plus assisting related committees. In reality, though, their roles have expanded by their backing of the Prime Minister in policy making (Sootla et al. 2000: 16-17).
Generally, the described sources of authority and the roles of the Prime Minister have enabled the leader’s emergence. At the same time, ministers’ independence is essentially limited on the one side by strong party discipline and on the other by cutting off civil service from the decision-making process. It means that the Prime Minister has, without clear dominance, succeeded in controlling not only government’s unity, but also management of two main policy areas. As Daft has written, “make preferences explicit, but keep power implicit”. Steering a government in a preferred direction, targets or goals must be very clearly formulated. Explicit proposals will often receive favorable treatment because other alternatives are ambiguous. Instead, “power works best when it is used quietly” (Daft 1992: 413). As already mentioned, support structures have played an important role in these processes.
2. SUPPORT STRUCTURES

The notion “support structures” denotes the structures, which directly advise or serve the government. Here are not included units that advise and single ministers. The main roles of government support structure are:

1) Help the government preparing decisions (advising, serve, administrate);
2) Deal with decisions (complete the agenda of Government Session, guarantee that all the decisions are prepared enough);
3) Monitor and control, whether the government’s decisions are implemented by the executive apparatus;
4) Mediate political and administrative branches of the government (Blondel 2000:6)

It is important to concentrate on the coordinating support structures, because only these take part in decision-making process. The coordinating support structures are these, which…

…tasks are associated with the main policy areas of the government;
…are important sources of information for government;

The State Chancellery, headed by the Secretary of the State, is according to the legislation the Government’s support structure. Besides managing operations and providing support services, the State Chancellery is also responsible for preparation of Government Sessions and juridical revision of bills. As these roles are mostly technical, the departments of the State Chancellery are not further analyzed. There can also be other actors in political-administrative relations of the leader, but due to the restricted length of the paper, only the central coordinating support structures are analyzed.

2.1. Prime Minister’s Bureau

Prime Minister’s Bureau (9 employees) advises and assists the Prime Minister. The tasks of the Prime Minister’s Bureau vary from the regular correspondence to substantial analysis of political situation and advising the leader. It came out from the interviews that the expansion of the Prime Minister’s Bureau has been consciously avoided. To be more precise, the Prime Minister has succeeded to create a small team with high capacity, which helps him to prepare for cabinet meetings, be informed, and hold and design a general political route. The members of the Prime Minister’s Bureau regularly take part in cabinet meetings (informal weekly meeting where main policies and decisions are discussed) and Government Sessions (formal weekly meeting, where mostly pre-reached decisions are ratified) (Sootla, Kasemets, Velthut 2000: 6). Advisors are crucial for the leader – they collect and analyze information, which is available only for the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister has highlighted the increase of ministerial responsibility. For instance the Prime Minister’s Bureau has not regular meetings with ministers’ advisors. It is a vivid example that the leader tries not to intervene into ministers’ work, and he interferes only if the negotiations between
corresponding ministries have failed and decision cannot be reached or if there is a serious conflict in the air.

While during the former government (Mart Siimann’s regime), the Prime Minister’s Bureau could be an institution, via which different units could influence government’s decisions; then now the access is much more restricted and it is bordered mostly with important economic circles. This argument is supported by the fact that PM’s advisor in economic affairs is taking care of relations with significant interest groups.

2.2. The Bureau of European Integration and The Bureau of Public Administration.

These two bureaus are in the structure of State Chancellery, and generally they are central pieces of coordinating support structure. Officially are both neutral, but as coordinating units of central policies of the government, they have acquired more important role by advising government and preparing decisions (which also means making the minor decisions themselves). At the same time both bureaus are crucial in gathering and mediating information in the relevant field.

The Bureau of Public Administration prepares, for instance, proposals of administrative reform for cabinet meeting. Bureau has wide access to various work-groups and other units connected with administrative reform. Therefore the Bureau has a possibility to transform information and present it in necessary form; therefore it takes part in policy-making process. Besides information possession and closeness to the leader, the influence of the Bureau is widened by its role to be idea-generator. It makes the first choices preparing proposals and evaluates other suggestions.

The Bureau of European Integration (17 employees) has formally the following roles: technical assistance of Ministerial Committee of EU Issues and The Council of Higher Civil Servants; gathering and delivering information about EU issues; coordination of the priorities in EU issues and assistance of ministers in EU matters. Besides these roles, the Bureau advises the Prime Minister in the questions of European Union. Therefore, it is more relevant to consider the Bureau more as a support structure of the leader than of the whole government. One example is that the direct support from the leader helps to make the Bureau’s work faster and in one’s turn, it has increased the Bureau’s role in a government apparatus.

The Bureau coordinates the work of Council of Higher Civil Servants (consists of vice- chancellors of the ministries), which is the main body for horizontal coordination of ministries in Estonia. On one side, the Bureau is a mediator or communicator between the Prime Minister and ministries, and on other side it a generator of inter-ministerial communication.

Generally, the both bureaus help to harmonize different policies, and have an access to Cabinet Meetings, which, for instance, it not allowed for ministerial administrative branches. At the same time the ministers do not have significant tools for increasing their say in political coordination – ministers’ advisors are mostly a connection between a party and a minister, not substantial analysts. Therefore the tools for harmonizing policies are the domains of the Prime Minister. Coordinating support structure is important connection between administration and the leader and this channel works obviously in both directions: if the leader is interested in preparation any decision or getting information, he can do it
quickly via support structures. In the other side, these support structures can take questions to the Government Session, which formally is not possible for these units.

It is possible to conclude that coordinating support structures in the current government are at first helpful apparatus for the leader, not for the whole government. These structures may easily prepare politically sensible decisions, check other actors in policy process, build coalition, and act as neutral experts influencing government’s decisions. Coordinating support structure is quite small, professional, with clear boundaries and high capacity, and has the backing of the leader. In other words, due to this configuration, the leader is relatively independent from other ministers, but he has sufficient information channels for feedback from administration.
CONCLUSION

This paper has been focusing on the roles and sources of authority of the Prime Minister in coalition government. Estonian government in office was used as an example. Before generalizing these findings, it is important to perceive the main characteristics of Estonian current political situation: there are not strong traditions and institutionalized values in political culture; politics is very adversarial (no compromises with opposition); steadily deepening politicizing (party discipline and inevitable need for unity in coalition); very few substantial analyzes in decision-making (the more important are existing analytical units), and strong office-seeking motive.

Analyzing the sources of authority, it was estimated that formal-legal sources are very general, and for the Prime Minister two main characteristics were outlined. First, the Prime Minister has a right and duty to chair Government Sessions; and secondly, in government formation procedure, the Prime Minister is a formateur. However, for the leader it is hard to press through his or her preferences as a formateur in the coalition, because parties often decide the seats. Therefore, the structural and individual sources of authority become crucial determining the genuine authority and leadership style of the Prime Minister. Considering the latter, the leader’s possibilities for emergence are rather subtle. The main techniques the leader could use for increasing his authority are:

- Occupying the central policy areas through which it is possible to control other main policies as well;
- Soliciting support before introducing ideas;
- Obtaining central position in the communication network;
- Exploiting some important roles for the survival of the whole government and becoming indispensable (for instance: creator and maintainer of harmony inside the cabinet, remover of conflicts).

These tactics require certain individual qualities like: flexibility in case of deadlocks; the ability to perform a “team-member” to win colleagues’ favor; sensitivity and empathy for perceiving the latent conflicts.

It was concluded that, in the case of Estonia, the sources of authority not deriving from jurisdiction are becoming important, and the final configuration of authority is set by each leader her or himself. Under these circumstances the Prime Minister can be characterized as "chief", "pilot", and "the symbol of teamwork". It may be generalized that the situation, when a politicized coalition has a threat of inner conflicts, is a likely start for Prime Minister’s emergence.

The mechanisms for utilizing coordinating support structures were also introduced. The leader could, for instance, set his priorities in a way he can empower government’s most substantive support units as his owns (like when choosing policy preferences). It is important to stress, that some of these support structures are not political in the sense that they consist of career civil servants, not of political appointees. But in reality, they have become important policy-makers in major policy fields, and word “half-political” is a better way for describing them. One way to create such support structures are keeping
in mind that these structures should be relatively small and very proficient, able to legitimize itself through substantial expertise (to sustain a “neutral” position in the eyes of governmental apparatus), and obviously, loyal to the leader.

It is not possible to say, whether other post-communist countries experience the same logic, but the results of the study reflect clearly the problems of new democracy.
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