

Court Rules in Favor of Former Prime Minister Kaja Kallas in Defamation Case

January 2025

The Tallinn District Court has ruled in favour of former Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas in her defamation case against lawyer Paul Keres. The decision took effect on 23 September 2024, after the Supreme Court declined to hear Paul Keres' appeal against the Tallinn Circuit Court's ruling from 10 May 2024. The legal dispute stemmed from comments made by Keres during a radio show, in which he falsely accused Kallas of having organized a birthday party at the state's expense. The case, which has spanned over two years, resulted in a ruling that requires Keres to publicly retract his statements.

Background of the Case

The legal battle began in late 2021 when Paul Keres, a sworn lawyer for former Education and Research Minister Mailis Reps, made statements about Kallas during an appearance on Kuku Raadio's "Sihik" talk show on 30 November 2021. In the broadcast, Keres defended Reps, who was on trial for fraud and embezzlement of public funds, and claimed that Kallas had similarly organized a birthday celebration at the state's expense. Keres mentioned an event on 17 June 2021, and suggested that it was tied to Kallas' birthday, inviting comparisons to Reps' alleged misuse of public funds.

Kaja Kallas, who was Prime Minister at the time and leader of the Reform Party, denied the claim, asserting that her birthday on 18 June had been celebrated privately with family and loved ones. The event on 17 June was described as a government dinner following a four-day session, which had been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Gerrit Mäesalu, director of the Prime Minister's Office, confirmed that the 17 June gathering was unrelated to Kallas' birthday.

Kallas Files Lawsuit Against Keres

Following Keres' remarks, Kallas filed a lawsuit on 13 December 2021, accusing the lawyer of spreading false information. Kallas' defence counsel, Ants Nõmper, called the statements defamatory and damaging to Kallas' reputation. Nõmper explained that they had initially asked Keres to retract his statements, but he refused, prompting the legal action.

The lawsuit demanded the retraction of Keres' false claims, an end to his alleged illegal behaviour, and moral damages. The case was closely followed in Estonia due to its high-profile nature, involving a sitting prime minister and a well-known attorney who was also defending another prominent political figure, Mailis Reps.

Court Rulings and Appeals

The legal proceedings began in the Harju County Court, which ruled in Kallas' favour. The court found that Keres' statement was false and ordered him to retract it on the same radio show where the claim had been made. Additionally, the court ordered Keres to pay EUR 15 000 in compensation for non-material damages and cover Kallas' legal fees, which amounted to EUR 13 410.

Keres, however, appealed the ruling to the Tallinn Circuit Court, which delivered a revised judgment on 10 May 2023. While the circuit court upheld the decision that Keres must retract his statement, it overturned the earlier ruling on moral damages. The court rejected the claim for EUR 15 000 in compensation, stating that the evidence did not indicate an intention by Keres to deliberately harm Kallas' reputation. The court noted that an attorney making an incorrect factual claim does not necessarily violate professional ethics.

Public Retraction Ordered

Under the circuit court's final decision, Paul Keres is required to publicly admit that his statement regarding Kaja Kallas was false. Within two weeks of the court's decision taking effect, Keres must issue the following retraction on Kuku Raadio's "Sihik" program:

"My statement, made on Kuku Radio's 'Sihik' program on 30 November 2021, at 12:00 p.m., that Prime Minister Kaja Kallas organized a birthday party on 17 June 2021, at the state's expense, is false."



Conclusion of the Legal Battle

The ruling marks the conclusion of a lengthy legal battle between Kaja Kallas and Paul Keres. Although Keres must publicly retract his false claims, he was spared from paying the EUR 15 000 compensation originally awarded by the lower court. This court case highlights the challenges of navigating political and legal disputes in the public eye, particularly for prominent figures in Estonia's political and legal landscape.