

By Lally Weymouth

Raised in New Jersey, Estonia's President Toomas Hendrik Ilves does not mince words when it comes to the situation in Ukraine and the threat Russia poses to his country and the region. He took time last week to speak with The Post's Lally Weymouth.

Excerpts:

**Q. What do you think of the situation in Ukraine?**

**A.** The issue is not just Ukraine — it is the entire post-World War II order, which is under question. The Helsinki Final Act forbade border changes through aggression and says explicitly that no such change in borders would be recognized.

[This] was already annulled by the [Russian] attack on Georgia in 2008. Prime Minister [Vladimir] Putin and President [Dmitry] Medvedev said they did it because Georgia wanted to join NATO. No one heard the alarm.

Now it is Ukraine, where even more egregiously, the casus belli is that Ukraine wanted to have an association agreement with the European Union. [Such an agreement] really doesn't give you very much.

**So the association agreement was not a big deal?**

Right. Clearly why the United States is worried — and oddly more worried than some countries

in Europe — is that this is chaos. If you can't count on the most essential agreements — that you don't invade countries and don't change borders — then we are in a whole new world here.

**Do you think the U.S. response has been sufficient?**

I would say the West has been in a state of shock. My analogy is that we are in 1945 or 1946, when the United States and Europe started noticing that their erstwhile ally against the Nazis was starting to do funny things and toppling governments and starting a civil war in Greece. In the beginning, people didn't know [what to do]. Then [Britain's] socialist Labor foreign minister [Ernest] Bevin came up with the idea of NATO. He saw Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia go, and he got worried. He approached the Americans and said, let's do something. The response was NATO and the Marshall Plan. The world had changed. . . . That was the beginning of the Cold War.

**Do you think Putin will build a land bridge to Crimea? Will he go to Transnistria? To the eastern part of Estonia? What's next?**

Looking at the isolation of Crimea and where they are concentrating their troops and the Russian attack on Mariupol, the land bridge to Crimea seems to be not farfetched. It seems their goal in eastern Ukraine is to create another frozen conflict.

I keep reading that Narva [the Russian-speaking part of eastern Estonia] is next. But this is silly. The average Russian miner in Donetsk gets [the equivalent of] 200 euros a month. The average Russian miner in Estonia gets 2,000 euros a month. All residents of Estonia are members of the E.U. and have free movement of labor across Europe. Polls show that people think the Russian annexation of Crimea is good. But if you ask them if they want to join Russia, they say no.

**Russian propaganda is said to be very effective in eastern Estonia. Is it?**

Yes, in so far as getting support for Crimea. At the same time, we are having a strong upswing in Russian liberals moving to Estonia. We see a rising belligerence all around toward many countries: practice bombing raids approaching Sweden; others approaching the northwest coast of the United States. . . . In 2011 they were practicing using a tactical nuclear weapon on Warsaw. They didn't do it, but you don't know what they are going to do. Last week, they opened criminal proceedings against Lithuanians who dodged the Soviet draft 25 years ago.

In our case, we had the equivalent of our FBI investigating a cigarette-smuggling ring. There was this bizarre event in which they came across the Estonian border during a meeting between the smuggler and our guy [the Estonian officer] and hauled him off and now he's sitting in Lefortovo prison [in Russia].

**That happened right after President Obama left Estonia? Was that meant to send a signal to Estonians?**

We don't know. You see an overlap between organized crime and the Russian secret service.

**Do you feel the U.S. and the West have done enough to protect your country?**

The outcome of the Wales summit was very good.

**The 4,000-man rotational force?**

Yes. And there is an air force training base being set up on our airfield. There will also be ground troops.

**Do you think Putin would be clever enough to try the strategy of appealing to the Russian-speaking Estonians so he wouldn't have to invade Estonia with troops? Or do you think he might actually try to invade the Baltic States?**

It is all so new, so it is hard to say. It's not about conventional forces going over the border. They used the "little green men" [counterinsurgency fighters] until they were getting badly beaten by the Ukrainians and then they brought in their conventional forces.

The big difference is that Ukraine is not in NATO and we are. This is about Article 5 — if it ever fails, then NATO no longer works. Then no one trusts it.

**Do you feel you've crossed the Rubicon by joining NATO?**

We are on the right side of the Rubicon. . . . There is a big difference between NATO and non-NATO. Why is NATO not defending Ukraine? Because Ukraine is not a member of NATO and we are. The question is not if we believe in Article 5. The question is, does Putin believe in Article 5?

**Would the U.S. and Europe react?**

I think they would. Obama said quite clearly that Tallinn and Riga and Vilnius are no less secure than Paris, Berlin and London.

**You've talked about the NATO-Russia Founding Act and how it should be changed for a new security environment.**

The problem with the NATO-Russia Founding Act is that [it was signed] in 1997 when Boris

Yeltsin was president. It was like peace and love and Woodstock, and now we are in Altamont. I would argue that, between 1997 and 2014, the security environment changed substantially.

I think we have to revisit this illusory partnership that exists between NATO and Russia.

### **Do you see an absence of American leadership?**

The U.S. is not going to put troops on the ground in a non-NATO country and risk a firefight with Russia. They would risk a fight in a NATO country because it is a treaty obligation. There is no treaty obligation for Ukraine.

When we became independent, we got the best and brightest to work on getting Estonia into the E.U. and into NATO. Thank God we did.

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