

Estonia, a world leader in technology, borders Russia, so its president is worried about the Ukrainian crisis.

You grew up in New Jersey and spent a good amount of time in America.

Twenty years, I spent. My parents were refugees. They met in Sweden, and I was born there. And then my uncle had come to the United States. He sponsored them, and they moved to New Jersey. So I grew up in New Jersey, and then I went to college here. Then I went to graduate school in Pennsylvania, and then, well, then I moved on.

But in your journey of moving on, you became a journalist?

Yes. Well, I was at I was at Radio Free Europe for a number of years, almost 10. First as an analyst writing about events in [the] Soviet Union, and then they sort of lifted me up by the scuff of my neck and made me head — director of the Estonian Service. So I was there until the beginning of the '90s.

How did you make this transition out of the news business and into government?

Well, the president at the time asked me to come. He said two things. One was that I did know a little bit about foreign affairs and foreign policy. The other one was, he said, "You're there saying what we're doing and doing right or doing wrong. But why don't you come participate and do it yourself?"

And so I did. Then Estonia needed an ambassador in Washington. And so they sent me there, and then they needed a foreign minister, so they pulled me back. Did that for about six years. Then I was in the parliament. Then I was elected to the European Parliament. Then I was

elected president. Then I was re-elected president.

When you were here, you studied at Columbia. You studied at the University of Pennsylvania. What did you study here?

Experimental psychology, mainly. Then everything else along the way.

You ended up dabbling in programming along the way.

Yes. I mean, one of the things that has affected me a lot much later was that I had an absolutely brilliant math teacher who decided, on an experimental basis, to teach 13-year-olds — I was 13 years old at the time — how to program ... I mean, I'm not a computer program[er]. I did work as one when I was in college to make a little extra money.

I'm not afraid of code. I mean, I understand how these things work. I thought that that was the one area where Estonia was playing on a level playing field. I mean, after the Soviet Union collapsed, we're poor ... [and] the rest of the world is rich and doing well. But that was one area where I thought we should, that we could, can beat. And so I started pushing for computer education in the early '90s.

Now Estonia gets dropped in with other places as very pro-development, a high-tech hub, a Silicon Valley of sorts. That must have been something of a challenge to get from the most basic of development needs and infrastructure needs to that. That's something that you influenced?

Well, a number of us did, actually. 1993 was actually the first Web browser ever. People forget that was only 21 years ago that Mosaic came out. But pushing this and also trying to make government more efficient, we started pushing for e-governance, and that's taken its own path. But part of the education side of this is that, well, Skype was invented in my country. Then

Skype, while it has been bought and is now owned by Microsoft, the research and development center is still in Estonia. And then there are a whole number of other startups that are no longer startups but now doing rather well.

And there are many manifestations of the degree to which there is computer literacy and that sort of innovation in Estonia. But I guess the one that strikes me the most is, you had online elections.

Well, we've had them six times. And since we use the same system, which everyone trusts, people use it to do all their banking and transfers and their business with the government. It doesn't seem so strange to us as it does to other people. Because for other countries, that's all you do. Then you go, "Can I trust this?" But if you have a highly reliable system that you trust for doing all kinds of transactions ...

And voting is just another safe transaction, as far as you're concerned?

Right. And it also has the added benefit that you can do it abroad and get much higher participation from people who happen to be away.

But you got these electronic ID cards that people use, not just to bank but to vote, to access other services. Ninety-four percent of the population pays their taxes online. Is there any reason we can't do that here?

Well, you don't have a secure identity. I mean, the card is not really the key. The card is that you have a two-factor ID system. You need a secure identity online for any of this to work. And until you do that, you really can't trust being on the Internet for safe and secure transactions. So we have that, as do a number of other countries.

Is it true, though, that President Barack Obama — I don't know whether he was serious or joking — said, "Boy, we should've gotten you guys involved in our whole "Obamacare" rollout?"

He did say that. But I think he was joking. Certainly we have a different system from the United States. But at least I would say that in terms of the technical side of things, [the] U.S. has followed very closely how we do this.

Let me talk to you about a few other digital facts about Estonia. You can start a company in Estonia, I've heard, in as little as 18 minutes. School and medical records are online. Children as young as 7 are taught to program if they want. Lots of things can be purchased by text. And I have heard and read that you can even get Wi-Fi in some forests in Estonia.

Yes. The first couple things go back actually to the secure identity. First, we don't need a card. You can use the SIM card in your phone. So the fact the two-factor identification requires a SIM card, a programmable SIM card that is uniquely yours. And whether it's in a card or whether it's in your phone — I mean, it's easy if you put a card in your computer. But yes, you can do all those things, and all of that assumes secure identity. The other thing we have, we have a very sophisticated system of connecting, using the secure ID.

And then what allows registering your company in 18 minutes is another law that we have, which is a once-only law, which whenever an American hears about them, they go, "The government may never ask you for any information it already has."

We exist on asking you the same information over and over again in America.

Right. And you writing down your address and your all that, whatever hundreds of times a year, you don't do that. So when you register companies and you put in the IDs of all the people who are in the company, then you can check up on all things. No criminal record, pays his taxes, does all that. You don't have to supply any of that. Which is very — I mean, it really is a way to reduce all the hassles of bureaucracy that all of us face or face in other places. But in Estonia,

we've done away with it.

Have you considered a benevolent takeover of America just from a technology perspective?

A number of countries are adopting our system. Or we're developing newer systems, together with our neighbors the Finns. It's actually the platform that we use, the software which we developed that — well, we paid for it. I mean, we had a company do it. We actually give away as foreign aid.

I mean, the U.K. is looking at us very closely and finds it all very intriguing. Because the other side of it, it is secure. I mean, especially with all these doubts about people listening in and so forth. I would be much more relaxed about that, simply because people look at connections. They aren't really reading your love letters. But even at that level of encryption we have — I make this little joke, I say, "We could store all our national data in NSA computers because they can't crack it." Haven't been able to crack it yet.

In your speech to the United Nations, you actually said, "The community of nations is only secure when its smallest members can feel secure. We cannot accept threats and intimidation in the 21st century international relations." You have been very, very tough recently on the world stage, warning about Russian aggression and where this can go. Tell me what you think we should be thinking about.

Well, I mean, I don't know what the solution should be. The problem is that since the U.N. was created, and we have the U.N. charter from 1945 which forbids aggression, but even further in the sort of trans-Atlantic space from the U.S. and Europe, we have had agreements that we have come to.

The most important one is the Helsinki Final Act, which is sort of the cornerstone, has been the cornerstone of security in in the trans-Atlantic area since 1975, which [was] signed by all parties, saying that no border changes through force, no border changes through threat of force and that if there are any border changes, those will not be recognized.

And if the basis of that, of all of those agreements is no longer there, then where are we? I mean, we're in a situation where the rules no longer apply.

You know, people, I mean, one country has basically decided it no longer needs to follow the rules that we've agreed upon.

And nobody knows who is meant to enforce it. And with Ukraine not being a NATO country, this further complicates things.

Absolutely. But still, it is a member of what is now the OSCE [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe], back then it was the CSC [Conference on Security and Cooperation], and party to all these rules. Of course, in the case of Ukraine, there are other problems as well because, well, they had the Budapest Memorandum, which said that take out all your nuclear arms and we — Russia, U.K. and the United States — will guarantee your security.

Well, another agreement that didn't hold. And on top of that, there's also another crucial document here, which was in 1990, the Paris Charter, which all parties said everyone can choose which way they want to go, who they want to be aligned with. And now — and that was more really about NATO. But in this case, Ukraine is not going to NATO. All it wants to do is have a fairly low level of agreement with the European Union. It's not EU membership.

Right, it's a trade agreement.

Right, basic with a little — you can get teacher exchanges or student exchanges. But that's it. I mean, this is — especially in the United States, people think, "Oh, you know, they're joining the EU." They're not joining the European Union. They are simply having a closer relationship, better trade relations. And if that is a reason to invade someone, then I think we're really in trouble.

In your speech to the United Nations, you also referred to Georgia. What happened in Georgia six years ago? You said, "Alarm bells rang already six years ago in Georgia, but no one heard the wake-up call. We must take conflict prevention more seriously. We must support states in their choice of democracy." The Russian argument is that they are supporting the ethnically Russian population in eastern Ukraine. You have one of those in Estonia as well. What is the dynamic there?

Well, I mean, if the average salary of a Russian miner in Ukraine is 200 euros a month, \$250 a month, the average salary of a miner, a Russian miner in Estonia is 2,000 euros a month there. Economically — I mean, it's not as if there's this richer country next door. The opposite is true. And the rights and freedoms you have in the European Union work anywhere. And on top of that, we are in terms of press freedom, Internet freedom, we're sort of one of the leaders in the world. The argument of having co-ethnics abroad — I mean, this is an argument made by the Germans in 1938 to dismember Czechoslovakia and to then annex Austria. That's not good.

Right. That went over poorly when people first said that when this started happening. But in fact, it is a remarkably accurate historical antecedent.

Right. It's really kind of the model one has to look at. People always say you can't talk about stuff like that. And Germany — and Nazi Germany was a different thing. But in fact, that recipe of, "We got enclaves all over the place, and we actually have to move in to protect those people," is something that has not worked out very well for Europe.

Historically, it's been a complete and utter disaster and was also a disaster in the Yugoslav wars after the collapse of Yugoslavia. We've seen this argument made. And every time it's made and acted upon, it leads to complete and utter disaster. Now, if you extend that argument, then it's not only Estonia, Latvia. It's Brighton Beach. I mean, take the argument that people from your ethnicity living somewhere else as a casus belli, or cause for war, that can lead to all kinds of problems. We saw it in World War II. We saw it in Serbia. In Europe, you have ethnic minorities from your country living in other countries almost at every single ...

Right, that's the way it works in Europe.

Right. Imagine a Europe that starts doing that. Then I mean — do we dismember Switzerland because there are Germans and French and Italians living — I mean, no one even thinks of that. It's why I made the point, is that these are arguments that we have pushed and worked so hard to work against for hundreds of years.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Original article on the Al Jazeera America [webpage](#) .