

Anna Korbut

"Ukraine chooses its own path and for this it has become a victim of aggression," Mr. Ilves said at the opening of the YES summit in Kyiv last week. "The EU as a whole must stand with Ukraine in its support to the country." Ukraine's Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin later wrote on Twitter that Estonia would take Ukrainian troops injured in Eastern Ukraine for treatment in recovery centers, and offer Ukrainian civil servants training in e-elections, a segment where Estonia is a leader. In his interview for The Ukrainian Week, Mr. Ilves draws parallels between transformations of the international order caused by Russia's actions today and circumstances that encouraged the establishment of NATO and EU over 60 years ago, and between the presence of Russian troops on Ukrainian soil today and Soviet occupation of Estonia.

**U.W.: What has happened to the Estonian security service officer detained recently by the Russians? Where is he now? What signal does this send?**

He has been charged. Clearly, he was on our side of the border doing a criminal investigation. He was abducted in the process of that criminal investigation. That criminal case involves smuggling into Estonia.

He works for the internal security service of Estonia; its staff does not go abroad to work. They only work inside Estonia. That is a very clear line that we have in our country. It is based on the rule of law. Why this was done – I can't figure it out.

**U.W.: Do you expect any real threat from Russia to Estonia?**

I do not expect it. However, what we have seen in Ukraine in the past six months is all unexpected. We are witnessing the complete abandonment of all the rules followed since WWII. Borders cannot be changed through the use of force or violent force. That has been the underlying fundamental truth of European security – even during the Soviet period. Now, the

things that we have always believed in are no longer true.

**U.W.: Barack Obama has recently visited Estonia to reassure you of support from NATO and the US. Do you feel reassured?**

We got everything that Estonia had worked for in the years leading up to the summit without any compromise. More specifically, the staff, the permanent NATO presence – our NATO base. It is now augmented with significant presence of allied troops, more officers. Politically, he reiterated that there is no difference between Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius and Paris, Berlin or London from NATO perspective.

**U.W.: The Baltic States, Poland and Ukraine seem to form a sort of a buffer belt between the ever more aggressive Russia and Western Europe. Do you think this could somehow change their security strategy, or their security allies, in the future?**

The only historical analogy I know of is the period between 1945 to 1947-48. In that period, the British, Americans, the French and the Soviets were allies fighting the Nazi Germany. When the Germans were defeated, we started to see that the Soviets began to move on the countries that were in between. Everyone was confused then, in 1946-47. The common thought was that they had been allies in defeating the Nazi Germany together, and now they were doing to us what the Nazis had been doing. This shouldn't have been too surprising. Today, everyone talks of September 1 being the beginning of WWII. But we should keep in mind that almost 75 years back from now, on September 17, 1939, the Soviets, as allies with the Nazis, invaded Poland. It took a while to understand what was going on in 1946-47 because it wasn't making sense, just like what Russia is doing today is not making sense.

Back then, it was what led to the creation of NATO in 1949. It also resulted in the Marshall Plan which was aimed at assisting Europe, while Stalin did not allow that in any of the Eastern European countries. It also led to the Coal and Steel Community in 1950-1951 which later became the European Economic Community, and the European Union eventually. So, two of the most fundamental institutions we have today – the EU and NATO – started in response to Soviet behavior which no one could understand but realized that we need to do something. The response was NATO as the security element, and the EU as the economic element, to prevent the disruption of countries economically and to boost the economies of Europe. That took pretty

much five years, beginning in 1945 and ending in 1949-1950 when the institutions were in place.

I don't know how many years it will take to move beyond the current institutions and to create something new, but we are clearly at the beginning of a period where Russia is a very different partner, or rather no longer a partner. This stage will take a while.

As to the allies, we have 28 NATO allies who have pledged to defend us and whom we have pledged to defend. In terms of countries that we get closely along with, Ukraine has been one. I came here in 2004 and froze on the Maidan 1.0. As Vice President of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, I went along with German MEP Elmar Brok and some other leading MEPs, to see Leonid Kuchma. We told him "You have to stop doing this". And he did. It never got to the point to which it got under Yanukovich where he did not listen to the Europeans. Kuchma did listen. We are all people who are very supportive of Ukraine, and we shall continue to be.

Estonians feel very strong solidarity for Ukraine. We have all kinds of events, rallies in support of Ukraine. Estonians support Ukraine. It's not just the president or prime-minister, it's a common feeling.

**U.W.: In one of your earlier interviews, you said that Europe would need a new rulebook for Russia now. Is this happening now? What do you expect the new rulebook to be like?**

We are in the beginning of what I think will be a longer process. But smart people are thinking about how to proceed. Not every country in Europe is convinced of the need for a new set of rules. We see that there are EU member-states that do not like sanctions. One of the problems is that they used to have this attitude towards Ukraine, Estonia or Poland, that "those East Europeans are always afraid of the Russians but they don't understand things". That is now changing significantly. In fact, there is a completely new understanding of the fact that Eastern Europeans were not paranoid at all.

**U.W.: How have European and Russian sanctions been affecting Estonia so far?**

European sanctions against Russia do not affect us. Russian sanctions against European countries are slightly affecting us. The goods Russia has banned from Europe were banned for Estonia already in January. So, it's nothing new for us. The new thing is, given the fact that the Russian market is now closed, a lot of goods from European farmers that are not going to Russia but staying within the EU, so we now have huge amounts of milk. The prices of agricultural goods have gone down. This is enough to bother farmers.

**U.W.: Russia is waging a powerful information war. Estonia is one of the targets, and you have a Russian-speaking part of the population. Do you feel threatened by it, and how does Estonia resist it?**

The average salary of a miner in the Donbas is EUR 200 a month. The average salary of a Russian-speaking miner in Estonia is EUR 2,000 a month. Why would they want to give up that? Every permanent resident of Estonia, whatever their citizenship, has the right to free movement in Europe with no visas, to free movement of labour. If they want to go work in London or Paris, they just do it. Why would they want to secede? Would they want free movement of labour to Tambov Oblast? I don't think so. We also have euro, and the ruble is plummeting. So, that is not really bothering us. We know from opinion polls that there is no sentiment about joining Russia among people who are citizens and residents of the EU.

We have noticed, however, that there are two separate issues. Many Russians in Estonia who watch Russian television support the annexation of Crimea. We don't. On the other hand, when asked whether they would want to join Russia, they say 'no'.

**U.W.: The widespread opinion has been that, if Ukraine resists Russian aggression decisively, the international community will be more prepared to act tougher to support it against Russia. How do you assess Ukraine's response to Russian aggression, both in the military sphere, and in terms of reforms in the country?**

There is a general rule in international security policy: a country that believes in itself will defend itself. If you say "we are going to defend our country", people understand that. If you say "we won't defend our country", no one will force Ukraine to do that. That is Ukraine's choice.

The main thing I see right now is, with the Russian troops and equipment in your country, that they have to leave. We have just celebrated the 20-years anniversary since the last Russian soldier left Estonia. That lasted from August 31, 1991, till August 31, 1994. All that time we had Russian troops, Russian tanks and Russian planes on our soil. It took a long time to get them out but we did. That was when our true sovereignty began.

Another important issue now is Crimea. I am a very strong supporter of the policy of absolute non-recognition of the occupation and annexation. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were occupied in 1940. NATO countries all maintained the policy of non-recognition till the very end – for 50 years. This meant that simple Estonian citizens could visit the US or Germany. But no one who said "I'm the official of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic" would ever get in in that status. It was a little different for Ukraine. It had the so-called "foreign ministry" and a seat at the UN; Belarus did too.

In terms of reforms, the Ukrainian President says "we could do reforms while we are fighting". There was a new wave punk rock band called Talking Heads. They had the song "Life During Wartime" that said "this ain't no disco, this ain't no Mudd Club, this ain't no CBGB" (Mudd Club and CBGB were well-known New York nightclubs for underground and alternative music and culture in the 1970-1980s – Ed.). It's basically war. Trying to do reforms in the middle of people dying in a war is very difficult. I have respect for the idea that people try to implement reforms at this time. But the first step is to stop the fighting, get the troops out. Then, do the reforms.

## **BIO**

Toomas Hendrik Ilves is the fourth President of Estonia, in office since 2006. Born in 1953 in Stockholm into a family of Estonian refugees, he grew up in the US and studied psychology there. Before he started his diplomatic career as Estonia's Ambassador to the US in 1993, Mr. Ilves had worked as research assistant at the Department of Psychology at Columbia University, as the teacher of English, and as a journalist for Radio Free Europe. In 1996, Mr. Ilves became Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs, then resigned in 1998 to join the Peasants' Party, a small opposition force which he soon chaired. In his second term as Foreign Minister, he launched the talks that resulted in Estonia's joining the EU in 2004. In 2004, he was elected MEP from Estonia. In 2006, he was elected President of Estonia.

Original article on The Ukrainian Week [webpage](#) .