

**Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves: I greatly hope that people of all ethnic backgrounds regard Estonia as their home**

Toomas Hendrik Ilves who was sworn in as the president of Estonia on October 9 has described his understanding of Russian-Estonian relations and the position of the Russian-speaking population of Estonia in an interview with Interfax.

Ilves believes that there has been no cooling in Estonian-Russian relations and spoke in favor of their improvement.

"I would like relations between our countries to develop and improve. Such is my course, and I don't see anything radical in this desire," Ilves said.

Commenting on a remark by an Estonian official calling his country's relations with Russia "ice-cold," Ilves said, "If you look at an ice cube, you will see that everything inside it appears to be stiff and lifeless. But if you look at Estonian-Russian relations, you can't see stiffness and lifelessness in them."

"Thus, I would not over-dramatize these relations, although they could certainly be better, especially if you talk about political relations," he said.

The Estonian president favored the enlargement of the treaty base in Russian-Estonian relations.

Ilves said he still believes the references to the 1920 Tartu Peace Treaty, which the Estonian parliament added to a law on the ratification of land and marine borders with Russia and which

Russia considers null and void, were not essential. Russia annulled the border treaties after the Estonian parliamentarians added the references.

"I still believe that appending the law on the ratification of border treaties with a reference to the valid 1920 Tartu Peace Treaty was not essential," Ilves said.

"At the same time, I am convinced - and numerous international law analysts made a very similar conclusion - that the Estonian parliament did not do anything wrong, and since the Estonian lawmakers have already made this reference, I also do not see any reason to remove it," he said.

"The reference to the Tartu Peace Treaty only points to one of the pillars of Estonian-Russian relations and does not impose any new or additional obligations on any side. The validity of the Tartu Peace Treaty is confirmed by international law," he said.

"The preamble to the law on the ratification of border treaties does not change the treaties signed by the Estonian parliament and does not provide any preconditions for territorial claims," he said.

He refuted Russia's claims that his country is revising the results of World War II.

"Estonia as any other country has an objective view of all the results of World War II such as the routing of Nazi Germany and the subsequent occupation of Central and East European states," he said.

As for suggestions made in Estonia to demolish or move the monument to Soviet liberators in Tallinn Ilves said: "Let me ask a question in return - is it a monument to the victorious Red Army, a monument to the fallen victors or a gravestone for the dead?"

"I respect the commemoration of those who died in the war. However, glorifying foreign

conquerors is alien to any people or culture, including the Russian people, of course," he said.

Ilves suggested giving a broader symbolic meaning to the monument.

"I support changing the meaning of the Bronze Soldier [as the monument is unofficially called in Estonia] that it would cover everything related to the Red Army - both the ouster of the Nazis and the sufferings that later befell the Estonian people," he said.

"Unfortunately, it happened so that for the Estonian people in 1994 one criminal regime was replaced by another," Ilves said.

The future of the monument has caused a split in Estonian society. While the Russian-speaking part wants it preserved, Estonian nationalists want it demolished or moved.

Three opposition parties and the ruling party have drafted two bills letting the authorities remove the monument on a legal basis.

Ilves voiced hope that people of all ethnic backgrounds in his country regard Estonia as their home.

"Therefore I cannot agree with Russia calling not only Russians but Ukrainians, Belarussians, Kazakhs and members of other ethnic groups living in Estonia its countrymen. They are our countrymen, of course," he said.

"Estonia is a homeland for everyone who lives here. It cannot be otherwise or people would leave Estonia. It would be bad for Estonia," he said.

Ilves said he is determined "to work during the next five years for all people in Estonia to feel at

home, for everyone to have work, health and love."

"The Estonian state has been making strong efforts to give everyone a chance to study Estonian, to get Estonian citizenship and be a full-fledged member of society. There is virtually no unemployment in Estonia and there are chances for fulfilling oneself," Ilves said.

He said that in Estonia the size of pensions or wages, the chances of receiving medical assistance don't depend on nationality. "Not a single nation is being oppressed or discriminated," he said.

Ilves added that he cannot imagine that the Estonian authorities would expel people from the country on ethnic grounds or visit schools to find out whether children of some specific ethnic minorities study there.