

Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, in Washington to discuss cyber security and Russia with U.S. President George W. Bush, spoke with RFE/RL correspondent Heather Maher about U.S.-Estonian relations and the upcoming Bush-Putin face-to-face in Maine.

What do you think Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin might discuss at their Maine summit?

Well, I'm sure they will discuss Kosovo. I'm sure they'll discuss Iran, I mean they're such self-evident issues that – but I mean other than that I don't think I can really speculate on what the outcome of the discussions will be.

Do you think the summit will result in any meaningful agreements?

Depends on what comes out of it. I mean, there are summits that produce nothing; there are summits that produce all kinds of agreements. I can't predict.

Do you think it's important that Bush and Putin meet now, given the animosity that has sprung up in recent months?

I'd say Estonia is a country in whose interest it is that Russia enjoys good relations with

democratic countries. It's obviously important. We want Russia to be able to get along with democratic countries.

Do you agree with comments made by Russian opposition politician Garry Kasparov that, by inviting Putin to the Bush family compound, Bush is sending a signal that the U.S. stands with Putin, and not with dissidents and reformers who criticize his record on media freedom and democratic opposition?

Not at all necessarily, I mean putting on for a second my sort of analytic cap – I was an analyst at Radio Free Europe – you could just as easily make the case saying by holding the meeting at Kennebunkport and not in Washington, you're considerably reducing the expectations for anything. I say that as an analyst, not as a president.

Do you think there has been, or will be, a 'ripple effect' in the CIS region as a result of the chill in U.S. - Russian relations?

No, I don't see that happening. I think that in fact the United States understands very well that its high support in Eastern Europe comes from its very strong defence of democracy. If there's any ripple, it's the rippling that we've seen for the past several years in which a wave crests over Latvia, then a wave crests over Georgia, right now a wave has crested over Estonia.

Who will it crest over in the autumn? I mean I don't want to persist these sort of – the wave metaphor, but I think that – I don't see the United States backing off on support for democracies. It's been a consistent position of the United States for decades. The support that we enjoyed from the United States under both democratic and republican administrations is always based on support for democracy in our part of the world.

What did you discuss during your June 25 meeting with U.S. President Bush?

Well, I mean I would say that we had, given that we spent actually two hours in intensive discussions, [that] we discussed just about everything. Clearly I mean the visa issue is something which is a broader issue for the countries that – this odd situation that has developed in which countries which are very strong allies of the United States, and they're involved in Iraq and then Afghanistan, their citizens have a more difficult time getting into the United States than countries that are not necessarily always the best allies of the United States.

And I think – this is not a conceptually difficult issue for anybody, I think that it's not only the countries such as my own or Poland or that – where this is an issue, but I think that the president clearly understands, the Congress clearly understands, and it's really a matter of management of a bill in Congress for how long until it's resolved.

It may be a short time or it may be a longer time, but there is no political will anywhere to block this situation. On cyber attacks, cyber security, well Estonia has – wants to set up a NATO center of excellence, and we are glad that President Bush expressed his support for this, including U.S. participation, and the next step is to get moving with it. I just want to point out here that it's not merely a matter of sort of technological solutions, it's really much broader, dealing with legislation, because of what – the kinds of things that Estonia faced then, that others have faced including the United States, in the attacks on the Department of Defence.

These are legal issues, I mean it's crime, and it's cross-border crime, which means that it's an international issue, and so that means it's something which we should be tackling in – among the NATO countries and among the members of the European Union. Because it is crime, that's all, but I mean it's – but my main point is that it's not simply a matter of coming up with clever computer solutions, it's also a matter of legislation in – among the allies.

But clearly we also discussed all kinds of other issues, developments in Europe, the constitutional treaty, the developments in Russia, what's going on in Georgia, Ukraine. I mean it was a very broad-ranging discussion.

What are some ways that the United States support Estonia?

Well I think the support for freedom and democracy is not exactly a worldwide phenomenon it's a – so that in fact we don't – I mean having common values on those issues – freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of association, free and fair elections – is not the dominant world view.

Estonia feels very strongly about these issues, the United States feels very strongly about these issues. The Estonians know that throughout the Cold War the U.S. was really the country leading the opposition to the occupation of Estonia, when many other countries, even countries today we consider allies, were perfectly happy to forget the issue, the United States was not, and so I think there is a very strong feeling among the Estonian public of positive feelings towards the U.S.

We also know that the U.S. was one of the main promoters of Estonian membership in NATO, again, this is not something we forget. And so – of course it looks odd, you have a country of 300 million, have a country of 1.4 million, and go wow, they're so big, they're so different, but I don't think in the world that is as – nearly as important as shared values and shared fundamental values.

How do you think the Iraq war is going?

Well it's difficult, I mean, we're there as well, we've been there since almost the beginning, and we're also in Afghanistan. We just lost two soldiers in Afghanistan this weekend, so we know what it's – we know that this is not – these are not easy issues.