

## **Estonian President and ex-MEP Toomas Ilves: new states "open to change"**

Not many MEPs go on to become Heads of State. But former Estonian MEP Toomas Hendrik Ilves did exactly that. After serving over three years in the European Parliament, he was elected the President of Estonia in September 2006. In this interview for the Parliament's website, President Ilves talks about what the new EU members faced when joining the EU and how in his opinion the "new" EU members are perhaps more open to change than the old ones.

### **As an MEP for over 3 years - how do you recall this time? Has it affected the way you act as President?**

I understand the EU much better now. I found the work of the European Parliament differs from the work of national parliaments, maybe because good working relations between colleagues in different political groups are considered more important there. In the latter, emotions can sometimes get high.

Many in the EP found it hard to get used to the new members. Their focus was often directed towards the Union's new neighbours. For example the question of Ukraine was not very important before enlargement because the EU did not have borders with it. Also, the states that had direct experiences with Russia have a different approach towards Russia than the ones whose experiences were more theoretical.

The countries which joined EU in 2004 had to go through extensive changes to achieve the transformation necessary for membership. They have maintained the readiness for change. Very often, the new EU members are open for bigger changes than the old ones.

**Do you feel Estonia has any special insights or advice to offer the EU on Russia?**

It is important to listen more to countries that have had practical experience with Russia. Many of the ideas I have heard were built on wishful thinking.

Reading the statements of Russian officials, it is clear that they are trying to decrease the influence of the new members. A recent study concluded that one of the main goals of Russia is to minimize the influence of the new members in the decision-making of the EU.

**Evaluating the 3 years Estonia and others have been members of the EU, are you satisfied with Estonia's relationship with fellow EU members?**

I am very satisfied but I would like to point out a general tendency. Talking about the new Member States, I would warn of making too wide generalisations - there are large differences in their views, approaches and attitudes. Some of them are very sceptical towards Europe and integration. Others, for example like Estonia, are some of the greatest supporter of the EU and want more integration. There are also big differences among the Baltic States. So, let us avoid generalisations.

**Estonia is often vaunted as a good example of how a small country can take advantage of an open economy and hi-tech industries. Are there wider lessons for the EU in the Estonian experience?**

Estonia has some positive experiences, like digitalised public services, that deserve to be explored by the others. We have gone far in reducing paper bureaucracy - it makes my life much easier to work with the computer. Our approach to facilitating computer use deserves to be examined by others.

In Estonia you can use your computer anywhere and you have free Wifi. In the worst case, you pay one Euro for 24 hours. In most of Europe you can pay up to 8 euros for 30 minutes.

When I moved in Tallinn from one apartment to another and asked for an Internet-service, the company told me that they could come on the very same day between 2-3pm and how did this time slot suit me? When I moved to Brussels, I had to wait 7 weeks from when I applied for the internet service!