

*Article by Gary Peach, European Voice*

One week after the April riots in Tallinn, while Estonia's embassy in Moscow was surrounded by an irate mob of pro-Kremlin youth groups and Estonian websites, both government and commercial, were under a massive cyber attack, the White House extended an invitation to President Toomas Hendrik Ilves.

Under the circumstances, it was the best possible gesture of public support that Washington could offer its diminutive Baltic ally. Better still was the timing. Ilves ended up in the Oval Office on 25 June, exactly one week before US President George W. Bush would host Vladimir Putin in Kennebunkport, Maine. The symbolism – Estonia first, Russia second – was not overlooked in the Baltic state. As Ilves said to Estonians, the invitation proved that membership of NATO and the EU was not just a series of empty obligations and formalities. "If we help others, then they will help us," Ilves said.

True enough, but it is difficult to imagine that the White House would have acted similarly had Ilves's predecessor, Arnold Rüütel, aged 78, still been president. Rüütel, a stodgy ex-communist who brought precious few ideas to the job, never had the erudition and aplomb that Ilves possesses in abundance.

Ilves and Bush first met in November 2006, just a month-and-a-half after Ilves (the name means 'lynx' in Estonian) was inaugurated, during the US president's stopover in Tallinn en route to the NATO summit in Riga, Latvia. Judging by all accounts, the man from Texas took an instant liking to the man who was a teenage immigrant to New Jersey.

So come April, when Estonia erupted in two nights of rioting that left one dead and more than a hundred wounded and caused extensive property damage, Bush remembered his new friend in the Baltics.

And how could he not? The loquacious Ilves, who, as well as English, also has a command of German and Spanish, always leaves a favourable impression. Listening to him is a treat. He wields a wonderful mix of intellectual insights and down-to-earth wisdom seldom found in public officials. Speaking on Ukraine's incessant woes, for instance, he is quick to point out that the crucial mistake was made in the early 1990s by the then president Leonid Kravchuk when the latter refused to co-operate with a diaspora of three million Ukrainians living in North America. By shutting the door on such potential expertise and investment, Kravchuk all but slammed the door to possible Western integration in his own face.

Ilves would know. A son of Estonian refugees, he was born in Stockholm in 1953. When he was thirteen his family moved to the US, where Toomas Hendrik (he always uses both first and middle names) later graduated from Columbia University (BA) and the University of Pennsylvania (MA) with degrees in psychology. In 1984 he packed his bags and left for Munich to work as an analyst with Radio Free Europe, and nine years later he returned stateside – only this time as ambassador to United States, Canada and Mexico for a newly independent Estonia. Of his own background, Ilves has said: "I speak English like an American, I think like a European."

Remarkably, as a member of the European Parliament from April 2004 to September 2006 he was tireless in using these two sides of his persona to bridge the transatlantic rift after the invasion of Iraq. He blasted Donald Rumsfeld's 'Old Europe' paradigm as a "disaster," and when German philosopher Jürgen Habermas and the late French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida published a joint declaration calling on Europeans to unite under a banner of anti-Americanism, Ilves wrote a lengthy, passionate rebuttal. Recalling that heady year of 2003, he said, "There was too much hysteria on both sides of the Atlantic."

Ilves eventually gave up his US citizenship to become Estonia's foreign minister in 1996. In more than a decade of domestic Estonian politics, he has stood steadfastly in the centre of the political spectrum as a member of the Moderates, a party that he helped create. Thanks to Ilves's friendship with Mart Laar, a former prime minister, Estonia was the first European nation to introduce the flat tax. In 2004 the Moderates became the Social Democratic Party, which Ilves left after becoming president.

A striking trait of Ilves is his versatility. He loves the rustic life and enjoys sporting a pair of overalls and tilling the soil at his farmstead in Arma, just a short walk from the Latvian-Estonian border. Film is another favorite pastime. Recently he even tried his talents at acting, taking a cameo role in '186 Kilometers' an Estonian picture about an out-of-luck actor who runs into sundry difficulties trying to make what should be a simple journey from Tallinn to Tartu, a

university town southeast of the capital.

In one of Ilves's charity drives, a few years ago he was asked to help raise money for disabled children by participating in a benefit concert. Ilves agreed and put on a small performance reminiscent of the Blues Brothers, going so far as to don the black fedora and sunglasses. During the European Parliament ballot in 2004, however, his political opponents from Res Publica, a right-wing startup, used this image of Ilves on its posters to scare the Estonian electorate into believing that the Chicago mob was threatening to overrun the Baltic state. The media campaign, which Ilves slammed as "vicious" and "slimy," backfired, and the Social Democrats won the most votes, walking away with three of Estonia's six seats in the EU legislature. The 'mobster' himself was appointed deputy chairman of the foreign affairs committee.

Two-and-a-half years later, Ilves, who actually prefers bow-ties, was further vindicated when Res Publica, which bitterly opposed a second presidential term for Rüütel, threw its support behind his candidacy.

For now, Ilves, who will celebrate his first year in office on 9 October, faces tremendous domestic challenges. After the Soviet memorial debacle in April, Estonian society is deeply split – one-quarter of the country's 1.3 million are ethnic Russians. Given the current labour deficit, keeping the Russians – many of whom are non-citizens without the right to vote in national elections – is a matter of economic urgency. Tellingly, Ilves's first domestic trip after becoming president was to Narva and Ida-Virumaa, towns in northeastern Estonia that are more than 90% ethnic Russian.

The appeal is also directed at Estonians. Demographics, after all, will be the country's single greatest challenge in the 21st century. While in New York in September, Ilves appealed to Estonians living in the US to think about returning to the Baltics. "We need every Estonian," he said.

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