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A New Year Interview with Toomas Hendrik Ilves on the expansion of Schengen, villages' movement and the offensive of fir bark beetle.

Twenty years ago, access to the Schengen club seemed about as impossible to Estonia as flying to the Moon. Now many people say that nothing special happened this week – Latvian border guards let us across the border even before Schengen.

I believe that the change is more evident to the readers of Maaleht than anyone else. In the last 16 years, the border has cut off much of the communication that has existed between Estonians and Latvians throughout most of our history.

When there is no bus connection between Valmiera and Viljandi, and when those living close to the border in Mulgimaa have to make a detour of 40 kilometres to come to the nearest checkpoint, neighbourly relations become somewhat scarce.

Naturally, a strict border is necessary to establish our sovereignty and to control our territories, but I guess that South Estonians tended to feel isolated, with Tallinn far away and nothing except the border behind them.

Now the whole picture is going to expand and I do presume that there will be a lot of lively communication of all kinds. Not just crossing the border to buy a beer at Aldari for a change.

The opportunities arising now are so remarkable that I would really like to urge people to use them. Let us keep in mind that in the past, South Estonia was part of Livonia, and hope that old ties between people, as well as economic relations, may be re-established. For instance, we could arrange joint Midsummer celebrations.

It is often asked what the EU policies mean for us locally – well, this time it is quite obvious that they have a local impact.

Lennart Meri always said that Estonia was short of time, that we had to hurry, and one of the goals he spoke of was the European Union and Schengen.

When we look around today, we can say that Lennart Meri was quite right. Had we not hurried then, we would be in really big trouble now.

Is there plenty of time now?

Time is never plentiful. Especially not for young people.

But our goals are no longer set to next month, next season, next year. Our goals are more long-standing now.

Not just in foreign politics, but also in domestic politics, I do wish that we would soon reach the

point when we can think farther into the future than the next elections. This presumes not only a deliberate approach, but also political maturity in a sense.

Is nothing threatening Estonia today?

The threats are there. Complacent slumber is never justified. I said this also in my Victory Day speech, which received comparatively little attention. All the purposeful work of twenty years, ever since the first brave demonstration in Hirvepark and the youth demonstration in Võru, needs to be carried on. The world has not become safe for Estonia.

Reading the works of cultural intelligentsia from 1937, 1938 or 1939 we can see that at the time, there was a lot of grumbling over the „silent era”, over Konstantin Päts, without realising the actual dangers. The horror that followed was so completely beyond imagination that no one could have imagined it. Not even the government, unfortunately.

The threats to Estonia today may be different, but they have not vanished. There are always those who would prefer an unstable Estonia to stable one.

When we look at the sequence of events that are incorrectly called the April events, then the fact that Estonia was IT-wise isolated from the rest of the world was much worse than some nights' rioting in the streets of Tallinn. The latter was a local phenomenon, while the former was a result of purposeful and resolute activity.

The celebrations of the 90th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia have been compared to 1938, when 20 years of independence was celebrated with great pomp and circumstance. Should we fear history repeating itself?

I would rather not go into this kind of numerology.

We have accomplished a lot and we have every reason to feel proud.

Anders Åslund, an American of Swedish origin, who is considered to be the world's top expert on transition economies, has in his new book compiled about two dozen earlier research papers on all post-Communist countries, about how they are doing. And his final conclusion is that the transformation was most successful in Estonia.

We could be proud of it. This is a fairly good result. We are the best among all the countries sharing the same fate.

Another thing – when we, beyond all expectations, were called to join the European Union in the first round of expansion, we were the last among that group of countries – Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, etc. Now, we have passed several of them.

In the past sixteen years, we have not been sitting idle and looking for scapegoats, as some others may have done. We have pulled ourselves up and set to work.

Estonian farmers can travel in other new member states and I am convinced that from such a tour, they would return saying: „We are doing very well! We are doing better!”

I suggest that Estonian farmers make such tours from time to time, to see how others are doing.

Can we say then that we have a fully functioning civic society here?

This depends on who we compare ourselves to. If we take countries where civic society is very strong, we still have a long way to go. Yet for instance the villages movement has been remarkably successful, a good example of how much citizens can accomplish on their own. I was at Kuhjaveere – a fabulous village! The villagers have actually tidied up everything, even the street signs. And there are many such places, all over Estonia.

And you see more of this spirit in the country. In the city, the temptation to clam up in your flat or house is much stronger.

This spirit is different from the Soviet mentality that we can observe all over the world: I'll do nothing if the state does not support me, or: I'm not starting anything, it will go to the dogs anyway.

The Defence League is a very important example here. It had a very important role in the year when we had problems. The Defence League is feared exactly because it is a voluntary organisation. Its members' readiness to protect is self-propelled, they are not a professional army, and they are not conscripts. The Soviet mentality does not understand voluntary action. The Defence League is a very good example of how civic society can address even more serious problems, e.g. state security.

The ideology that the government should do everything is a modern version of the proverb: „The manor can look after itself”.

People are apprehensive of an economic depression. How grave do you consider the danger to be?

There is no reason for unnecessary panic. All this talk about the frightening slowdown of economic growth as it is „only” 5-6 per cent – this is a bit funny, as all of the „old Europe” could only dream of such a high growth!

I think we need much less panicking.

Speculations about the devaluation of kroon are much more dangerous than the devaluation itself, because devaluation is not realistic, but if the alarmists keep up their speculations, it might become a self-fulfilling forecast. Think of all the panic victims a few weeks ago, who exchanged their kroons to Euros and back again.

It is clear, of course, that Estonian economy will not make as fast progress as it did for the last two years, but we must keep in mind that 11 per cent economic growth rate is not sustainable. If we continued at the same rate, our economy would be bigger than that of the US by the end of this century. So let us slow down a bit.

Economy is cyclical. World economy is currently coming to a cycle where things slow down. This does not mean depression, just slower development. For the past 16 years, Estonia has largely remained outside these cycles, as we were still a transition economy and had not yet come to the point where we would have become part of this common economic system.

We are used to getting more of everything all the time. And yet today, we have developed so far that economically, we are on the same level as Portugal.

In fact, we have done quite well. But as we are a people that always worry about something, we probably cannot experience much content.

So you recommend no sleepless nights?

Rationality is much better than sleepless nights. Caution in borrowing, for instance, can be recommended. A reasonable Estonian with common sense decides not to spend more than his income at such a time. Considering the interest rate, I do not recommend SMS-loans.

There is no need for panic, just some retrenchment while waiting for better times.

Here I would like to underline that speaking of agriculture; the time that so many have dreamt of has probably arrived. Arrived due to the coincidence of two things: the European Union agricultural aid and the grain prices on the world market. Such situation has never occurred before.

This year, we have come to a situation that makes it really lucrative to be a farmer in Estonia. If we work well, it can be a very profitable area of life.

And if we look at things more broadly, there are people – elsewhere in the world, not in Estonia – worrying about food crisis, about rising prices of grain. What will happen to food aid to Africa, when other countries will not be able to pay for it in the same quantities? There will simply not be enough grain, at least not on the food market. It is much more lucrative to grow low-quality maize for ethanol production than grain for food.

This is bad news if you live in Africa, but good news if you live in Estonia and are engaged in agriculture.

And how is Ilves the Mulgimaa farmer doing?

I am growing hay, or rather, my neighbour uses my fields to grow hay for his cattle. I am more

into forestry; although I am not cutting trees down but planting them and cleaning up the forest.

How often do you visit your farm?

Always when I have some free time. When I am not on a foreign visit, I spend my weekends there. In fact, it is nicer there than in the city.

I try to arrange my weekends so that I can travel in South Estonia. For instance, last Saturday I visited Penuja in connection with the opening of borders. And I called our rural municipality mayor and suggested that we, too, could organise some event in Abja rural municipality to celebrate such a major event.

Is there a bus connection to your farm, and is your post brought by a postman?

So far, I have received my post all right.

When did you last talk to a simple villager?

Who can we call simple? In fact, most people are complicated. I talk to my neighbours every now and then.

What do you talk about?

Last time, my neighbour and I had quite a long talk about the climate change. Not about how very warm it is, but about the fir bark beetle, which has, as I see it, become a major problem all over South Estonia.

I don't know how thoroughly this has been addressed in Estonian media, but in the international press, in connection with Sweden, it has been topical. Owing to climate warming, the bark beetle is already able to reproduce twice a year, not once, as it used to.

In Sweden, Estonia and Latvia, you can see dead fir-trees in many forest areas. I lost four big fir-trees last year, and a fortnight ago I found two more fir-trees in my forest, destroyed by the bark beetle. It is even worse for my neighbour; he lost several dozens of trees, in a small area.

Would your neighbours be interested in, let's say, discussing the issue of the Legal Chancellor?

I believe that many people are interested in the issue of the Legal Chancellor.

Experience tells me that people have a more mature way of observing what is going on in Estonia. They discuss things much less on the tabloid level than perhaps ten years ago. And much less in the style: Oh, what can you expect, they are all like that!

People are really well-informed, and ever more conscious of their role as citizens. That is good.

Nor is the climate change an issue just for Eesti Loodus or a few climate conferences; many people are worried, they follow and discuss the developments.

By the way, how much space has Maaleht given to the bark-beetle topic?

I cannot reply off the cuff, I must check. But still, what will become of the Legal Chancellor?

The President will propose another candidate. Estonia shall have a Legal Chancellor.

It is quite obvious that some political parties wish to have members of their own party in all important official positions.

Our Constitution states that the Legal Chancellor candidate is proposed by the President. I do not favour any covert distortions of the Constitutions a la „the President may propose a candidate, but it should be our candidate.”

If this is the case, the Constitution should be altered.

Which do you estimate will be the keywords of 2008 in the world?

Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, oil price, climate, presidential elections in the USA.

What is your New Year wish to the readers of Maaleht?

I wish them a peaceful – I repeat – a peaceful New Year.

We must make use of the year of the 90th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia to see how long way we have come, and where we would be without the Republic of Estonia.