

Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves is quick to point out he holds a strictly ceremonial post — a technically correct but modest portrayal of the ex-foreign minister's stature. Last year, *The Economist* praised the American-educated president, who has been in and out of Georgia for more than a decade, as a "suave, savvy and cynical" political heavyweight ready to dispense the West's more frank advice to Mikheil Saakashvili.

The Messenger spoke with the famously bow tie-sporting President Ilves shortly before he met with acting parliamentary speaker Nino Burjanadze and opposition leaders. Later that day, he would declare that Estonia is a "firm, but demanding" friend for Georgia.

But before the public statements, Estonia's head of state shared cautionary parables of political rancor, suggestions on what makes a strong democracy and why some would love to see Georgia falter and fall.

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: Estonia sees Georgia as, unfortunately, the only country that has really managed to do a major transformation out of being a Soviet country. Others, some are trying, most are not. We like countries that try.

If you look in the [Russian] newspaper *Gazeta*, there's an interview with the new head of the Levada polling company, Mr. [Lev] Gudkov. And he said in this interview, 'Russia needs enemies. This is how we become great.' Who are Russia's enemies? He says, 'Well, number one is Estonia. 60 percent think Estonia is the enemy. Number two is Georgia. 45 percent think Georgia is the enemy. Number three is Latvia, number four is the United States.'

Well, I'll say it's lonely at the top... We like countries that succeed in being a democracy. And that's what I think it comes down to, is which are the countries that are under attack? It's the countries that are making [strides] towards genuine democracy, transparency, dealing with corruption. And they're the ones that are disliked. And we know what it's like to be the victim, the object of that kind of dislike. And so when there's a country that's doing something, we like that country and we try to help that country.

If Georgia weren't moving toward democracy, we wouldn't be here.

TM: The Baltics were among the first to hail the outcome of the January 5 presidential election. Given the controversy and initial uncertainty over the results, was it too soon for Tallinn to issue its statement on January 7?

Estonia didn't say anything until the initial statement...by ODHIR had been made.

You needed something fast... You don't want your entire election discredited by people who are working for intelligence agencies. In other countries, I don't mean here.

Is the relationship between Estonia and Georgia fundamentally about countering Russia?

No, no, no. The first move actually from Estonia was when I was foreign minister in the late 90s, when I came here. And Irakli Menagarishvili was the prime minister, and it was very clear to us that Georgia was trying to do something that we had also done. When someone else is trying to do what you're doing...we think you ought to help them.

What forms does that help come in?

The private sector is interested in Georgia because it's practically the only place of the former Soviet Union where you can expect to do business the way you do in the West, that is, transparently and openly. The NGOs are here for the same reason, they think it's an interesting place.

Are Estonians less confident in Georgia after the crisis of the last few months? Are businesses concerned about their investments?

We were concerned, obviously, about what was going on here on November 7. It's not a secret, a lot of countries looked with dismay and with concern about what was happening here.

Not to beat around the bush—you know what really bothers all of us, everywhere? All the people who are the FoGs? The Friends of Georgia? No problem with the opposition, people being voted out of office, that's all great. I've been opposition twice... Clearly it's better to be in government than out of government, but on the other hand none of us in Estonia, no one who was taken seriously in Estonia, ever questioned the legitimacy of the constitution and the constitutional order. Or ever said anything about having an unconstitutional change of power. And that's what was worrying to me.

If you're going to have an extraconstitutional change of power, then, basically, you're lost. You're not going to get any help. Then you're just going to slide back into, 'Oh, you're one of them.' And Georgia has really in the last four years moved way up in everyone's estimation. And an extraconstitutional change of power, of whatever means, would move it back to, 'Yeah, it's one of them.' And we don't want Georgia to be seen as 'one of them.'"

Was there any hesitancy to work with the Saakashvili administration after it came to

power through extraconstitutional means?

There wasn't, just because [the Shevardnadze administration] was 'them.' You were one of 'them' already. We were kind of weird in that we actually saw a little hope here that we didn't see elsewhere, because we knew people here, and you would talk to people in Georgia and there was something here. People's ideas, and their thinking and what they said...it looked liked there's hope.

We were having these big trans-Atlantic conference phone calls: 'Whadda we do?!'

Because we want Georgia to succeed. All of us who care about Georgia know—there's a lot of people who want Georgia to fail.

You see the new ideology, up north for you, in the east for us: 'democracy doesn't work in our country, because we have a different kind of democracy, because we're a different kind of country.' We tend to believe that democracy has the same ground rules, principles, everywhere, and there's not like a European democracy and then such a thing as an Asian democracy, and you think they're different. We don't believe in that.

Rule of law, freedom of speech, freedom of the media, freedom of association are universal principles. If Georgia fails, then it's another argument in favor of those who say that kind of democracy is genuinely a specific thing to the West. And the Baltic countries are this bizarre exception, but in general if you lived in the Soviet Union, then 'we have our own sovereign democratic route.' Georgia's proving that's not true. So Georgia's more important than whoever is the second country that takes major steps towards reform. The first one is the important one.

Some opposition leaders have proposed scrapping Georgia's presidential system in favor of a parliamentary system. In general, how have parliamentary systems fared?

In 1989, when I was working at Radio Free Europe, I remember reading in some political science journal a study done by several academics...studying presidential versus parliamentary systems in Latin America and Asia. And they concluded at that time that basically, if you want to be a democracy, you need a parliamentary system.

I would say that basically the United States is really the only country with a strong presidential system that has managed to remain a democracy, and that's because in the United States they went from 1783 to 1932, about 150 years, with a weak president.

Otherwise, in general, a strongly presidential system has not had a good track record. It's possible. France, the new Poland, have presidential systems. And Georgia. But in general, we [democratic nations] all have parliamentary systems. Maybe it's a lack of faith, but basically we all fear that Lord Acton is right. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Too much power in the hands of one of the three Montesquieu branches—I mean, the temptations are there.

A parliamentary system is better for democracy. Now, again, each country makes its own decision. If the decision is made democratically, who are we to say anything?

We chose a parliamentary system, and we're glad we did.

You've called for a reassessment of the peacekeeping format in breakaway South Ossetia and Abkhazia. What would you like to see replace the Russian-led CIS forces there?

Whatever Estonia wants is not what ends up happening. Let's face it, we're 1.3 million, it's not a lot. We're like a suburb for most capitals. But we do think that the situation—it's unnatural. You don't have a neighboring country send its troops in as 'peacekeepers.' We don't think that's very normal. It's not something that anyone should take seriously, and we don't like the fact that it gets any kind of cognizance from the European Union.

We just don't think it's legit, frankly.

What kind of future cooperation can we expect between Georgia and Estonia?

We take Georgians and put them into our Baltic Defense College, which is a NATO institution, and we have Georgians study there because we think that's a good idea. And we send people here to work on institution building; and then people come to Georgia because they like Georgia and they work on NGOs.

It seems that we're going to send the head of our electoral commission here [for the spring parliamentary elections]. It's one of the things we thought you need help on, is the vote counting. Especially when it comes to the parliamentary elections and the complicated system you have here. Whatever the result, you do not need five days or six days of incomplete results.

[Our ombudsman is] the interface between the common man and the big bad government... We want to send him here. You have an ombudsman here. In Estonia, the institution has a strong role. People think that if the state has wronged them, then they can turn to the ombudsman and he can deal with their concerns.

You don't really have a classical musical station. What I heard from [First Lady Sandra Roelofs] is 'yeah, it's a problem,' so I brought a whole bunch of Estonian classical composers, CDs.

Estonia actually has a 24-hour classical music station on the internet, it plays a lot of avant garde 20th century music. We're going to try and send the person who does that to do something.

Those are the kind of things we do.

While you're here, you'll be meeting with acting speaker of parliament Nino Burjanadze, and then opposition leaders. Do you have a message for them?

I've known Nino Burjanadze for years and years. She's very impressive. I know from Estonia that we often don't appreciate the good people we have, and I'll say that now about Nino. She's someone that's very impressive. For a woman to be in that position and to have that kind of authority in a post-Soviet, macho, troglodyte world—she's a real asset for Georgia.

One message [to send to the opposition], from my own experience: it's terrible being out of power. You know, you're a minister, then you're back in parliament and you're nothing.

But you also know that, 'well, we don't like the guys in power right now, and this and this are wrong with them, but we're still following the constitution.'

[In Estonia] we're all playing chess. No one's coming and tipping over the board. We're playing chess, and he accepts this is how the knight moves, and how the rook moves, and we play chess. If you change the constitutional order or extraconstitutionally change political power, you're back to square one.

The point is, use the elections.

Provided they are fair?

By most standards, [the January 5 election was] pretty fair. Of course, there are problems, irregularities... There were problems with hanging chads in [Florida's] Dade County [in 2000], right? I mean, in fact, the current president of the United States won in an election where...he won with the electoral votes and the popular vote, he lost. People don't go and say, 'Those were illegitimate elections.' They don't. It's accepted those were legitimate elections, because that was the constitutional order. There were some bizarre anomalies that come out of that, but that's the way it is.

What will you tell Burjanadze about Estonia's support for Georgia's NATO aspirations?

Estonia supports giving the Membership Action Plan to Georgia, as do a number of other countries. It's not clear whether that's going to happen. November 7th did a lot of damage. The whole thing did a lot of damage to Georgia's reputation. It's not fatal, but I'd say that they're hit.

The Membership Action Plan was going to be a difficult thing to push through on the part of Georgia's friends anyway—it's just much more difficult to push it through [now]. But what am I going to tell Nino? She's smart, she already knows this. I'm not going to give her any news.

The Saakashvili administration made an explicit effort to copy Estonia's successful economic reforms—former Estonian prime minister Mart Laar is an economic advisor to Saakashvili. Observers say one of the root causes of the November anti-government demonstrations is a persistent poverty in Georgia. Did Estonia face the same rocky start to its reforms?

Absolutely.

First of all, no government managed the entire four years. They would fall.

One reason I was always really [annoyed] at Western journalists, is because they'd say, 'Once again in an Eastern European country the government was voted out of office. They're not stable because they don't have the same people being voted back in.' My response is, any place where someone gets voted back in is a sure loser, because any reforms are going to make you unpopular.

Estonia started out with the same GDP per capita as Georgia in 1991... And the very radical reforms that were undertaken, mainly undertaken by Mart Laar—he wasn't the only one but he personified [the reforms]—meant he got voted out. He was the demon of Estonian society: 'He ruined Estonian agriculture, he has ruined our entire country.'

I would say that, looking at countries...with so-called stability, they kept the same guys in power all the time. Well why were they in power all the time? Because they didn't do anything, so no one is angry at them.

So, it's good to have electoral change.

I was part of the people doing the radical reforms, but then you're out. And then you're sort of sitting there. [Now] people are benefiting from the economic reforms of 15 years before. But unfortunately these benefits kick in a lot more slowly than the immediate results, the negative side. The positive side of economic reforms you'll see in five years, you'll see in seven years, you'll see in ten years.

If you're in power, you might as well recognize that if you do a good thing, the benefits will be realized by the opposition when they're in power. That's just part of it.

My personal thing was getting Estonia into the European Union. And I worked 18-hour days, seven days a week, and when Estonia got into the EU, I was a little opposition parliamentarian,

and I didn't even get invited to the ceremony. A lot of people thought that was kind of nasty and stupid, but nonetheless I was not invited to the ceremony.

But Estonia's in, right?

Questions and responses have been edited for length and clarity.