

President Toomas Hendrik Ilves talks about relations with both, Estonia's Eastern and Western neighbours and how he hopes his country can play an even larger role in Europe.

Estonian President says Europe is Estonia's priority, not Russia

The Estonian parliament elected Toomas Hendrik Ilves as their new president two months ago. The Swedish-born, American-educated Ilves has been an ardent supporter of EU and NATO integration. As supreme military commander, he is also in charge of Estonia's armed forces. Around 50 soldiers are in Iraq and more than 100 are in Afghanistan. Toomas Hendrik Ilves talks about relations with both his eastern and western neighbours and how he hopes his country can play an even larger role in Europe.

EuroNews question: "On November the 28th, President George Bush will be the first U.S. president in office to visit Estonia. His visit comes at a time when his popularity ratings at home are at an all-time low, mainly due to the war in Iraq. Your country has sent troops to Iraq as part of the "Coalition of the Willing". As supreme military commander, do you now have any regrets this decision?"

President Toomas Hendrik Ilves: "We may have regrets about the course of the war but we are a country that would have so wanted to have democracies of the world come to our assistance under Soviet despotism, or for that matter, under Nazi despotism, I mean we were invaded by both. In principle, Estonia has the right to be there. We may have, and do have, differences of opinion on how to conduct the operation. We are dismayed to find that the threats we were told were there, were not there. But nonetheless the decision was the right one to take."

EuroNews: "Just that, for example, two Estonian soldiers have died in combat. Some will say that sending troops to Iraq is the price to pay for NATO membership for Baltic countries. Do you think there should be a price at all to pay?"

President Toomas Hendrik Ilves: "Iraq is not a NATO mission, it's not a price to pay. There are moral obligations certainly to do things if you're a democracy. The decision to send troops to Iraq, and we are in operations elsewhere, are the decisions of a sovereign state and not because we have to pay anything to anyone."

EuroNews: "What for you is more important for your country: EU membership or NATO membership?"

President Toomas Hendrik Ilves: "You have to understand, they do very different things. In the case of NATO membership, I would liken it to buying a suit of armour. You have to pay two percent of your income to buy the suit and keep it and you have to get yourself into shape so you fit into the suit of armour. Joining the European Union, on the other hand, meant replacing every single bone in your body, step by step. I mean you buy the suit of armour, I mean you have to get in shape, but joining the European Union, first you go in and have one bone taken out and replaced and then you have to do the next bone. And then you have a completely different...the basis of your entire being, your existence, your society has a completely new structure."

EuroNews: "Five years ago, a NATO enlargement expert said that NATO expansion was the Titanic of American foreign policy and the iceberg on which it would founder would be Baltic membership. Today do you feel that your country and your Baltic neighbours have proven this prophecy wrong?"

President Toomas Hendrik Ilves: "Clearly the case of Estonia, its participation in Afghanistan for example, shows that this is not in anyway an iceberg, though we do keep cool. Again it comes back again, that quote is precisely ... is a western interpretation but really the same message that democracy, a secure democracy on the border of Russia will be perceived as a security threat. And I think that is just an odd way of looking at the world."

EuroNews: "But more along those lines, you said you would like to improve relations between your two countries. How do you convince Moscow that having a secure..."

President Toomas Hendrik Ilves: "I'll tell you, it's not that important. I am a European. I think about European issues. I don't think about Russian issues. Europe as a concept has been the Holy Grail of the Estonian ... (people) ... ever since the first occupation of Estonia in 1940: to get back to Europe, being cut off of Europe by Soviet occupation is what brought us to the state we were in. It's what kept us from becoming a gleaming, wealthy country like Finland which was basically at the same level of development as Estonia in 1940. We think about Europe. Reporters are always concerned about what we think of Russia but that's not our priority. Our priority is our own country, and our priority is Europe."

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