

**ABOARD UTAIR FLIGHT 354 OVER RUSSIA:** The Estonian president, responding to Moscow's claim that he called for the breakup of Russia, dismissed the charge as a misinterpretation of his words.

Toomas Hendrik Ilves had said in a lyrical speech to the World Congress of Finno-Ugric Peoples in Siberia that the linguistic group shared European and democratic values — and he appeared to imply that Russia did not.

Ilves on Sunday rejected the charge by Konstantin Kosachyov, chairman of the foreign affairs committee of Russia's lower house of parliament, that he was making a veiled appeal for Finno-Ugric independence.

"To read into the speech anything requires a hyperactive and distorted imagination," Ilves said in an interview with The Associated Press.

The Finno-Ugric people include speakers of Finnish, Hungarian, Estonian and related languages.

Kosachyov said Saturday that Ilves had stirred separatist sentiments in his address the same day at the congress, which took place in the Siberian oil town of Khanty-Mansiisk.

"Albeit in a very disguised way, I could feel a call to the Finno-Ugric peoples of Russia to think about their own self-determination," Kosachyov said in comments carried by the state news agency Itar-Tass.

In his speech, Ilves appeared to suggest that only by being part of Europe could Finno-Ugric minorities have their rights protected.

"The European Union umbrella has given the Estonian, Finnish and Hungarian languages new guarantees they have never before possessed in their history," he said in his speech. "We might thus ask: How can we put all Finno-Ugric languages under European Union protection to ensure their preservation and development?"

But Ilves said his comments were not intended to suggest that Russia's Finno-Ugric people needed independence.

"We clearly have an interest in the fate of small nations. That's why I came here — we care," the Estonian president said in his native English language. Ilves was born in Sweden to parents who fled Estonia, grew up in the United States and graduated from Columbia University in New York City.

Russia and Estonia are locked in a bitter row over the role of the Red Army in World War II. Russia believes the Soviets liberated Europe, while the Estonians consider the Soviets occupiers.

Estonia removed a monument to the Red Army from the center of its capital, Tallinn, last year, causing outrage in Moscow.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said Friday that some Baltic nations were glorifying Naziism and rewriting history.

Ilves on Sunday denied the charge.

He said there were many events in Soviet history "that would require shame and penance," such as Soviet deportations of Baltic peoples to gulag camps during and after World War II.

But Russia refuses to face up to those events, Ilves said.

"There is an unfathomable unwillingness to come to terms with those facts," he said. "Is it glorifying Nazism to talk about Soviet crimes?"

Kosachyov also had complained Saturday about the treatment of Russians in Estonia in a speech at the Khanty-Mansiisk congress. After those remarks, Ilves and the other Estonian delegates walked out of the conference hall in protest.

Despite the tensions, Ilves said a Saturday meeting with Medvedev — the first between leaders of the two former Soviet nations in 14 years — had been "friendly, open, constructive and forward-looking."

Relations were "on the threshold of a new era," Ilves said.

Medvedev concluded an EU-Russia summit in Khanty-Mansiisk on Friday by saying the former Soviet Baltic states had made heroes of the Nazis by denigrating the role of the Red Army in World War II.

Attempts to desecrate "the good name of soldier-liberators were unacceptable," Medvedev said.

EU officials took a different view.

"The EU is completely against all kinds of totalitarianism," European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso said. "We reject totalitarianism, including Soviet totalitarianism."

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