

David Williamson, Western Mail

TINY democracies can thrive if they prize the minds of men and women as one of the greatest national resources, the president of Estonia declared during his visit to Wales yesterday.

Sitting in the First Minister's office, Toomas Hendrik Ilves said: "If there's something that does work, it's that if you're a small nation, every mind counts. Every person who can think counts."

Estonia – home to ground-breaking internet communications Skype – takes pride in bringing new technology into the heart of everyday life.

President Ilves said: "Why we have taken such a strong, hard IT-approach is we want to liberate our brains from doing things that machines can do."

He added: "There only are 1.4 million of us. You can't increase the real size of your population... but what you can do is increase the functional size."

He is proud Estonians can pay at parking meters using mobile phones, and – providing inflation is brought down – looks forward to his country's entry into the Euro in 2011.

President Ilves admits that entry into the EU and Nato has required major changes, including the imposition of tariffs and loss of control over interest rates.

However, such losses of autonomy are against the background of decades of Soviet rule.

Estonia gained independence in 1991 and watched the Russian military action in Georgia during the summer with horror.

President Ilves believes Europe stands in stark contrast with growing authoritarianism in Russia.

He said: "Russia's democratisation, I think, has been in trouble for a while.

"I mean in terms of freedom of speech, freedom of expression, the rule of law, corruption, authoritarian responses to opposition, the inability of opposition forces to get on the media – the big question for Europe is, 'What's more important? Making money or standing by our values?'"

A particular concern is the defence of international law.

He said: "Smaller countries need the rule of international law much more than big ones. As a small nation our existence depends far more on law than it does on power.

"If you take the Thucydides principle, the strong do what they can and the weak do what they must.

"Well, we've been in a situation of doing what we must too much."

Estonians, he said, stood in "solidarity with the Georgians".

President Ilves, a psychology graduate, was on the frontline of the propaganda battles of the Cold War when he joined Radio Free Europe in Munich in 1984.

His strong American accent reflects years spent in US universities and as an ambassador to the superpower.

He does not believe the collapse of Icelandic banks has doomed the concept of small, "clever" countries.

He said: "In terms of small countries, it's basically how you do things. The financial sector in Estonia represents 4% of GDP.

"The financial sector in Iceland represented 25% of GDP."

Boasting of Estonia's economic progress, he said: "We started out with a GDP of about \$800 a year, and the last we measured was \$21,600 (*per capita at PPP), which is basically the same as Portugal – that's since independence to 2006."

He added: "We're less corrupt than half of the EU. We had to impose tariffs to join the EU."

Link to the original article on [WalesOnline website](#) .