

President Toomas Hendrik Ilves returned to Estonia after the country had been freed from Soviet rule. His country, which acceded to the European Union in 2004, is now awaiting accession to the euro zone. When the Berlin Wall fell on 9th November 1989, Mr. Toomas Hendrik Ilves was working as the Head of the Editor's Office of Radio Free Europe. For him, "it was not yet the right time to return as Estonia was still under the Soviet regime", recalls the head of state who has spent the majority of his life on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. However, "it has definitely been the best thing that has ever happened to me!" He became president in 2006.

Sabine Verhest

Has the European Union met the hopes of Estonians since being liberated from the Soviet regime? The pre-accession negotiations were long...

We were impatient. However, today I would say that the requirement for meeting the strict European Union regulations was the most important. Our euro-scepticism, to tell the truth, was almost non-existent, compared to our southern neighbours. I do believe that this can be explained by the fact that Estonians have always been more realistic; they have never indulged in any exorbitant hopes. I also believe that they see the European Union as an opportunity to make their country more influential.

The IMF decided recently that Estonia would be ready to adopt the euro in 2011. How do you feel about such a schedule?

Estonia has always expected an objective assessment of its achievements. Large countries may ignore the rules, as we can see in the case of the Stability and Growth Pact. Rules are more important for a small country – you know you will be admitted when you play by the rules. It is nice when a political ruling is made in your favour; however, when this is not true and the judgement is not based on rules, a small country has no capacity to protest. There is a good chance that we will adopt the euro but it depends on our budget deficit, which will not exceed 3% as a general rule.

The crisis has hit Romania, Hungary and Latvia with full force. How do you explain the fact that Estonia has survived the crisis somewhat better?

First of all, we have assigned a significant amount of capital, 10% of our gross domestic product, into stabilisation reserves since 2000. Should we face an unexpected demand for money, we have it. Next – we can say that we basically lack public debt. Therefore, we do not have these two problems, but we have a number of others: the real estate bubble, that has drawn back now, the immense debt load of the private sector and, of course, falling demand in export markets. We have one of the largest export rates per total gross domestic product and a very small domestic market.

Would your economic situation have been better if you had already adopted the euro?

Yes, most definitely. Many of our problems are attributable to foreign investments, withdrawn because of fear of devaluation. Slovakia is in the euro zone and the effect of the recession has been minor there.

To which extent should the European Union expand? Should Ukraine, one of the former republics of the Soviet Union, like Estonia, also become a member state?

Objective criteria, including the one concerning the level of corruption, must be met for that purpose. The fact that you have written legislation and you have adopted all the laws of the European Union does not really matter if the laws are not effective. Ukraine has a huge problem with corruption; this is no secret. And this is not really encouraging.

Bulgaria and Romania have the same problem; however, they became the EU Member States...

This is one of the reasons why expansion is treated with certain scepticism.

Do you support Turkey's accession?

Yes. We don't see religion as an issue. Certain people would like to draw a cultural line, but to which religion should we link ourselves? Orthodoxy? Protestantism? The European Union is a secular project and religious differences have no importance whatsoever.

There has been lots of discussion of Herman Van Rompuy possibly becoming the

President-in-Office of the Council? How do you feel about this?

No one has been officially nominated as a candidate. No one has had the courage to say "I'm running for the position", so what do you want me to say?

Riga has suggested the candidacy of Ms Vaira-Vike Freiberga...

A former chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee also made a proposal to me. The selection of the president of the European Union is, of course, a complex process, and a number of qualified candidates have been mooted. One hundred million people live in the Central and Eastern European countries, but no candidates from this region have been given serious consideration. I can see four executive positions: President of the Commission, President-in-Office of the Council, High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and the Secretary General of NATO. The latter is not in the same organisation but is still a part of the ensemble. It really amuses me to see how many things have changed since the fall of the Berlin Wall – Radek Sikorski's candidacy for the position of the Secretary General of NATO was opposed with the argument that Russia would not approve. If this is an argument to be taken seriously, the world has really changed!

Original interview in French on the webpage of the Belgian newspaper [La Libre](#) .