

"Our objectives can be achieved by considering the real situation and acting appropriately with Estonia's national interests in mind, not dreams," says the President of Estonia, Mr. Toomas Hendrik Ilves.

Kärt Anvelt

What exactly do you consider to be most important for Estonia – on a global scale – when you think of the year 2010?

For Estonia, the most important goal would be a strong Europe and a unified European Union. This involves the active approach of all the EU Member States – regardless of their size and the length of their EU membership – and visibility in solving the problems, which are of concern for Europe as whole.

Hopefully, the member states will be able to answer how the Lisbon Treaty, which came into force recently, will be implemented in practice. How will Estonia find itself a valuable position while contributing to the European Union? Each member state is currently trying to determine and understand how the treaty will affect current practices. As often happens with any treaties of a constitutional nature, the practice will be more important here than various provisions, leaving space for diversified interpretation.

Secondly, I do hope that the security situation in Afghanistan will improve considerably. The decision adopted by the United States of America and several other allies – to send extra forces to Afghanistan – will definitely give some hope. And let us remind ourselves that this is exactly how it happened in Iraq. NATO's success in this operation and the security of the members of the Estonian Defence Forces there depends on improved security in both Afghanistan and

Pakistan.

Should the *Riigikogu* extend the mandate given to our Defence Forces in Afghanistan once the current one expires, or have Estonia and our soldiers done enough?

If NATO and its allies would leave Afghanistan now, and suspend the operation that began back in 2001, this would amount to a surrender, declaring futile and useless the efforts and sacrifices made by the alliance over the past decade.

I am not saying here that it is only by military means that success will be achieved in Afghanistan – definitely not; however, without improving the security situation – considerably and as soon as possible – reconstruction of that state cannot be successful. If the NATO forces were now to leave Afghanistan to its own devices, the consequences would be grave for the security of many countries and regions; and the credibility of NATO would also suffer a serious blow.

In today's world, there are no countries that can simply assume their security starts from their very doorstep. Any country that wishes to wipe its hands of global issues and hide in the corner may suddenly discover itself facing even more serious problems. We have seen this in Europe.

And this is why I believe that the Afghan mission of the Estonian Defence Forces should be extended.

Could this also be treated as a give-and-take issue? We must offer security to enjoy it ourselves?

How else could it be? However, to understand the Afghan problem, we also need to understand that for NATO to leave Afghanistan while the Afghan army and police are still incapable of ensuring security in their homeland would result in a rapid spreading of violence and terrorism – and not just in Afghanistan.

But also in Pakistan, which is a country with nuclear weapons. Violence and extremism would also spread to many countries, such as Central Asia and beyond. And this would affect us much faster than we can imagine right now.

Such a world definitely does not serve Estonia's interests. Therefore, we must admit that the operation in Afghanistan – both in its military and civil, reconstruction aspects – represents an operation that will also ensure Estonia's security.

What exactly do we gain from the Baltic Sea Strategy, which you initiated yourself?

This will help us to establish policies that are stronger and more open than before in this region of the European Union, which has now become the internal sea of the EU, our new Mare Nostrum. The Baltic Sea Strategy – both as a concept and as official European Union policy – has always been initiated by the desire to use, develop and expand as much as possible all the four freedoms of the EU, i.e., the free movement of people, labour, capital and services within the region.

Only some years ago, we were concerned that a part of Europe wanted to move faster and that this would result in a so-called "two-speed Europe". But as it turned out, the "old members" of the EU cannot be characterised as willing to enhance integration. The approach taken by some in relation to the Services Directive demonstrated instead that increasing integration, which is also beneficial for the Estonian economy, is supported by other countries instead, mostly located around the Baltic Sea. Estonia's most important economic and co-operation partners are also located here; therefore, closer and more efficient regional co-operation definitely does serve our interests.

Naturally, here we should also mention another objective: improving the environment of the Baltic Sea, as, unfortunately, this is regarded as one of the most heavily polluted seas in the world. Therefore, everything that takes place in the Baltic Sea region will directly affect the quality of our lives. What other priority could we have?

If we are to assume that the Lisbon Treaty will contribute to a stronger European Union foreign policy than ever, something that you have repeatedly stated, then how can the voice of smaller countries not only be heard, but also have some influence?

Co-operation will bring success. I don't mean small countries co-operating with each other, but the co-operation between all countries that sharing interests common with Estonia.

An effective understanding of our own desires and the concerns of other countries is also one of the foundations of success. Therefore, we must be equally committed to the policies of the European Union – regardless of whether we are discussing energy or the issue of refugees. It is not just Estonian problems that are also Europe's problems. If we were to forget this, we should not be surprised to find ourselves in a situation where no one will care about Estonia's troubles.

We can only affect the common foreign policies of the European Union by adopting an active approach ourselves and by dispatching competent officials who are capable of taking the initiative in the positions available in the various institutions of the European Union, by promoting work in such institutions as a logical part of a successful career.

Last year You said, in one of your speeches, that “only by acting together as the “new members” will we be able to delete the distinguishing line that has remained until today.” Do you believe this can be really done?

Indeed, I do. Definitely, this is one of the most serious problems and we cannot expect that only time will help to solve it promptly. To meet this goal, we need to overcome not only the consequences of the development that split Europe apart for fifty years, but also other, much older and even bigger differences, the roots of which reach deep into the history of Europe.

Now, as we complete our sixth year as a member of the European Union, we are still experiencing the same attitude – as if the new member states were somehow inadequate. Yes, there are some countries among the new member states that have serious internal problems and are unable to cope with corruption or social issues. However, the “old” member states have their own problems too and, to tell the truth, corruption and social tensions are not unknown issues there either.

It is also quite wrong to say that the so-called “old” member states have longer democratic traditions, which go far back in history to some ancient time before the communist regime took over Eastern Europe. In fact, there are very few European countries that can boast to have had democratic experiences over a number of centuries. We also keep forgetting what Norman Davis will never tire of repeating: one of the very first constitutional republics in Europe was Rzeczpospolita, which was born in Poland.

This memory lapse or even ignorance can be measured, as the representatives of the “new” member states attempt to find their way among the top decision makers and are still stuck at a red light.

I will now repeat two questions, which I also raised this winter, in the European College in Warsaw.

At the moment, the European Union maintains 158 foreign representations, i.e. EU embassies. How many of these 158 embassies in the sixth year of our EU membership are headed by someone from among the 75 million new members? Just one.

Secondly, there are forty-one Directorates General in the European Commission; they represent the "bureaucracy", which largely control the European Union. How many of these directorates in the sixth year of our EU membership are headed by someone from among the 75 million new members? The answer is zero.

These two figures – zero and one – convey the impression of 21st century Europe being divided, once again, into spheres of influence. The new and the old. But who would be the dividers now? Would it really be the European Union as the moral cadre of Europe?

We must focus, with determination, on issues that are important for Estonia, particularly, and for the whole of Europe to give a negative answer to the last question. The very principles of the European Union as an association rule out diminishing or ignoring someone for being "small" or "haunted by their history".

How would you judge the role of the President of Estonia in foreign policies? Has it been diminished? If yes, could you please elaborate?

The president is one of the representatives of state power who has the authority to represent Estonia in interstate relations. Nothing has changed here. The head of state will participate in designing and implementing Estonia's foreign policies by participating in bilateral meetings, giving speeches, and interviews.

It is true that the role of the government and, above all, the prime minister has become more important since Estonia became a member of the European Union and NATO, as he is the one who represents Estonia at the summits of these organisations. Such a task division is appropriate and reasonable, considering the constitutional organisation of Estonia.

The speeches of the President have not always found support in Estonia...

As one reads the material that is printed in our media, one may obtain the impression that our foreign policies, in a way, consist of two components, which cannot be harmonised – “foreign” and “policies”. The first means everything happening somewhere else and with somebody else; the second represents everything we are doing here ourselves. And should some Estonian do or say something abroad, the media will often be unable to categorise it. Attempts are often made to emphasise a single sentence or idea and ignore the general context.

So far, you are the only Eastern European head of state to have met with Mr. Barack Obama in the White House. What does this mean, symbolically?

Two things. Firstly, that Estonia has successfully maintained strategic connections and relations with the United States of America. Secondly, from Washington's point of view, Eastern Europe is no longer a problematic region that requires special care and for its “hand to be held”. The focus of the problems and challenges of the United States has now shifted. To the very core of the problems of Estonia and Europe – Afghanistan, Iran, Middle East, European Union neighbouring countries.

Here we, the eastern Europeans, should take the situation a bit easier. Yes indeed, as long as we represented a “problem” for the USA – meaning an undetermined security structure – we were under constant attention. The foreign policy approach of Washington is highly targeted and now sees Eastern Europe more like a success story. Twenty years ago, we were poor countries, strangled by communism, while now the same countries are characterised by a) democracy, b) market economy, c) NATO membership, d) European Union membership, e) contributing to solving global problems.

As a consequence, US foreign policy no longer includes the terms “new” and “old”; western and Eastern Europe. There is one single Europe and against the background of problems, which are much bigger now, Washington no longer sees the differences that we may overstate ourselves.

In relation to the US President, Mr. Barack Obama – has US foreign policy taken a turn towards a more conciliatory approach and what could a reset in US-Russian relations mean for us?

Washington has explained that the word “reset” is being used as a verb, not a noun. Therefore, they do not mean beginning anything from zero, but a conclusion that is very accurately conveyed by the phrase “to change one’s course”.

This is exactly what we can see in US-Russia relations – progress has been made in spheres that are mutually beneficial, while no party has abandoned their respective principles. Rhetorically at least, the United States is maintaining a considerably lower profile. However, there are no changes in attitude towards the countries that have made democratic choices. Georgia and the Ukraine are still being supported; human rights still hold an important place.

Generally speaking, we should overcome the fear of being sold in the 21st century, as happened in Yalta and Potsdam. The anxiety is understandable. However, the constant interest of western countries in us does not mean that the Baltic states will be sold. It is time to leave this rhetoric to history. In particular, this constant worrying now, when we are members of the European Union and NATO, becomes annoying and creates some suspicions with regard to the maturity of those concerned parties and their ability to comprehend the world.

How would you describe the possible relations between Estonia and Russia in 2010?

I believe that respectful, business-like and relaxed relations between our countries serves the best interests of Estonia, Russia, European Union and NATO. This is a target for which we should strive.

However, I do not expect large and abrupt changes, to say nothing of a breakthrough, seeing that, as a general rule, relations between countries develop evolutionally, not revolutionally. One should focus on everyday issues, which are equally important to both parties, such as the environmental condition of lakes Peipus and Pskov, economic co-operation, cultural contacts, issues related to crossing borders, or co-operation between rescue workers and policemen. All these issues are very important for neighbours.

What should our Minister of Foreign Affairs keep in mind when speaking of relations with Russia?

I just finished answering this question.

This year, 65 years will pass since the end of World War II and Russia is about to organise big festivities. Are you going to take part in these events?

Until now, Russia has not sent us any invitation or official explanation; also, we do not know exactly what will be taking place there on that day. But, when the 60th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany was celebrated in Moscow five years ago, I did say that the Estonian head of state should accept Russia's invitation to participate in the events.

How important would the presence of Estonia's representative in Moscow be and would this be for foreign policy reasons or for other reasons?

World War II represented a fight against one form of evil for many countries. Every European country and nation had to face its fate in this war. I think it would be wrong, even peculiar, to blame any of them for their victories. We are proud of our victory in the War of Independence, while the Russians take pride in their victory in World War II.

The time that has lapsed since the end of the war should be sufficient to identify a shared part of memories, cognition and knowledge. As it is said in the European Union: our history is your history and your history is our history. And the last big war meant big sacrifices for all of us and we could remember these sacrifices, together.

Finland's communication with Russia is often described as pragmatic. Isn't there really anything Estonia could use in its relations with Russia?

I don't really think that our communication with Russia is somehow less pragmatic. The opportunities available to Estonia and Finland are different, as we have been reminded, every now and then, that the attitude towards Estonia would never be the same as the attitude towards Finland. Estonia and Russia must find their own way of building up their relations. The common understanding of the foundation of such relations serves as one of the pre-requisites for normal relations.

A little over three years ago You said that the past cannot be used as a quarterstaff.

Yes, I did. But I also said that this is true only when the past is transparent, is public and known to everyone. Denying the past, or more specifically, only accepting it to a certain extent will only fan the fires of a foreign policy propaganda war.

How should Estonians view the passing of 65 years since the end of World War II?

The end of one of the most horrible wars in Europe meant relief for millions of Europeans. The evil was defeated. Here, in Estonia – and a large part of Eastern and Central Europe in general – we cannot, however, forget that for us World War II really ended only half a century later. Nor can we forget the victims, even though such an approach will not be pleasing to everyone's ears.

At your previous meeting with President Medvedev, he said that the development of Estonian-Russian relations is only behind the preamble of the Act for the Ratification of the Estonian-Russian Boundary Agreement, passed by the Riigikogu. This was recently repeated by the Russian Ambassador in Estonia, Mr. Nikolai Uspenski. Considering the situation, do you see any opportunity for the genuine development of relations between the two neighbouring countries?

Such an approach simplifies relations between Estonia and Russia. I am convinced that the political climate between neighbours depends on much more than just one preamble, nondescript and not involving any pretensions, even when being unnecessary.

To me, it seems that this very preamble has only been used as a pretext to leave relations between Estonia and Russia exactly the same as they are now.

Anyone walking around the Old Town of Tallinn either before or after New Year's Eve could see and hear that the pre-requisites for improving the relations between Estonia and Russia are there – and there are plenty of them.

At the "Estonia After Euro" conference, you said that we are among the European Union members with the least initiative. In this context, you repeated the idea that "Estonia is a policy taker, not a policy maker". What does this really mean?

The expression "policy-taker" can be construed as someone who is dragged along or hanging behind, while the expression "policy-maker" can be interpreted as those who are pace setters or decision-makers. It is quite obvious that a self-respecting country, no matter how big or large its area and population is, does not want to be dragged along by anyone. However, only those with their own opinion and interests, and the guts required to present and defend these ideas and interests, will make it to the ranks of decision-makers.

Last year, on 2nd February, you also warned that Estonia cannot afford passive nodding in foreign policies. Could it be you are forcing Estonia to jump beyond its limits?

I am not trying to force anyone to jump anywhere. However, I am trying to force people to remember that the success – or failure – of Estonia's foreign policies and diplomacy will determine our future for a very long time. Exactly the way it happened in 1996-2003 – exerting ourselves took us to the European Union and NATO, although when we started with the efforts, there were very few who really believed we could achieve the objectives.

And we have to make efforts now; we must become audible and understandable. We must be bold and active. While remaining realistic, as our objectives can only be reached by acting realistically, by focusing on the national interests of Estonian people, not dreams. At the same time, we must not be afraid to express our opinion instead of hiding our values under a nice layer of politically correct expressions.

This is what you mentioned in your essay that discussed Estonia's foreign politics – "Remembering the Milosians", attaching importance to value-based foreign policies – something that the pragmatists are criticising you for today. Does this mean that for you pragmatism has no place in foreign relations?

We must first observe what Estonia's independence and the restoration of our independence relies upon? Above all, on the absolute value-based ideals of the former President of the United States, Mr. Woodrow Wilson, concerning the right for the self-determination of nations. And would Estonia ever have been able to restore its independence had the western countries acted in line with "realism"? Definitely not. It would have been much more convenient to ignore all the principles we rely upon today. The United Kingdom made a step towards "realism", when it "returned" the gold reserves of the Baltic States to the Soviet Union at the end of the 1970s. In the 1980s, there was more than enough people in the United States – and some at very high levels – who were inviting others to abandon the "out-dated" non-recognition politics.

What should we do, then? Forget the very same principles we used to build our independence and restore our independence? Start to ignore the violations of human rights? And where should we draw the line, then? Would it be even more "realistic" to abandon our history, as this would probably make transit more successful?

This is how pragmatism, which I would call true realism – what can be done while remaining true to our ideas and values, and when will this begin to prevent us from fulfilling our main task in protecting the people of Estonia – will provide a framework to value-based politics. A framework, in which our foreign policy makers are acting, on a day-to-day and an event-to-event bases. Let us be realists – not everyone in the world around us is sharing our values.

Are You going to speak about foreign policies and diplomacy again on 2nd February, the anniversary of Tartu Peace Treaty, as you have done over the past number of years?

Absolutely. The anniversary of Tartu Peace Treaty is the right time and place for that. So no one

could think that the situation in Estonia, a part of the European Union and NATO, is settled now forever. These organisations are both living organisms, which means they are also changing, and their health requires constant care and attention.

[The original article](#) *in Estonian.*