

BRUSSELS, October 9, 2006 (RFE/RL) -- Toomas Hendrik Ilves will be sworn in today as Estonia's new president. Ilves, 52, surprised incumbent Arnold Ruutel, 78, in a runoff, beating one of Estonia's last Soviet-era leaders on the back of an upsurge of public support that many in Estonia saw as an echo of the late 1980s. Although largely a titular head of state, Ilves has accumulated significant foreign-policy experience, most recently as deputy chairman of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee. Ilves, a former RFE/RL analyst and broadcaster, spoke with RFE/RL's Brussels correspondent, Ahto Lobjakas, and identified Russia's recent turn away from democracy as his greatest concern.

RFE/RL: Your election was accompanied by an upsurge of public sentiment somewhat reminiscent of Estonia's "Singing Revolution" in the late 1980s. How much of a break with the past to you think your election represents, and how much of that past is still there?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: I think that when Estonia became independent, it, first of all, simply became independent. But independence is not enough. There are many countries that are independent -- Enver Hoxha's Albania and North Korea today, [as well as] Belarus, are independent countries. Democratization takes a much longer time, as we've seen. Economic reforms can be carried out fairly quickly.

But what, I think, is felt in Estonia is that civic society has not developed enough. I don't think that things started going backwards. But certainly, over the past five years or so, Estonians have become far more aware of what the presence or an absence of a civil society means and that certain tactics were used during the election or [in] other spheres, where citizens' rights were trampled on, [their] civic rights. There were cases where people were embarrassed or threatened publicly because they expressed their political opinions, people [members of the electoral college] were threatened that their communities would be underfunded if they voted the wrong way. I think this is a residuum of Soviet thinking.

RFE/RL: When you take office, you will be leading a country one-quarter of whose population is Russian-speaking. More than 100,000 of them are stateless. Do you have a vision for that part of the population of Estonia?

Iives: I think that we need to be more inclusive in Estonia. Because of the historical past, we've ended up with a situation that takes a very clear position on what constitutes Estonian citizenship, and that really comes down to knowing the language. And I don't see the overwhelming majority of people in Estonia accepting a change in that....

On the other hand, I think that government policies should be much more oriented towards dealing with the problems that are fairly specific to what we could tentatively call the Russian-speaking population. I think it's a bad term, actually, simply because there are many Russian speakers and, I guess -- as I point out whenever people talk about the Russian-speaking population -- you can actually say that just about anyone living in my country who is over the age of 25 is a Russian speaker because they were all forced to speak Russian....

But I think that if you look, for example, at rates of substance abuse, especially needle use, then it's almost exclusively a problem among the Russian speakers. And that's a serious problem, and we really have to develop policies that address the problems that are, in fact, directly related to certain groups. It's a difficult thing, I mean, because needle-related addiction is not a problem among Estonians. Young Estonians, they tend to use other drugs, unfortunately.

RFE/RL: Coming to your wider vision, will you, as president, be patrolling a ["The Clash of Civilizations" author Samuel] "Huntingtonian" border, or will you be sitting at one end of a bridge?

Iives: I certainly cannot make a claim that there is any Huntingtonian basis to the success of democracy and rule of law in one society or another. But it is clear that there is a difference between rule of law and democracy in Estonia and what's to our east. And the difference is becoming more and more profound as time goes on. So, in that sense, I will stand firmly on the side of the rule of law and democracy and civil rights....

I would say that virtually all of the issues that we have in our problems with Russia stem from an absolute refusal on the part of Russia to really accept what happened in the past. And this obsession with perpetuating these utter and complete lies about Estonia voluntarily joining the Soviet Union -- I don't understand why it's done. I mean, it's much easier for the Russian government to say, "We had nothing to do with them." I mean, the German government says, "We have nothing to do with them" -- meaning the Nazis....

And from that, unfortunately, all other problems stem. Because, for example, even in the case of the Russian population, the Russians [would be] perfectly justified in demanding immediate citizenship for all people if Estonia were a de novo state that came out of nothing.

RFE/RL: Russia's problems with its neighbors are a wider phenomenon, of course. Russia has its problems with Estonia, it has its problems with Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine. A lot has been said about the whys and wherefores of this, but a lot less about how to move on. As president of Estonia, do you have any ideas that might be applicable to the rest of the post-Soviet fringe, as it were?

Ives: Well, the first thing again it comes down to the problem of what you do if there's a large, powerful country that a priori views democratization on its borders as a security threat? I mean, Belarus is in no way treated as a security threat, [but] having democratic elections in Ukraine is viewed as a security threat or as a threat against national interest. I don't think any of us, anywhere, have figured out what do with that. We persist in this sort of pretending that we're dealing with a country just like us. On the other hand, it doesn't behave just like us, unfortunately....

Unfortunately, actually, the only three countries that came out well from the Soviet experience, or came out capable of fairly quickly joining -- rejoining Europe -- or joining the European Union were the three Baltic countries. The transitions have been much more difficult in Ukraine. I mean, there's no transition in Belarus. Moldova's in difficulties, not to mention the Caucasus. There are many factors. One is that I think that the support for the Baltic countries was much greater on the part of Europe. We were small and easy to support -- it's much harder to support a 50-million [population in] Ukraine. Secondly, there were certain traditions, again the

continuation of certain ideas throughout, during the Soviet occupation, and the remembrance of the independence period made the rebuilding of the state much easier [in the Baltics].

Institution building, looking back, turns out to be far more important than anyone thought. It's not simply a matter of having a majority win an election. And secondly, it is not a matter simply of privatizing what you have -- privatizing state property. The rule of law, as many people have pointed out, and even a year or two back [U.S. economist] Milton Friedman -- who thought everything could be solved simply by privatization -- even agreed that, ultimately, unless you have the rule-of-law side worked out, privatization will simply lead to the kinds of situations you have in Russia and Ukraine.

RFE/RL: You've worked as a senior member of the European Parliament for 2 1/2 years now. Do you think that the European Union has hit an immovable object in Russia when it comes to taking its values eastward?

Ives: As long as the price of oil is as high as it is, yes. Let's face it, the line from Russia over a year, two years, has been basically: "We're not going to listen to what you people in the West say. We don't have to." Russia's approach has meant, unfortunately, that they've also developed what they think is a different form of democracy. I mean, I think "managed democracy" is a real threat....

I'd say that any adjectival modifier of the word "democracy" should send alarm bells ringing -- be it a "people's democracy" or a "managed democracy" or a "sovereign democracy." If you put an adjective in front of it, then it is not a democracy.

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