

*On 8 March 2010, Russian daily Nezavasimaya Gazeta published an exclusive interview with Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves. The interviewer was the writer Mikhail Veller.*

**Mr. Ilves, as the President of Estonia, how concerned are you about the unfriendliness, if you will, that prevails in relations with Russia?**

I should begin by saying that my grandmother lived in St. Petersburg. My favourite writer is Nabokov. I hope that the Russian and Estonian nations will live side by side for thousands of years to come. Relations have to be rebuilt, and the misunderstandings that have arisen must be resolved.

**But the Russian mass media regularly report that Russians are discriminated against in Estonia, that the rights of the Russian-speaking minority are being violated and that obstacles are placed on the road to obtaining citizenship.**

But notice a telling fact: Russians are not leaving Estonia for Russia. They are either staying here, which already says a great deal, or they are going to work in Europe. Like Estonians themselves, incidentally.

The Estonian Citizenship Act is much more liberal than analogous legislation in many other democratic countries, where it is much harder to gain citizenship. As for the language examination and history examination, these are requirements in every country.

In the early 1990s, close to a hundred thousand people received Estonian citizenship on the

basis of Estonian Citizen Committee cards. These people declared their desire to remain citizens of an independent Republic of Estonia – already before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Everyone who wanted to become a citizen of the Republic of Estonia, not for selfish reasons but on the strength of their convictions, received Estonian citizenship. Everyone who wanted to become a citizen. They were not required to have language proficiency or prove physical presence before naturalization – nothing.

**The moving of the Bronze Soldier monument damaged Russian-Estonian relations significantly on the level of public opinion and had economic consequences as well. It seems to me that the function of politics is to achieve the desired goal not by being the loudest but by using the optimum means. Why was it nevertheless decided to move the monument? Why was this not done on the pretext of having to perform repairs, during the winter months, by surrounding the park with a fence? There would have been no unrest. What was the point of that sort of provocation and demonstrativeness?**

First of all, I want to draw your attention to the sense of decorum and the adherence to ethical and legal norms that accompanied the moving of the monument and the re-interment of the fallen soldiers. Incidentally, at the very same time, a monument to fallen soldiers in Khimki near Moscow was simply demolished in the course of construction work; without any ceremony at all. This story was reported by all the newspapers.

When the Bronze Soldier had finally been moved to its dignified place at the cemetery, senior Estonian officials laid flowers at the base of the monument and paid their respects to the memory of the fallen. This is also significant.

Secondly, every sovereign state ultimately decides independently what is situated on its territory, and where it is to be situated. This is a country's internal affair.

Third, this monument in the centre of Tallinn had, by 2006 or so, become a place where provocations were staged – people brought red flags and pictures of Stalin, and delivered speeches about the glory of the Soviet empire. There were also cases involving Russian chauvinism that were deeply hurtful to Estonians.

The riots of April 2007 involved a large number of criminal and aggressive elements. Remember the smashed windows and looted stores left in the wake of the mob, or the unfortunate young Russian man who was stabbed.

**Since that time, the Russian public has received only negative information about Estonia via the Russian media, and the image of Estonia as a free and democratic country has been shaken.**

Negative information and accurate information can be worlds apart. If we look at freedom of speech around the world, according to the international organization Reporters Without Borders, Estonia ranks sixth in that regard, the US places 12th, but Russia is 147th – behind Belarus, which is 146th.

There was a joke back in the Soviet era that has now been adapted in Estonia so that it is no longer a joke but the plain truth. It goes like this: In Estonia anyone can go up to the Office of the President and shout: "Ilves is an idiot!" The same is true in Russia – anyone can go up to the Kremlin in Moscow and shout: "Ilves is an idiot!" This says something about freedom...

**Freedom of speech, freedom of movement and economic freedom have always been closely related. In the 2000s, much was written about the Estonian economic miracle. The kroon was introduced in 1992 and pegged at eight to the Deutsche mark – an exchange rate that remained unchanged until the kroon was pegged to the euro, in just as stable a fashion. In its years of independence, Estonia experienced an economic growth spurt, despite having limited natural resources and a tiny geographical area. Russian readers naturally ask: how was this possible? Why is the average standard of living in small, resource-poor Estonia higher than in immense, well-endowed Russia?**

A proverb says that every excess becomes a vice. Look at all of the big commodity-producing countries. Why improve the economy when it is simpler and more profitable to extract oil or gas or mine gold? The Dutch disease nearly broke the back of the Dutch economy! Why work at all, if the money flows right out of the ground?

First of all, we succeeded in carrying out economic reforms in the first half of the 1990s. For advice, we called on German specialists who had carried out successful privatization in the former GDR after reunification. We had many “mini-Gaidars”. We trusted them but we also verified. These reforms have stood the test of time.

Second, and this is very important – our privatization process was completely transparent. Everything was in the open and understandable; there was no nepotism. It was fair play. Those who were able to perform better in the market economy became rich.

Third, and this, too, is very important – we have no oligarchs. There are no people who would hoard national wealth.

Fourth, there is little stealing in Estonia. Corruption is low here.

**How hard has Estonia been hit by the economic crisis? How many people's lives have become worse? People must have already grown used to the economic boom, as good things are easy to become accustomed to.**

The main problem right now is unemployment. We are doing all we can to reduce it, up to and including the state paying employees minimum wage if an employer provides them with work. This is more far-sighted than paying benefits to the unemployed. It is important that people continue to think like gainfully employed people, that they feel they are necessary and do not lose the social status they are used to. Otherwise, they may grow accustomed to being socially dependent.

From time to time, people are given temporary jobs doing thinning work in forests, or various

restoration projects. Local governments are also creating new jobs; I could mention the recently instituted subsidized positions of ticket sellers on public transport. Yes, the wages are low, but people do not feel cast-aside. The state will help them get through the hard times.

**Has the state tried to get people increase consumer spending and thereby support the economy such as in the US – or has it focused on banking like Russia?**

One good thing is that we have tried to save money all these years and we have not wasted it. We had a reserve of 10% of our GDP to fall back on.

As for banks, in today's European Union they are all interlinked. For instance, the Swedish-based parent companies of Estonian banks have the option of using aid from Swedish state, but it has almost never been needed.

We are trying to retain jobs and make sure that the economy is functional.

(Estonian banks are actually branches of Scandinavian banks, as Scandinavian banks are their majority shareholders. – NG)

**Celebrities in Russia today send their kids to Western universities, they become CEOs and go into elite business circles. What are your children, the Estonian president's children, doing?**

My son Luukas graduated cum laude from Stanford University in the US. He is now serving in

the Estonian defence forces.

**Do you see him often?**

Seldom. For three months during basic training, he did not have any leave. He is now attending NCO training, but even there he does not get every weekend off.

**He doesn't have any complaints?**

Luukas is a 22-year-old full-grown person and is responsible for leading his own life. The fact that a person in young adulthood is doing his civic duty is normal.

Besides, military service in the Estonian army is a completely normal thing. We do not have dedovshchina – young men get a good training, they are not afraid of conscription, nor do they look down on it. As a father, I am glad that my son is one of the best in his unit in terms of physical training. On the weekend, though, he was studying On War by Clausewitz.

**You grew up in exile – in Sweden followed by the US. You returned to your homeland after the Soviet system collapsed. What do you think now, many years later – aside from the bad, did Soviet rule bring Estonia anything good?**

If I'm not mistaken, Brodsky has an essay on this topic. He answers it this way: yes, but no.

**But didn't Estonia have a dynamic, intriguing and rich literary, painting and musical scene? A foundation was laid for science; the Estonian Academy of Sciences was founded...**

Yes. But it all took place under pressure. It would appear that a totalitarian regime is still too high a price to pay for artistic development. On the other hand, science and research are international. One of the world's most respected psychologists and best memory researchers is Endel Tulving from the University of Toronto. And one of the best Dostoevsky scholars in the West was the late Viktor Terras of Yale University. He was most likely able to write about Dostoevsky a little more freely than Russian scholars were allowed in the Soviet era.

**As the Estonian president, do you believe that the Russian side is without exception to blame for the negative aspects in Russian-Estonian relations and that the Estonian side is in the right?**

There are people in both countries who want to win points at home by using sharp words aimed at neighbours. And there will always someone who mounts a counteroffensive.

Naturally Estonia has not always done everything right. Years ago, I was almost the only Estonian politician to express the opinion that adding a preamble – that is, an explanatory provision – to the Estonian-Russian border treaty was not an expedient course of action by our parliament, even though from the legal standpoint it did not change anything in the border treaty that had been signed by our foreign ministers.

(The Republic of Estonia considers itself the legal successor of the Estonian state that was in existence from 1918-1940 and considers the independence gained in 1991 to be independence regained. The Russian side does not recognize this. In the border treaty, Estonia wanted to mention the Tartu Peace Treaty signed between Estonia and Soviet Russia in 1918, without raising the question of reinstating the former boundaries or recognizing the administrative border of the USSR either de jure or de facto. This significantly complicated the ratification of the Russian-Estonian border treaty. President Ilves opposed including the reference to the Tartu Peace Treaty. – NG)

**Have you recently sensed an improvement in relations from Russia, anything more flexible or constructive or more goodwill?**

One can indeed note a lack of negative signals. I think both sides are pausing to catch their breath.

Just look at the seriousness of the problems confronting the entire world, beyond the borders of Estonia and Russia! If we want to focus on serious and real tasks, there is no point in deviating from the course and getting caught up in with little disputes. It is better to meet each other halfway than to squabble over trifles. The main threats facing our countries, the main endeavours and main decisions – they all lie elsewhere.

I am convinced that Estonia is completely sincere in its commitment to good relations with its neighbours, because this is important for us.

**In closing, do you plan to visit Moscow for Victory Day on 9 May?**

If I am sent an invitation, then of course.

### Toomas Hendrik Ilves

Toomas Hendrik Ilves is the fourth Estonian President (his term began in 2006).

His grandmother, Jelizaveta Vassiljevna Tšistoganova, was ethnically Russian.

Ilves was born in Stockholm in 1953. He graduated from Columbia University in the US (B.A. in psychology) and Pennsylvania University (M.A. in psychology). He worked for Radio Free Europe in Munich. He has lived in Estonia since 1991, and has served as Estonia's Ambassador to the US, Mexico and Canada. He was Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1996-1998 and 1999-2002.

*Link to the original interview in Russian <http://www.ng.ru/> .*