

Josh Rogin

Estonia sits at the intersection of Europe and Russia while also providing a connection back across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States. Led by Toomas Hendrik Ilves, often called the "Dean of the Balts," the country is fiercely transatlanticist and hugely skeptical of Russian actions and intentions.

As the country most severely attacked by Russian cyber hackers, who brought the country's internet to a halt in 2007, and one of the newest members of both NATO and the European Union, Estonia is poised to play a role in the evolving security architecture on the continent. Ilves, whose family lived in exile during the Soviet occupation and who grew up largely in New Jersey, is calling for more direct cooperation across the Atlantic on meeting emerging threats.

Visiting Washington in late March, he sat down for an exclusive interview with The Cable.

JR: What is your assessment of U.S.-Europe relations in this, the second year of the Obama administration?

THI: In general, one of my concerns is the drifting apart of Europe and the United States. We blame the economic crisis but the economic crisis of 1948 wasn't too good either, so that's not enough of a reason. Clearly there are major challenges that are not related in any way to Europe at this point. From the U.S. point of view the major challenges are terrorism, Afghanistan, the rise of China, but I don't think that should lead to a withering of the transatlantic relationship. From the European side as well, we really need to, in many ways, keep Europe focused. What we do see with a weakened transatlantic relationship is a return to a much more national agenda than you had before.

JR: How do you view the emergence of a common European national security posture?

THI: It's stupid to have an EU defense posture, and a NATO, and where most of the troops from the European side are from NATO, are in NATO, they're moving in sort of ships in the night, when in fact they're sort of the same ships. You're a minister of defense and you go to Brussels and you talk to the other EU ministers of defense about what you're doing, and then you get in your car and drive other to NATO headquarters and then you have a discussion of what you're going to do with almost the same people, but you're not supposed to be talking to each other.

JR: Do you get the sense the Obama administration is neglecting its European interlocutors?

THI: Well my interactions are very good. I'm one of the few people from Eastern Europe that's gone to the White House; so I can't complain. There are people who say, they're not talking to us ... there's a perception the diplomats aren't doing the amount of talking that was done before. From an Estonian point of view, we have a lot of U.S. attention, so it's not our issue, but I think that perhaps that's all the more reason for me to say, I see this thing out there.

JR: Has neglect by the U.S. and EU toward Ukraine and Georgia since 2008 opened the door to increased Russian influence?

THI: I think the unwillingness of some members of the EU -- the EU works by consensus -- to do more for either Ukraine or Georgia is clearly something on which Estonia has a different

view. It's not just since before 2008, it's just now continued. In general, one of my concerns is that [EU] enlargement is in serious trouble. The barrier has been raised higher and even with the Lisbon treaty, the kinds of arguments that will brought to bear will not make it any easier for them.

JR: How do you view the coming sale of the amphibious assault ship Mistral from France to Russia?

THI: What has been said is that if one country doesn't do it, some other NATO country will be willing to step in because of the economic crisis. I think it touches on a much broader issue on where we are today, which is that it's not the Cold War, so countries feel that they can sell. It's a competition within NATO member states on which shipyard will get the deal. And if it's not the French it'll be the Dutch or the Spanish. Now I don't know if that's true, but this is a difficult situation for us because it really comes down to how much you trust the Russians. Clearly, some of the remarks that were about "well we could have taken over and had we had this ship, we could have done Georgia in 40 minutes" doesn't make anybody very thrilled.

JR: According to the NATO secretary general, the Mistral sale is not a NATO issue, it's a bilateral issue. Is that right?

THI: Well, if it all becomes a bilateral issue then why do we have a NATO? That's a philosophical issue that we have to address. Is it only a collective issue when you're attacked but otherwise it's all 19th century selling whatever you can? I don't know but we need to discuss these things.

JR: What are your thoughts about Russia moving closer to joining NATO?

THI: The one thing that unifies NATO is a common commitment to democracy, rule of law and human rights. And those are not empty phrases because what membership in NATO implies is that you are willing, as a head of government, to send your troops to die and the troops themselves are willing to die for something. Estonian troops are willing to die for democracy and human rights. An alliance that would include undemocratic countries, where there are no free elections and where you don't have freedom of speech, I don't think that would work.

JR: What lessons did you draw from the cyber attacks you suffered? What are the implications for NATO?

THI: We're in a new era. The crucial issues for countries individually, but especially for NATO, what are the implications for Article V? How do you ascertain responsibility? What's an appropriate response? What's a proportional response? I don't think we've figured that out. It's a difficult issue. On the other hand, if suddenly you wiped out with missiles one-third of the U.S. electrical system, you're damn sure you'd have an Article V response, but if you just do the same thing through malware, what is your response? What is proportional? You can't even figure out who did it. You have to guess. Maybe you're wrong. What do we do? We don't know the answers to those questions.

JR: Are the Russians deliberately trying to foment unrest in Estonia by working with minority populations against the Estonian government?

THI: Well, I don't know about every day, but certainly ... [Russian Embassy] people who are clearly not only diplomats are meeting with people who are heavily involved with organizing protests on a regular basis in isolated parks. ... The whole approach is to minimize the feeling of being loyal to the country you're in. Looked at more broadly, you have these so-called

"defensive compatriots" abroad combined with the Russian military doctrine, which was in fact used in Abkhazia and Ossetia in passing out passports to people and then using that as a pretext. ... Those are all sorts of things that don't fit into a 21st century peaceful coexistence way of doing things.

JR: What's the effect of Russian tampering inside Estonia?

THI: Well, I'll say it's not working. It's more fun to be an Estonian.