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Conversation with Toomas Hendrik Ilves, president of Estonia.

Jacek Pawlicki: You have been to Poland several times and today president Bronisław Komorowski is arriving in Estonia. How important relations with our country are for Estonia?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: Good relations with Poland are in our interest since Poland is the only big state in EU which knows what our point is. When we talk for example about deportations in times of USSR, Poles don't need to be explained what it means. And others are asking : why didn't you call the police?

Estonian relations with Poland are excellent. Personally for a long time I have very good contacts with Polish politicians, also originating from those times when I was a minister of foreign affairs and a member of the European Parliament. I will do everything for the Polish-Estonian relations to become even stronger. This is one of my priorities in the foreign policy.

There is also a personal reason. A close friend of my mother was Jadwiga Urbanowicz. She was a wife of Witold Urbanowicz, Polish ace pilot and the commander of the famous 303

Division that shot down 16 German planes. They were friends of our family, they lived in a small apartment in New York's Queens. I used to visit them as a child and the meetings with the Urbanowiczs made a huge impression on me. I realized that the history of unfair sufferings is something that unites us – Poles and Estonians.

What are your expectations from Polish presidency in EU which is going to start on July 1?

I expect concentration on these issues which are important for us, countries of the Central and Eastern Europe. I expect concentration on a reform of common agricultural policy since today with the same fuel, seeds and pesticides'prices our farmers receive less than farmers from the West. It's a complete dysfunction of uniform EU market.

I also expect focussing on development of transport infrastructure in our countries. And I don't mean expressways only but railroads as well. We need fast rail, like in the Western Europe.

Do you mean something as TGV, connecting Warsaw with Vilnius, Riga, Tallinn and Helsinki?

Exactly. Poland has power in EU to push it through. We need Polish leadership and we count on Poland.

Recent prime minister Andrus Ansip's victory in the elections made a big impression in Poland, since in the time of crisis Ansip's government prepared for Estonians painful reforms and tightening of their belts to save the state's budget. This is a unique thing in Europe – usually governments are punished for reforms.

It was similar in Latvia. The Latvians went through a terrible recession, then difficult reforms but haven't yet enter eurozone. As far as Estonia is concerned, we, Europeans from the East, do not yet feel enough luxurious to rest on our laurels. Besides, it is normal after what we've been through, after mass deportations, soviet system...

You mean that here, in the East, we know that nothing is forever and nothing is for free?

That's what I ment. And people from our part of Europe are able to suffer for the better future life. In our case there was one additional thing: we had a clear goal – joining eurozone. Thus the prize was within arm's reach.

Joining eurozone was extremely important, since there was a strong pression on devaluation of our currency. We know that lack of economising programme would mean devaluation and this would hit people's pockets, especially those with mortgages. Therefore it was so easy for the government to tell people that now we have to suffer two years in order to avoid even bigger suffering in the future and to enter eurozone.

We still have problems, for example very high unemployment. We have too many people who are poorely or unadequately educated meanwhile modern technologies sector is in short supply of employees. We also need specialists of different fields, for example we don't have enough welders.

And don't you have too few plumbers? Do you remember the big fuss in 2005 in France over a Polish plumber, which in general was a fuss over hiring employees from new EU states?

(Laughter) Och, all this damned western xenophobia! In the West such a populism still passes as politically correct if it is related to us, Europeans from the East. It is such a shame that the Constitutional Treaty [predecessor of the Lisbon Treaty] was rejected in French referendum not because of what it consisted of but because of the xenophobic campaign on Polish plumber. We have to get rid of such xenophobia from Europe and here Poland can count on strong support from Estonia.

We must overcome such divisions in Europe. Indeed, wealth is still something that divides us but as far as responsibility and fiscal discipline are concerned this old separation for the East and the West that became valid 60 years ago is not any more actual.

What changed in Estonia after joining eurozone on January 1?

We, Europeans from the East, have to be in every European club, otherwise decisions will be made without us. I am convinced that in EU there are those who will want to exclude countries of our region from the process of important decisions' making because of the country not being a member of eurozone. We will not be excluded by anyone anymore.

Besides what I think is the most important now is that we feel more confident. The fact that we were able to do this, that we were able to go through such a difficult process made us stronger.

I don't think that regular people really feel the financial aspect of entering eurozone. Indeed, loans are less expensive now but no-one is willing to take them *(laughter)*. We also gained something as far as investors' trust is concerned, businessmen are happy.

There is also one more important aspect of joining eurozone – we passed another exam. For the last 20 years all the time we had some difficult examinations: joining EU, NATO, Schengen area. Euro was the last one. Now we are like a graduate who has taken his degree and can decide what will be next. And there is no professor who can tell us what exam we have to take next.

Is it presently the biggest challenge for Estonia – to decide independently what to do now?

Yes, however it is also a challenge to get rid of this mentality that we still have to take some exams. It is difficult since until now others were telling us what the conditions are to join EU, and what other things we have to do to join NATO and eurozone.

So what is now waiting for Estonia?

We need to focus on the soft side of being an EU member.

Does it mean you have to focus on getting richer?

For example we have to focus on tolerance. Because of the situation on labour market we need qualified labour force from abroad but we have to be tolerant so that people would like to come to our country.

In Estonia you still have a problem with Russian minority which makes up approximately 30% of the country's population. The Russians complain about discrimination, strict language rules that make it impossible for people whose Estonian is not on a good level to get a job in public administration.

Should those people who do not speak official language get a job in administration? This problem originates from the fact that Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union. For 20 years we have been an independent country and still you can find people who say „oh my God, I have to learn Estonian!” Is this a normal thing?

Maybe they need more help from the state?

But Estonian language courses are financed by the state. The problem is that many of those people needed a lot of time to accept at all our independence and the fact that Russian occupation is not going to come back. The younger people, the easier it is for them to accept it, however soviet mentality is still strong. What can we do about it? Should we turn Russian into another official language?

I have read in the western media that Tallinn is the world capital of cyber defence. After Russian hackers' attacks in 2007 Estonia put a lot of effort to protect against next one. The Cyber Defence Centre was established – the first cyber army in the world was created.

It is an exaggeration with this capital of cyber defence. Computerization for us was a method for fast modernization, which in turn made us more vulnerable to various attacks. Besides, hackers' attack from 2007 was quite primitive compared to how it might look today.

We started dealing with cyber defence to some extent automatically since we are a highly computerized country and internet is important also for politicians.

Is Estonian Cyber Defence Centre really a cyberarmy?

These are IT specialists in banks, supermarkets and not people who will wage a cyber war. For sure they are not going to run in the forest with a machine-gun. But if they are willing to work on their laptops in their free time to do something for the country, it's great. The Cyber Defence Centre is not only some pure patriotism but a lot of fun as well - they meet, they chat, they drink beer.

But are they able to defend Estonia against cyber attacks?

We hope so. This whole thing is very fresh, it's only three months old.