

Adrienne Warren

Estonia is changing the perception of the Baltic region and the future. Much has been written about Estonia's technological breakthroughs, its internet freedom, and its e-democracy. But there is more to Estonia's advancements than meets the eye, and perhaps in equally critical areas. President Toomas Hendrik Ilves spoke to Eastbook.eu about how Estonia shed the legacy of the Soviet Union, the importance of adopting a new language and perspective which reflects the present and not the past, and what other aspiring nations, such as those in the Eastern Partnership, could take from Estonia's experience as a young nation, on a mission...

Adrienne Warren | Eastbook.eu: In a recent interview with you by The Economist ("How Did Estonia Become a Leader in Technology"), you mentioned the necessity for shedding "legacy-thinking." Achieving this shift in thinking and perspective seems to be central to development—what advice would you give for shedding such entrenched perspectives?

President Toomas Hendrik Ilves: Maybe somewhat paradoxically, we owe our success partly to the poverty and backwardness that the Soviet occupation left behind. Because of that, we had to do certain things from scratch. Some of our technical infrastructure had remained at the level of the 1930s throughout the occupation, and then we were offered telecommunication technology from the 1970s, as a gift. Luckily, we said no to such help so we could go right to what was new in the 1990s. Holding on to whatever they already have has prevented many bigger, richer European states from using the opportunities offered by today's technology.

Perhaps indicative of this legacy-thinking is the academic world's insistence on referring to the "Post-Soviet Space." In a recent exchange on Twitter you mentioned that the term Post-Soviet is obsolete. This perspective has prompted us to reassess how we refer to this region and look for terminology that more accurately reflects Estonia and, in fact, the Baltic region. What new language would you recommend to the academic and journalistic world in reporting, studying and discussing these nations? Why do you consider this important?

Der Spiegel recently published an article declaring "East Germany" dead. It was a transformation stage between DDR and the de facto united Germany of today, it has become obsolete as a separate entity. People from eastern states are no longer just representatives of "East Germany", they are, for example, the Chancellor and the President of Germany.

Similarly we can get rid of "Eastern Europe" insofar as it is not a geographical but geopolitical notion. We do not talk about "Post-Habsburg" or "Post-Ottoman" European states today, so how long should we be talking about "Post-Soviet" states, meaning countries that share a certain tragic episode in their history but come from different cultural backgrounds and have developed in very different directions after the breakup of the Soviet empire?

We cannot keep defining the world or our place in it by referring to what once was, it just makes no sense. Now it makes sense to talk about the EU, NATO, the Nordic-Baltic area or the Baltic Sea region – political and cultural spaces that have something in common; alliances, shared values, goals and interests.

Similarly, there is much debate about Estonia's position, geopolitically; with various opinions about whether Estonia is Eastern Europe, Northern Europe, North-Eastern Europe, and even recently, a report from KPMG about Estonia, referring to it as a central European nation. Can you help us put this debate to rest and find a proper way of referring to Estonia and the Baltic region?

Estonia is one of the most integrated countries in Europe and in our region. We belong to the EU, to NATO, Eurozone, Schengen, OECD. We are certainly not geographically in central Europe but we do have strong ties with Central European nations such as Germany and Poland. Do we even have to draw such strict division lines? During the Cold War Prague was considered Eastern Europe and Vienna "the West", even though Prague lies further West than Vienna. Similarly, Helsinki was considered "West" and Tallinn "East", although Helsinki lies right to the North from Tallinn. Perhaps we should be able to get the geographical directions right by now, undistorted by outdated political categories.

Moldovan Ambassador to Estonia, Victor Guzun, recently referred to Estonia as an example for Moldova, and that Estonia offers a road map for EU integration, which gives hopes to other aspiring nations. In this light, we at Eastbook.eu are developing an

institute which analyzes Estonian policy and the way in which it has been successful in creating a free and open society while integrating with the European Union. We would like to offer this learning to other developing nations in the region who wish to cultivate stronger EU relations and enhance their progress towards democracy and a thriving community. Mr. President, we'd appreciate your perspective — where would such an institution have been useful to Estonia in the years of its accession? How do we best implement such a think-tank for the benefit of aspiring nations now?

I think it was very important for us that we knew what we wanted, we had always known it throughout the occupation – we wanted to be an independent, liberal democratic nation that belongs to Europe. We have long and strong historical ties with Europe, and when Estonia first gained its independence in 1918, we announced our liberal democratic values in our Declaration of Independence. We knew what we wanted to go back to, we were ready to re-establish our democratic institutions as soon as it became possible again.

Not all countries in transformation are as clear about their goals. As we have seen, democracy is not an automatic by-product of capitalism or market economy, you need to rely on democratic values and institutions, you need the rule of law. We also got a lot of help from our neighbours Finland and Sweden, we benefited from having our own people in the West. But we also received advice that we were wise not to listen to, e.g. IMF told us not to establish our own currency, and we still decided to go for it. So we gladly share our experiences with those who want to hear, but we are not too eager to tell others how to do things – we know that no one wants to be patronized.

Much has been written and analyzed about Estonia's breakthroughs in technology and e-democracy. The progressive strides by Estonia in this arena offer a remarkable example to every nation as a template for development. But Estonia's progress goes beyond this-would you point out other areas where Estonia offers a superior developmental example, both to its neighbours and to those further afield?

In connection with ICT-development, we have a pretty impressive startup landscape – last year, at an European startup competition 30 firms were chosen as the best among thousands of European companies that applied – and seven of them were Estonian. The first and third place went to Estonia. So that is, I think, how our progress in ICT is paying off. We have NATO Cyber Security Center of Excellence here, and the EU's IT Agency is located in Tallinn. We are trying to develop our e-Government Academy into a think tank in cooperation with Tallinn Technical University that does research on societal change related to ICT-development. So it is not just

technology, it is about a whole change of lifestyle and we are in a good position to analyze it.

Of course we do other things too. Estonian sportsmen are doing well in skiing, tennis and fencing right now. Our song festivals are known worldwide, but also in pop music, our festivals like Estonian Music Week attract visitors from all over Europe and beyond, we have great young bands and singers of our own coming up.

Interview courtesy of President Toomas Hendrik Ilves.
Thank you from Eastbook.eu

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