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Estonia's president is the first subject of a new, occasional USA TODAY interview series with some of Europe's most dynamic and thought-provoking leaders and personalities.

TALLINN, Estonia — He's the president. He can code. And he speaks fluent New Jersey.

"I knew who Bruce Springsteen was before he had his first record," Toomas Hendrik Ilves says in perfect American English.

Born in Sweden and raised in Leonia, N.J., Ilves isn't your standard presidential type. He's one of a new breed of tech-savvy political leaders in Europe who hope to exploit the digital age to benefit economies and move ahead of nations that lack the resources or vision to keep pace.

"What has had a direct impact on my life that I still feel all the time, and which is specific to the little town (Leonia) I was in, was that it had a very good school system where I was taught to program at the age of 13," says Ilves, 59.

"That was something that shaped my thinking regarding Estonia," he said. "The idea that we should be getting our young people to work with computers."

The Estonian capital of Tallinn has a high-walled medieval heart, a citizenry with Eastern European roots and Nordic highlights, and, at this time of year, a cozy, wintry ambiance worthy of any Swiss chocolate box. Many make the trip for its atmospheric Christmastime market.

The president, who is tall and lean, has a fondness for bow ties and three-piece suits.

He posts frequently on Twitter and speaks often around the world on issues of cybersecurity and government infrastructure in the electronic age — areas in which he has developed an expertise.

He can be combative, too. In June of last year, he had a public spat on Twitter with the Nobel Prize-winning economist and New York Times columnist Paul Krugman. The two men had a difference of opinion on Estonia's fiscal position and Ilves accused Krugman of being "smug" and "overbearing." A composer from Latvia subsequently turned their sparring into a 15-minute "financial opera."

"If you know what you're talking about don't couch it in these milquetoast terms," Ilves says of politicians who delegate to others to do what he calls their "bland" social-media bidding for them.

"They don't take a stand because they're afraid of getting beaten," he said in his sparsely-decorated waiting room down the hall from his private office.

Halfway through his second and final five-year term, Ilves is proud of having guided Estonia out from under the shadow of its imposing Russian neighbor. Estonia became independent from the crumbling Soviet Union in 1991 and is far ahead of its neighbor and many nations in digital sophistication.

"President Obama did not ask my opinion," Ilves says, referring to the recent fraught roll-out of the Affordable Care Act's online health care exchanges. "Although a lot of countries do come and study how we do things."

With a population of just 1.3 million, Estonia has now likely done more to digitize what Ilves has called the "basic processes of society" than any other country on the planet.

Ilves, who lacks the legislative authority in Estonia that resides with the prime minister, Andrus

Ansip, is the brain trust behind many of the digital endeavor's key building blocks, including the Tiger Leap Foundation, a state-backed investment body that made sure that by the tail end of the 1990s all Estonian schools were online.

Technology, Ilves says, has allowed "tiny little backward Estonia" to overcome "a learned helplessness" following 50 years of Soviet "un-development."

"We basically started off with a tabula rasa," Ilves says. "In 1993, for example, Estonia had a phone system from 1938 and the city of Helsinki was offering us a free analog system from the late 1970s and I said, 'No, we don't want to get stuck with 1979 technology. It would be better to go straight into the most modern technology.' So we did, and immediately had a digital phone exchange all over the country."

While around 10% of its homes may still lack flush toilets, according to the EU's statistics agency Eurostat (the EU average is 3%), Estonia has a digital infrastructure that has created some remarkable efficiency:

25% of its electorate now votes online, and can do so from anywhere in the world

99% of tax returns are handed in electronically

97% of health prescriptions are filled online

Nearly 100% of bank transactions take place over the Internet

A company can be started in as little as 18 minutes

School and medical records can be accessed instantly online

Children as young as 7 are being taught to program

Many items, including bus tickets, can be purchased by text

Free Wi-Fi is said to be available even in the forests

Is there a downside to all this?

"I'm still waiting for someone to figure that out," Ilves says, laughing, before pulling what looked to be an iPhone out of his blazer pocket to read a message. Estonia's top politician appears to be an Apple guy. He is often pictured with one of the Cupertino, Calif., firm's laptops by his side.

Jüri Kaljundi, a well-known Estonian entrepreneur, says that "it almost feels like technology is the president's hobby. He often stops by start-ups here to say hello and talk about technology. It's not just marketing."

Before Skype was purchased by Microsoft for a whopping \$8.5 billion in 2011, the Internet telephone service firm was dreamed up in Estonia, a place now regularly mentioned in the same entrepreneurial circles as London, Berlin and even Silicon Valley.

"When our diplomats go abroad, they are surprised that they can't do the things that they can do here," says Ilves, who returned to Estonia in the years before independence, first as a journalist for Radio Free Europe, then in a series of government jobs. Those jobs included the Estonian ambassadorship to the U.S., which would culminate in the presidency, for which he had to renounce his American passport.

"I would say that Estonians are even a little skeptical about it, not realizing that what is going on here is far beyond what is taking place anywhere else," the president says.

Ilves emphasizes that organizing a society around the Internet requires a secure online identity, something that he says Estonia has accomplished — and the majority of the international community has so far resisted.

"The problem of online identity," he says, "is expressed best in an old New Yorker cartoon with a picture of a dog next to a computer and the dog says, 'No one online knows you're a dog.' "

Or from New Jersey.

Story Highlights

Estonia is one of the most wired nations on the planet.

President Ilves spent time as a teenager in New Jersey.
Estonia's leader has pushed for widespread computerization.

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