

Moderated by Bartosz Węglarczyk, the Editor in Chief of the Rzeczpospolita, 21.12.2015, Warsaw.

Are we now in the state of new cold war between Europe and Russia?

T.H. Ilves (THI): Well, I'm not sure the "cold war" is a good term, Mark Twain said "the history doesn't repeat but sometimes it rhymes". We are in a situation where the peace dividend is already completely spent. As you can maybe remember, at the end of the cold war everyone said now we have the peace dividend, we don't have to spend money on defense, now we can have peace, love, Woodstock, but it isn't quite so. The truth is today we already don't have this dividend and that's why I'm so happy that Poland similarly to Estonia is a country with such a serious attitude towards defense.

I would say that we are somewhere before the state of cold war. I think it would be possible to avoid the next cold war. We are somewhere in the year 1947-48, when the situation wasn't already that good in Poland, in Czechoslovakia, in that time, or in Hungary. We had a former ally of the West who suddenly started damaging governments in different countries of the Eastern Europe, but also made some efforts to do it for example in Finland as well. They didn't succeed. But it was visible that such actions were undertaken. And it was a beginning of various initiatives, of course the most important of which is the North Atlantic Treaty which in 1949 became the Organization of the North Atlantic Treaty (NATO). There was a kind of ambiguity between May 1949 and creation of NATO. I think now we are in a similar situation.

We lack clear understanding of what is happening. When we look for example at the first answer to the war in Georgia, it was to immediately realize the strategic partnership. Probably it was not the cleverest step when we look from time perspective. So the ambiguity appeared directly after the invasion and after the Anschluss of the Crimea. And the little green men question: "Oh, they just bought themselves uniforms in some local shop with military equipment". And people even believed for some time in this story. And then we realized or some of us realized it earlier and some later that in fact it is Specnaz, units of special forces. That the whole situation was an eventuality plan that was kept somewhere all the time in standby and then it was just implemented.

Is this a cold war? No, I don't think so, it's not yet a real cold war. One of the writers said last year that this is the movement against the Enlightenment, a breakaway from what was in 1989-91, actually it's about the ideological attitude connected with the opposition to the liberal democracy developing in the West from The Scottish Enlightenment. What I can definitely say is that this is a post-post cold war era.

Are allies enough prepared for this new era?

THI: I mean, that is one reason why we like to have a persistent, permanent presence. It gives you more time. You see, the thing is that the entire military doctrine of Russian Federation has changed dramatically since the 2008 Georgian war when Russia realised that the old way (the Red Army with a million men moving in) does not work. That is one of the lessons learned from the Georgian War. They see the entire focus on snap exercises, rapid action. I was misquoted once by press when I said it is four hours from when the order comes from the Kremlin until the time that the helicopters and troops are ready to go. Our press thought: "Oh, only four hours to take over Estonia." No, what I said in the original quote was that it takes four hours from when the order comes to when the helicopters rise.

Four hours is very, very good given that the so-called rapid reaction force of the European Union needs 90 days from order to action.

My point is that the old model would require massive troops built up on the border. It gives you about three weeks. Because the satellites say all this funny stuff is happening behind our border. That is the old model. Now, with the new model it is different.

The green men...

THI: The green men... that worked once. Let us face it, the next time there are green men, we will know they are green men. What no one knew in Crimea was what was going on. And people actually believed that they were just buying these uniforms in local stores...

One-third of your population is Russian and you trust them completely?

THI: The salary in the Donbass for a miner is 150 euros a month. But they lack opportunity to go and live, work or travel visa-free even to the European Union. The salary of a Russian miner in Estonia is 1500–2500 euros a month with free movement of labour within EU. Our own poll confirms it.

So, what happened in Crimea and Donbass is the result of the failure of the Ukrainian state?

THI: I remember 25 years earlier when I was at Radio Free Europe reading a funny piece of a study done by Deutsche Bank. It was a theoretical piece before the collapse of the USSR asking if these countries were independent, who would do the best. According to the Study the best would do the Baltic republics at the time and Ukraine. Well, if you look at where Ukraine is today, and look where Poland is today, and where Estonia is today... The starting positions of Poland, Ukraine and Estonia were more or less the same, with bare minor differences in GDP per capita in 1988–1990. I do not want to say they failed but something went wrong.

But just finishing this point on the Russian minority in Estonia. You are saying that you can trust them but can you comment on plans/actions of Russian secret services – what are they doing, if you can disclose some of the details if it is possible?

THI: Oh, absolutely, yes, of course we trust them. On Russian secret services: what are they doing? I mean they are constantly producing nonsense stories. The Russian minority has been a canard for 25 years. No one had to leave but to this day, that in order to become a citizen you have to do a language test. It is really not very hard and it is not designed to keep people out. It is just to show minimal competence in the language. And I think that is a perfectly reasonable thing to do.

Do you think that experience of Estonia could be in a way useful to such countries like France with their massive minority? Is there something they could learn from it?

THI: Well, on nationality policy every country sets their own tradition. In the case of France, they have this citizenship law where you automatically become a French citizen if you are born there. Which, in fact, we in Estonia have more or less now from this year. If a parent has undefined citizenship, his/her child gets Estonian citizenship. But we are not at the point where you take a visit to Estonia and your child is born there and he or she becomes an Estonian citizen, which is the case in the United States and France. We know that in the United States people travel to the US to give birth there and their child becomes a citizen and then they get the right to move there. We do not have that.

Going back to the security policy. I do not want to lose this point where you started with those 4–8 hours from the moment the Kremlin decides. What would happen then? So the Europeans are not able to come to the rescue because they are too slow. What would happen? Why are you so confident?

Four hours from when the order comes to when the helicopters rise.

How long will it take for NATO to get to Estonia? It does not matter. Because a country that invades a NATO member has to worry about all kinds of other things from the minute they invade. Now, the question is, is that worth the price? I do not think that they are willing to pay the price...

The Russians?

THI: Whoever.

It seems to me that it is a quite a fundamental question. You know very well the American mentality and the politics of the US. You are absolutely sure that they will react in a different way. Especially with the Democrats, it seems that they will remain in power next year as well.

THI: I think that the Democratic Party has been as transatlantic as the Republicans. If we get Hillary Clinton, she is extremely transatlantic. So I am not worried about that at all. Things I worry about are new threats not so much Russia. I mean, I am worried about what is happening to Europe with the migration crisis that I think is far more threatening.

On this point concerning this threat from the East and from Russia. I understand Estonian government intends to put e-Government into a cloud and to save it. Is there any war already going on at this level with Russia?

THI: This is something we can do and Poland cannot because Poland or most of Europe would not have a secure digital identity. We have an architecture that makes it very difficult to get inside the system. It is offered by many countries but not on a mandatory basis. In Estonia everyone over the age of 15 has a unique electronic chip-based identity.

Putting everything in the cloud is simply a matter of security not even because of Russia or anything like that but because your data have to be secure. And in a time when data are more and more electronically secured, you need a very good system. Look what happened to the United States. The Office of Personnel Management lost the records of all US federal employees, including people who work for the CIA, NSA. They did not lose it, it was stolen. You cannot do that with the Estonian system. You can steal one person's records. Fine. But you cannot steal everyone's records.

The reason we are doing this has nothing to do with Russia. The idea actually came after Fukushima catastrophe because Japan lost a certain percentage of its data, national data in the tsunami. And then we started saying, "Wait a minute, we are a much smaller country. OK, we are not seismically active but in fact it makes sense to have your data stored in different places and not only in the country." Almost all modern countries have laws mandating that you have to have your data in your own country not outside the borders.

You said a minute ago that there is a threat from the South, from terrorism, from the refugee crisis...

THI: Well, first of all, terrorism yes but I see the biggest threat is actually the refugee crisis because its effects the European unity, European solidarity and the rise of extremist parties is what I am worried about.

Why is Europe not able to build up an efficient strategy to be efficient and I have your quote, "We're entering 'a low dishonest decade'".

THI: That is actually a W. H. Auden quote, the poet.

But I think it is very interesting. The title is September 1, 1939:

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire

**Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,**

Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night.

It was about Poland. I mean the reaction of the West to Poland. Or the Nazi invasion of Poland, so there is a Polish theme. We saw back then that we had Neville Chamberlain saying, "Czechoslovakia is a far away place we know nothing about."

You see the same risk of the same kind of...

THI: Well, this provincial, parochial attitude of as long as they're not in my country, I do not care...

The elections in Spain, the referendum in the UK...

THI: We see a lot of that in Europe today. And if you have that attitude for the whole sort of fundamental basis, the foundation of the European Union will collapse.

How do you explain this is happening? Why is it happening?

THI: Well, first of all is that we have never had a threat like this. Secondly, we have forgotten what we had in the past. I researched for my Churchill memorial speech what the refugee situation was after World War II. There were 12 million non-German refugees on the territory of Germany after May 1945. 12 million. I mean...

On top of the people who were...

THI: Yeah, there were 12 million Germans and there were 12 million non-Germans. The Bunde
sland

Hessen had 4 million inhabitants, and it had almost 1 million non-German displaced persons, refugees. The crisis that we have today is actually fairly small and we are far richer. I did the calculations, it is all

[in this speech](#)

. I calculated 1945 dollars into 2015 euros and basically, it cost about 50 billion euros to deal

with the problem. 35 billion euros in the current valuation came from the United States. Then, it was the UK and Canada. But the point is that to resolve the crisis people spent a lot of money. And a lot of political will went into this and we do not have that political will today. We have this NIMBY, which is Not In My Backyard. So, it is fine, let them go elsewhere.

Is it because people forget about the experience of war? Is it because they are sure peace will always prevail? Why is there such a reluctance to sacrifice in today's Europe? Because at the same time we live in a global world with Internet so it seems that at least on the surface people would tend to be more global than parochial. How do you explain that?

THI: I do not have an explanation. I just noticed the phenomenon and I think that this can be very dangerous. I mean, I have already heard that some of the richer member states ask why should they be paying for building highways and for all the structural funds to countries that refuse to participate in dealing with this refugee crisis. Why? Why should we do that? How do we explain that to our voters? I mean, that is what I have been saying in my own country.

Is there a link, you are saying? For me there is no link. Because those structural funds started with Felipe Gonzalez at the beginning of the 1990s and it was in return for opening the Spanish market to richer countries, more competitive countries like Germany.

THI: Absolutely, there is a link. The structural funds are a manifestation of European solidarity.

There might not be a logical link but there is an operational, instrumental link. You do not show us solidarity, why should we show you solidarity.

But we have to name Poland here. Because I know that this is a delicate issue for you. But it is the Polish policy of the previous government and the present government to block this refugee issue, to block this proposal by Germany of compulsory automatic distribution of those people...

THI: We believe in voluntary distribution mechanism. We do not think that the compulsory mechanism is what you need but you do need to have solidarity. So we are willing to burden-share.

We have people who are saying no to refugees. They say we do not want people who look different. That is the link to the kind of racism in our culture. And then you have a US unit marching in a parade with black soldiers, Hispanic soldiers. They are defending my country.

We had a racist incident against a black soldier. We have kind of extremist parties saying that we do not want black people. And then one of these party member goes, "Well they should wear uniforms 24 hours a day." What? We cannot expect NATO to come and support you if you are going to be beating up black soldiers when they are not in uniform.

Maybe the difference between Europe and the US is that in the US people still believe in something and there are some ideals around which people can unite.

THI: The problem is a lack of political courage and will on the part of many European leaders with the possible exception of Angela Merkel who is willing to take unpopular positions. Leadership is not like, you know, which way is the wind blowing. Which is you do whatever your last poll result shows. Leadership is saying that this is a thing we have to do. I do not care if the poll suggests that we do something else. And if we go back to the refugee crisis in 1945–1949, the leadership was there. If we do not solve this problem, we will have a much bigger problem.

One question concerning the Polish–Estonian relation. Because President Duda chose Tallinn, chose Estonia as his place for the first foreign visit. The idea, as I understand, was to rebuild solidarity between countries of our region from Estonia down to Romania and Bulgaria. Maybe taking a bit from the idea of Pilsudski's Intermarium. What do you think about this?

THI: First of all, we were very happy that President Duda chose Estonia. Why did President

Obama come to Tallinn? We are a country that believes in doing what is agreed to do. Poland and Estonia, two countries that have had 2 percent or close to 2 percent defence spending of the GDP for a long time... This is one of the many reasons why we have good relations. We both show solidarity to defence and we see the reality that defending yourself requires commitment and money.

But still this idea of this Intermarium? Do you think that this is something that could be used in today's world? I read an interview once a few months ago with George Friedman and he said that this is something that should be recreated...

THI: If it is based on commonly held values then there is a point. If the alliance is based on convenience, the minute it is inconvenient it falls apart. If it is based on something more fundamental, then it stands a chance.

Refugees like defence spending are a cost. My government believes that the cost of dealing with the refugee crisis or defence is a cost we have to pay in order to keep a more important things alive such as th NATO and EU. Without the European Union, if we are just 28 single countries... The smaller you are, the more difficult it is. Then you are back to quiddities and a million dialogues and the weak do what they must and the strong do what they will. We look at this and we go, "The European Union is something that is of extreme importance to maintaining our integrity and independence and our viability as a nation."

At least do we share in this region the same concept of democracy? Or if you look certain countries, Hungary, Poland today, you have some doubts of this?

THI: I do not have doubts about countries in the European Union.

I have worries about extremist parties funded by somewhere from the East. Le Pen got 9 million euros from the Russians. I am worried about that. On the other hand the advantage of liberal democracy over other forms of governance is that you get a new chance every four years.

In January, there will be debate on the state of democracy in Poland.

THI: I am not going to get into that. There are always people on the outside willing to say all kinds of things before they know what is going on. Here I agree with Edward Lucas and give peace a chance. I really do not think that after a government has been in power for just a few weeks that any other countries have really anything to say about it. Obviously, we say things when we see things that are undemocratic or violate the charter of fundamental rights, all of those things. But that has not happened. So I think we should just chill, calm down.

You mentioned that cooperation between the countries of our region would be possible if we share values and solidarity and so on. Does Estonia feel closer on this level with Scandinavian countries?

THI: That is too simplistic. On certain issues we are very close to Sweden and Finland. On security-related issues we clearly are on a very different page from Finland and Sweden. Because they are against NATO membership. We love NATO. In fact, we are very good NATO members.

There is not a serious movement toward NATO at this time. And we also highly value the transatlantic link which we have in Europe through NATO. The only treaty-based relationship between Europe and the United States. Now, that said, when it comes to things such as press freedom, we are up there with Finland and Sweden and Denmark. Internet freedom, we are up there, ahead of Finland, Sweden and Denmark. So on different issues we are in different places. Clearly on defence we are very transatlantic. Clearly on personal freedom we are kind of liberal here. So it depends.

On the very concrete level of cooperation between the Baltic States and Poland. Recently, there was some good examples like the new power line and the new gas pipeline. But on the other hand, we still do not have a highway going down to Poland, no modern railway. How do you see it on this very practical level?

THI: Rail Baltic, the high-speed rail-line, is moving ahead in all three countries. The real issue is

the connection from the Lithuanian border to Warsaw. What is happening with that? I do not know how that is developing.

You will raise it during your visit maybe?

THI: I have mentioned it. I mean, we already have had many, many years of discussing on getting it done in the Baltic countries but of course there is no point to do it unless it hooks up to Warsaw. And it is not only the three Baltics, it is also Finland. Because for Finland a high-speed rail link that would also include freight would reduce the travel time of goods from Finland to Europe by 24 hours. That is a huge amount of time. As soon as this thing exists and you get to Warsaw, there will be a rail ferry between Finland going back and forth. Right now, the goods go on a ferry from Finland across to Sweden, then down Sweden. There is no rail link there. In terms of production costs, it is of vital importance. We have four countries to whom it is important.

And the highway as well.

THI: Right now we have upgraded the highway between Tallinn down to Lithuania. All three countries have done that.

And again here the Polish section. It is basically a tragedy.

THI: I have driven it. I would not say a tragedy.

The interviewer: **Basically, 7 hours from here to Vilnius.**

THI: It is not as comfortable and easy as it might be. I will put it that way.