

David J. Kramer

A conversation with Estonia's President

The Transatlantic community paved the way for Russian aggression well before the Ukraine crisis. says Estonia's President, Toomas Ilves.

In late November, David J. Kramer, the president of Freedom House, met with Estonian President Toomas Ilves at the Halifax International Security Forum to discuss Russian aggression, corruption, and the collapse of the post-Cold War security order.

David J. Kramer: Mr. President, thanks very much for doing this. Let's start with a question about the security environment you face. How safe and secure do you feel in light of the situation in Ukraine? Your country was the target of a cyber attack in 2007, so this is not the first time Russia has posed a threat in the region.

Toomas Ilves: Well, I don't think in regional terms, although there are regional manifestations of the deterioration. Since the invasion and annexation of Crimea, we've seen the collapse of the Transatlantic security environment as we've known it. We could start with the UN charter, which forbids aggression, but in the Transatlantic space the basis for security has been the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which specifically forbids a change in borders through force or threat of force. That no longer holds.

I would argue that it no longer held after the 2008 invasion of Georgia, but the rest of the Transatlantic community did not buy that. In fact, they let it slide, I would say, first by breaking off negotiations over the EU-Russia partnership as long as Russian troops remained. Then, a

month later, with no change in status of foreign troops, Europe claimed, "Thank God common sense prevailed." That was 2008, so we've hit the snooze button a few times; but now, finally, we have the wake-up call.

We have allowed aggression to stand in Georgia, having done nothing and instead gone off on this "peace, love, Woodstock" idea. We're now in a situation where we have genuine aggression, the collapse of the post-Cold War order, and we see all that on the 25th anniversary of the annus mirabilis of 1989—when we should be celebrating the neo-Hegelian triumph of the Fukuyaman view of the inevitability of liberal democracy. I too have believed all along that we were heading there. Unfortunately, what we're seeing right now is that it can be turned around. When you have a collapse of order, you can expect all kinds of things.

To the collapse of order we can add the 1990 Paris Charter for Europe, a major summit celebrating the freedom of Eastern Europe—minus the Baltic states, which were excluded—that concluded that all CSCE (OSCE) states have the right to choose their own security environment. What we see in 2014 is not only that you do not have that right—consider the statements by Medvedev and Putin in 2009, that they invaded Georgia to keep it from joining NATO—but now Russia's rationale for doing what it did is something so minor as Ukraine's wanting to sign an Association Agreement with the EU.

I'm often stunned by the statements made by people within the European Union as if the EU Association Agreement were the big thing. Estonia signed its Association Agreement ten years before it joined the European Union. Five years before, we began negotiating, having been accepted to begin negotiations. Basically, the Association Agreement provides for teacher/student exchange programs and a slightly reduced tariff rate. This is not European Transatlantic imperialism, advancing to the borders of Russia with its evil designs.

Then, of course, there's the failure of the 1994 Budapest memorandum, which was supposed to guarantee the territorial integrity of Ukraine (in return for Ukraine giving up its nuclear arms). This may have far-reaching implications for generations. I don't know what country in the future would ever give up its nuclear weapons in exchange for a security guarantee.

Look around, and you see all kinds of stuff happening. In Denmark on Bornholm island they have this annual summer festival that involves the entire political elite, and the Russians chose that particular weekend to do a mock bombing on the island with nuclear-armed missiles. Just recently, their bombers were circling Guam. They've been doing things in Norway, in Japan,

Portugal. The worst part about it in terms of standard security is that they're doing this unscheduled, and flying with their transponders switched off. In another incident, a Danish SAS passenger plane came within 100 meters of a Russian plane that the pilots didn't see or know was there. This is a kind of behavior that should be far more alarming than some of the Putinverstehers tend to think.

DK: Is this a strategy, or is Putin making this up as he goes along? If Yanukovich were still in power, he wouldn't have invaded Ukraine. Is this a reactive policy that has now taken on a life of its own?

TI: I think the annexation of Crimea was done too quickly and professionally not to have been planned far in advance. Maybe it was a plan they had in place and kicked in because of Yanukovich. But that still begs the question: Would Ukraine have remained a semi-feudal, corrupt state with passive acceptance? A triumph ten years later of this failed Orange Revolution would have come anyway. This is where I remain Fukuyaman. People want to be free. As we saw in the Maidan, they're willing to freeze for months on end, even to die, to be free. It was not a cynical, manipulative game, as people like John Mearsheimer would have you believe. Shouldn't Ukrainians, too, have the right to decide their future?

DK: What about the Brzezinski argument about the Finlandization of Ukraine?

TI: People can decide themselves. The Finns decided on that course, and continued to democratically elect their parliament (with the exception of 1973), with voluntary limitations on freedom of speech.

DK: What we've seen play out in Ukraine has led to 4,000 killed, hundreds of thousands displaced, and the division of a country that really was not divided; there were differences, surely, between east and west, but a lot of countries have that. And now Putin has wreaked havoc in Ukraine.

TI: And inadvertently created a Ukrainian nation. In the Benedict Anderson sense, he created a

real community out of an imaginary community, and it really was imaginary; there wasn't much of a Ukrainian ethnos before. There were people in Lviv who strongly felt Ukrainian, but the idea that everyone felt that did not exist. So he's managed to do that also, along with the death and destruction.

Now what I worry about is that enough people will see things dying down and accept the status quo. If that happens, we will have acceded to the breakdown of our security architecture, treaty-bound. We will not be in a good place.

DK: Are you satisfied with NATO's response in terms of beefing up the security of Estonia?

TI: We're satisfied with what it has done over the past six months; it's finally doing what it should have been doing all along. In a sense, it has now enacted the Russia-NATO founding pact in the Baltic countries. That 1997 act ostensibly says, "The Alliance will carry out its collective defense and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces" and specifies that it applies only to the current and foreseeable security environment. But what has been going on in 2014 is not the same "current and foreseeable security environment" as what was foreseen in 1997.

So I think NATO has done a lot, much of it driven by the United States. The question is whether it's enough.

DK: Is Estonia vulnerable? Not to tanks streaming across the border, but to hybrid warfare and stirring up the local population?

TI: Less than the illiterate journalists who keep asking if war is the next thing. They simply look at the map; they don't understand that GDP per capita, according to the IMF, is \$23,000. The average salary of a miner in Donetsk is €150–250, and the average salary of a miner in Estonia is around €2,000. You don't have the same motivation.

DK: What about cyber attacks aiming to take down your banking and other systems?

TI: We were subject to that attack in 2007, I think, because we already had a reputation for being one of the most cyber developed countries. Since then we have considerably boosted our defense in both the private and public sector; I always remind people that no system is secure. Now, the NATO center of excellence for cyber defense is in Estonia.

DK: Let me shift to the nature of the regime. It is described as a very corrupt and authoritarian regime. How do you view the intersection of these two characteristics?

TI: In terms of the foreign policy aspects, I highly recommend a recent piece by Michael Weiss and Peter Pomerantsev that describes this nexus of money, lies, and corruption, not only inside Russia but also in the West. So this is a much broader problem.

One of the things I've read recently that impressed me most was a piece by Christopher Walker of the National Endowment for Democracy. He calls this out as a containment policy against Western democracy. Not only in Russia, but in other countries as well, we see various manifestations of this. Suddenly it makes much more sense.

One could posit that, like Kennan, there is a Mr. H (in Russian, H is X) in Russia who has written an essay on "sources of Western behavior"—free and fair elections, rule of law, respect for human rights, freedom of religion, press, and association. He says Russians have to fight these everywhere and show the superiority of their model. And then there's a Russian intellectual, Boris Shumatsky, who says it's the victory of the postmodern counter-Enlightenment, which says that everything is possible and nothing is real, that facts can be made up, that everything depends on context such that a lie can be true.

DK: So, in addition to trying to contain the spread of democracy and Europeanization by neighbors, there is the issue of the ill-gotten gains of people in the regime and those

close to them. They become desperate to stay in power, because if they lose power they lose everything they've acquired.

TI: It's the Mario Puzo model, described in a very important theoretical work about the nature of kleptocracy and the regime. You can't leave office—you become hostage to your own system. It's a mutual dependency; everyone below is dependent on the guy up there for whether you're arrested or not, so it continues. At the same time, the guy on top, having behaved the way he has, can never leave office alive, because no guarantees will hold. You have gangsters running companies.

DK: Does that suggest that Russia's stuck with Putin until 2024, or will he be carried out of the Kremlin?

TI: He could be there longer.

DK: So 2024 is a minimum, perhaps? Do you not think the regime and system are so brittle that this could all collapse?

TI: I'm not convinced by that argument. I think it could maintain itself for a long time in terms of the counter-Enlightenment. I think we saw, eight or nine years ago, with the creation of the Nashi, the beginning of street thugs' ability to counter any possibility of an Orange Revolution. Were I running a country like that, I'd be thinking ahead all the time. Unless we see a really collapsing economy, a revolution from below seems unlikely. I think there's enough loyalty within the upper circles.

DK: No one wants to be the first to stick his neck out.

TI: It's hard to say. On the other hand, whether they're trial balloons or not, you see noises about how "we should call him czar" and "father of the nation."

DK: So, two days after President Obama visited your country—where he gave a very good speech, gave good reassurances about U.S. security support and NATO standing up for Estonia—the Russians kidnapped a security officer from your territory. What signal do you think that was intended to send?

TI: Well, we have indications post hoc that it was not really meant as a signal. What we're dealing with is a massive smuggling operation. One of these smugglers was coming over from Russia. We were trying to figure out what was going on. To our surprise, it turned into an FSB operation at the border. Why is the FSB working with smugglers? That's the interesting question. Of course, they could have been involved anyway, because they're in charge of the border protection. Anything being smuggled across the border could be moved with the knowledge of the FSB. Lo and behold, they conduct this abduction. It was a crude, primitive, barbaric violation of international law, but there's no larger message to infer from it. As I said, we're seeing this stuff all over. This kind of behavior is going on, in general. A Lithuanian ship was arrested, and more bizarre to me was the initiation of criminal proceedings against Lithuanians who dodged the Soviet draft in 1989 and 1990.

DK: Your fellow European allies and colleagues, particularly in the east-central part of Europe, are arousing concern. Carl Gershman wrote a piece recently criticizing the Czech government for not living up to the Hável legacy. Is this part of what we were discussing earlier, the corruption factor? Or are we seeing splits between the EU and NATO for other reasons?

TI: I don't know quite what to make of this. Certainly, it's a new generation, and perhaps there's complacency with peace and freedom and liberal democracy. Things are going okay economically, and these problems seem far away. The attitude is, "As long as it's not in my backyard, so what?" Politicians would not pursue this policy if it weren't a winner with the voters. So there's reason for pessimism. Some of these leaders' statements have been extremely disturbing regarding what the whole freedom and liberal democracy thing is about. An additional factor that comes into play is that extreme left and extreme right groups in Europe are being paid for.

DK: Is this reflective of a strategy on the Kremlin's part to buy up Europeans and split

and divide them? Or is it just opportunistic?

TI: It worked with Nordstream, so this is nothing new. That was ten years ago already.

DK: On that note, President Ilves, thank you for speaking with us.

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