

Toomas Hendrik Ilves, the President of Estonia, talks to Visegrad Insight editor-in-chief Wojciech Przybylski

**Wojciech Przybylski: How did it happen that Estonia went from being a post-communist country, with its Homo Sovieticus burden, which we all share, to being the leader of the region in terms of new modernization. How did you do that?**

**Toomas Hendrik Ilves:** I wish I knew. We wanted to, perhaps more than some others. In 1939 Estonia and Finland had basically the same GDP per capita, the same level of urbanization, the same level of technological development, Estonians watched Finnish television, and we went from having basically the same level of development to one, which in 1991, was thirty times less GDP per capita. Not only did we want to be independent, we realized how much we had lost in fifty years of occupation. We were willing to undertake reforms that... worked. It was basically like the Balcerowicz reforms in Poland that we pushed here, while not everyone else did.

**Was there general consensus on the direction of Estonian reforms?**

I do not know if we had a consensus. I think there was a willingness to do things, and to do things very differently from the way they had been done before. There was no great debate but there was a broad sense of, "now we do things differently." We did well with technology – we saw the success of Finland and Nokia – so the important thing that really opened doors to people psychologically was the success of Skype. Four young Estonians did something that went global and it encouraged people to say, "Wow, we can think about more than just our wood industry!"

**The Internet gave you the opportunity to become big despite an unfavorable location?**

Not only that. One of the things that I realized in 1993 was that in all other respects, we had lost fifty years. Highways, buildings, laws... But in 1993 we built our first web-browser that. And it

was not worse here than in other places. Everyone was at the same level. So in this area alone we could compete with the United States, Germany, and other countries. Otherwise, there were no grounds for comparison with Germany in terms of wealth or infrastructure, but this was one area in which that did not matter. Everyone was at the same place.

**At the same time, going digital was meant to change the soviet-style bureaucracy?**

That came slowly. Jeremy Rifkin, a neo-Marxist, writes in his book *The End of Work* that the "terrible thing is all this computerization," but he gives one example that was really inspiring to me, which goes in the opposite direction. There was a Kentucky steel mill that employed 12,000 people and produced hundreds of tons of steel. In the book he describes how the new Japanese owner automatized and computerized production so that they would still produce hundreds of tons of steel but only with 120 people. For Rifkin, this was the ultimate negative. I read it and said to myself, "oh, yes." Our historical neurosis was all about, "we are so small, there are so few of us." Estonia is smaller than some companies in the world; we have too few people, but due to IT we can apply economies of scale and do not have to worry about having too few people.

**Estonia, just like other countries of the region, underwent great democratic change. Alexis de Toqueville said of such revolutions that to make them a permanent change, it takes three generations. How far are you from the old times, in terms of mentality and political culture?**

A shift in values does take time. Some values change quickly, and some more slowly. If you look at tolerance toward homosexuality, Estonia shares the East European intolerance. However, if you look at attitudes toward innovation and free enterprise, it's the opposite. When it comes to citizens' participation in the political process, people are not happy about it but they are aware of it. I recently read a study on civic society in Eastern Europe, and basically only Estonia and Poland – of the whole post-communist world – have a level of participation equal to that of Western Europe. You may not be able to sense it, but the study looked at participation in all kinds of processes, as in volunteers and so forth. So that changed quickly and it changed more quickly than in other countries like ours.

**But what about actual participation in the political process, in elections? The last elections to the EU Parliament were a disaster for Central Europe in terms of participation. Estonia's was not high, either.**

I think the problem we all share in Central Europe is that we are still caught up in domestic issues and have not really figured out the importance of Europe. On the other hand, were Europe to take a stronger position on issues important to us, like Ukraine, we would have much more participation. But the main message from the EU and many old member states is that "they have a gas pipeline they don't want to give up," not to mention their Mistral ships.

**Is this also true of defense and cyber security? You often speak of these issues, one of the few politicians in Europe who does so.**

Cyber defense in Europe is small. I would rather address the e-governance and digital agenda.

**But these issues are connected to defense, as we have seen in the recent conflict involving Russia.**

That is a kind of strategic communication and psychological warfare. In terms of cyber warfare, I am not sure that they are that much better. Our weakness in the West on cyber issues comes from an unwillingness to cooperate enough among ourselves. In NATO you have mobility as a general principle, so you can take a "cheese eating surrender monkey" and put it under "American imperialist." One fits under the other. These are, of course, national stereotypes.

The mobility principle, that paradigm does not exist within cyber-defense. Instead, we have a kind of intelligence community as a paradigm, so we do not share anything with anybody – we do our thing, they do theirs. This means that the best we get with such an approach is that when we find a virus, only then do we think that maybe you also have the same. But genuine cooperation comes only at the beginning. In this regard, all countries in Europe are smaller than Russia. We are 900 million people in NATO, but our lack of unity means we are smaller than the Russians.

**Do you see prospects for improved cooperation between Estonia and Central Europe, or at least Poland, in the future?**

Believe me, we have excellent cooperation already. It is about defense spending and security policy, not to mention cooperation at levels that we cannot even talk about.

**This is highly political, but what about civil society and the economy?**

Estonia is afraid of Poland.

**Why?**

Because it is so big. Finland is five million. I mean, that is the kind of number our businesses can deal with. Sweden is nine million. Denmark is four and a half million. We should nevertheless still go to the Polish market, and it is slowly happening. More and more Estonians are now taking vacations in Northern Poland, in Sopot. In fact, one of the best state visits I had was to Poland. I went to Gdansk and then I stopped in a spa hotel in Sopot for a night. While on a walk there, suddenly I heard people saying in Estonian: "It's the president, it's the president." It turned out that they were Estonians who just happened to be there. "We thought we would come down to Poland and it's really great and we really like it here," they told me. So you see that this change is taking place, it just takes time.

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Toomas Hendrik Ilves has been the President of Estonia since 2006.

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