

INTERVIEW WITH TOOMAS HENDRIK ILVES: THE CHOICE TO BE EUROPEAN*

In an exclusive interview with TPQ, the President of Estonia shares his perspectives on issues ranging from cyber security to transatlantic relations and the dynamics of the Eastern Neighborhood of the EU. He underlines his conviction that all nations are capable of democracy and points out that Estonia serves as an example to prove that democratic reforms, carried through with persistence and principle, can change the fate of a state and a nation. However, the President also points out that there is no universal guideline for how this has to be done, and that, in the end, it comes down to the countries themselves. While Turkey's accession process has slowed down for various reasons stemming from both sides, President Ilves emphasizes that full membership is still possible, if membership is what Turkey really wants.



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You have been one of the key actors for nearly two decades in Estonia's development of its revolutionary system of electronic government, which resulted in Estonia ranking number one in Internet freedom by Freedom House. Could this approach provide a universal model for strengthening governments' transparency and delivery of services, while bolstering citizens' participation in governance? Or, is Estonia's experience unique, given the country's independent and entrepreneurial spirit, coupled with the expertise it developed in cybernetics during the Soviet era?

There are many factors that contributed to the development of our information and communication technology (ICT) and e-governance. Somewhat paradoxically, we did what we did because we were poor. We had to start from scratch; we did not have legacy technology to hold on to. In ICT, unlike many other fields, we were on a level playing field with the developed world – the first browser, Mosaic, was invented just a few years after we regained our independence. So we took off right away and we got going faster than many others.

Yes, a well-functioning system of e-services –based on a government-granted secure online identity–affects everything in society, from the way we use public services to the transparency of decision-making and even the level of corruption. You cannot bribe a computer. And of course there is nothing that prevents other countries from developing their own systems that are similar to ours. We look forward to more and more countries establishing a secure e-service system that we later can eventually interact with.



How do you think the EU should respond to revelations about the U.S. National Security Agency's electronic surveillance of European Allies?

The EU is having a dialogue with the U.S. collectively on this issue, and member states are discussing things with them bilaterally. The problem is more complicated

than what the public debate allows us to see. There are gray areas that have emerged, partly due to technological developments outpacing legislative, policy, and psychological paradigms on both sides of the Atlantic, and they will eventually be overcome by updating the relevant legislation within nations as well as internationally. Unfortunately there has been some political posturing on the issue that only fuels anti-Americanism in Europe and also the other way round – a perception in the U.S. that Europeans cannot be trusted. In today’s international security environment, we do not have the luxury to undermine the transatlantic bond.

At the same time, the EU is working on developing and promoting its own cloud computing industry. We have understood how important it is that our citizens who are concerned for their privacy have a chance to use services that are subject to EU law – if you use the services of U.S. companies that are regulated by U.S. law, we cannot rely on the protection of our own privacy laws. The idea to promote European cloud computing was up before the eavesdropping scandal broke out, but the scandal makes the need to rethink our standards and legislation more obvious.

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Is NATO adapting sufficiently to cyber threats? What policy lessons did Estonia learn from Russia’s cyber attacks in April and May 2007, and how is Estonia imparting those lessons to its allies and partners?

Although 2007 was a major wake-up call for Estonia domestically, and for everyone else internationally, we had already been tooting the cyber horn years before. The attacks of 2007, technically primitive but psychologically effective, were a blessing in disguise in many ways – we were suddenly taken seriously among the Allies. We achieved visibility that otherwise would have been unattainable and our own society raised its awareness level. In my country, we passed a whole-of-government cyber security strategy, the first such in the world. We put resources into systems resilience and prioritized coordination. The necessary homework still goes on.

Things suddenly started to move also in NATO. In 2008, NATO opened its Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn to enhance the Alliance’s cyber defense capability. In 2011, NATO passed its cyber defense policy, which was a major milestone.

Technological development and the challenges that it brings along mean that we need bold and ambitious thinking. The nature of the cyber domain is such that 2014 is already an entire light year away from 2007. The organizational structure of NATO's cyber realm needs to be updated, consultation among allies prioritized, intelligence shared. No future military conflict will take place without a cyber component. I am afraid not everyone in the Alliance has understood that.

Can Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia determine their own destinies through domestic reform that earn “more for more” under the EU's Eastern Partnership?

I find it hard to understand many recent steps, both in foreign and domestic policy that Russia, a self-defined partner of the EU and the U.S., has taken recently. For example, I have a hard time understanding why Russia spends so much on military equipment when the actual and acute challenges for the country are nonmilitary. Why intimidate its neighbors in the West when this is the most peaceful border Russia has?

As for Sweden and Finland, it is my belief that their eventual NATO accession –an issue that is currently hotly debated in these countries– would make the Alliance stronger as well as enlarge the zone of stability in Europe.

For the Caucasus countries, I would say their destiny is primarily in their own hands. Here I would like to highlight Georgia who, although having faced huge challenges during the past decade, has emerged as a dynamic young democracy. The process of becoming a liberal democracy based on rule of law is a tough road, but it may be the only right road in the end. At least we in Estonia, after regaining our independence in 1991, never had any doubts about that. By adopting liberal democratic values, each state not only paves its road to the EU and NATO, but also becomes internally stronger, and a better place for its own citizens.

How has Estonia shared the lessons of its successes in democratic reform and Euro-Atlantic integration with Georgia, Moldova, and other Eastern Partnership countries?

First, we cannot forget that many other countries supported us during our democratic reforms, and we are grateful for that. Since 1999 Estonia has supported, and cooperated with, those countries that are willing to learn from our experience and take a similar road. We have a moral obligation to do so; it is our contribution to international development cooperation.

We understand the challenges of our Eastern partners, as we stood in a somewhat similar position after 50 years of Soviet power. We serve as an example to prove that democratic reforms, carried through with persistence and principle, can change the fate of a state and a nation. We prioritize the Eastern Partnership states as our partners in development cooperation; our cooperation has been especially tight with Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. At the same time we emphasize that the reforms cannot be imposed from the outside. There must be an internal need and a strong will to democratize in each country. We support those states that have shown that they share our values and wish to be integrated with the European Union.

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Our Ministry of Foreign Affairs has several projects through which we have worked with experts and officials from the Eastern Partnership countries. We have an active Eastern Partnership Centre in Tallinn, organizing educational programs for the partnership countries with the help of our Nordic and transatlantic allies; we have shared our e-governance system with them that supports their democratic development through the spread of public e-services.

Does the Eastern Partnership provide sufficient incentives for Euro-Atlantic integration to catalyze the reforms envisioned by the “more for more” approach?

The policy of Eastern Partnership works only through a differentiated approach, based on the principle that the help the partnership countries receive is related to their own dedication to reforms – “more for more” and “less for less.” This principle mostly has worked as motivation for all the countries of the Euro-Atlantic integration process to go on with their reforms. We see different degrees of dedication to democratic reforms in different Eastern Partnership countries, and we react accordingly. Different levels of integration or cooperation with the EU follow from that.

Ukrainian democratic reforms were supported by 186 million euros last year through the Annual Action Programme 2013, but unfortunately that did not lead to an association agreement, which the EU hoped to sign at the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit last fall. With Moldova and Georgia, the EU has already signed that agreement. We hope to achieve visa freedom with Moldova in 2014.

The positive steps that have been taken are the results of the countries' own active engagement. But as I've said before, it is up to them in the end. We respect the sovereign right of all states to make their own choices, and we support those who choose the democratic path.

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It might sound surprising, but Turkey can also have an important role to play in Moldova's accession to Europe. Turkey's influence in the Euroskeptical Gagauz region in Moldova is very strong. Just like Turkey made its decision to become part of Europe decades ago, it can now encourage Gagauzia to follow the same path.

Do historical and cultural realities limit the spread of democratization eastwards, beyond the Baltic, Central European, and Southeast European countries? Do you see the potential for leadership and political will in the EU to inject momentum to the Europeanization of both Eastern partnership countries and Turkey?

That would be the logic of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" theory. Many authoritarian leaders are strong Huntingtonians; they claim that democracy is something that only fits a particular cultural space, while others prefer "their own kind of democracy," which too often is not democracy at all. However, many countries that have democratized have proved that democracy is not limited to a particular historical and cultural space.

Of course liberal democracy as we know it is a result of a long historical development. But can we claim that democracy is possible only as a result of that particular development—from Athens to Rome to the Reformation to the Enlightenment—and it is not attainable through other kinds of processes? I think the world would be a sad place if Huntington was right; if democracy would only be possible in countries with a certain cultural background, not in others. I personally believe that democracy is possible everywhere.

But democratization is a long process, and historical background—just as cultural habits—certainly does have its effect. As for the EU, the principle of "more for more" applies to all of its neighborhood policy, with neighbors to the East as well as those to the South. Turkey, like any other nation, makes its own decisions. We are

naturally interested in bringing Turkey closer to Europe both institutionally and value-wise, meaning the shared basic values of liberal democracy, rule of law, and human rights. In my earlier talks I have brought Turkey as an example that a Muslim majority country can be a democracy, that there does not have to be a conflict. We naturally hope to see strong protection of human rights and freedom of speech in Turkey also in the future.

We are glad Ankara has taken steps toward democratization and it is important for us to see the country stay on a democratic track.

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If you compare how you thought Turkey could contribute to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Caucasus in 2003 versus your opinion of this potential today, what are the fundamental differences?

Today, just as much as in 2003, Turkey plays an important role in supporting the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region. The fact that the process has not been as fast and steady as we hoped in 2003 does not mean that Turkey’s chances to contribute to the process have fundamentally changed. Turkey still has a strong positive influence on the region.

Also, thinking of the growing importance of the Caucasus region for the economy, energy security, and stability of Europe’s southern neighborhood, Turkey and the EU need to work together more and more to strengthen the region’s ties to Europe. The three countries of the South Caucasus are all different, but Turkey could help them all, including Armenia.

How has Estonia evolved since it regained its independence (for the second time) in terms of dealing with public protests and media freedoms? How do you define red lines of acceptable forms of public dissent? Do you think Turkish society and its political elite have the potential to follow a similar course?

We in Estonia were very clear about our values and choices once we had a chance to restore our independence: we established democratic institutions and rule of law; respect for basic rights, including freedom of speech, was a self-evident part of all this. Estonia has been ranked as one of the freest countries in the world by different international institutions. We have people who disagree with the government and

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they are free to express their opinion – mostly it is verbal, although we have seen our first strikes and street demonstrations during the last few years.

Freedom of assembly as well as speech is a fundamental right in a democracy. Unless we are dealing with violence and vandalism, I see no reason to limit it. And I see no reason why Turkey, or any other country for that matter, would not be able to respect those freedoms.

What can Turkey and its European friends do to overcome the view in many EU member states that Turkey simply does not belong to the European civilization? Is full EU membership still possible for Turkey, or is some form of “privileged partnership” the best that can be expected?

I think I already answered that question above. I am not one of those who believe that your culture, history, or religion determines what kind of political civilization you choose to belong to. The essential argument is similar, whether it comes from the racists who say: “They are not capable of democracy, because they have a different culture, they belong to a different civilization,” or from the authoritarians who say: “We cannot accept your democracy, because our culture, our civilization is different.” It is the same argument posed from different sides.

I believe all nations are capable of democracy; of course, you have to want it to succeed in it – that is why democratization was so quick and smooth for parts of Eastern Europe. The people of the Baltic States, Poland, the Czech Republic, etc. knew that they wanted to live in a democracy. What we mean by “European civilization” also depends on the historical and political situation. During the Cold War, Vienna was considered “Western”, and Prague a gray, hopeless “Eastern” town – although geographically Prague lies to the West from Vienna. Likewise, Königsberg was in the heart of Europe when Immanuel Kant wrote his “Perpetual Peace” there, but later the same town, renamed Kaliningrad, drifted quite far away from Europe.

Turkey is already a part of the Euro-Atlantic cooperation and, as I said, I see no reason why it should not go on toward closer integration with the European Union. We

in Estonia believe that every European nation desiring to access the EU should have the possibility to do so. Full membership may take a longer time than we expected at a certain moment. The international economic crisis, Turkey's internal conflicts last year, as well as some kind of "enlargement fatigue" on both sides may slow the process further. But I would not say full membership is impossible, if membership is what Turkey really wants.

Did the EU and Turkey miss opportunities to sustain positive revolutionary change and avoid Islamist extremism in the broader Middle East and North Africa? If there is still a window of opportunity, how can Ankara and Brussels seize it?

Certainly not everything has gone exactly the way we hoped it would. As the Polish former *Solidarnosc* (Solidarity) activist Adam Michnik has said: "[w]e know very well how to make fish soup from an aquarium but we don't know how to make an aquarium out of fish soup." It is much easier to overthrow a dictatorship than to build a new, strong democracy in its place. As I already said, it starts from knowing what you want. You have to have relative consensus on that. And you need stable institutions. Creating a democracy takes years of work; you need the institutions, rule of law, development of civil society, fundamental rights and freedoms, low corruption, economic growth – and there are many ways to go wrong.



As we have seen, not all of those countries liberated from the former Soviet bloc along with us chose the path of democracy; hundreds of millions of people in those countries live in conditions Freedom House does not classify as “free.” Paraphrasing the opening sentence of Lev Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, I’ve said years ago: “[a]ll successful post-despotic countries reformed alike. Each unsuccessful country finds its own excuse.”

Democracy has meager chances to succeed if overthrown dictators are followed by movements and rulers who are no more fond of democracy, who just want to establish their own undemocratic rule. Also, we have seen that parliamentary systems tend to succeed better than presidential forms of government – with the U.S. as a notable exception to the rule.

However, there is no universal guideline for how this has to be done. We have offered to share our experiences with all those who ask for advice. Both Brussels and Ankara can support democratic movements and democratic reforms in the neighborhood, but in the end it comes down to the countries themselves. Successful reforms start from within the societies.