

# Ignored for too long

2011-02-03 Interview by Anna-Maria Galojan



Edgar Savisaar is one of the founding members of the Popular Front of Estonia and the current leader of the Center Party. He has served as the prime minister of Estonia, the minister of Internal Affairs and the minister of Economic Affairs and Communications. He is now the mayor of Tallinn.

Estonians go to the polls in early March for parliamentary elections. TBT caught up with the Center Party chairman to get his views on upcoming events.

## Mr. Savisaar, what are your ideas about Estonia's place in the EU and in the eurozone?

Estonians have so far been urged to serve the needs of the euro; [however] the Center Party will make the euro serve the needs of Estonians. The euro will bring us closer to a fairer and more effective European model of society – a progressive income tax, relevant social guarantees, and the right to free education. [Prime Minister Andrus] Ansip's government abused the shift to the single currency, pulling Estonia's social model away from Europe. As a result of his politics of enriching the rich and transferring the just-emerged middle class to the new poor, Estonia likens itself more and more to Russia. Unlike Estonian Finance Minister Jurgen Ligi, I do not see Estonia being a Messiah, that should destroy the European way of life by exporting our draconic social and economic policy. To the contrary; I think Estonia should learn from and copy the fundamentals of Europe, especially of Nordic countries, as much as possible. In failing to do so, the current exodus of our people to the countries with progressive taxation will only speed up.

## How do you perceive Estonia's influence, or decision-making, in the EU?

Estonia has two geopolitical groupings with whom we should align with inside Europe – Baltic and Nordic states. Unfortunately, in the Baltic direction Estonian governors have shown a too long and too deep arrogance. However, Latvia is already surpassing Estonia economically, and Lithuania needs urgently our support for the joint Baltic nuclear power plant project. Estonia also has done everything differently from Nordic countries: heavily opposing the Nord Stream [gas pipeline] project, which interlinks Europe and Russia; pursuing an extreme rightwing economic policy; shaking domestic peace by exploiting the nationalistic card in mainstream internal politics. The Christmas-time attack against the director of the Russian railway company, Vladimir Yakunin, made by European Transport Commissioner Siim Kallas, the Estonian national, disturbs already the entire EU Eastern relations, the sphere which is, in Europe, linked to great expectations. At the same time Kallas has to resist tough personal accusations for a cover-up and watering down the reports while being the European anti-fraud commissioner. In the given circumstances his ability to stand for Estonian interests in Europe has been completely marginalized. The possibilities to protect Estonian interests in the EU will improve only after changing our representatives in the Council [Prime Minister Ansip] and in the Commission [Commissioner Kallas].

## How do you see the development of the EU, in social areas, fiscal integration, international competitiveness?

Deeper European economic, political and cultural integration is the only chance to survive global competition with China and other emerging economies. Staying competitive in the modern world is unthinkable without a common media space, which would strengthen Europe's internal identity and would promote a common European image to the wider world. But Europe does not have even its own daily newspaper. Euronews is doing great, but it has to be much more powerful, first of all by better financing from the EU. Media is a vitally important tool in global competition. Also, I hope very much that we, all together, will pass the test of the European social model. As a living and working environment, Europe remains extremely attractive to the entire world, which one indicator is in immigration pressure, [another] from countries with rising economies. I do hope we can maintain European living standards. It would be a much worse situation if, instead of the influx pressure from outside, Europeans would start to massively leave for other continents, looking for a better life.

## Do you still aspire to holding a position at an EU-level institution?

I have never seriously considered any post of the European Union. Perhaps I am too patriotic for working abroad. But from the other side, never say never...

## How do you see cooperation with our Latvian and Lithuanian neighbors, since from your Popular Front days you didn't seem too interested in cooperation, especially with Riga?

Tallinn City and I have always had especially close relations with the administration of Riga, including after the years of the Popular Front, and also when [President] Toomas Hendrik Ilves (then the minister of foreign affairs) made his shameful comment "Who the fuck are the Balts to us?" in an interview with The Wall Street Journal. We are in excellent relations also with today's mayor of Riga, Nils, [who] is a frequent visitor in Tallinn, and I do often enjoy his hospitality in Riga. If our cities were strange to each other, there would be no sense for Rail Baltica and Via Baltica. We are very interested in tourists coming to us from Riga, to spend their free time and money. At the same time, airBaltic has brought Riga much closer to many Tallinners. Riga is following with special interest our experience as the European Capital of Culture 2011, because after a few years Riga will carry the same title. For Tallinn, Riga's experience in implementing a new ticketing system in public transport is also important, the development of the municipal police in Riga is impressive; there are a hell of a lot of issues which are for us mutually interesting. Just note, I did not first mention the history; this is common and anyway links us. In regards to cooperation with Latvia and Lithuania, but also in regards to other countries around the Baltic Sea, I do admit my big regret is that the EU Strategy of the Baltic Sea Region, which was initiated with so many high expectations, lacks today a real economic and political role in the development of the region. But I do hope that that this grand cooperation attempt will be extensively learned, and the Baltic Sea region will be able to utilize its full potential in the quickly changing world. In this context the warming of relations between Poland and Russia seems to me especially remarkable.

## What is this 'special agreement' with United Russia? What does it mean, its significance and necessity?

The cooperation agreement between the Center Party and the United Russia Party is similar to those which the Russian governing party has signed with dozens of other parties in all of Europe and the wider world. These agreements are everywhere treated as an additional opportunity to build relations with Russia as an important partner. Only in Estonia has this agreement been sometimes described as an ego trip of the Center Party.

## What is your proudest achievement in politics?

Disconnecting the Estonian economy from the Soviet Union and regaining independence for Estonia.

## What was the biggest mistake in your career?

Only the dead make no mistakes, and so in life as well as in politics errors often occur. I do consider my biggest political mistake was in bringing [Prime Minister] Andrus Ansip to the premiership in 2005. Initially, while together in government, we did well, but later the Estonian state and people have had to carry a far too heavy cost for his governance – inflation, unemployment, the exodus. Just think: Estonia is losing during this current crisis a share of its population that is already comparable to the war-time exodus of 1944.

## What kind of role do you see for Estonia in EU-Russian relations during the next 15 years?

Estonia has for far too long of a time been in the role of cordon sanitaire, whose opinion has been, over the years, ignored by the EU and by its bigger members (Nord Stream was the most curious, but, unfortunately, not the only such case). We have to become a bridge for the movement of goods, services, knowledge and also labor between the EU and Russia, relying on our advantageous geographic location, our knowledge about Russia (including language skills) and our Russian-speaking population. Our circumstances [would let us] benefit the most from developing EU-Russian relations, better even when compared to Finland. By these circumstances we would be equal to Latvia which, unlike us, has recently made major progress in this area.

## What can be the biggest future challenges for Estonian foreign policy?

In foreign trade policy Estonia has to establish an effective relationship with emerging economies, first of all with the so-called BRIC countries [China, India, Russia, Brazil], but also with South Korea, Turkey and other global players. A precondition for doing so is the development of the national economy, which would lay the basis for national capital accumulation. Due to the decreasing share of the U.S. in Europe and other parts of the world, Estonia has to invest as much as possible into the European Union's common foreign and security policy. A major trigger for tightening with Russia and the West is the strengthening of China, and this development provides security also to Eastern Europe. But only until Russia or the West does not gamble with security policy with China – then the ghosts of the amoral deals, at the expense of smaller states, may recur, as happened in Europe in 1938 and 1939. Estonia also has to be able to restore the population to at least the level at the time of regaining independence (our population has fallen from 1.5 to 1.3 million). Unfortunately, that is not possible anymore if only relying on the natural increase and Estonians returning from exile. We need a thoroughly re-worked immigration policy.

## Do you see any relevant solution to the Estonian-Russian border conflict? How long could it take?

Estonia has no border conflict with Russia. Our border is in place and functions also as a Schengen border. Estonia has no ambitions for Russian territories; as well, Russia does not have any territorial claims on Estonia. But Estonia made a mistake while amending, in the parliament, the preamble to the border agreement after it was already signed by the foreign ministers (say "thanks" to the right-wing parties). We have to correct that mistake and then the fate of the border agreement will depend only from the Russian side.

## What does it mean for you to be a politician or statesman? Are these words synonyms in current Estonian politics?

A statesman or stateswoman should be the title, one which will be awarded to a resigned politician only by the next generations depending on if they consider his or her work to be good or bad for the people and the nation.



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