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*Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary  
of the Republic of Estonia to Ukraine*

## **IT IS IMPORTANT TO LEARN FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF OTHERS**

– *Your Excellency, could you please tell us why you joined Foreign Service?*

– Well, I am a little bit different diplomat than the usual officers, because I have spent almost eleven years of my career in the Government Office in Estonia. It is like the Cabinet of Ministers here. There I was responsible for the European relations and prepared Estonia for the accession to the European Union. Later when we had become members of the EU, I was appointed as the Head of that Office. Then several years later, the Foreign Ministry asked me to join their team because they needed someone in Brussels. I suppose if you have been dealing with the European Union issues for the whole your life, Brussels will obviously become your prime target. You want to be there as this is the place where decisions are made. Moreover, at that time representing the country in Brussels was an interesting offer for me.

– *Foreign Service has its highlights and challenges. Could you please give us examples of both from your tenure as the Ambassador to Ukraine?*

– Challenges and benefits are two sides of the same coin. For example, moving from country to country is the most exciting and at the same time logistically difficult thing, especially for the family, as it was when my wife worked in Brussels. Now we have very small kids, so we live here in Kyiv, and obviously, everything is a little bit different. Still, if you care about foreign countries and international relations, this is the most exciting job, because you can get exciting tasks every day.

Also being a diplomat in Ukraine always keeps you busy in terms of the pace. There is big contrast if to compare diplomatic work in Ukraine with more stable Western European countries. Obviously, it can be explained by all things that are happening here: on the one hand, it is the country at war and on the other it is the country, where reforms have to be implemented. Thus, if you move with the same pace as in the Western European countries, you will not get anywhere. That is why you have to work faster. At the same time, and it is the most exciting thing, this work provides great opportunity to be a part of the process and to see everything first-hand.

– *Mister Ambassador, please tell us how working in Ukraine can be compared to your other overseas postings? I know that you have been in Belgium, Switzerland and Luxemburg.*



*Святковий концерт «Звуки Естонії» в Національній філармонії України з нагоди святкування сторіччя Естонської Республіки. На фото Надзвичайний і Повноважний Посол Республіки Естонія в Україні Герт Антсу з дружиною*

*Festive concert “Sounds of Estonia” at the National Philharmonic of Ukraine on the occasion of the centennial of the Republic of Estonia. In photo the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Estonia to Ukraine Gert Antsu with his wife*

– I have been the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Estonia to Belgium, Luxemburg and Switzerland and discovered these countries mainly from Brussels. Obviously, there is great difference if to compare situation in Ukraine and other countries, namely in pace of activities. Moreover, there is mutual interest to what is happening here that is represented in steady stream of visitors from Estonia to Ukraine and vice versa. Estonians show an interest in Ukraine and a lot of experts travel to the country for consulting purposes, whereas representatives of Ukrainian institutions (e.g. police) visit Estonia to see the results of our reforms.

– *It is known that Estonia was a part of the Soviet Union. Your Excellency, how do you think, what helped Estonia to overcome the Post-Soviet crisis?*

– First of all, the reason is in the cultural background and great interest to education among the Estonians. We had many educated people, who really were more exposed to the West than people in the rest of the Soviet Union. Estonians, especially those living in Tallinn, had an opportunity to watch Finnish television before we became independent. Therefore, people could see how the life, the normal life and normal world, looked like.

Secondly, it was an adoption of a Nordic culture of doing business and implementation of reforms. In the late 80-s we already had business contacts with Finland and Scandinavian countries, so we were much more exposed to the West. That is why we attracted western investments rapidly and adopted the Nordic culture of doing business. It helped us to avoid corruption on a big scale. Of course, there were some corruption cases, as many things were happening in the 90's, but we overcame them quite rapidly. We managed to implement very quick reforms (you might call them "shock therapy" reforms), which lasted during the period from 1992 to 1994. In other words, we reformed the whole country, basically, in two years and it was a big advantage. Despite the fact that for Estonians this period was economically difficult, it is always better to implement reforms in the country than make populist steps.

– *Estonia is known for its technology sector and how much Internet connectivity it has. Therefore, please tell us what kind of the Estonian Internet policies should be adopted in Ukraine in order to promote its technology sector?*

– First of all, the Estonian technology sector could be divided into two types – the state sector and the private one (the enterprises). Speaking about the private sector, I should say that Ukraine is managing it quite well. There are a lot of IT companies and despite the fact that most of them are subcontracted to the western ones, it is really good start for Ukraine anyway because of an increase in the amount of own products and value added. I guess the Government has created quite decent conditions for the private IT sector in this country.

On the other hand, there is state sector. In Estonia it is especially strong due to its e-Governance system, which is probably the best in the world, and Ukrainian government, therefore, should create similar conditions to implement the same one. The basis of the Estonian e-success is what we call the X-Road. It is a special project binding other systems and databases that makes it possible to organize communication and data exchange among hospitals and police, ministries and courts, and every person in Estonia. Currently the Estonian system has already been implemented in Finland, so we have a kind of Estonian-Finnish joint space. I am very happy that we are a part of this process in Ukraine, as the company that developed this system in Estonia won the public bid for doing the same here. The Ukrainian e-Governance system will consolidate work of all ministries. It may sound a little bureaucrat-oriented, but in the end Ukrainian citizens may benefit from practicing it. For example, besides getting married or divorced and buying real estate, where you have to be physically present, in Estonia you may do practically everything over the Internet from your home. It can save a lot of time, as you are not asked by the Government for the same data twice. For instance, when my youngest child was born more than a year ago in Estonia, he got his personal number in the hospital, so the Government has had all information needed and I did not have to go anywhere to register him. Moreover, I do not really remem-

ber whether we had to apply for child benefit or it was received automatically as well. Of course, this process should be an automatic, because the Government already received the information about the child and just need to transfer money to your bank account. Another example concerns tax declarations. Estonians fill their tax declarations in over the Internet. It took me about 5 minutes to fill my tax declaration in from here, but the process could be even faster, like 3 minutes. The same as in the situation with the child registration, the tax office has already received Information about money from the bank, where you have your account, or from your employer, so all information needed is available and the document should be just signed. So, you see, the more things go automatically the better. Estonians calculated that the e-Governance system was saving 2% of GDP per year, which was exactly the same amount as the Government spends on defence. Therefore, due to this system Estonia covers expenses on defence.

Getting back to Ukraine, I would like to tell about new electronic system of data exchange. It will be called Trembita and it should be ready in a couple of months this year. As I mentioned before, the system will consolidate work of all ministries. The e-system will be developed for each ministry and then all of them will be able to establish links with other systems and institutions. This is the most important thing.

– *Mister Ambassador, do you find the public diplomacy easier due to the rise of social media and how has the rise of social media and the Internet affected diplomatic work?*

– I don't think Estonia has special advantage from social media. However, I suppose that social media makes public diplomacy easier, but it has both positive and negative sides.

As far as I can see in Ukraine Facebook is more popular than Twitter and our Embassy has its own page there. It has a fair share of followers, but it seems people find more interesting to communicate with Ambassadors directly. I have hundreds of Ukrainian Facebook friends and, actually, I have met some quite interesting people as a result. Certainly, in this respect social media makes it easier to reach out people, however, it is important not to overuse it.

I created my Facebook profile about 10 years ago to keep in touch with my friends. However, if you are an Ambassador to a foreign country with hundreds of local followers, you cannot really leave your own emotions out. In another words you cannot say that the service in this or that restaurant was bad, or that there are many holes in the road, because people will see that the Ambassador of Estonia is complaining and this will not look good.

That is why, on the one hand, social media is making diplomacy easier, but on the other, it makes the private life more complicated. It is difficult to find the balance between private and professional life. In theory, it is clear, but on practice, it is complicated. For example, I would like to find a small Ukrainian wine

producer. Let's say I like one sort of wine very much, so if I decide to share my experience with others, whether this will be professional or private. It is private on the one hand but professional on the other. Therefore, social media has both positive and negative sides.

– *On April 6, 2017, in Tallinn, the Estonian Minister of Culture Indrek Saar and the Ukrainian Minister of Culture Yevhen Nyshchuk signed the Estonian-Ukrainian cultural cooperation program for 2017–2021. Could you, please, speak more about this?*

– First of all, I am sure that it is very important to have cultural exchange between the two countries, as the culture is a crucial tool to learn about each other. The cooperation program has been really signed and, for example, Estonian bands already given performances in Ukraine as well as the Ukrainian ensembles in Estonia. Unfortunately, due to difficult times in Ukraine people have a constant source of worries, and culture issues pales into insignificance.

Moreover, it is also worth noting Estonian movies. Last year in December we held the Estonian film festival, where Estonian movies were shown to celebrate the 98<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Republic of Estonia. I would like to mention that Estonian movies won international awards. They became quite interesting to see and we are proud to share them.

Also I would like to tell you about the concert, which was held in Kyiv on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Republic of Estonia. A famous Estonian conductor, two Estonian soloists and Kyiv orchestra gave a great performance in the Ukrainian National Philharmonic Hall. Therefore, we are very happy to use the culture as a powerful tool of diplomacy as well.

– *Mister Ambassador, how could you describe the state of the Ukraine-Estonia bilateral relationship today? What are the focus areas of the bilateral partnership with Ukraine? How do you think, where has the most progress been made and which areas should be improved the most?*

– Well, in short, it is mostly about political relations in the framework of which Estonia supports Ukraine in its fight against the aggressor and its aspirations to integrate with Europe and become its part. Speaking about the main focus areas of the bilateral partnership with Ukraine, I would like to mention support in passing reforms and business activities between our countries.

Unfortunately, due to events in Ukraine and changing standards, which made export to the country more difficult to everyone, the bilateral trade volumes fell compared with previous periods. However, there is a growing trend again and I hope for a positive development. Although the mentioned situation, both countries should be interested in investments, particularly Ukraine, due to Estonian unique tax system, simplicity and high level of transparency in the country. Taking into account that Estonian economics corresponds with all rules and national standards, for Ukrainian companies to have a part of their production in Estonia is a great possibility as it provides the opportunity to obtain a label “made in Europe”,

and then to bring Ukrainian products into the European market. For Estonia it also makes sense to invest in Ukraine, because of a possibility to hire low-salaried workers and close proximity of Ukraine compared to China or the South East Asia. I am sure there will be even more investments in future, for this reason in Ukraine the principles of the rule of law should be followed, a proper court system should be established, and fair and neutral judgements should be made.

You have asked about the negative sides – which areas should be improved. Well, unfortunately, in Ukraine there is a big problem with investment protection. During the last half a year there have been huge scandals with two biggest Estonian investors in Ukraine. Here in Estonia they have been much discussed in the media, while in Ukraine have not received widespread coverage. As a result, the potential Estonian investors became very cautious and will not change their position until those problems are solved. In addition, there was even bigger scandal when Estonia was put to the Ukrainian list of offshore zones. It was blacklisted together with the Caribbean Islands and other offshore areas, but Estonia is one of the most transparent countries in the world.

Therefore, speaking about the future perspectives, I am sure that there is a huge potential in economic cooperation between investors, but for that, the rule of law in Ukraine should be improved.

– *Estonia is famous for economic transparency. Could you please explain how it has become such transparent country?*

– I think it could be explained by the combination of such advantages as the best economic in the world, good government, low corruption and geographical position. We are very closely linked with Nordic and Scandinavian countries. Most of our investments coming from there and a great part of Estonian people go to work abroad to Finland or Sweden. Therefore, we are closely connected to them and it is rather obvious that we want to be similar to them. We respect and share their culture, hence any sort of corruption is just unacceptable for people, public sphere and media.

What should Ukraine do? Well, the good thing is that you do not have to reinvent the wheel as many things have been already done in the European Union, modern European world, and even in the Post-Soviet countries like Estonia. So you can learn from the experience of others.

Speaking about Estonia, we have already been helping Ukraine to reach the transparency. For example, we have a cooperation project with NABU, according to which Estonian specialists in the anti-corruption sphere train employees of NABU.

Broadly speaking, Ukraine also should meet the EU and IMF demands, namely regarding the establishment of the anti-corruption court in compliance with recommendations of the Venice Commission, as it is the only way to have normal country with low level of corruption and transparent economics which people could be proud of.

– *Does the crisis in the eastern part of Ukraine have an influence on relations between our countries, namely business relations?*

– Taking into account what may be seen here in Ukraine and covered in the media, the main problems for potential investors are the rule of law and the war, however, the latter does not play such big role in business relations. It is explained by the localization of the conflict, as in such centres of business activity as Kyiv, Lviv or Odesa there is no war. Obviously, war influences mainly the political relations. Supporting Ukraine was always an important case in any situation, but supporting the country at war is even more crucial task. The biggest part of Estonian assistance, which is more than 40%, goes for Eastern Ukraine. More than third of it is sent as a humanitarian assistance for people suffering from the conflict in the East and people living in the conflict zone. Furthermore, we try to pay more attention to the cooperation with Donbas and we are constantly looking for the opportunities to deepen the cooperation between Mariupol and Estonia. Therefore, the crisis influences our decisions and choices in policies.

– *Speaking about the Estonian support in terms of military assistance, your Excellency, does Estonia provide any training for Special Forces of Ukraine?*

– We really train the special forces of Ukraine and it is an important part of our relations. For example, this year we are concentrating on teaching Ukrainian officers English in Estonia. Actually, it is more important than it sounds, because speaking English is a major requirement to be closer to NATO, while getting closer to the Alliance is important for defence issues.

Furthermore, our military assistance includes not only trainings, but also rehabilitation of the wounded military people. Perhaps it is the most visible part of our assistance, because we are constantly sending them for rehabilitation to Estonia.

– *Mister Ambassador, could you please tell us about your hobbies?*

– One of my biggest and the most important hobbies is football. It was my hobby since the childhood. While growing up, I was a Dynamo-Kyiv supporter. That is why I was so happy to know about my appointment to Kyiv. It is a huge football city and the first day I arrived here the year and a half ago I went to the stadium.

– *Do you play football now?*

– I used to play football, but since the injury and surgery, I have not done that. Before the injury, I always played as goalkeeper because I was never good as a field player. And after the injury I became just a football fan.

I also like opera music and here in Kyiv, as well as in the other cities of Ukraine, there are a lot of opportunities to go to the opera. Unfortunately now I do not have many chances to benefit from it, because I have two small children of one and three years old, but I hope when they become elder a bit, I make up for lost time.

In addition, I may say, that living in new environment is an exciting opportunity to learn a new language. That is why the next my hobby is learning Ukrainian. It gives me the possibility to read books in Ukrainian and I would like to say, that it is also a great chance to know more about the country, its culture and traditions, especially when you have small children and not much spare time.

– *Mister Ambassador, is it hard to learn Ukrainian?*

– It depends on the background. If you speak Russian and Polish, as I speak, then of course, Ukrainian is not so difficult to learn.

– *What other languages do you know?*

– Besides Estonian, English, Russian and Polish, I also know French and used to speak Danish, but year by year it became passive, as well as my knowledge of Dutch, which I spoke while staying in Belgium. Furthermore, I comfortably read German, but would like to improve my speaking skills one day. I simply started to learn it while I was a teenager. In those days a satellite television was appearing and I watched German TV. I think I have a feel for languages and will be able to learn German on my own without living in Germany.

Therefore, environment is very important for learners, as it is easier to learn languages in the countries of their origin, than trying to do that in Tallinn.

– *Your Excellency, you were appointed to Kyiv in 2016. Could you please tell us more about your favourite places here?*

– Obviously, one of my favourite places in Kyiv is the Olimpiyskiy stadium. I like it so much, especially in warmer times. I would like to say that sunny weather makes me happy and this is explained by the geographical position of Kyiv. The city is further south than Estonia and, due to the angle of the sun, which is clearly different from Estonian one, I feel like really living in the south.

Another of my favourite places is Podil. It is very nice area for walking around and is very close to the Dnipro River. Unfortunately, the access to the river is not the best and there are no many places where it is possible to walk along the river. Therefore, it is just a scope for development. For example, in Estonia, namely in Tallinn, which is a great seaside city, we have started creating opportunities for people to have more access to the sea and more reasons to go to the seaside only now. So I hope that here in Kyiv people will have the same opportunities and it is only the question of time.

Speaking about other places, I would like to mention Lviv and Chernivtsi. Well, Lviv is a wonderful city. However, Estonians do not know much about it. I think they might know its name or just have heard it, but they cannot imagine that it is a European-looking city of coffee and cakes and may be associated with Vienna. Chernivtsi also surprised me when I went there last summer. It also looks a bit like Austrian city but is further south as well. It is exiting place, which I would certainly like to visit again. I have been to many places of Ukraine but it is such a huge county, so there are still many places to discover.