

Subtitles: Arnold Rüütel, president of Estonia (2001-2006)

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(This interview was conducted in Russian. President Ruutel's answers were in Estonian.)

Sous: This Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty project is called "Russia & Me." What is it like -- your Russia? Could you name three Russian politicians who represent your Russia?

Rüütel: The wheel of history would have to get turned back all the way to the rise of Moscow's tsardom in the mid-16th century, which expanded its holdings to the Far East and the far North. But it didn't manage to subjugate the lands to its west and south; it didn't have the strength for that. In the 18th century we, the peoples of the Baltic countries, were Russia's western border. Belonging to different peoples ultimately determined the values and cultural background with which our society developed. If I have to choose three names [of Russian people] who significantly affected Estonia's development I would begin, in chronological order, with Peter the Great. His aim was to chop open a window to Europe. Estonian land was used for defensive structures with geostrategic aims. A far-reaching process of Russification began at the same time. The collapse of Tsarist Russia and the socialist revolution that followed gave the Estonian people a chance to form their own state. The second [person] I would name is Stalin, who entered into the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact with Hitler's Germany. Because of that, Estonia was occupied again for half a century. During the Great Northern War [between Russia and Sweden in 1700-1721] and the plague that broke out afterward, more than half of Estonia's population perished; another one-fifth to one-fourth of Estonians fell victim to World War II and [political] repressions. Later we opened a monument to Estonian gulag victims in Kazakhstan, in [the city of] Karaganda. The so-called Cold War and the U.S.S.R.'s economic and social lag led to a need for fundamental reform. And so [Mikhail] Gorbachev announces perestroika, which was utterly unacceptable to the ruling elite, which [in turn] organized a putsch in order restore itself to power. Under these conditions. Estonia restored its independence, fully within its rights and without bloodshed. Russia did the same under [Boris] Yeltsin. Yeltsin also recognized Estonia's independence.

Sous: [Ukraine's former] President [Viktor] Yushchenko, also a participant of the "Russia and Me" project, spoke of you very warmly as his friend and as a person who is greatly esteemed in Ukraine. You've been there many times. You were Yushchenko's adviser during his presidency. What do you feel now when you watch the news from Ukraine where 6,500 people have perished in a military conflict?

Rüütel: This is a tragedy for the Ukrainian people. President Yushchenko tried to steer the country onto the path of democratic development. And did everything [necessary] for this. But Moscow -- or, as we also say, Russia's -- ambitions stem from the positions held by the state's leadership. And here the countries' positions don't coincide. The Ukrainian people are standing up for their inalienable rights. And I am sure Ukraine will reach the goals it has set. Since that is also supported by the international community. And Russia doesn't have the right to disregard the rules of international organizations accepted at that level.

Sous: During your presidency what was the worst day in relations with Russia and what was the best?

Rüütel: My presidency lasted from 2001 to 2006. After independence we moved toward developing relations with Western countries. Relations with Russia remained at the level of cultural exchanges and economic ties. The peak of tensions in relations with Russia came on May 9, 2005, when celebrations for Victory Day were held in Moscow [marking the 50th anniversary of the end of Soviet involvement in WWII]. Leading figures from NATO and the EU traveled there to take part. On one hand, the U.S.S.R. made a large contribution to destroying fascism and so it was important to commemorate the fallen. But in the Baltic countries this was followed by mass deportations and the repression of innocent people, many of whom perished in the gulag's death camps. In light of these contradictions, I, together with Lithuania's President [Valdas] Adamkus, decided to spend that day among our own people. And the most memorable year, without a doubt, was 2004, when we entered the EU and NATO.

Sous: You probably have very clear memories of the day of August 20, 1991, and your subsequent visit to Russia. Tell us about that.

Rüütel: That truly was a memorable day. First off, I was immediately informed when the [attempted Soviet] putsch began [in Moscow]. Early in the morning, around 6 o'clock, I was warned that I could be arrested. But that didn't stop me. I said I would go to work, convene the [Estonian] Supreme Soviet, and that we would declare that we would not comply with the demands of the putsch. Which is just what we did. Busloads of additional forces began entering Estonian territory. There were serious divisions of the Soviet army located here at the time. And there was a real danger that we could be arrested. There were reports that more than a hundred people -- a special unit for capturing enemies -- had come to Estonia for this purpose. Nonetheless, on the evening of August 20, we made our decision. We knew that armed resistance had begun by then in Moscow. We were in communication with the leadership in Moscow. And we announced the restoration of independence. The putsch failed, and the issue that gained urgency was how to immediately restore Estonia's legal rights as well. I went to Moscow right away. The very next day, I asked right away for a meeting with Yeltsin, Russia's president. He was at the funeral of the three young men [killed the night before in a clash with the military]. As soon as he returned from that, he met with me in his

office. This in a situation when the building where [parliament] deputies had gathered was being fired on. I met with him and told him about my request. He agreed right away and fully approved of the restoration of Estonia's independence. "Russia will approve of this." Right after that meeting I insisted on another one – with the then-head of the KGB. He met with me around 11:30 p.m. Came by car to pick me up and took me to KGB headquarters. We spoke for about an hour and a half. I insisted that I be given the KGB files pertaining to Estonia. As well as the weapons and intelligence-gathering resources. The latter was granted right away, but the files – those they said they would not hand over. I objected: Why? He replied that, first of all, we [Estonians] are a small people and, second, there are many among us with connections to the KGB. For a small people that could provoke intra-state conflicts. So a handover of the documents is not going to happen. I had to accept that. We got some documents, of course, but not all of them. That's what those first days were like; I went on to visit diplomatic missions and embassies in Moscow, first and foremost those of the major countries. There were times when [we] called and people were ready to see us in an hour and a half's time. It took two days of running from one embassy to another to secure their support for the restoration of Estonia's independence. A few days after [my] return to Tallinn, the first delegations started arriving. Two or three months after that, about 70 countries had recognized Estonia's independence. Those were memorable days. There was one other memorable moment I'd like to add here. After all the procedural documents were signed and the [diplomatic] credentials were presented, Yeltsin invited me onto the square [to walk] among the people [defending the White House]. He spoke there. I was alongside him. We stood on a dais. The people protected him with shields. And we were together there with him, prepared in case fighting began. Of course there were people there supporting him. A giant crowd. Then he and I walked among the people a bit, spoke to them.

Sous: Mr. President, your surname means "knight." Estonia's President Lennart Meri [1992-2001] once said that after the age of 70 he could say things he had been afraid to say before. You are already 87. Now, looking back at the events of your life, of the 25 years when you held the highest posts in Estonia, what do you consider your main achievement or merit as a politician, as president of Estonia, as head of Estonia's parliament?

Rüütel: I don't know how apt it is to use the word "merit" here. The idea of restoring Estonia's independence always lived in me, smoldered in me. This has to do with memories. When I was a boy I saw the Soviet military entering the country after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. An endless flow of vehicles came in columns to Saaremaa [Estonia's largest island]. They came at night. I stood at the edge of the house where we lived. The road the vehicles drove down passed right by our house. I stood and watched the column move. That picture still stands before my eyes. It was back then that I understood I would do everything in my power for justice to win out. Probably that is the thing that can now be called my main achievement, even if it did take dozens of years.

Sous: Tallinn has a bas-relief of Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin, to commemorate his contribution to the peaceful restoration of Estonia's independence in 1990-1991. In your view, what is the main difference distinguishing the three [Russian] presidents Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin?

Rüütel: Seeing the increasingly bad economic and social situation in the U.S.S.R., Gorbachev tried, as a member of the young generation, to reform society within the framework of perestroika. But changing the existing conditions did not prove doable. People who stood then at the top of the U.S.S.R.'s ruling pyramid [later] wrote in their memoirs that the beginning of the end of the U.S.S.R. was the passage on November 16, 1988, of the declaration of sovereignty by Estonia's Supreme Soviet. According to that document, only laws passed by the presidium of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic could be effective on the E.S.S.R.'s territory. Analogous decisions were made later in Latvia, Lithuania, Russia and a number of other Soviet republics. Yeltsin's decision at that time laid the foundation of today's Russian Federation. [Vladimir] Putin tried to force Russia's economic and social development, which proved effective when comparing the [Russian] indicators to international data. Nonetheless, he ignored many aspects of international law. For example, in annexing Crimea.

Sous: Did you ever fear Russia? It's a big country with enormous levers of influence – from gas and oil to military might – and then there's little independent Estonia...

Rüütel: I wouldn't use the word "fear." It's true that the military potential of Estonia and Russia can't be compared. That said, I was always aware of Russia's geostrategic interests in the Baltic countries, which can be traced from the times of Peter the Great to today. At the same time, in 1918 Estonia managed to form its own state. It's true that it survived only a couple of decades and then the country was occupied again for half a century. But we were able to restore independence and become a member of the UN, EU, NATO and a number of other international organizations. I believe [Estonian] society has reached a level of development where international law is working and powers exist [in the country] to enforce it.

Sous: During your presidency, Estonia became a member of the European Union. If you were now part of the EU leadership, what would you do to try to stop the war in Ukraine? What, in your view, is the weakest spot in Russia's relations with the West?

Rüütel: I believe the EU chose the right position when it introduced sanctions against Russia, since the latter violated international law. I hope the international community's harsh condemnation of Russia's actions against Ukraine will open the eyes of Russians and their leader. The weakest spot in relations between the EU and Russia is a lack of trust in the latter. It's impossible to have a working relationship with a country that wipes its feet on international agreements. Here it's worth noting that when Ukraine

gave up its nuclear weapons Russia was a country that guaranteed Ukraine territorial integrity.

Sous: As part of the "Russia & Me" project, the [former] president of Latvia, Guntis Ulmanis, expressed bewilderment in his interview that Russia's occupation of Crimea had come as a surprise to Western leaders. In one of your recent interviews you said the events in Crimea "were not an accident in terms of Russian policy, and at the same time Estonia's geostrategic location historically has been important to Russia." Now some politicians and analysts are trying to predict which country might be next for Russia after Ukraine. Some say Moldova, some Belarus and Kazakhstan. Do you feel Estonia could be next? How significant is the Russian threat?

Rüütel: I spoke earlier about my view on Russia's interests, which had some corroboration from statements by well-known Russian leaders. Putin once said the collapse of the U.S.S.R. was the largest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century. I do believe Estonia's security is guaranteed by our membership in the UN, EU and NATO.