Guntis Ulmanis, president of Latvia (1993-1999)
Anna Sous, RFE/RL
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(This interview was conducted in Russian.)

Anna Sous: We're sitting in your country house, a quiet, beautiful place, with a pond. Everything here is made out of wood, and there are flowers all around us. What thought does the former President Ulmanis wake up with?

Guntis Ulmanis: During Soviet times, and immediately after Soviet times... you know that my close relation was [early 20th-century Latvian leader] Karlis Ulmanis. He was the president of Latvia. It was with that thought that I lived -- the thought of Karlis Ulmanis. Maybe not about the presidency, about the president. But I often thought about what I would do if I was president. And my fate was such that I was given that possibility, and I became president. So what do I think about now? What am I thinking about now? Strange as it may seem, not about politics, not about the presidency. I am thinking about how life has turned out, how good it is, when you get down to it, to live in my favorite country, seeing how we're moving in the right direction. And there's no point in making judgments over our mistakes and problems -- we need to be grateful for what we have: our little piece of land, a house, good friends, a wonderful country. Birdsong every morning. That is what I think about.

Anna Sous: Mr. Ulmanis, this project is called "Russia & Me." In Soviet times you spent time in Siberian exile, and when you were president, you removed Russian troops from Latvian territory. Not long ago, when Crimea was occupied, you warned Latvian leaders that they needed to continue communicating with Russian officials, that they shouldn't cut their contacts with them. Can you tell us what Russia means for you -- the Russia that you feel close to?

Guntis Ulmanis: I don't want to link Russia only to particular figures, whether it's [Boris] Yeltsin, [Vladimir] Putin, or anyone else. Russia, for me, is something far broader and far deeper. My fate has been such that I think that I'm protected by God. I was born at a time when the world changed completely every day -- 1939. And all the years after that were very tough; there were lots of problems. My first five or six years were in Siberia. They used to call Siberia "the people's prison." I experienced that firsthand. Afterwards, the occupation of Latvia, the Soviet Union -- again, life was very difficult. Then God gave us the chance to restore what had been in 1939. And there was a link -- a very protracted one, but a very timely one, I think. Our territory was always connected to Russia, in one way or another. Sometimes we were closer, sometimes more distant, sometimes more complicated and tough. There were very unpleasant moments, but the tolerance of the Latvian and Russian people has enabled us to overcome the problems created by politicians. The Latvian people never organized pogroms [of the Russians]. Our opponents have framed the issue of a two-language system in very harsh terms. There won't be

a two-language system. In ordinary life, in fact, it exists, but it cannot exist in law, since the character and enormous energy of the Russian language would swallow up Latvian in a very short amount of time. I'm not afraid of saying that, not only because I am concerned about my own, Latvian, language. In Europe they often think, "What's the problem, there are several nationalities living there, why not make several languages state languages?" It seems, on the surface, to be very easy, rudimentary, but the aggression of one language toward another is obvious. Not because we want to stop people from talking to each other in different languages, but because we don't want the Latvian language to disappear into history. The Latvian language has existed for many thousands of years. It was not a state language but the language, such as it was, survived. This language is very strong, robust, and distinctive -- but it needs to be protected by all possible means.

Anna Sous: You mentioned Boris Yeltsin; you worked with him closely when you were president. I quote: "In my view, despite a number of poor decisions, Yeltsin remains a national hero in Russia. He thought not only about his country, but about his neighbors, too." But at the same time, Yeltsin made Putin, a KGB agent, his successor.

Guntis Ulmanis: All leaders, including the Russians, need to be judged in the context of their time. When Yeltsin was in power, a person with Putin's character could not have emerged in Russia, and the other way around. I can't imagine how Yeltsin could have managed Russia today, with his character, but he was a very typical and colorful spokesman for his people, and unlike other Russian leaders, he loved and recognized Western culture and democracy. How much he loved it, I cannot judge, but the fact that he acknowledged this... He communicated very often with the leaders of Western Europe and America, with great respect. He had a great respect for the Baltic leaders, including the Latvians. I don't think these were merely emotional outbursts. It was necessary at that time, because we were all idealists, including the Russians. And I think that Yeltsin saw the advantages and the bright side of democratic society, but it was difficult for him to bring them to Russian society, which as we see today, was not especially ready for this. Or we can put it like this: Russia has its own particular ideas about democratic processes, based on its views and according to its principles. When you tell me that Yeltsin appointed a KGB official as president, I don't think that Yeltsin was guided at that moment by what kind of work the man had done, or where. For him, other features of the man's character were more important, and Putin, however we may judge him in the light of current events, is a person of strong character. This is a man who makes decisions and who acts. Western and American leaders need to understand this, and from there, they need to talk to Russia, so that we avoid terrible situations like Crimea, or something worse in the future. Sanctions may come and go -- like any kind of penalty, they don't last forever. Even the worst kind of criminals are eventually freed. The same with sanctions, which today are being justly applied to Russia by the Western world. But we need to think in the longer term about what kind of dialogue we can have. As for me, for example, I can't understand why the Western world didn't see the situation in Crimea coming. For me, a former president and politician, that was astonishing. How could this be? No one in the world anticipated this, saw it happening, or predicted it. Yes, there was rhetoric, but that's not saying much. But where were the analytical and intelligence systems and concepts? In the end, the Western world had no idea what Russia was thinking.

Anna Sous: And now, when there is a war in eastern Ukraine, does the Western world see what Russia's next step will be? Is there any idea of what needs to be done? What is the West's weak point in terms of its relationship with Russia?

Guntis Ulmanis: It's hard to say. I think that the information services are working better, the defense services, and the military potential... And there is no reason to downplay this, to say that there's no need to produce guns, tanks, machine guns. We need to produce these things, because we're faced with actions that are clearly aggressive, which one morning could give us a shock, and not only in this way. But it's not just bombs that decide the fate of the future – it's also talks, dialogues, meetings. The Americans often say to me, 'Well, tell us something about Russia – we don't understand them.' But how long can we not understand them for, I ask? A hundred years go by, and you still don't understand the Russians. We need to get started. It's time to study Russian, meet with Russians. But not in Sochi, as [U.S. Secretary of State John] Kerry did. I think that this meeting was somewhat emotional, to say the least, and it could have been of benefit, but not in a way that we've seen so far.

Anna Sous: You once said that the future of Latvia depends on Russia's relationship with the rest of the world, and the role of Latvia in that. Not long ago a new Latvian president was elected. What advice would you give to him on how to behave with regards to Russia, and how to build relations with Russia?

Guntis Ulmanis: Following meetings with European leaders and representatives of the European parliament and governments, I think that the new president should look for a way to have a direct dialogue with the Russian president. I am saying this based on my own experience. When the troops withdrew, there were some very difficult moments. Nevertheless, with the help of telephone connections, the Russian president and I managed to find a common language. And Yeltsin had no problem phoning me, and the other way around. Today this is no longer the case. I don't doubt that the Latvian president may be a very good mediator between the big European countries and Russia.

Anna Sous: You recalled the time when Russian troops withdrew from Latvia. What was the best day in your relations with Russia, and the worst? Perhaps both happened on the same day?

Guntis Ulmanis: Your program has such a succinct name, "Russia & Me." Well, it could be the other way around. But in that short headline, there's a deep meaning. As it happened, there were bright and dark days throughout my life in my relations with Russia. Not only during the six years I was president, but in all my 76 years, we were connected in some way or another. The dark times were when we were sent to Siberia in cattle trains. The bright times were when the Siberians welcomed us, I wouldn't say with love, but in a very humane manner. And despite the authorities forbidding them from doing so, they very often saved us from dying of hunger, and from other catastrophes and tragedies. The freedom of Latvia -- independence, the declaration of sovereignty -- these were the brightest times. Joining the European Union and

NATO... I can't imagine what would be going on in the Baltic countries now if not for NATO. On the other hand, I hope that it will never be necessary to invoke NATO'S Article 5 on war, defense, bloodshed.