

Hans-Friedrich von Ploetz : „I had a significant direct communication with Putin“

Hans-Friedrich von Ploetz (1940) – a veteran of German diplomacy. Starting from 1966 for 40 years he was the representative of Federative Republic of Germany in the most responsible positions: he has ambassador in NATO (1989 – 1993), UK (1999-2002), Russia (2002- 2005). At the moment von Ploetz continues working at various corporations with businesses connected to Eastern and Western countries. Starting from spring of this year von Ploetz is the member of the Supervisory council of Baltic International Bank. So our meeting was held in the premises of Baltic International Bank in Riga. Besides, the former ambassador is also a frequent guest of Baltic Forum. So – he knows the Latvian specifics.

Turkey, France and immigration

Your Excellence, the most actual question now is Turkey. What will be the impact of the attempt of coup upon the relationships between Ankara and EU and NATO?

Everybody is following the events in Turkey with deep interest and sympathy to the victims. It is a complicated situation. Turkey has a long tradition of spiritual country, with divided religion and government. Starting with recent times the division has become weaker. It is difficult to comment on the possible development of events, looking from here. Erdogan is an elected president. Confrontation is really strong at the moment, and integration of the society will be a challenging task. To protect both order in the country, but also constitutional democratic structures, independence of court. Turkey is one of our allies, close connected to EU, and we sincerely hope that everything will turn out positively there.

Don't you find Turkey as different from other allies basing on political culture, because Turkey was Islamic monarchy for hundreds of years, and just in the recent 70 years – a secular state?

They have chosen European way during the recent 70 years. As we started to build European Union, the Turkish people started negotiations on participation at the very moment. Turkey has implemented admirable legislation changes. Let's see what happens.

A tragedy in France took place during the recent weekend – and France is a large NATO country with nuclear weapons. Some time ago in Warsaw summit hybrid war was discussed, and now France demonstrated inability to protect its people. Doesn't it prove the weakness of NATO in the face of such kind of threats?

Can I answer with a question? How do you think, a government or a state can protect from a terrorist in a truck?

I guess that it is a result of bad immigration policy of France for decades. In order to stop such events, EU and NATO should change the policy.

You mean, close the borders, not to let anyone with “wrong” faith in?!

I mean, not closing borders, but to behave at least like at the times of Charles de Gaulle or Giscard d’Estaing.

I am not sure, to say honestly: I guess that you remember that at the time of Gaulle’s Algeria was a French province and later lost the status. The immigration of the Northern Africans has a long history in France – I’m not saying now if it is bad or good. Was the integration policy successful? It is another question. We are facing challenges brought by flow in of people with different origins. And whoever promises easy solutions is not a realist, he is a populist.

Do you think that the policy of Angela Merkel is supported by the majority of Germans?

Her ratings are increasing. They were below 50%, now they are close to 60%. Naturally, there are discussions and criticism. In the next year election will take place, and then we’ll see more precise situation. I think that it is not possible to reflect all the complexity of the problem in an interview. When we’re speaking on Germany, I have to emphasize the following – 1888 was the last year when the number of new-born German children was bigger than the number of deaths in the country. Since that time the internal growth of number of population has been negative. But the number of inhabitants is growing! How does it happen? At the end of the 19th century we had high dynamics in industries, steel and coal. And many workers came from Poland. After the 2nd World War masses from Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece – and later Turkey – came in. During the Yugoslavian wars – hundreds of thousand refugees from Balkans arrived. After the end of the cold war some 26 years ago waves of immigrants came from Eastern Europe.

And now – refugees come even from further away places, absolutely different societies, people are running away from civilian wars. Syria, Iraq – they just want to save their lives. The situation which arose last year was really difficult for our chancellor. To close borders when people are fleeing war? At the very beginning many people in Germany supported the Chancellor in welcoming the refugees. Now we are learning. Let’s see. But I think that it is not possible for the Europeans to close borders and say – Stay where you are. It’s your problem that your kids are dying, and we’re not worried about it. It would not be a Christian attitude.

Can we say in this context that British people are more cold-hearted than Germans?

Great Britain has a large, significant part of population from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and other former colonies. The decision taken during the referendum was focused on free movement of people from other EU countries. This is a separate question! To be a member of EU it means also to accept the four freedoms of the common internal EU-market. And one of them, a significant one, is the freedom of movement of people. Great Britain accepted it. And now many said: “Enough!” Others said „Welcome!” Immigration thus had a considerable impact on the result of the referendum. But there were also other issues

on the agenda.

Border issues

Do you see visa-free regime of Ukraine with EU this year?

I'm not sure. But I am not working for government any more. I'm reading newspapers as you are, and I'm not even writing in newspapers. The process is being examined...

German nation, the political class, do they see Ukraine as European country which is going to join the EU – or as a cut-off slice which is said to take “20-25 years” to join just for everybody to forget?

Please let me look at the question from another perspective. The origin of the EU was cooperation of 6 countries. Preceding that, soon after the war there was a territorial dispute between Germany and France on Saarland, a rather serious one that could not be settled between the two countries. The region, occupied by France, was producing coal and steel- and thus rather important. Jean Monet, one of the most important French political leaders after 1945, developed a very clever idea: if two countries are unable to settle the conflict between them, try to broaden the context and draw other interested countries into the debate. In this spirit, France's foreign minister Schumann proposed the European Coal and Steel Community (CSCE) with six members, in addition to France and (West) Germany the Benelux countries and Italy. The key issue however was security: Let us create a transparent framework for the coal and steel industry of our six countries – and we have an early warning instrument if one of the countries starts to produce tanks! What a clever approach. Once the CSCE was founded, the Saarland-issue lost much of its divisive nature, and was settled in a referendum in 1955, the region became a member of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Thus, European integration had, right from its beginning, a stabilizing and harmonizing impact. This is still the case today. After the end of the “cold war” there was a very real danger that territorial disputes in the central European region, for example between Hungary and some of its neighbors, could become a threat to peace. However, the fact that none of these countries had a chance to join the EU if they had unsettled border problems with their neighbors, helped them to settle them, and to achieve, what they considered of paramount importance for their countries: to become a member of the EU.

Regarding relations between the EU and Ukraine, we agreed on free trade area, not on membership. This is a perspective, but many reforms have to be achieved in Ukraine before it can become reality.

When you were ambassador in Russia, you met Vladimir Putin, monitored his politics. How can you describe the political philosophy of Russian Government? Most of the Europeans still don't understand "who is Mr. Putin" and what he really want.

I have to say that during my time in Moscow I had considerable direct communication with the president. Probably you remember that in 2003 the 300th anniversary of St.Petersburg was celebrated. The heads of all EU countries were invited, and all of them solemnly signed, together with Putin, a really ambitious project: To establish between the EU and the Russian Federation four common spaces, of economy, internal and external safety, and humanitarian. A very ambitious project indeed! I think that Putin at the time was seriously committed to make it reality. Why it did not happen so far? There are many reasons, and not only caused by the Russian side. Was the plan too ambitious? I don't think so. But – the world has changed, and new crisis have developed.

At the recent summit of NATO in Warsaw there were two basic points: we are an alliance safeguarding the security of its member, and we want dialogue and cooperation with Russia, wherever possible. Decisions relating to security were criticized in Russian mass media; those on developing relations with Russia were overlooked. Thus, sadly the Russian public was not fully informed.

Both German and Russian markets are significant to Latvia. Due to sanctions the economic growth of Latvia has slowed down significantly. What do you see in the nearest perspective in our economy?

Yes, the sanctions hit both Russia and us – nobody is happy. But after the events in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, we had to give a clear signal that using military force in changing borders in Europe breaks all the many common agreements which we have signed since 198. We had to give an unmistakable signal that the order of European house has to be kept.

And please take into consideration that there were people at the time who wanted to go much further and support the Ukraine by supplying weapon etc. We did not agree; we wanted to decrease the military conflict! The key instruments are the Minsk agreements agreed also by the Russian president. Their implementation is difficult and does not only depend on Russia or Germany. Unfortunately Ukraine is not in a good condition. Thus, the situation is complicated, but if all parties cooperate and understand each other, the situation can gradually improve.

Bilingualism – a force!

We represent a newspaper which is writing in the name of 40% of inhabitants of Latvia – Russian-speaking people. There are different opinions on us: so BBC made a "documentary" film on revolt in Latgallia being occupied by Russians.

Where was the revolt?

In eastern Latgallia, Russians revolted and Moscow supported. But it was a movie –

fake.

And I thought that I have missed something... (laugh)

How do you see the existence of the minority in Latvia - as a challenge or a possibility to create a bridge with Russia?

I think that one fact is interesting and important: after Latvia regained its independence, the Russian-speaking population did not leave the country. Does that tell us anything? I think that they are quite satisfied with their lives, even though, of course, there are things they don't like. And Latvian population is more or less satisfied that there are Russian speakers in the country as well. It is overall feeling, that they are citizens of the country.

Some of them - aren't.

Yes, I know the problem. At any case they stay. I am sure, though it is not easy to claim this - that the bilingual and bi-cultural element in Latvia is also of huge economic value. This morning I came from Helsinki. Finnish businessmen complained that despite more than 800 kilometers of a common border with Russia they have very few people speaking Russian and knowing Russian culture. They consider this a real obstacle in developing trade and cooperation with Russia.

Don't you think that Latvia should build on its special strength: Being a member of the EU, believing in democracy and rule of law, being geopolitically in a promising position, why shouldn't one imagine that Latvia could become to its eastern and southern neighbors a kind of "Baltic Switzerland" where it is pleasant to spend your holidays and where you can safely cooperate with banks and business?

And don't underestimate the fact that Latvia has such a special know-how. It creates special opportunities for Latvia - but also for the EU in general - a big potential benefit. The labor market in the EU is huge, and young Latvians have excellent chances because they have such special, Russia related skills.

Does Baltic Switzerland need missiles?

Some time ago Latvia joined OECD which is called "club of wealthy countries" in mass media. And now we'll be subjected to more severe financial monitoring as well. How do you think, what will be the impact on Latvian economy, banking system?

I think that it is not possible to find a country in the world and in Europe where all would be satisfied with everything. It is a normal situation. But if you compare Latvia in 1991 and now, I guess you'll agree that everything has changed for best. Will the situation be perfect? I doubt. Nevertheless Latvia has overcome the recent crisis, started moving again. In the face of very serious challenges, the potential and ability of the country was demonstrated.

In such critical situations it is very difficult to maintain the necessary level of public

support for making the necessary difficult structural changes. Competition between political parties is fierce, and some don't hesitate to promise easy solutions for complex problems. That is what is called populism.

Against this background, one has to give credit to the countries recent achievements. Things could be much worse. More and more tourists visit this country and its wonderful capital – and show respect for the hard work done by the country. Martin Luther King once said “I have a dream.” Why shouldn't you dream that your big neighbor – Russia – whom you know well, one day appreciates you in the same way as we, Germany and France, appreciate our neighbor Switzerland. Safety, stable institutions of state and solid banks and a competitive business community, calm relaxation, good climate, beautiful beaches. Just go for it!

It's right, but Switzerland hasn't joined EU and NATO.

I have to remind you that Switzerland has very comprehensive sector agreements with the European Union. They guarantee, although Switzerland is not like Norway, a member of the European Economic zone. Thus, they have easy access to the huge internal market of the EU, know and apply most of its rules – and make a contribution to the budget of the EU. It's their choice and we respect it.

When you speak about security, Switzerland is neutral. Which in no means implies that the country is not interested in the security situation in Europe and beyond. When NATO countries debated hotly in the 1980 the deployment of medium-range missile as an answer to Soviet SS-20 missiles, a high level political and military delegation from Switzerland came to Bonn in order to gain reassurance that we were on the right path, as they saw it.

And in the very end, returning from your wide diplomatic experience and current political hot topics in the world to Latvia and our banking sector. You have joined the supervisory board of the Baltic International Bank recently. What is your motivation to spend more of your time and efforts here, in Latvia and in the bank?

I believe in financial service market of Latvia due to several reasons. One is the bilingual and bi-cultural markets you have, and as I mentioned, I think that it opens wide possibilities for Latvian companies – and through them also to EU. Their dynamism is quite impressive.

It is also due to a certain factor Latvia shares with its other Baltic neighbors: Here one finds what today is most important for a dynamic development of financial services : educated and professional specialists with experience in various phases of economic development cycle of a country, excellent level of technologies and infrastructure, as well as ambitions to reach high goals. And last but not least commendable efforts to implement international standards of compliance. More and more banks support today sustainable investments, thus environmentally friendly development. The Baltic International Bank is a pioneer in this field and makes impressive efforts to imply a farsighted strategy. The management has understood that sustainable economic development and respect for the environment are not enemies. In fact the support each other.

Already during my diplomatic career, but even more intensively I have been working with sustainable and “green” investments. I hope to put this experience to good use in the interest of the bank and its clients.

Thank you for your interesting answers.

Вести Сегодня (Николай КАБАНОВ, фото Владимира СТАРКОВА)