

LIFE MOTIVES OF UNTYPICAL PREMIER

LEADER OF REFORM PARTY AND PRIME MINISTER ANDRUS ANSIP HAS BEEN HEADING THE GOVERNMENT OF ESTONIA FOR EIGHT YEARS ALREADY

Extrême popularity among Tartu residents made Andrus Ansip the mayor of the Estonian intellectual capital three times. He treasures the support of residents so much that after winning a seat in parliament he preferred to remain Tartu mayor rather than an MP. Earlier he refused to run for president. However there is no flying from fate and Ansip continued his political career in Tallinn. In autumn 2004 he received the portfolio of the economy minister. After government resignation six months later, President Arnold Ruutel entrusted forming a new government to Ansip appointing him prime minister. Ansip's career records were coming like from a horn of plenty.



In the spring of 2007 he won a record high number of votes in the history of parliamentary elections in Estonia and again headed the government. Opinion polls showed that in the next six months he enjoyed the highest popularity rating compared to his predecessors. In March 2010 Ansip set a time record of holding office as the prime minister. In Estonian parliamentary election in 2011 a new record holder appeared – Tallinn Mayor and leader of opposition Center Party Edgar Savisaar – and Ansip was only second however his Reform Party again won and he headed the government for the third time.

THOSE IN LIMELIGHT ARE TO BLAME

Estonia is a parliamentary republic and the prime minister is vested with the real power in the country. Some politicians believe Ansip succeeded to find the fairway in the sea of economic problems and became the worthiest prime minister of independent Estonia. It is true that for Europe Estonia is an example of a balanced budget policy. A proof is the smallest state debt in the EU and one of the lowest budget deficits. Although "the best" epithet is excessive it definitely reflects the economic

situation in the country in the first half of Ansip's term as the prime minister.

In 2009 economic recession began and production in Estonia dropped 14 percent. Indicators were worse only in Latvia and Lithuania among EU members. To stop budget deficit from growing and to retain the possibility of joining the eurozone the government had to radically cut expenditure. According to the latest Eurostat review, Estonia currently is one of the poorest countries in the European Union as it occupies the third place from the end by the purchasing power of the population and overtakes only Bulgaria and Romania. Naturally, many people blame the government and the prime minister for that.

"The government can influence prices through budget policy. The levers are in our hands and Estonia used them in the best way in the European Union: we do not live on credit and do not increase inflation by our deficit. The government used all levers which it had to trim inflation. As for blaming the prime minister, it is inevitable. Those in limelight are to blame, it is a rule. Someone said on TV that I am to blame even for wormy mushrooms in autumn. I am used to it. They also say that we are as good as pie in Europe's eyes. But I do not feel that keeping finances in proper order benefits ordinary people. Nobody feels that which is only natural. However had the state affairs been in a mess we would have experienced much more pain. Let them better be in order and I shall keep carrying the blame", Ansip said in response to accusations from opposition.

Thus, the recent pledge by the prime minister to bring Estonia to the top five richest countries turned out to be premature. Supporters say Ansip should not have trusted his party advisers. Opponents have a different opinion: Estonian society (and consequently parliament) has no strong and united opposition that can counteract reformers and the prime minister. It does not exist because there were no major upheavals in Estonia during Ansip's rule. The opinion is backed by those who prefer to forget the 2007 developments which resulted in the removal of the Bronze Soldier monument from downtown city to the military cemetery.

"BRONZE DEVELOPMENTS" – CRACK LINE IN ESTONIAN SOCIETY

Naturally, harsher crises happen in the world, but in Estonia the dramatic developments closely linked to the name of Ansip developed into a line of political crack. On May 8, 2007 Ansip paid tribute to those killed in World War Two and laid a wreath to the Bronze Soldier monument at the military cemetery. A week later he admitted he had "underestimated the significance of the Bronze Soldier for Russian people". The direct result of the removal of the Bronze Soldier was the withdrawal of some Russian investors and a sharp decrease in the flow of Russian cargoes through Estonian seaports. A heavy blow was dealt to the national economy and the trust of an overwhelming majority of Russian-speakers in Estonia to the prime minister was irretrievably lost.

"Had he publicly apologized to us we would have currently lived in a different country", said insulted witnesses of the April drama. Many of them are far from politics and simply love Estonia, but they did not forgive Ansip for his role in the "Bronze developments". The same opinion is shared by some critics of the prime minister from the Estonian political elite: "The removal of the monument in such a dirty way (at night and in secret from defenders of the Bronze Soldier) ruined the relations between Andrus Ansip and foreign-speaking population of Estonia and with Russia". It is true that six years ago relations with Russia which were far from cordial reached the freezing point.



BREAK THE ICE

Today the political atmosphere gets fresh Baltic wind. Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet discusses bilateral relationship with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov while Estonian Economic Affairs Minister Juhan Parts meets his Russian counterpart to discuss economic cooperation prospects.

In April 2013 Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev chaired the Conference of the heads of

government of the Baltic Sea region in St. Petersburg. Andrus Ansip was also invited to participate. Estonian society was concerned whether the prime minister would go and the answer came from the government press service on March 1: "The prime minister accepted the invitation. The visit program has not been determined yet but in case of a possibility he is ready to meet Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev".

The bilateral meeting took place and was called historic. The prime ministers communicated in the Russian language and agreed that bilateral trade turnover was on the rise and measured in billions of euro and the number of Russian tourists in Estonia was growing. To promote relations in other spheres Medvedev suggested

"to go beyond ideological schemes". Ansip did not object. The Estonian prime minister said he had friendly relations and mutual understanding with the Russian counterpart.

"Our views regarding the Narva bridge coincide and investments should be made by both parties to ensure easy travel for people and goods. If the Russian side views the border

treaty as a precondition for investment then we shall begin with it", Ansip said. There is no doubt it would not take long to sign the treaty.

"I would not say a new epoch has come. In would say business relations between the Russian Federation and Estonian Republic are currently in the best state in the past 20 years", Ansip said and added he expects Medvedev to visit Estonia although he did not offer a concrete invitation at the meeting. "Medvedev knows he is a welcome guest in Estonia", the prime minister said.



Political observers and diplomats in the Estonian capital said relations between the two countries are getting warmer. It is evidenced by a visit to Estonia of Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill who had a meeting with Ansip in the government residence. The patriarch wrote in the book of honorary guests: "I wish major success to the government of Estonia in the solution of the tasks faced by the country. Let economic and social development be always supported by spiritual and moral development of individuals and society as the world can perfect only that way. I also wish neighboring Estonia and Russia to enhance mutual relations and cooperation for the benefit of both peoples".

PRIME MINISTER HAS NO RIGHT TO SAY HE NO LONGER WANTS TO WORK

The currently ruling Reform Party is living through hard times because of a series of scandals which was crowned by vote rigging during partisan electronic election. At a meeting with parliamentary faction leaders Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves said the new scandal was beyond the pale. The head of state was extremely negative about the situation in the ruling Reform Party headed by the prime minister. Ansip's reaction was much harsher. He was more indignant than the president. "Life is such that crimes are committed. The reaction is impor-

tant. If reaction is not adequate it makes a problem, but we reacted promptly", he said.

The usually high rating of the Reform Party considerably dropped after the rigging scandal and it was difficult to remain even tempered in such a situation. Naturally, sober-minded character and sport endurance helped Ansip.

Asked whether he wants to quit and lead a quiet life he answered: "The prime minister cannot make such decision. Should I say I no longer want to work? It would be unacceptable conduct. The prime minister can quit if the people no longer trust him. But when you do what you

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believe in you do not get tired. And you should not even start doing what you do not believe in as it would all go wrong and be tiresome for you and others. That is what I tell my children".

LIFE IN TWO CITIES

Ansip has three children, all daughters. Elder Reet continues family tradition and is a doctor, but not a gynecologist like her mom, but a dentist. Middle Tiina is a journalist and is bringing up charming twins. Younger Liisa finished the ninth form this year with merits in the Miina Hjarma school in Tartu, one of the best in Estonia. The father was very proud with her and took a one-day leave to attend Liisa's graduation party together with wife Anu.

There is also Labrador Kata and gray cat Senny waiting for the family head in Tartu. The Ansips have

been living in two cities for ten years now. "We call each other every evening and on days-off and I go home to Tartu if there is a chance. Naturally, it is abnormal life and I am owe my family. I would be better for a child to grow close to the father and husband

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and wife to be always together. I hope this time will come", Ansip said.

So far the prime minister lives in a two-room apartment in Tallinn. "I do everything myself. In the evening I cook packaged soup or boil ravioli and it takes me a lot of time because I also have to wash the pot. Packaged soup is much faster. I am not very demanding in menu". Vendors in next-door supermarket know the prime minister personally while shoppers often come to him for a talk. "Especially when I queue to the cashier. Russian-speakers are often surprised to see the prime minister shopping and buying bread, pate, cheese and sausage, cottage cheese and ravioli. They believe in Estonia it should be like in a big power where cooks feed prime ministers with delicacies served by wait-

ers". It is no problem for the Estonian prime minister to wash his shirt and he has been ironing his trousers himself all his life. Even in a hotel abroad Ansip asks for an ironing board. "Since childhood I am used to iron trousers. The mother never did it and I do not allow my wife to do that. As for services, they demand a lot of time which I always

lack. It is easier to do everything myself".

Naturally, the family discussed the possibility for the wife and younger daughter to resettle to Tallinn. "But we decided that Tartu has stronger arguments. Emotional ties and feelings at home are important", Ansip said. He even prefers to go in for sports in Tartu. "Let' take cycling: I biked in Pirita (in Tallinn). It is a good track but in Tartu you can make Pangodi-Elva circle or through Pylva or bike from Tartu to Vyru. It gives you a genuine feeling of freedom!"

MOST SPORTIVE PRIME MINISTER... IN THE WORLD

The prime minister said sport means a lot for him. However the second half of October, November and the first half of December have very busy work schedule as there are numerous bilateral visits and much time is spent in aircraft. "Days-off do not belong to you and your family. These months are physically most exhaustive and there is no time



for sport. In other months I bike or roller-skate or ski at least once a week on business days and sometimes more often. And naturally on days-off. I need sport".

At the age of 56 Andrus Ansip maintains his high reputation of experienced skier and high-class biker. Last winter Estonian media quoted the diary

of a Tartu skiing marathon participant published in Nevskoe vremya newspaper, specifically the chapter called Prime Minister Comes Out from Forest. "Organizers showed us the best filming point ten kilometers from the start. Looking for the point we came with a map to a skier dressed in Estonian team uniform. A strong man of average age said he was a local and was glad to speak Russian. He explained everything in detail and showed it on the map. We thanked him and he asked where we were from.

We said we were journalists from St. Petersburg. And you?



I am Prime Minister Andrus Ansip, he said and extended his hand. It was good luck to meet the first skier in a forest who was the prime minister. Ansip laughs: "I am likely the most skiing prime minister in the world". He ran in over twenty skiing marathons in various countries of the world. He is likely the most skiing and the most sportive prime minister. I saw myself how Ansip roller-skated along the embankment of the gulf as an ordinary Estonian. And there were many ordinary Estonians there in that summer afternoon. Ansip began his last year vacation on a bike. He cycled from Tallinn to Tartu and covered 189 kilometers in five hours 28 minutes. The prime minister cycled the route four times, but this result is the best. He was actually inspired by the upcoming trip to Olympic Games.

He supported Estonian Olympic athletes together with the family. As the visit to London was unofficial and private, the prime minister covered all expenses. According to his declaration, the only source of income of the Estonian prime minister is

his wage of 3997.27 euro and representational expenses equaling 20 percent of the salary. He has no private cars and no air or water vehicles.

IT IS STUPID TO LIVE BEYOND MEANS

"In a global debt crisis the major stupidity which we must avoid is to live beyond means. A dark future is currently in store for indebted countries and we cannot live in debt. It will cost us too much", Ansip often repeats. The absence of borrowed loans and other liabilities confirms an absolute harmony of

his economic theory and personal habits.

Once they asked Ansip whether it was difficult to survive on average wage in Estonia. (Average before deduction wage comprised 1020 euro in Tallinn in 2012 and the lowest in provinces was 654 euro). The prime minister said: "I would not like to elaborate on the issue as it may look as bravado or

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boasting to someone, but I am working in my position not for money". Anyway, the average monthly wage is statistically growing in the country however living standards are falling. But the prime minister believes that "hard times in Estonia will not last long and life will improve in future anyway".

Ella Agranovskaya,
for Amber Bridge.
Photo by Nikolai Sharubin