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Barack Obama

Joint Presser with Toomas Ilves

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President Ilves: Good morning. To begin with, I'd like to welcome President Obama to Estonia. It is a genuine pleasure and an honor to receive you right before the NATO Summit. Your visit sends a strong message. We are grateful to the United States and to you personally for your leadership, your commitment, and your support to Estonia.

To begin with, I also want to say that we are appalled by the latest news from Iraq. We condemn these barbaric acts. We see ISIS as a serious threat to all of us, and stand together with the United States and our allies on this issue.

The main issue on our agenda today is security. The question on everyone's mind is the situation in Ukraine and its wider impact on European security. I just did hear that President Poroshenko and President Putin have agreed on a cease-fire. I just hope it works. But in the general situation, we need to be clear and consistent in the language that we use to describe the situation in Ukraine.



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As the EU underlined last weekend, this is Russian aggression. The EU and the United States are ready to take further restrictive measures in response to Russia's behavior. Russia must admit that it is a party to the conflict, and take genuine steps that will lead to a de-escalation of the conflict. We must also continue to support Ukraine by providing the country with the assistance that it needs.

When it comes to the security of our region, the United States engagement here runs deep. Estonia is a close and reliable ally to the United States. We take our NATO commitment seriously -- very seriously. We have not sat back and waited for others to take care of our security. Since joining the Alliance, Estonian soldiers have consistently defended the freedom of others -- in Afghanistan, in Iraq, and most recently in the Central African Republic. We dedicate sufficient resources to defense, and are consistently increasing our national defense capacity.

We are grateful to the United States for sending troops here and for actively participating in the Baltic air policing mission. Your presence underlies the credibility of NATO's Article 5. Without a doubt, your bilateral contributions have helped set an example for other NATO Allies. A robust and visible Allied presence here in Estonia is the best way of discouraging any possible aggressors. We look forward to the NATO Summit confirming this.

But we face a completely new security situation in Europe, and we are pleased that this is reflected in many of the summit's documents. We expect the NATO Summit in Wales to adopt the readiness action plan that will guide allied nations for years to come through a set of practical steps and measures of reassurance and deterrence.

In addition to our close defense cooperation, I am also pleased that our bilateral relations are strong in many, many other areas, including and especially cyber and energy security.

Globally, we are working together to promote our common values -- democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Estonia is a world leader in Internet freedom and in e-governance. We have a liberal economy offering many exciting opportunities for increased trade, cooperation and investment. And this is also one reason why we believe that T-TIP is a crucial, crucial effort on the part of both the European Union and the United States.



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And let me once again welcome President Obama to Estonia, to Northern Europe, one of Europe's most prosperous and successful regions. Our countries share common values and interests, and I'm certain that together we can and will contribute to the vision of a Europe whole, free and at peace.

Thank you.

President Obama: Tere Päevast. To President Ilves -- I want to thank you and the people of Estonia for welcoming me here today. It is a great honor to be in Estonia, especially as we mark our 10th anniversary as NATO Allies.

Mr. President, thank you for being such an outstanding partner. I was proud to welcome you to the White House last year, and we've spoken since on the situation in Ukraine. Your life reflects the story of your nation -- the son of refugees who returned home to help to chart a path for a free and democratic Estonia. As many of you know, that long journey also took Toomas and his family to America, to New Jersey, where they still remember him as "Tom." And it was wonderful to meet your daughter today and find out she had gone back to New Jersey as well. He says that he "knew Bruce Springsteen before he had his first record." So you embody the deep ties between Americans and Estonians. I want to thank you for your friendship.

I've come here today because Estonia is one of the great success stories among the nations that reclaimed their independence after the Cold War. You've built a vibrant democracy and new prosperity, and you've become a model for how citizens can interact with their government in the 21st century, something President Ilves has championed. With their digital IDs, Estonians can use their smart phones to get just about anything done online -- from their children's grades to their health records. I should have called the Estonians when we were setting up our health care website.

Most of all, I'm here because Estonia has been a model ally. Estonian forces have served with courage and skill in Iraq and Afghanistan, and we honor our servicemembers who made the ultimate sacrifice in Afghanistan, including nine brave Estonians. As NATO nears the end of our combat mission in three months, I want to thank Estonia for the commitments you have made to help sustain Afghan security forces going forward.



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As a high-tech leader, Estonia is also playing a leading role in protecting NATO from cyber threats. Estonia contributes its full share -- its full 2 percent of GDP -- to the defense of our Alliance. In other words, Estonia meets its responsibilities. And as we head into the NATO Summit in Wales, Estonia is an example of how every NATO member needs to do its fair share for our collective defense.

So I've come here, first and foremost, to reaffirm the commitment of the United States to the security of Estonia. As NATO Allies, we have Article 5 duties to our collective defense. That is a commitment that is unbreakable. It is unwavering. It is eternal. And Estonia will never stand alone.

As President, I've made sure that we are fulfilling that promise. Early in my presidency, I urged our Alliance to update our contingency planning for the defense of this region, and additional NATO forces began rotating through the Baltics, including Estonia, for more training and exercises. In response to Russia's actions in Ukraine earlier this year, the United States increased our presence further. We have contributed additional aircraft to the Baltic air policing mission -- a mission to which 14 other NATO Allies have also contributed over the past decade. And we're now continuously rotating additional personnel and aircraft through the Baltics. I look forward to joining Prime Minister Rõivas in thanking our servicemembers later today.

On my visit to Warsaw this spring, I announced a new initiative to bolster the American military presence here in Europe, including in the Baltics, and we're working with Congress to make sure that we deliver. Today, I can announce that this initiative will include additional air force units and aircraft for training exercises here in the Nordic-Baltic region. And we agree with our Estonian allies that an ideal location to host and support these exercises would be Amari Air Base here in Estonia. With the support of Congress and our Estonian friends, I'm confident that we can make this happen. And I look forward to discussing this further when we meet with Presidents Bērziņš and Grybauskaitė this afternoon.

As President Ilves indicated, we spend a great deal of time on Russia's aggression against Ukraine. I'll have much more to say about this in my speech today. For now, I just want to commend Estonia -- including President Ilves -- for being such a strong voice both in NATO and the EU on behalf of the Ukrainian people. Estonia has provided assistance as Ukrainians work to strengthen their democratic institutions and reform their economy.



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And because we've stood together, Russia is paying a heavy price for its actions, and NATO is poised to do more to help Ukraine strengthen its forces and defend their country.

And more broadly, I want to commend Estonia for being such a strong leader beyond NATO. Whether it's contributing forces to the EU mission in the Central African Republic or supporting relief efforts for the Syrian people, helping nations like Tunisia in their own transition to democracy or standing up for Internet freedom and human rights, this nation of 1.3 million people, as we say, truly punches above its weight. The world is better for it, and it's yet another reason why the United States will always be proud to stand with our ally, Estonia.

Finally, I want to say that today the prayers of the American people are with the family of a devoted and courageous journalist, Steven Sotloff. Overnight, our government determined that, tragically, Steven was taken from us in a horrific act of violence. We cannot even begin to imagine the agony that everyone who loved Steven is feeling right now, especially his mother, his father and his younger sister. So today, our country grieves with them.

Like Jim Foley before him, Steve's life stood in sharp contrast to those who have murdered him so brutally. They make the absurd claim that they kill in the name of religion, but it was Steven, his friends say, who deeply loved the Islamic world. His killers try to claim that they defend the oppressed, but it was Steven who traveled across the Middle East, risking his life to tell the story of Muslim men and women demanding justice and dignity.

Whatever these murderers think they'll achieve by killing innocent Americans like Steven, they have already failed. They have failed because, like people around the world, Americans are repulsed by their barbarism. We will not be intimidated. Their horrific acts only unite us as a country and stiffen our resolve to take the fight against these terrorists. And those who make the mistake of harming Americans will learn that we will not forget, and that our reach is long and that justice will be served.

Mr. President.

President Ives: Well, I thought we could open things up for some questions, I understand two from Estonian journalists and two from President Obama's entourage. As the host, I'll give the first opportunity to one of our tough questioners, Aarne Rannamäe.



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Question: Yes, thank you. Aarne Rannamäe, Estonian Public Broadcasting. I have the same question to both presidents. The partnership between Russia and NATO is not the same, as we all know. Why to keep actually it alive, the agreement signed in 1997 between Russia and NATO? Perhaps it would push or give some new opportunities to our region's security in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

President Ilves: Well, from our side, first of all, NATO did decide to freeze its relations with Russia several months ago. But on the issue in terms of what is the -- what are the implications of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, I suggest all those who say we can't do anything because of the NATO-Russia Founding Act read the NATO-Russia Founding Act, which says that these conditions hold -- to quote -- "in the current and foreseeable" future, or "the security environment of the current and foreseeable" future. That was the security environment of 1997, when Boris Yeltsin was President, and there had been no violations of either the U.N. Charter or the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, the 1990 Paris Charter.

So I would argue this is an unforeseen and new security environment, and therefore one has to hold on to certain provisions. It does not mean we have to give up the whole act, but certainly when an agreement in certain parts no longer holds, well, then it's time to make a change.

I mean, the NATO-Russia Founding Act has been violated by Russia. We continue to support the vision of that document, but its substance has changed dramatically, and I am confident that all of NATO's actions are and will be conducted in accordance with its international commitments as an alliance.

President Obama: The circumstances clearly have changed. And I think this will be a topic of discussion in Wales. Beyond the issue of that particular document, our top priority has been to make sure that there is no ambiguity when it comes to our Article 5 commitments to our NATO Allies. And as a consequence of the rotations that have been increased, the presence of U.S. troops in the course of those rotations and additional NATO Allies, what we want to send a clear message to everyone is, is that we take those commitments seriously.



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And I think what's going to be clear during the course of this summit is that, given the changed landscape, not only do we have to make sure that these rotations are effective and designed towards current threats, but more broadly, NATO has to look at its defense capabilities as a whole and make sure that they are updated and properly resourced. For I think a certain period of time there was a complacency here in Europe about the demands that were required to make sure that NATO was able to function effectively. My former Secretary of Defense I think came here and gave some fairly sharp speeches repeatedly about the need for making certain that every NATO member was doing its fair share. I think Secretary General Rasmussen, during the course of his tenure, continually emphasized the need for us to upgrade our joint capabilities.

And obviously what's happened in Ukraine is tragic, but I do think it gives us an opportunity to look with fresh eyes and understand what it is that's necessary to make sure that our NATO commitments are met. And that's one of the reasons that I'm here in Estonia today.

I'm going to call on Ann Compton. Ann is on her farewell tour.

Question: Thank you very much, Mr. President. Now that you say a second American has been slain, what is your response? Will airstrikes continue inside Iraq? Might they expand into Syria? Will you have a full strategy now on ISIS which will satisfy those like Prime Minister Cameron, who call it an imminent threat to all the interests? And will it satisfy some of your supporters like Senator Feinstein who fears that on this you may have been too cautious? Thank you.

President Obama: Well, keep in mind that from the outset, the moment that ISIS went into Mosul, we were very clear that this was a very serious threat not just to Iraq but to the region and to U.S. interests. And so we've been putting forward a strategy since that time that was designed to do a number of things. Number one, to make sure that Americans were protected in Iraq, in our embassies, in our consulates. Number two, that we worked with Iraqis to create a functioning government that was inclusive and that could serve as the basis for Iraq to begin to go on the offensive.



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And the airstrikes that we've conducted in support of protecting Americans conducting humanitarian missions and providing space for the Iraqi government to form have borne fruit. We've seen that in Sinjar Mountain. We've seen it most recently in the town of Amerli, which heroically held out against a siege by ISIL. We're seeing progress in the formation of an inclusive Sunni-Shia-Kurd central government. And so what we've seen is the strategy that we've laid out moving effectively.

But what I've said from the start is, is that this is not going to be a one-week or one-month or six-month proposition. Because of what's happened in the vacuum of Syria, as well as the battle-hardened elements of ISIS that grew out of al Qaeda in Iraq during the course of the Iraq war, it's going to take time for us to be able to roll them back. And it is going to take time for us to be able to form the regional coalition that's going to be required so that we can reach out to Sunni tribes in some of the areas that ISIS has occupied, and make sure that we have allies on the ground in combination with the airstrikes that we've already conducted.

So the bottom line is this: Our objective is clear, and that is to degrade and destroy ISIL so that it's no longer a threat not just to Iraq but also the region and to the United States. In order for us to accomplish that, the first phase has been to make sure that we've got an Iraqi government that's in place and that we are blunting the momentum that ISIL was carrying out. And the airstrikes have done that.

But now what we need to do is make sure that we've got the regional strategy in place that can support an ongoing effort -- not just in the air but on the ground -- to move that forward.

And last week when this question was asked, I was specifically referring to the possibility of the military strategy inside of Syria that might require congressional approval. It is very important from my perspective that when we send our pilots in to do a job, that we know that this is a mission that's going to work, that we're very clear on what our objectives are, what our targets are; we've made the case to Congress and we've made the case to the American people; and we've got allies behind us so that it's not just a one-off, but it's something that over time is going to be effective.



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And so the bottom line is this, Ann -- it's not only that we're going to be bringing to justice those who perpetrated this terrible crime against these two fine young men. More broadly, the United States will continue to lead a regional and international effort against the kind of barbaric and ultimately empty vision that ISIL represents. And that's going to take some time, but we're going to get it done. I'm very confident of it.

Question: Did you just say that the strategy is to destroy ISIS, or to simply contain them or push them back?

President Obama: Our objective is to make sure that ISIL is not an ongoing threat to the region. And we can accomplish that. It's going to take some time and it's going to take some effort. As we've seen with al Qaeda, there are always going to be remnants that can cause havoc of any of these networks, in part because of the nature of terrorist activities. You get a few individuals, and they may be able to carry out a terrorist act.

But what we can do is to make sure that the kind of systemic and broad-based aggression that we've seen out of ISIL that terrorizes primarily Muslims, Shia, Sunni -- terrorizes Kurds, terrorizes not just Iraqis, but people throughout the region, that that is degraded to the point where it is no longer the kind of factor that we've seen it being over the last several months.

Question: Argo Ideon. Estonian daily newspaper, Postimees. My question is also for both presidents. Ukraine is facing a difficult time, and the situation on the ground may become even more complicated in the run-up to the parliamentary elections there in October. In your view, what more could be done and should be done to support Ukraine politically, economically, and also from a security point of view? What do you think about the idea of providing Ukrainian armed forces with weapons to counter Russia's attack in the east of the country more effectively? Thank you.

President Ilves: Well, most importantly, Ukraine needs above all continued political support. And from that support comes decisions that involve everything else -- economic aid, humanitarian aid, and also military aid. And from that come also decisions on equipment.



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In Wales, the NATO-Ukraine committee will gather and will decide how to increase NATO defense cooperation with Ukraine. This is the kind of decision that we in NATO take together. On the humanitarian side, we have doubled our humanitarian and development assistance in looking for what more we can do. We have already brought wounded, seriously wounded Ukrainian soldiers to our top-notch rehabilitation center here and will continue to do so. That is certainly one thing that is -- we know the Ukrainians lack that and we have it at a superbly high level, and also, I should add quickly, that with the assistance with the United States and the Walter Reed Hospital that we have this here.

The next couple of months leading up to the parliamentary elections will be very tricky. Russia, I predict, will do everything in its power to undermine the elections. We saw this already in the case of the presidential elections. It will try to destabilize the government in Kyiv, and to keep Ukraine forces from regaining ground in the east. So we should be prepared for a tough several -- or a month, month and a half. The next government, of course, that will be then will have the full legitimacy that comes with the new parliamentary elections -- must show that it is a clear and better alternative to the one that the people of Ukraine ousted half a year ago.

And I also see that making sure -- ensuring that the elections are carried out in a free and fair manner will be a topmost priority for us, for the OSCE. And I think one of the issues should be, in fact, the kind of interference that we saw in the presidential elections, that not be allowed or be fully addressed and recognized by the monitoring of the elections. I think that we all -- after especially the presidential elections, we all know what the Russian forces can do to disrupt the democratic process. And I think we should be far better prepared to document all of that when we get to the elections.

President Obama: Political support is absolutely vital. And one of our goals at the summit over the next several days is to once again project unity across NATO on behalf of Ukraine's efforts to maintain its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The sanctions that we've applied so far have had a real effect on Russia. And I think it's important for us to continue to impose costs on Russia so long as it is violating basic principles of international law.



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And so far at least we've been able to combine efforts between Europe and the United States and some of our allies around the world, and the results are a Russian economy that is effectively contracting, capital flight putting a burden on the Russian economy that at the moment may be overridden by politics inside of Russia as a consequence of state-run propaganda, but over time will point to the fact that this is a strategy that's not serving Russia well, in addition to not serving Ukraine, obviously, well.

Beyond that, the Ukrainian economy is something that we have been paying a lot of attention to. We helped work with the IMF to ensure that Ukraine had the resources to get through some of the emergency financing issues that they had to deal with, but we're going to have more work to do.

The military efforts that have been required to deal with Russian-financed, Russian-armed, Russian-trained, Russian-supported and often Russian-directed separatists has meant that -- has meant a drain on the Ukrainian economy, not to mention the fact that you have major industrial areas inside of Ukraine that obviously have been impacted by the conflict there.

So we're going to have to make sure that the international community stands behind the Ukrainian economy in the short term, even as we encourage and advise and work with Ukraine to carry out some of the basic reforms that are going to be required in order for them to achieve the kinds of models of success that we've seen in Estonia and Poland and other places. And that's a tough row to hoe. It took a couple of decades for some of the countries who are currently in the EU to achieve the sort of market-based reforms that have led to such great prosperity.

Ukraine is not going to be able to do that overnight, but we have to make sure that we are helping build a bridge towards that new future. And if we combine those efforts with a commitment to continuing the NATO-Ukraine military relationship -- they are not a member of NATO, but we have consistently worked with their military in terms of training and support -- then I think that not only will Ukraine feel that in words we are behind them, but they'll see that in deed we are working with them, as well.

Steve Holland of Reuters.



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Question: Thank you, sir. Just following up on Ann -- will you have this military strategy on ISIS ready for discussion with NATO allies this week? And in your view, what should NATO be prepared to do to take on Islamic State? Lastly, how much stock do you put in this reported cease-fire between Ukraine and Russia? How do you assess Putin's motives?

President Obama: It's too early to tell what this cease-fire means. We haven't seen any details; we've just seen a couple of wire reports. We have consistently supported the effort of President Poroshenko to achieve a meaningful cease-fire that could lead to a political settlement of the conflict.

So far, it hasn't held, either because Russia has not been serious about it or has pretended that it's not controlling the separatists; and the separatists, when they've thought it was to their advantage, have not abided by the cease-fire. So we haven't seen a lot of follow-up on so-called announced cease-fires.

Having said that, if, in fact, Russia is prepared to stop financing, arming, training -- in many cases joining with Russian troops -- activities in Ukraine, and is serious about a political settlement, that is something that we all hope for.

I've said consistently our preference is a strong, productive, cooperative Russia. But the way to achieve that is by abiding to international norms, to improving the economy, to focusing on how they can actually produce goods and services that other people want and give opportunity to their people and educate them. That's not the path that they've been pursuing over the last several years. It's certainly not in evidence when it comes to their strategy in Ukraine.

I'll leave it up to others to interpret Mr. Putin's psychology on this. But in terms of actions, what we've seen is aggression and appeals to nationalist sentiments that have historically been very dangerous in Europe and are rightly a cause of concern.

So there's an opportunity here. Let's see if there's follow-up. In my discussions with President Poroshenko I've consistently said that he needs to follow up on the kinds of reforms that he proposed so that eastern Ukraine feels as if it is fairly represented and that Russian-language speakers are protected against discrimination. These are all things that are part of this platform. We encourage them to move forward.



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But no realistic political settlement can be achieved if effectively Russia says we are going to continue to send tanks and troops and arms and advisors under the guise of separatists who are not homegrown, and the only possible settlement is if Ukraine cedes its territory or its sovereignty or its ability to make its own decisions about its security and its economic future.

With respect to Iraq, we will be discussing this topic. Even before ISIL dominated the headlines, one of the concerns that we have had is the development of terrorist networks and organizations, separate and apart from al Qaeda, whose focus oftentimes is regional and who are combining terrorist tactics with the tactics of small armies. And we've seen ISIS to be the first one that has broken through, but we anticipated this awhile back and it was reflected in my West Point speech.

So one of our goals is to get NATO to work with us to help create the kinds of partnerships regionally that can combat not just ISIL, but these kinds of networks as they arise and potentially destabilize allies and partners of ours in the region.

Already we've seen NATO countries recognize the severity of this problem, that it is going to be a long-run problem. Immediately, they've dedicated resources to help us with humanitarian airdrops, to provide arms to the Peshmerga and to the Iraqi security forces. And we welcome those efforts. What we hope to do at the NATO Summit is to make sure that we are more systematic about how we do it, that we're more focused about how we do it.

NATO is unique in the annals of history as a successful alliance. But we have to recognize that threats evolve, and threats have evolved as a consequence of what we've seen in Ukraine, but threats are also evolving in the Middle East that have a direct effect on Europe.

And to go back to what I said earlier to Ann, we know that if we are joined by the international community, we can continue to shrink ISIL's sphere of influence, its effectiveness, its financing, its military capabilities to the point where it is a manageable problem. And the question is going to be making sure we've got the right strategy, but also making sure that we've got the international will to do it. This is something that is a continuation of a problem we've seen certainly since 9/11, but before. And it continues to metastasize in different ways.



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And what we've got to do is make sure that we are organizing the Arab world, the Middle East, the Muslim world along with the international community to isolate this cancer, this particular brand of extremism that is, first and foremost, destructive to the Muslim world and the Arab world and North Africa, and the people who live there. They're the ones who are most severely affected. They're the ones who are constantly under threat of being killed. They're the ones whose economies are completely upended to the point where they can't produce their own food and they can't produce the kinds of goods and services to sell in the world marketplace. And they're falling behind because of this very small and narrow, but very dangerous, segment of the population. And we've got to combat it in a sustained, effective way. And I'm confident we're going to be able to do that.

Thank you very much. I appreciate it, Mr. President.