*Information about interviewee:*

*Marko Mihkelson, Estonian MP and Chairman of the Estonian Foreign Affairs committee. Interview conducted in Tallinn, Estonia.*

*R= Respondent – Marko Mihkelson*

*I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton*

I: Has Russia's Compatriot Policy had an in Estonia?

R: It is obvious that this is and has been one of the main tools for the Russian Federation from the early 90s, and the collapse of the Soviet Empire and Russian Empire, to use this tool to generate some sort of influence on the territories once belonging to, not only the Soviet Union, but to the Russian Empire. The most recent example is the decree of Putin to start, so called Passportization in Ukraine, in Eastern Ukraine, so in case of Estonia, in the early 90s they had very strong demands, both directly in bilateral relations but also internationally that Estonia should grant automatically citizenship to all Russians living in Estonia. They do not use this that much anymore, but in the early 90s we had 30 plus percent of the population who didn't get, by restitution law, the right for citizenship or the automatic right for citizenship, from those 30 percent, quite a significant number make the decision to obtain Russian citizenship, let's say roughly 100,000 of the our population they are citizens of the Russian Federation an 6 or 7 percent still have this so called 'alien passports', but I argue that, Russian policy using these tools against us in Estonia was much more visible, emotional in the 90s. Since 2007 [Russia's cyber war attacks on Estonia] it has been very quiet, but they have used the Russian language issues, they have used quote, supposed discrimination issue, all the time, but we haven't seen that they somehow specifically, let's say, handle those one hundred thousand citizens yet, but they keep this potential asset in case of crisis or whatever. I must argue also, that perhaps today, we have the best relations between Estonians and Russians in Estonia than ever. At least, since Soviet period. We very rarely hear anything about sort of, ethnically motivated situations, so thankfully, it is because Estonia developed economy, social systems, healthcare system pretty well. Of course problems are everywhere, but still this is something that we can see today. Plus of course, if you compare Estonia and Latvia, non-citizens have a right to vote in local elections, probably this has also calmed a little bit potential tensions among those that think that their voice is not heard.

I: Has it created obstacles in achieving Estonia’s foreign policy goals having 100,000 Russian citizens living within the country?

R: No. Not at all. It could be more serious if those one hundred citizens could be Estonian citizens and Estonia could be a completely different country, if the early 90s we made a different decision to grant them citizenship. Perhaps we couldn’t see membership of NATO or even EU. But today, I do not think there are. We have the prime minister's party that have a so-called agreement with Putin's party, United Russia. They argue that this is not valid or active, but they of course, have they are majority supported by Russia. Among prominent members of Centre Party, there are people who pose rhetoric and also action, that this is contrary to our foreign policy goals. The member of European Parliament, Yana Toom, has visited Bashar Assad and in May she will visit Donetsk and Luhansk, which is of course a sign that she is playing by those mirroring mood those Russians that are living under Russian information influence, but still the prime minister has separated himself and government from the position of specific personalities that are within his own party. We have seen it during voting in parliament when we have discussed resolutions on Ukraine for instance, or other issues, that could be a little but sensitive for them because of strong support from local Russian communities.

I: At the moment, is there a fear that Russian practices we have seen in Ukraine might be used here in Estonia?

R: No. Estonia and Ukraine, we are completely different countries and histories are different. But at the same time, I argue that the fate and the future of Ukraine is not only our interest and has a direct connection with our security but also with European security. This is why we of course we very clearly and closely monitor what is happening in Ukraine, but even there, in Donbas, I have been several times there in September I visited the front line and I know the region pretty well, let's say, not only from a distance. It is economically, socially, politically, a completely different environment. Where those people have lived all their lives. But even in this community which is very stagnant in a way that very few people have travelled and very few people understand the world and they are massively under the influence of Russian propaganda. Even taking this into account, Russia had to use GRO operatives to launch what we saw in 2014 in the spring time. Even there, they had to bring in, so called tourists to organise everything that led to war. In Estonia of course, you can imagine that among those one hundred thousand Russian citizens living in Estonia, or among the Russian population which is slightly bigger, you can find people that truly think that perhaps independence of Estonia is temporary and must be a happy family under Russian rule and so-called Russian world. But already in the early 90s when we had surveys among Russian population, more than 90 percent, said that Estonia is their homeland, they do not want to go back to so called motherland or Russia proper let’s say and they are happy to be hear. Actually at the end of the day, even with this grey passport, they are able to travel in EU, they are able to work here and there in UK, majority of those who live in the UK, out of 20,000 Estonians are Russians, many of them with grey passports. They enjoy the possibility to be pretty equally. This is a little bit more difficult for Russian official propaganda to turn them against our government. They did a massive kind of attempt in 2007, in May, they geared up this issue with World War II fight with true history, with true historic facts, they truly thought they can turn those people against our government. They managed to bring in to central Tallinn only a couple of thousands, from Tallinn and other parts of Estonia. It was all over within 48 hours, since then it has been truly quiet and that was kind of a turning point in my understanding. Now if they would like to organise something similar, what we have seen in Georgia in Tsinvali or East Ukraine, they have to really launch some sort of very special operation, by GRO or by other special operatives here in Estonia, but I must tell you, we have learned quiet a lot so in order to have early warning system within society to see if there are any kind of change of mood with certain groups of people within our communities and plus also, early warning by our intelligence to understand if there is any kind of interest across the border to launch something like this.

I: In a recent interview, you stated that Russian has continuously interfered in the Internal affairs of many countries. Is this the case in Estonia?

R: All the time. It means different interfering here than in the US, in the UK, or France. The question is, a lot of people in Estonia understand Russian language. Not only Russians but Estonians as well. Some out of old habit but some because this is the only foreign language they know. Some, they watch Russian TV and if you are not prepared to watch this, you can be get brain damage. Sometimes minor, sometimes very serious one. I have met Estonians, not Russians only, who start to tell you, Americans are evil, that Europe is going to collapse, all typical Russian propaganda topics. People talk about this, not the majority of course, some of them, but still I understand that this comes from the day to day influence, which is not directly connected to Estonia, but they attack us. Again when I was journalist in the 90s, I worked in Moscow, I was a correspondent there. our bilateral relations were strained because of our will to join the EU and specifically NATO, they organised all kinds of informational operations against Estonia. If you compare the situation today with twenty years ago, it is quiet. We cannot see these kinds of day-to-day attacks, but they are more sophisticated. They work for so called useful idiots. They do not even interfere, but applaud what is happening in open societies, and the polarisation in many of our societies today. They can use social media, trolling in social media or useful idiots. They know the sort of influence they can exert. They even do not know in their activities work for Russian interests. This is something we are currently, unfortunately, in not a very good time in internal politics, after the elections, far-right parties are gaining in popularity. Not gaining so much popularity in difference, but the prime minister decided legalising them, bringing them into government, that again has polarised society more than I can remember. Not only Estonians and Russians but more difficult situations are because today it is more between Estonians and Estonians. That is something, if I could be a Russian strategist sitting in Moscow today, okay - boxed checked, let's keep this like it is, do not attack Estonia, they make their work on their own in their interest. They are broken and vulnerable or do not have a united position in foreign policy and security policy issues. These far-right parties are sceptical about the European Union and that all works in their interest to fragment or polarise. If you do not have a strong united position on Russia or other issues in our interests.

I: It is clear that there is a very different interpretation of historical events in Russia to here in Estonia, for instance, about many issues, but particularly with regards to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Is this important for Putin?

R: This is absolutely one of the most essential issues, for not only Putin, but the Russianness or something like that. Russia has been continental empire of so many centuries and you know, I am by profession an historian, and Russia is one of my competencies, so I know the situation pretty well, not only from books, but empirically, how they fought back their imperial might both in Moscow in October 93 or in Chechnya, starting a war in 94 and to put the brakes on the further collapse of the empire, but this is something that is very difficult to understand by those who have not had direct or own connection with this sort of mentality, this way of thinking, and also the government. Our neighbourhood has been the same for centuries, but fortunately or unfortunately, we know Russians pretty well what to expect and what to not expect. But this is how they have lied about territories and history. This is something that goes back not only to Putin's, Yeltsin's or whatever times. I can recall as long back as the 16th Century, during the Livonian war, Russian Tsars demanded Tallinn back because they claimed this belonged to Russia. We were never under Russian rule by that time. But this is something so deep in their roots in understanding the world around them. I describe it and this is our official line as well, we have to make Russia accept the rules international law, and the principles they have subscribed to for the United Nations and for other institutions. I argue that we have to make it happen that Russia will one day accept that their borders are fixed, and not flexible. This is in their mentality, that territory is something that can be changed, in interest of Mother Russia or Russian interests specifically, to the west and to the south. What we have seen in Georgia and Ukraine at the moment, this is only the beginning, this is not something they have satisfied, this was very vivid, statement by Putin a couple of years ago. One school child asked, 'where are our borders' and Putin answered to this, 'we do not have borders'. This is something that we must understand, this is why they do not recognise the fall of the Berlin Wall. They cannot accept a democratic unified Europe. They see it a different way. They see that Russia is a centre of power, that has to have an area of influence around themselves or globally, in Venezuela or Sudan or other places. One that helps them, to maintain this kind of position is to of course argue that the only civilisation was saved in World War II by many sacrifices in the many millions, and so many of them were killed by themselves. But this is where their main argument goes, that they have some sort of legitimate right over some kind of territories or over truth of history, which is again, if we think a little bit about how World War II kicked up, it is obvious that the Soviet Union played a major role in 1939. This is very sensitive issue, this touches one way at the heart of Russians because you can imagine seventy years of propaganda, how deep are these emotions. Family stories but behind this or next to this, there are also propaganda lines that we brought peace, stability and prosperity to those who do not accept it, those that attack us and want to dismantle Russian Federation or empire. This is where the countries like Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, I argue also Belarus in some way understand, probably, the best what it means to be part of Russian Empire and being part of united democratic free Europe, which has never been the case. And the only reason is, we can't accept the world view disposed by Russia. But they have been very successful today, to disseminate this idea that NATO's enlargement and expansion to east were evil, that NATO broke a promise to expand. I hear constantly, by Mearsheimer and others but I argue against this, because I argue against, do not forget we have a right to say about the future as well. Even Putin has said, ok we accept nations to make their choice about security arrangements. How come Ukraine made their choice about being closer to European values and principles and what did you do? Same with Georgia in 2008. In a way we have been pretty lucky that we have managed, as I said early to you, that our leaders in the early 90s were firm in their views about where we must go and how we have to do it. We managed to push Russian troops out in 94 thanks to very strong support from our allies and friends in the West. But also managed to quickly reform our country in a way to be ready for NATO membership in 2004. That was almost the last moment for us to make that step. Many of my colleagues in the West today say that if you could ask today the very same question 'Can we be a member of NATO?' the answer would be no. This is something that is the key element in the future, how to best generally, understand the modus operandi that won't change any time soon. It is a question of how we can handle these policies, how they use compatriots in Estonia or as you know, Berlin, Toronto and in many other countries, specifically around the day of May 9th for instance or some other moments. It is a very interesting topic actually. How do we understand here, how the West understands in general and what is our position to defend true facts of history, can this somehow influence the policy from us? What has been very positive, is what has happened with this united position with Ukraine since 2014. We saw in the case of Georgia; the West was totally not ready to respond to this. Everyone understood that this was not the Georgian massacre of Tskhinvali or South Ossetia but it was a Russian act of convention and interference in order to stop Georgia's path to NATO. It happened right after the Bucharest summit of NATO. Both Putin and Medvedev announced this was the case, of course a bit later. But in Ukraine, we have maintained unity on this kind of mild sanctions, we managed to put together, this is something very significant, also a five-point strategy towards Russia.

I: Russia's has consistently stated that it has, can and will protect and defend Russian citizens, wherever they may be. What do you think of this argument?

R: Yes. This is one of the main strategic points. If they say and talk about right to use military force, they copy somehow the Americans and the Western countries, but they do it in typical Russian way. Do the government really help their compatriots? First, they create a problem and then they help, like they did in Georgia. They first of course did everything that Georgia couldn't manage the sort of problems in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Of course, Russia used all their tools to create a situation there, that was nearly unmanageable by Tbilisi. Then they started passportization, forcefully, involuntarily gave out passports, and then they declared these citizens are in danger and then provoked Georgia to go into war in July, August 2008 and of course their main line, for the international public was that they are defending their own citizens. The very same happened in Crimea, in February 2014, to be honest, an excellent operation. Not a single causality, you take over a strategic territory from another country, and within one month you are declaring it part of your own country. And also, as I mentioned, in Eastern Ukraine, they launched a military operation, like they did in Crimea, but massively used the same language, protecting people who were afraid to become victims to fascists you came to power in Kiev. They tried the same in Estonia in the early 90s, very heavily, the same methods. First they tried to keep their military force here. Secondly, to do everything to show that we are not afraid to become members of NATO and EU because we are fascists and Nazi and discriminatory or whatever. So were just lucky that they didn’t go as far to organise some real provocations, they were busy with Chechnya and their own issues. From day one, August 1991, when we regained our independence, we almost never had common lines with them because they never helped in real terms, the Russians living in Estonia. Only helping their own interests. If you read their strategic documents, it goes like a line through all of them, they are masters to it. Of course, they can try to organise something, they can tell something, there are so many speculations, is Narva next, or Daugavpils next, you can imagine you can just infiltrate or organise a terrorist attack somewhere and then can declare our compatriots or citizens are in peril and we have to move, we have to go and send peace keeping force. This is all that you can imagine. But I argue, that it is not so easy to do today, then it was perhaps in the 90s against us.

I: Why?

R: Many reasons. Okay let's start that we are NATO. Their calculus is not only about our capacities but also other gains, do they need this conflict. So many other issues, US, Europe, China. They are totally connected with global context. This is why we argue that of course, are in better hands and the situation here is more predictable and stable, and we have stability in some other hotspots. North Korea, South China Sea, or Middle East or so. Because the US is very stretched, NATO and Europe's allies have a way to go to become again, militarily a force, specially by Russia; this is number one. Second, our own capabilities are much better. I myself am a reserve officer, I know pretty well what our force is capable. How our intelligence is very good in terms of early warning systems, we understand pretty well, not only their mentality, but practically, we can today we can determine their activity in order to understand if there is any planning or preparation going on. Plus, economically, people in Narva, everyday could cross the river to Ivangorod and see the difference, which is massive. Ivangorod is not Moscow or St Petersburg, Russian provinces always live in different century, and that is the big thing and Narva looks today much better than perhaps even ten years ago. There are European investments, our own investments. Last but not least, if Russians take Estonia as a home, who wants a crisis in their homes? Specifically, if they see what has happened in Ukraine. Which is course very painful for them to see. Even in Eastern Ukraine, I have met people who have lived in this area in World War II in 43, 44 and they told me even in that time, the situation wasn't that bad as it is now. It is now going on 5th year, longer than World War II, so people sometimes do not think about these things. There are many criteria that there is a Russian calculus, that they tried to use us as a soft belly or something, it is not so easy. But again, they can be ready and primed when they see very serious cracks in the EU and specifically or course NATO. If they understand that the two or three major capitals of NATO, there are leaders who could be very cautious to sign immediately up to Article 5 then they can move. Because the strategic goal of Russia as far as we understand it, is that they have not accepted Euro-Atlantic security architecture as it was settled after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and their ultimate goal is to recreate Russian supremacy, somehow in Eurasia in their partnership with China, this means that they have to get at least veto rights on security issues in Europe and the best possible way is to dismantle NATO and if this is done, there strategic goal is achieved and they work very long term perspective. It is not that they didn’t manage this time in the US to meddle in that way and the U-turn in sanction policy, again they achieved quite a bit in a way what kind of rhetoric h, what we have heard from the white house in terms of NATO and what we have seen in Europe today with this populism. Think about this yellow jacket movement in France, one of their demands, was immediate demands was immediate pull out of NATO, why? Was this a social problem? Who wrote this? If you ask French people, they are really concerned about Russian specific interests are there. Then you can connect the dots, basically if you go back, at least one hundred years, then you see that Russian specials, Soviet period, KGB always used certain elements in our countries, how to penetrate their interests. One emigre, in our words, compatriots, in 20s and 30s, and secondly of course, useful idiots, that time the far left, today they understand it is much better to play and choose traditional values, where liberals do not care about us, let's support far-right movements instead of communist parties or whatever. This is the very same pattern they do everywhere, the main goal, in my understanding, one is to dismantle NATO and secondly, Finlandlise the whole Europe. It is not only about NATO country, but if you look at the bigger map, you understand that Europe is rather small. So you understand that Putin is back to the basics, where Stalin was seventy of eighty years ago, when he dreamed about a walk to the Atlantic. A couple of days ago, he was in China, in Beijing at the Belt and Road conference, he made a statement, saying we must work together to create common space in Eurasia, to bring together European Union economic space with Eurasian economic space to be a global power together, China against United States. It's interesting.

I: Russia has denied there operating an expansionist policy, with regards to compatriots and territory.

R: They do not care about people. They never did. This is something again that is one of the miscalculations of our Western governments. We as Western civilisations understand that everything starts from the wellbeing of one single persons, and people think that the country is most important. That how well the country is doing, perhaps others do well as well. One Ukrainian general told me at the beginning of war in Ukraine, I asked him, how bad can go? He said, 'you know, Leningrad blockade during World War II, he told me that, until or unless the situation in Russia is not as bad as during the Leningrad blockade that things can get worse that you can ever imagine. So these people, they do not care about human lives, they have thought this way, but in the interest of this mother Russia, it's like Jihadist thinking. Excuse my language, it is something like this, that even during World War II they send millions and millions just to die. They didn't care about them. I saw myself in Chechnya, during the worst war, I was there several times in 95/96. I am a historian and I have read about these things, but I was with my own eyes what it means really, not caring about their own citizens first. Chechens were and still are Russian citizens, they killed them en masse. It was a huge massacre that time. Tens of thousands perished, but also their own army, how they handled their own military, still this time as well, they do not care about people Wagner, they have now introduced new methods how to interfere in other countries, with military power, this was first introduced in East Ukraine, not showing a flag, going in, doing the job, now they have done it in several places, most famously Syria, were just five hundred were put in, as you know this American attack killed five or six hundred in half an hour, Russia didn't even say anything. They are sending them to central Africa, or Sudan or Venezuela. So coming back to your question, this is not an issue for them at all. This is only a very brutal calculation, one of many, how to use, achieve many goals of state interest. They can perish as many as possible. Remember when Putin, start with this, how Putin became president, apartment bombings in Moscow, of course the FSB was behind these. I do not have any other understandings of these situations. From the very first day of his legacy as a leader of Russia, the Kursk, the submarine sunk, the first answer he gave to Larry King with a slight smith: 'It sank'. One hundred plus perished. They didn't do anything to accept Western immediate help to rescue people. Then the Norilsk hostage situation in Moscow in 2000, they poisoned their own people. The most dramatic situation can be dealt with in the Hague criminal war caught, the hostage situation in 2004, they launched this operation, they killed with their activities fifteen hundred people, hundred and eighty and hundred ninety kids. Everything is forgiven to them. We only put sanctions up for the Malaysian aircraft was downed in Eastern Ukraine, only because one hundred Dutch citizens perished in this massacre. Then you ask, how far they can go. They can go as far as they want and as far as we allow them to go. This is why of course, it is important to deal with this issue at home. The integration issue has been one of the priorities for every government, because we want to build a stable society, predictable in its problems and how to solve them and to keep it on a social level, not an ethnic level. Not allowing Russians to accuse us, because even in the 90s we immediately turned to the EC and international practices in order for them to advise us, what we should do in order to be internationally accepted as a country who deals with minorities in the proper way. This is the thing that every country who has Russian compatriots or minorities, like we do here, or Ukraine or others, this is something that we have to from our side, again this is defence of the rights of those people is not the ultimate goal of Russia. It is a tool to achieve something else, and something else is what I said, to pay back for the humiliation of collapse of Soviet Empire, to dismantle United States supremacy in this world, and part of that, one of the symbols is NATO of course, and if NATO is broken, then this automatically de-links the US from Europe and transatlanticism. It is today, clearly visible through NATO and we know how difficult our relations today in trade issues with EU and US, but again, it is a long game and I can't see any change any time soon. I had yesterday a very interesting conversation with the US ambassador to Russia. Mr Huntsman was in Tallinn and we spoke about several issues but his points and current connections with Russian authorities and his work with them, as ambassador of US, basically, confirms it. We are living in interesting times.