

Beat: Business

ESTONIA AT EUROPE'S DIGITAL EPICENTER-SMALL COUNTRY, LARGE FOOTPRINT

ONE HOUR WITH AMBASSADOR KRISTJAN PRIKK

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USPA NEWS - The Estonian Ambassador to the United States, H.E. Kristjan Prikk, and an invited group of C-suite, private sector US executives interested in furthering bilateral relationships between the two countries, joined the Ambassadorial Roundtable's discussion forum for an in depth and candid look at the Estonian digital successes, economy, cybersecurity, AI, and advances in the healthcare sector. The Ambassadorial Roundtable's monthly discussion forums connect private sector executives, investment capital, the military and academia with the diplomatic community, fostering close cooperation, generating impactful, sustainable solutions necessary for peace, progress, and innovation.

A small, northern Baltic nation, with an estimated population of about 1.2 million Estonia has long been at the helm of technological innovation and digital modernization. The country's digital success has been recognized by the international, global organizations such as the World Bank, the United Nations, and the European Union. It's approach to digital governance, innovation, and cybersecurity has been hailed as a model for other countries looking to develop their own digital ecosystems. Estonia's approach to digitization provides an inspiring example of how countries can leverage technology to create more transparent, efficient, and accessible governance while creating innovative businesses that contribution.

Ambassador Prikk began the discussion by sharing the history, geography and economic impact of Estonia which has managed to make such a significant mark in the field of digital information. The country has been at the forefront of technology innovation and has received international recognition for its digital prowess and digital revolution which began in the early 2000s, and since then, it has become one of the most digitally advanced countries in the world.

The Ambassador attributed one of the main reasons behind Estonia's success in the digital sphere as its commitment to digitization. Estonia was a pioneer and has invested significantly in its digital infrastructure, making it one of the most connected countries globally. "I never had an actual paper check book" Ambassador Prikk shared, "my access to my bank account was digital from the beginning. We can access the internet almost anywhere, including public spaces like parks and city centers a strong through our digital identity system, the eID system. The eID allows us to access a range of digital services, including healthcare, banking, and education. This system has made life more convenient for Estonians, enabling them to access online services from anywhere at any time."

In addition to its eID system, Estonia has also made strides in developing its digital economy. In recent years, Estonia has become a hub for tech startups, with many entrepreneurs flocking to the country to set up operations. The country's startup ecosystem has received international recognition, with many Estonian startups disrupting traditional industries and garnering significant investment. This emphasis on innovation has enabled Estonia to maintain its position as a tech leader, with the government regularly investing in research and development to foster innovation.

Private sector program participants in cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and healthcare, welcomed opportunities to partner with open, innovative Estonian systems. For example, "Pediatric Moonshot", an organization with the mission to reduce healthcare inequity, lower healthcare costs and improve outcomes for children - locally and globally led by renowned scientist and Stanford University professor, Timothy Chou, found the potential prospect to create a partnership with Children's Hospital in Tallinn, very alluring for future cooperation. "Our plan is to create privacy-preserving real-time applications based on access to data in all 1,000,000 healthcare machines in all 500 children's hospitals in the world", Tim announced.

Estonia's open governance system is another factor which contributed to the country's digital success. "Our government has

encouraged the population to participate in decision-making processes” continues the Ambassador. “We have established a range of digital tools that facilitate these processes. Citizens can use digital tools to propose legislation, share their views on policies, and provide feedback. This system of open governance has helped to create a transparent and accountable government, which has contributed to Estonia's reputation as a leader in digital governance as in 2000, the Estonian parliament declared the internet access a fundamental human right.

One of the most significant achievements in the digital realm is without a doubt, Estonia's e-Residency program. Established in 2014, the program allows non-Estonians to apply for a digital ID allowing them to access Estonian digital services and establish a business in Estonia remotely. The e-Residency program has generated significant interest globally, with many entrepreneurs and individuals attracted to Estonia's innovative approach to digital identity and governance.

The country has also made impressive strides in the field of cybersecurity. Estonia's heightened focus on cybersecurity has stemmed from its desire to protect its digital infrastructure from cyber threats. Estonia has established a range of measures to protect its digital assets, including legislation and investment in cybersecurity. The country has created a 'Cyber Range' training ground to provide cybersecurity officials with hands-on experience dealing with cyber threats, positioning Estonia as a global leader in cybersecurity.

The education sector also benefitted from Estonia's open ecosystem. The country was able to leverage to enhance learning and has integrated knowhow into its education system, with students and teachers using digital tools in the classroom. This has helped to modernize Estonia's education system, making it more accessible and convenient for students. Estonian schools have also been recognized for their focus on digital citizenship, emphasizing the importance of responsible digital behavior and ethical online practices.

While Estonia's achievements are numerous, there are also challenges that the country faces in its quest to maintain its digital dominance. “One of the significant issues facing the country is the digital skills gap”, Ambassador Prikk noted. As the country becomes increasingly digitized, there is a growing need for tech talent, and Estonia must address this challenge to maintain its competitive edge. Additionally, cybersecurity threats continue to evolve, and Estonia continues to remain vigilant in protecting its digital infrastructure from these risks. Nevertheless, Estonia's outlook looks bright as the country ranks in the top indexes of affluence, cybersecurity and cloud computing.

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