Estonia at the Forefront: Digitalisation and Defence

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Marika Linntam and Carolin Hochstrat



Interview with Marika Linntam, Ambassador of Estonia to Germany

Screenshot aus dem Interview, bei Bedarf gerne zuschneiden...

Zu Beginn kurze Infobox über Carolin Hochstrat und Marika Linntam...

Interview

Carolin Hochstrat: Would you like to tell us a little about yourself?

Marika Linntam: I have been the Estonian Ambassador to Germany for a little over a year now, a role I take on with great honor and responsibility, as Germany is one of Estonia's main partners and allies. Germany's role in Europe is incredibly important. I have worked in the Estonian foreign service since 2001. My academic background is in law, particularly European law. I studied it in Germany at the University of Trier in some courses and completed a longer master's program in France. My career has consistently been focused on Europe. Over the years, I've held various positions, including postings to Brussels, where I was involved during Estonia's presidency of the European Union. Before that, I served as Estonia's state agent at the European Court of Justice. Since 2014, security issues have been a significant part of any European diplomat's work, and certainly for Estonian diplomats. Before coming to Germany, I spent five years as the Director General for Europe at the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, overseeing bilateral relations with European countries and key EU policies.

Carolin Hochstrat: That's a remarkable path to becoming an ambassador! What would you say have been the biggest milestones and challenges in your career?

Marika Linntam: The biggest milestones often revolve around major postings. For example, my time in Brussels allowed me to work closely on high-level EU affairs and engage with critical topics that even heads of state were discussing. Being responsible for relations with other European countries at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was a tremendous honor. Of course, becoming Estonia's ambassador to Germany is an important milestone.

Carolin Hochstrat: How do you handle the responsibility that comes with being a diplomat?

Marika Linntam: I genuinely enjoy my work, so I embrace the responsibility that comes with it. Managing international relations, especially for Estonia, is a key role in ensuring the country's place in the world. It's a privilege to contribute to that.

Carolin Hochstrat: What has your experience been like as a woman in the diplomatic and international field?

Marika Linntam: Personally, I haven't found gender to be a decisive factor in my career. The Estonian foreign service maintains a good gender balance, and in my various postings, I haven't noticed significant differences in how male and female diplomats are treated.

Carolin Hochstrat: How would you describe Estonia in three words?

Marika Linntam: Innovative, digitalised, and beautiful—especially its landscape. Estonia is an amazing destination for tourism because of its stunning nature. We have a long coastline, around 2,000 islands (many of which are inhabited and fascinating to explore), as well as marshlands, forests, and lakes. The people are friendly, though some might say that people in the north take a bit longer to open up. Overall, we are very welcoming.

Carolin Hochstrat: Estonia is often seen as a pioneer in digitalisation. Could you tell me more about that and your e-government system?

Marika Linntam: After regaining independence in 1991, Estonia faced economic challenges and needed deep reforms. Our leaders had the foresight to focus on digitalisation early. In the 1990s, we introduced the "Tiger Leap" program, which brought computer classes to all schools and integrated IT education into the curriculum. Today, nearly all government services are available online, with the exception of getting married. Citizens can securely access services using their ID cards, which also enable digital signatures. This digital transformation has been a significant advantage for Estonia, fostering innovation and a strong startup culture. We now have the highest number of unicorns per capita in Europe. Estonia also actively shares its digital expertise with other countries.

Carolin Hochstrat: You've touched on cyber security. Could you explain Estonia's approach, especially in light of its history with cyber-attacks?

Marika Linntam: Cyber security is the flipside of digitalisation. In 2007, Estonia experienced severe cyber-attacks from Russia, which served as a wake-up call. We've since built a robust cyber security system. Tallinn hosts NATO's Center of Excellence for Cyber Security, and Estonia actively promotes responsible state behavior in cyberspace, emphasising international law and security.

Carolin Hochstrat: How would you describe Estonia's relationship with Russia, particularly in the context of the war in Ukraine?

Marika Linntam: Estonia values good relations with its neighbors, but this also depends on the other side. Our membership in the European Union and NATO has been crucial for our security. Russia's actions—annexing Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022—are grave concerns for us. Such actions threaten European and global security. Estonia strongly supports Ukraine, as we believe allowing Russia to benefit from aggression would undermine the rules-based international order.

Carolin Hochstrat: How significant is NATO for Estonia?

Marika Linntam: NATO is vital for our security. Estonia contributes significantly, with defense spending at 3.4% of GDP. We also encourage other NATO countries, especially in Europe, to strengthen their contributions.

Carolin Hochstrat: What about strengthening Europe's defense capabilities within the EU?

Marika Linntam: NATO is the cornerstone of our collective security, but the EU also has a role, particularly in areas like hybrid threats and supporting the defense industry. Strengthening these areas complements NATO's efforts.

Carolin Hochstrat: How would you describe Estonia's role within the European Union?

Marika Linntam: Estonia is a constructive and engaged member. We focus on areas where we can lead, such as digitalisation and cyber security, and work collaboratively to ensure EU policies benefit all member states.

Carolin Hochstrat: As Estonia's ambassador to Germany, how would you describe the relationship between the two countries?

Marika Linntam: Estonia and Germany share close ties, rooted in historical connections like the Hanseatic League and strengthened by common values. Germany plays a key role in Europe, and we highly value our cooperation across various areas.

Carolin Hochstrat: What advice would you give to young people, particularly women, aspiring to a diplomatic career?

Marika Linntam: Follow your own path. Diplomacy offers many areas of focus, so it's important to find the one you're passionate about. Commitment and inspiration are essential in this field, as it requires genuine interest and dedication.

Carolin Hochstrat: Thank you so much for this insightful conversation and for your time.

Marika Linntam: Thank you for having me.

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