

By Matthew Kaminski

Estonia's president, who was raised in New Jersey, on how Crimea has changed 'everything' and what NATO should do now.

From the pinkish presidential palace here, the Russia border lies 130 miles due east across a flat coastal Baltic plain. Toomas Hendrik Ilves took up residence in 2006, two years after his small Baltic state joined the European Union and NATO. At the time, most people assumed that any Russian threat had been buried with Peter the Great, who first brought Estonia into Russia's empire.

Not so fast. "Everything has changed," President Ilves says almost as soon as we sit down for a Thursday afternoon coffee.

"The post-Cold War order. Peace, love, Woodstock. Everyone gets along—sure we have minor problems here and there, human rights not always so good, but there are no more border changes." After last month, he says, "that's out." Russia annexed Crimea, massed forces on Ukraine's eastern borders, and prodded "Russian speakers" to rise against the government in Kiev. Moscow also pointedly complained about the treatment of Slavic kinsmen in the Baltic states, the same charge used to justify the invasion of Ukraine.

"An aggressive, revanchist power," in the Estonian leader's words, makes the unthinkable thinkable. "We were already caught off guard with Crimea," he says. "Once you lose the predictability factor, you can't be 99% sure they won't do something." The most dramatic something would be a Russian military incursion into NATO's front-line states.

Perched alone up in eastern Baltic are Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Their fear of Moscow propelled them to become the first and only former Soviet republics to seek the refuge of NATO. But now doubts are appearing. The West has responded tepidly to the Crimean aggression. Military budgets are at historic lows as a share of NATO economies. The alliance, which marked

its 65th anniversary on Friday, has never faced the test of a hot conflict with Moscow.

In this new debate over European security, Mr. Ilves plays a role out of proportion to Estonia's size (1.3 million people) and his limited constitutional powers. A tall man who recently turned 60, he has the mouth of a New Jersey pol—he grew up in Leonia—and wears the bow ties of a lapsed academic. Americans may recall his Twitter TWTR -2.07% feud two years ago over Estonia's economy with economist Paul Krugman, whom Mr. Ilves called "smug, overbearing & patronizing."

Mr. Ilves was born in Sweden to Estonian refugees who fled there after the Soviet annexation of the three Baltic states in 1940; the family subsequently moved to America when he was a boy. He first set foot on Estonian soil in his early 30s and returned for good after the Soviet collapse. Previously the country's foreign minister, he is a brash presence on the trans-Atlantic policy circuit.

To say the least, Mr. Ilves and his Baltic colleagues were outside the post-Cold War and pre-Crimea NATO mainstream. At every opportunity, the alliance had repeated that it "does not view Russia as a threat." It honored a "three nos" pledge made in the 1990s to Moscow that NATO has no need, no intention and no plans to deploy troops or nuclear weapons in any future new-member states. The 67,000 U.S. forces in Europe are based west of the Elbe River, mostly in Germany. The alliance refused for years even to draw up contingency plans to defend the Baltic states, considering that an unnecessary provocation to Moscow.

The Russian attack on Georgia in 2008 set off alarms in the Baltics, which renewed their push to strengthen their defenses. Germany vetoed them and the U.S. concurred. An American diplomat in 2009 called Estonia "paranoid" about Russia, in a confidential cable released by WikiLeaks. Since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, Estonian leaders have steered clear of the I-told-you-so's. "I don't get any, unfortunately, thrills out of vindication," says Mr. Ilves. "But we have been told by some of our friends, 'We did think you were paranoid and overreacting and now we think you're right.'"

Estonia's relations with Moscow were always fraught, but the security alarm bells rang only recently. In 2007, after the Estonian government ordered the relocation of a Soviet war memorial in Tallinn, the country was hit by a massive cyberattack, presumably from Russia. Mr. Ilves, a champion of "E-stonia" (birthplace of Skype), calls the episode "an own goal" for Estonia and a blessing in disguise.

"We've been far ahead of everyone in terms of the Internetization of society, and we knew all along we were vulnerable," he says, adding that Estonia's allies had dismissed the country's fears of cyber's military potential as "science fiction stuff." Soon after the attack, NATO put a cyberdefense center in Tallinn.

In recent years the Baltics have watched the modernization of Russia's military up close. Unhappy with the performance of his troops in Georgia, Vladimir Putin has poured resources into the military. The Russian defense budget is set to grow 44% in the next three years and account for a fifth of all central government spending, according to Jane's Defense.

Russia has doubled the number of troops in the Baltic region since 2009, says Kaarel Kaas of Tallinn's International Center for Defense Studies, and it has focused on improving special rapid-reaction forces, long-range missiles and air-defense capabilities. Kaliningrad, a militarized Russian enclave between Poland and Lithuania, is "like a giant aircraft carrier," he says.

As NATO cut budgets and sought to reassure Russia about its peaceful intentions, Mr. Putin put his new might on show. The "Zapad" ("West") biannual military exercise that began in 2009 involved tens of thousands of troops in practice attacks on Baltic countries, culminating in a faux nuclear strike on Warsaw.

The Crimean operation was the coming-out party for Russia's modernized military. Highly professional and well-equipped special forces were the core of the lightning-quick invasion. Russia used jamming technology and cyberwarfare to neutralize the Ukrainian troops' communications. Russian soldiers mixed with local militias and evaded notice by Western military intelligence until it was all over. "The change in the way that Russia does things is quite astounding," says Mr. Ilves. "The old Finnish Winter War model of a million people coming across the border and just swamping, that's long gone."

President Ilves says the EU "response is going to be economic fundamentally," and limited by concern over the cost to business, which explains the bloc's reluctance to impose stronger sanctions on Russia. Yet at NATO, "they have woken up to the new reality." He declares Estonia "quite satisfied" with the decision by its foreign ministers this week to suspend contacts with Russia and rethink eastern defenses.

The rethinking within NATO has only begun. The U.S. and the rest of the alliance stopped short of the demands from Poland and the Baltic states to forward deploy NATO troops. Estonia managed on Thursday to get NATO's blessing to turn the brand-new Amari military airfield near Tallinn into the first NATO base in the country. This small Balt tends to be proactive. While European governments axed some \$50 billion from military budgets in the last five year amid fiscal belt-tightening, Estonia is only one of four NATO allies to devote at least 2% of gross domestic product to defense, supposedly the bare minimum for security needs.

"It lessens your moral clout if you have not done what you have agreed to do," Mr. Ilves says of defense budgets. His barb hits directly at neighboring Lithuania and Latvia, which both spend less than 1% of GDP on their militaries.

To Mr. Ilves, the alliance's most urgent need is "increasing deterrence in the region." He won't get drawn into discussing a wish list, but with deliberate understatement says, "boots on the ground is kind of a good idea." The Estonians have told U.S. officials that American boots are best. The presence of U.S. soldiers in the Baltic states and Poland, the other front-line state, would become the most reliable tripwire for a NATO response to any Russian encroachment. Mr. Ilves offers a different formulation: "I wouldn't say a tripwire but a sign that we're serious here."

As many officials at NATO's Brussels headquarters admit, the Russian military could today roll over Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in hours. The countries' indefensibility was an argument made against their membership. "Berlin was never defendable," Mr. Ilves shoots back, referring to the Cold War-era. "Ever. There was no concept of defending the allied sectors of Berlin. But what defended it was the idea that if you come in, there is gonna be a whole lot of smoke and ashes elsewhere."

Even though an invasion of former Soviet satellites by Russia would confront NATO members with trying to stop a nuclear power, Mr. Ilves says he has been assured that the alliance's Article 5—a pledge to regard an attack on any member as an attack on all—isn't in danger of being ignored or watered down. "In terms of Article 5 coming into force," he says, "even when we don't ask, we've reassured at the highest levels."

Europeans farther away from Russia are reluctant to confront Mr. Putin, and Barack Obama has

not been interested in Europe for most of his presidency. That raises a question: What if NATO balked? Then "everyone in NATO comes under existential threat," Mr. Ilves says. "Then every country is on its own. As soon as that happens NATO no longer exists as an alliance. It's simple."

Yet there's perhaps no greater Putin fantasy than the destruction of NATO, and this would be the biggest called bluff in military history. A robust forward deployment to NATO's eastern front lines is to its proponents the best way to make the Kremlin think twice before trying.

The Estonian president refuses to read Vladimir Putin's mind. He says NATO should arm Ukraine immediately with defensive weapons to deter any further incursions. Although the aggressive rhetoric from Moscow went down a notch this week, "the directions don't look good," Mr. Ilves says. Russian propaganda and some 50,000 troops along Ukraine's eastern border are on a war footing.

"But I would say in the West 'hope springs eternal.'" Mr. Ilves invokes Alexander Pope in a subtle parting jab at his allies' blinkered view of their giant eastern neighbor.

Mr. Kaminski is a member of the Journal's editorial board.

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