

By Tony Barber

Toomas Hendrik Ilves, Estonia's president, extracted a line from one of the 20th-century's most powerful poems about diseased politics and moral failure to criticise Europe's responses to the refugee crisis, the rise of populism, Russian belligerence and other challenges.

"We're entering 'a low dishonest decade'," Mr Ilves said in an interview on Wednesday. He was quoting from "September 1, 1939", a scathing attack on the government policies and social attitudes of the 1930s that W H Auden, a British poet, wrote on the outbreak of the second world war.

"Either we do things better or, if we don't, the EU is going to lose its ability, as an entity, to act in the world," the US-educated president said. "That's the test of a state, or a state-like entity. Can it deal with the problems for which the social contract was established?"

Mr Ilves, 61, has served as Estonia's head of state since 2006, having grown up in Sweden as the son of two Estonians who fled their homeland in 1944, just before the Soviet takeover which stripped their country of its independence until 1991.

Partly because, as he put it, "I am the child of two boat people", Mr Ilves expressed trenchant views on Europe's handling of the refugee crisis, which he said stood out for its inadequacy in comparison with the vigorous manner in which European governments, with US support, had coped with a much bigger refugee problem between 1945 and 1950.

However, he was at pains to exempt Angela Merkel, Germany's chancellor, from criticism.

"When I talk about absence of leadership, she's one of the few people in European politics who's doing more than sticking her finger in the air to see which way the wind is blowing," he said.

"Clearly, she's taken a risk on the refugees issue. But why do you have elected politicians? If you just do politics by poll numbers, then a priori you're not going to get leadership."

Mr Ilves also praised Ms Merkel's firmness towards Russia as a chief reason why he expected the EU in January to extend economic sanctions against Moscow. The 28-nation bloc adopted these measures in retaliation for Russia's annexation last year of the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea, an act the president condemned as "the Anschluss in Ukraine", and its armed support for separatist rebels in south-eastern Ukraine.

Following the Paris terrorist attacks of November 13, Mr Ilves voiced doubts about seeking a partial accommodation with Russia based on a common fight against Isis, the militant group.

"There's not enough to justify some sort of new anti-fascist alliance with Big Joe," Mr Ilves said, using the nickname applied to Josef Stalin, the Soviet dictator with whom the US and UK allied themselves against Nazi Germany. "If we're going to do that, we might as well get something in return. We don't really know what we're getting."

Estonia is among a number of central and eastern European countries that are uncomfortable about an initiative by Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Germany's foreign minister, and Jean-Claude Juncker, the European Commission president, to develop closer ties between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union, a Russian-led bloc with Belarus and Kazakhstan.

Mr Ilves said the EU needed to wake up to the reality that Russia under President Vladimir Putin had violated every major European security treaty from the 1975 Helsinki Final Act to the 1990 Charter of Paris.

"We have to realise that the post-cold war era is over. We're in something else now. Peace, love, Woodstock, Kumbaya, let's dramatically slash defence spending and enjoy the peace dividend — that's all over," he said.

Mr Ilves criticised mainstream European political parties for the "vain hope" of shoring up their voter base by borrowing the language of anti-immigrant extremist parties.

"They fear that their electorates will be captured by more radical forces. One is the 'blood and soil' argument of the extreme right. The other is the 'loss of jobs to immigrants' story of the left," he said. "The conventional parties hope, 'Maybe if we sound a little like them, we won't lose votes'."

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