

by Trudy Rubin, Inquirer Columnist

In the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet empire, most Western nations basked in the illusion that liberal democracy had triumphed. Many thought NATO had become an anachronism in an era of permanent European peace.

Some countries freed from Kremlin control, including tiny Estonia, knew better. Only 21/2 decades later, the European Union teeters and populism thrives - on both sides of the Atlantic. A revanchist Russia bent on restoring past glory makes nuclear threats against members of the NATO alliance.

So this is an opportune moment to listen to Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, who was in Philadelphia last week to address a Baltic studies conference at the University of Pennsylvania. (The son of Estonian refugees, he studied in the United States and is a Penn alumnus.)

"Twenty-five years of Western history are over," he said bluntly. "The optimism of the 1990s has been shattered by Russia. Russia is back with 19th-century goals and 21st-century means."

But, he cautioned, "we are clueless amid transformational change to which we do not know how to respond because we don't know what we want to achieve."

Of course, the threats to the Europe of 1990s dreams are internal as well as external. The populist parties that are gaining strength across Europe and the appeal of Trumpism (and Bernie Sanders) here are outgrowths of the economic pain wreaked on citizens by globalization - and by the failure of traditional parties to respond.

But, as Ilves noted, the economic travails of Western democracies present openings for a reckless Russia to meddle. Populist leaders in Europe, some openly encouraged by Russian

President Vladimir Putin, are pressing for the breakup of the European Union. On June 23, the British will vote on whether to leave the EU, and the vote looks likely to be close.

Meantime, Donald Trump talks of possibly leaving NATO, while constantly complimenting Putin. Although Ilves never mentioned Trump by name, he is clearly concerned.

"East Europeans were told to get over their fears of Russia," he said, "but today Western Europe recognizes there is an ongoing war in Europe."

Indeed, Russian planes conduct provocative stunts, like recently buzzing within 30 feet of a U.S. Navy destroyer in the Baltic Sea and flying with transponders off over Baltic countries, risking a collision with civilian aircraft.

And there are things that worry Ilves even more.

"Today, threats to use nuclear weapons are part of the Russian discourse, with simulated nuclear attacks on Stockholm and Poland," he said.

Kremlin emissaries have reportedly threatened a nuclear response if NATO moved troops into the Baltic. And last year Putin warned he might call for a nuclear alert as Russia was invading Crimea. Moscow is reportedly considering putting nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad, a small Russian territory on the Baltic Sea.

Making nuclear threats against the West reeks of the Cold War. "The Soviet Union never did this after 1962," Ilves said in an interview. "It is one of the things that is shocking today."

Is Putin's posturing mainly meant to distract Russians from their failing economy? Would Putin ever consider invading a NATO member such as Estonia?

The Estonian president wants to take no chances. "The thinking of Russian leaders is unpredictable," he answers.

Indeed, Ilves says it took NATO members far too long to grasp the significance of Putin's invasion of Ukraine: "Changing borders in Europe has been a no-no since 1945. The last time was 1938 [when Germany invaded] the Sudetenland." Yet there are still European countries that want to end sanctions against Russia that were imposed on account of Ukraine.

Ilves believes sanctions have had "a deterring effect," and caving on them would only encourage Putin to nibble further, possibly on the Baltics.

"We need a credible deterrence policy in the Baltic region to influence the Russian calculus to make the costs of interference too high," says Ilves. "Russia's behavior requires a decisive and united [NATO] response."

Of course, NATO skeptics here and in Europe echo the Kremlin charge that Putin is reacting to a fear of encirclement brought on by NATO expansion to the Baltics and Eastern Europe. It's far more useful to consider the alternative. As Ilves points out, Putin felt free to invade Ukraine precisely because it wasn't a member of NATO.

What Trumpism ignores is Ilves' larger point: The West must recognize the importance of a free and secure Europe that shares our values. This is something that Americans took for granted during the last two decades.

The threat that Russia presents is more complex than in Cold War times. Putin wants to divide and weaken NATO and the European Union and promote a new brand of managed "democracy," with himself as the leader. His nuclear-rattling may be testing the alliance's staying power.

So far, NATO has held firm, and will deploy several thousand more troops to the Baltics and Poland on a rotating basis. Key NATO countries also seem to be waking up to the need to spend more on defense.

"NATO has not been this relevant for a long, long time," says the Estonian leader. "Europeans haven't been under this kind of threat since [before] Gorbachev's time."

Ilves' warning is a reality check during America's strange election campaign.

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