

Toomas Hendrik Ilves

The following remarks were delivered on May 13 at the 2016 Lennart Meri Conference by the President of Estonia. In the wake of the recent Brexit vote, they are more resonant than ever.

I am happy yet somewhat wistful addressing I guess for the tenth and last time the Lennart Meri Conference. I am hardly presumptuous enough to echo Dean Acheson in claiming I was "Present at the Creation", but I certainly feel like a midwife to this annual event—one of the more successful non-digital developments in this country of the past decade. When I look back on the past ten years, however, I must confess I am less optimistic than at any time in recent memory.

When Kadri Liik first organized this conference in 2007, it was a genuine breath of fresh air in this part of the world, where high level conferences were a rarity, and were usually organized by people from elsewhere. The world in 2007 was of an altogether different era: a generally optimistic world before the financial crisis, before discussions of Grexit, before the invasion of Georgia, the Arab Spring, the Bolotnaya Square uprisings, the Maidan, and the Anschluss of Crimea, before the migration crisis and the reaction to it among member states, before the rise of populism and serious talk of the UK leaving the EU. Through the years at the Lennart Meri Conference, Boris Nemtsov was a frequent panelist. So was Andrei Sannikov, who would later languish in Lukashenko's prison.

In the intervening ten years—dare I invoke W.H. Auden and call it a "low, dishonest decade"?—we have not only lost the palpable optimism that was everywhere just two years after the accession of Eastern Europe to the European Union and the inclusion of the Baltic countries in NATO, we have also lost the underpinnings of that optimism, its foundational core. We have discovered that the post-war foundations of security—the UN Charter, the Helsinki Final Act and the Paris Charter—can be violated. Today, threats to use nuclear weapons are part of the normal discourse—not just in the bizarre huffing and puffing of North Korea but in the simulated nuclear strikes on such targets as Warsaw, Stockholm and Denmark's Bornholm island. We see saber-rattling, we witness an ongoing war in Europe itself, where it takes the Foreign Affairs Council to go beyond grave concern and talk explicitly about Russian troops in Ukraine. Within Europe itself, we see the possible collapse of the Schengen area.

What we—meaning the countries that had just finished a difficult 15-year odyssey to rejoin Europe—hoped for was a new normality, that is to say, to be co-participants in the widely accepted norms of civilized behavior, be they in foreign affairs or security or in following the rules of government fiscal policy. Yet no sooner did we join than the world around us began to unravel. And not because of us!

Of course, thank heavens that we joined when we did. Thank heavens that we did all the work that it took to be accepted. We need only to look at those who failed to undertake the necessary reforms, and who for whatever reasons did not push themselves to reform enough to join the liberal democratic fold. Neither in the EU nor in NATO, they live in a Hobbesian world.

While few will say so publicly (though some do), the Fukuyaman quarter-century is drawing to a whimpering close. It is no longer about the victory of liberal democracy, it is a scramble to protect it both abroad and at home. Enlargement, though not dead in the water, say some, is barely afloat. The Peace Dividend is spent—indeed we borrowed off it more than necessary and now countries have to recapitalize. But NATO at least is back to protecting its own—back in area, back in business.

From a strictly national point of view, Estonia has done rather well. As with this conference, the country is serious: serious about its defense and its commitment to NATO's 2 percent defense spending guidelines. Its finances are sound, corruption is low, we enjoy the Euro, a free press—freer than many countries of so-called Old Europe—and even the European Commission concludes that we have a more developed e-governance system than any other member state. In short, despite, or perhaps because of, our own domestic whining about our own inadequacies, the country has become a genuinely modern European state—something even some of our neighbors doubted 20 years ago when I became foreign minister.

And yet Estonia does not stand alone. Our worries are no longer just our own, our worries include Europe's troubles. While we are among those nations that have agreed to the Commission's numbers for taking refugees and continue to do so apace, while we willingly participate in the various operations of both the EU and NATO to maintain our European borders, it is because we realize full-well that Europe's fate is our fate, and that we rise or fall with the institutions and treaties that were created to keep Europe free and democratic.

Yet everywhere we in Europe turn, there seems to be another intractable crisis. Blame is ascribed to everyone—usually everyone else. This "new normal" that we are in—from an aggressive revanchist Russia to the migration crisis, horrific terrorism in Brussels and Paris, right- and left-wing populism and the crumbling of solidarity—requires us to stop whining and do something.

We ourselves must be better. Our own leaders and politicians, both in government and in the opposition, have to improve. A simple catalogue of issues I gave above should give us enough pause to realize those who want a secure, safe, liberal, and democratic Europe must pull together. And as voters, too, we must realize the seriousness of what we all face when we make our electoral decisions. Extremist parties and politicians exploit the current refugee crisis, just like they exploited the economic crisis. They exploit the dissatisfaction of voters with the often anodyne and milquetoast resolve of European leaders. Citizens await decisive responses to crises. When traditional parties do not provide them, they look for those whose rhetoric sounds decisive yet carries within it the "decisiveness" of reaction: of simple, often un-European solutions the Union was created to rid Europe of forever.

We need our leaders to lead. If every principled decision is watered down by the latest poll, that is not leadership—that is holding on your seat.

A Europe where someone else is always to blame, a Europe that looks first for where one can turn a quick profit in a shady deal with an authoritarian regime and only then at international law, a Europe that doesn't take its defense seriously enough to pay for it or refuses to help other EU members overwhelmed by refugees, is not a Europe that will last for very long. This is a Europe that many on the far-right and far-left, however, want. For they know well that it is the end of Europe, and a return to the might-makes-right mindset of the 1930s. In that Europe, everyone will eventually lose. But the first victims will be the small, the powerless.

This is why, Ladies and Gentleman, we must not adjust to the "new normal". We must not allow it to become our baseline. Avoiding this fate requires also that we do more than has been the case with the old normal. Inter alia, this means:

We must admit that our current level of funding to deal with the migration crisis is inadequate. UNRRA, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, spent between 1945 and 1947 the equivalent of 50 billion 2015 Euros on the post-war refugee crisis.

Europe needs dramatically to up defense expenditure to deal with threats we thought were long gone.

And we need to get over Europe's orientalism that Edward Said used to describe attitudes toward the Middle East but persists to this day in attitudes toward those so-called "Eastern Members". For 20 years the eastern Europeans were said to be paranoid. Now, however, what was long considered to be the "Eastern factor" in EU-RU relations, has become "the new normal".

Our Europe, our liberal democratic West, is a very different place from what it was a decade ago. We know from where we started but we must think harder how to shape it looking ahead. If we don't, it will be shaped by an anti-Enlightenment movement of authoritarians with little concern for democratic legitimacy. This will require us to be pro-, not re-active. Much of what the West faces today, from Russian aggression to the migration crisis was foreseeable. We simply chose to ignore the signs.

While I haven't gotten into it here, we need also to end our provincial protectionism and luddite approach to the economies and technologies of the 21st Century. If not, even rising democracies like India will overtake us.

At the minimum, we must create a future that is rules-based. Not only for aggression or trade, but for ourselves. If any single moment defines for me the beginning of our decline, it was the 2003 decision that the Stability and Growth Pact applied only to some. *Quod licet Iovi non licet Bovi* is no way to run a Union.

A rules-based order means we do not allow those who have violated the rules to determine what they will be. Commentary is fine, but just as dialogue is not a policy, giving the aggressor a say in defining aggression is to throw out the rules.

The upcoming NATO summit will be one opportunity to begin to address many of these issues. It will be a sign of the new times, when we will redefine Western security to deal more appropriately with the sea-change in we have witnessed in this realm, admitting that the current

and foreseeable security environment of 1997 in twenty years has changed beyond recognition.

The EU too will have to overcome the divisiveness caused by the migration crisis. For one, we need to tone down the rhetoric. We must realize that NIMBY is not a policy, and we must finally come up with a solution that leaves no one unfairly burdened. That will not be an easy task. Yet it is vital to ensure we will not have any smoldering resentments within the West in the future.

So, Ladies and Gentlemen, I hope this year the Lennart Meri Conference will not only delineate and adumbrate the problems we face, something participants have done for years with particular perspicacity. Those issues we already know. I hope that out of this conference we at least start drawing the outlines of a Prolegomenon for a future Europe, again whole, free and at peace.

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