

*by Robert Anderson in Stockholm*

The Baltic states, past victims of Kremlin attacks, have called on the European Union to suspend its drive for closer relations with Russia after its invasion of Georgia.

“We have to review our policy. Can we consider a partner a country who behaves like this?” President Toomas Hendrik Ilves of Estonia said in an interview. He added: “It’s time to stop sticking our head in the sand.”

The presidents of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, together with Poland, issued a joint statement at the weekend warning that the Georgian conflict would be a credibility “litmus test” for Nato and the EU.

This immediately prompted a warning from the Russian ambassador to Latvia that they would pay for their attitude. “One must not hurry on such serious issues, as serious mistakes can be made that have to be paid for a long time afterwards,” Alexander Veshnyakov told the Baltic News Service on Monday.

The Baltic states fought for their independence against Russia in the early 1990s and have suffered frequent Russian interference since.

After Estonia moved a Soviet war memorial in spring last year, Russia interrupted border traffic and nationalists attacked Estonia’s embassy in Moscow and launched a wave of cyber attacks against public and private institutions. Georgia is now suffering similar web-based attacks and Estonia has sent two of its experts to give advice.

Baltic leaders believe they have been vindicated by Russia's attack on Georgia and they hope that EU foreign ministers will share their tough attitude when they meet on Wednesday.

"It's very difficult for any country to take the same view of the EU-Russian relationship as they did before," said President Ilves. "The (Russian) behaviour has been so egregious that we can't close our eyes any more."

President Ilves said that this would not be an anti-Russian coalition, as some EU states such as Italy fear, stressing: "It's a pro-democracy, pro-rule of law coalition that is emerging right now."

The Baltic and Polish presidents are calling for a review of the planned new Partnership and Co-operation Agreement between Russia and the EU and for the suspension of the programme to ease EU-Russia visa restrictions.

The presidents accuse Moscow of failing to meet the minimum requirements for the visa facilitation programme and of abusing the scheme in South Ossetia.

"The visa facilitation policy was complicit in what happened in Georgia," said President Ilves, pointing out that Russia issued passports to inhabitants of the separatist region - granting them easier access to the EU than Georgians - and then used the presence of Russian nationals there to help justify its invasion.

The presidents also criticise Nato's failure to give Georgia a timetable for membership earlier this year: "We regret that the not granting of Nato's Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Georgia was seen as a green light for aggression in the region," their statement said.

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