

Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves flew to Tbilisi in the middle of Georgia's war with Russia to stand with four other leaders of former communist countries in support of the Georgian people. RFE/RL correspondent Charles Recknagel asks him why he feels such a personal commitment to Georgia's efforts to become part of NATO and the EU, and how he views its struggle with Moscow.

RFE/RL: President Ilves, you took the trouble to travel to Tbilisi and show solidarity with Georgia in its moment of crisis. Why do you personally feel so strongly that Georgia's problems are your own, and the world's own?

Toomas Hendrik Ilves: On a more philosophical level, we cannot have a repeat of what happened in '38, when Neville Chamberlain returned declaring peace in his time and, after all, so what if a small faraway country about which we know nothing is dismembered. Certainly that was the beginning of the conflagration that ensued.

I think on a more realpolitik level, the assumptions that we have held since the end of the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union, which I would call the post-'91 settlement, the basic assumption is that whatever happens inside Russia it will not return to its former ways of invading other countries. That is a very fundamental assumption which affects everything we do, NATO planning, everything. That assumption has collapsed and I think it will take a generation to get back to the point where we were in the beginning of August where we thought, OK, we can have all kinds of words but we will never see an invasion on the part of Russia.

RFE/RL: Many ordinary Georgians have expressed disappointment to the press that the West did not offer them more help in the hot war that they just fought. Did you hear the same while you were in Tbilisi and, if so, how did you respond?

Iives: I did hear that and I would say that there are a number of factors. One is that very unfortunately Georgia was not offered the Membership Action Plan in the Bucharest summit of NATO and as I said then, and I say it now, that decision was interpreted as a green light to do what you want with Georgia. And I think those that blocked [the offer] bear some responsibility in what ensued.

But the other thing, of course, is that the West is slow to react. I mean, these kinds of things take a little while to sink in. Once it sinks in, usually the West acts rather forcefully. If you look at the reaction of the United States right now, it is very forceful. I think they, just as we, were taken aback by what happened and it took everyone a while to realize that the paradigm had shifted completely.

RFE/RL: The French-brokered plan for cease-fire offers five points, including future nonuse of force and withdrawal of troops to their previous positions. Is this an adequate starting point for calming this crisis and getting back to negotiations over Georgia's frozen conflicts, or would you see a need for more conditions imposed on either or both sides?

Iives: If you just invaded with 10,000 troops and almost a thousand tanks, then withdrawing to the previous borders with that amount of military hardware, I don't think is a good way to start. I think it has to be more concrete. The troops have to leave Georgian territory and we need to ensure the territorial integrity of Georgia.

RFE/RL: After this incident, do you think the EU will harden its stance toward Russia and move perhaps more toward the Eastern European members' perspective of Russia and away from that of France and Germany?

Iives: I think it's inevitable. To kind of [reiterate] a statement I read the other day -- I think there is actually a very pro-Russia, Russophile coalition inside the European Union which places

good business relations above European values of human rights, democracy, and so forth. And I think that this will be a point of contention in the future.

However, I don't see such an accommodating stance on the part of the "realist" camp, to which I think we belong. We saw that Poland and then Lithuania did cave in on the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement discussion, due to heavy pressure. I don't think that is going to happen again when similar issues come up. As I said, the previous paradigm is over and dead; the most fundamental assumptions have changed.

RFE/RL: Some observers might say that this Georgian-Russian fight again highlights the difference between two orders being constructed in Europe. One is a shared space, marked by shared institutions where an agreed political and economic framework works to maintain peace and prosperity -- I am thinking of the NATO/EU space. The other is a space marked out only by its previous history and where powerful states have spheres of influence and relations are unregulated -- I am thinking of Russia and its neighborhood. Do you see the European continent, if you permit the expression, in these terms and is that why you give so much attention to what goes on in the East?

Ilves: That's a long question to simply answer with a yes. I see it from a slightly different perspective. What I would actually say is that Europe is that area which is defined by interlocking interests, fundamental freedoms, and so forth. And Europe is defined by that, and what doesn't have that is not Europe.

As an analogy: Königsberg was the heart of Europe. Kaliningrad has nothing to do with Europe. The same geographical space. Joseph Joffe in a recent piece, and clearly also Robert Kagan, have pointed out that what we're dealing with is a very 19th-century hegemonic approach to things on the part of Russia today that makes it very difficult for them to really understand and interact with what we call Europe.

And Europe finds it also difficult. I mean, if on the one hand you have a kind of authoritarian, bullying petrostate flush with lots and lots of money and then you have a Europe that doesn't really understand the use of force involved or believe in that kind of politics but does believe in

money, I think we have a dangerous mix. But basically brute force, power, and buying politicians -- as we've seen, unfortunately, at the highest levels in Europe -- is not compatible with the Kantian "perpetual peace" assumptions of the European Union.

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