

Siegfried Thielbeer, Tallinn

Notwithstanding the unanimous denunciation of Russia's Georgia-policy, the interview with Angela Merkel could not have been easy for the Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves. After all, the Federal Chancellor had played a major role in blocking the extension of NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Georgia and Ukraine on the NATO Bucharest summit in April. „That gave Moscow the impression that Georgia belonged to your sphere of influence,” Ilves said to the FAZ on Tuesday before receiving Mrs. Merkel.

In its unprecedented decision, NATO promised both countries only a prospect of joining NATO sometime in the future. President Ilves stressed that for him, the decision was still perplexing. He says that giving the two countries the Membership Action Plan would not even have meant that a date was to be set for their accession.

Can Berlin be defended?

For Ilves, petty decisions are no longer acceptable. In his opinion, the Western countries are facing a tremendous ordeal, as the main presumption of international relations for the past 20 years has now vanished. It can no longer be presumed that Russia would balk from an attack against another country, such as the one in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Therefore, NATO should refocus on its main task, the territorial defence of the member states. First of all, all attention should be focused on detailed revision of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, addressing the obligation of military assistance. Ilves explained that the alliance had already drawn up crisis plans for Poland. Now, plans must be drawn up also for the defence of the Baltic States.

Can these countries be defended at all? „Can Berlin be defended?“ Ilves parries. Just now, the Baltic States are on the forefront and need the unanimity of the West.

Nevertheless, he does not consider that the Baltic States are under an increased threat ever since the Georgian war. The Baltic States are members of NATO, and Europe does give more attention to its immediate neighbourhood than it does to events in allegedly remote Georgia. Ilves cautions that all of Europe, and not just the Baltic countries, should now feel less secure. All Europeans should ask themselves whether it is possible to join into partnership with a system that does not share European values, such as the rule of law, democracy and freedom of speech. Perhaps, Ilves surmises, it will sooner or later become evident that what Russia is after is not a partnership but just visas for the functionaries.

An ally to be trusted

The Georgian President Saakashvili revealed similar thoughts to the French paper *La Libération* on Monday: the Russian leadership would probably feel it most if they were deprived of their Côté d'Azur holidays, and their children of the possibility to study in England or France.

In the past years, Estonia has been a loyal ally to Georgia when the Caucasian country needed support in wrestling with Russia. Russia's pretext for the offensive – defence of the Russian minority – is in Estonia widely interpreted as a plainly universal argument that could be used also for intervention in the Baltic States, or probably next in the Ukraine. The overall response of the West, which has been perceptibly weak, has increased the general uncertainty. It is especially Germany's reputation that has been damaged in Tallinn – as one of the core countries of the EU, Germany was expected to do its duty. The question what Estonia's membership in the EU and NATO is actually worth is being asked more and more frequently.

The public sentiment in Estonia is as unstable as in Latvia. Especially the elderly are reminded of the Soviet occupation, the executions and the deportations. The Russian minority, mostly depending on the Moscow TV channels for information, has views different from those of the rest of the population. The part of population that speaks Russian as their mother tongue and was resettled in the Baltic countries during the Soviet period, and often feels like second-class citizens due to the tensions generated by citizenship and language tests issues after the restoration of independence, is mostly understanding towards Moscow's steps. Still, many consider it prudent to conceal their views and prefer to say that they do not watch the news.

A misleading signal from Bucharest

In the course of our interview, President Ilves expressed his conviction that Moscow had started already in April to prepare for the invasion. Those knowing how many months are needed to prepare for the mobilisation of the NATO or EU strike forces, will understand that Moscow cannot dispatch thousands of soldiers and tanks to Southern Ossetia in a matter of hours.

In Estonia's so-called security circles the prevailing opinion is that Saakashvili fell into a trap patiently set by Moscow. Southern Ossetia is fully under the control of former KGB clans. Moscow could have guaranteed peace there at any time. How is it possible that a puppet regime ruling over a population of 45,000 by the grace of Moscow is able to dispatch troops consisting of 5000 men? Putin provoked Georgia in order to gain control over the district. He was convinced that the West would come with nothing more than futile protests.

Also Kadri Liik, Director of the International Centre for Defence Studies, who has a lengthy Moscow-experience, speaks of the NATO summit and the misleading signal given in Bucharest. The EU countries recoiled from hostilities with Moscow, although Moscow can only understand unambiguous talk. Any wording referring to a compromise is read as a sign of weakness. Foreign Minister Paet, who kept himself diplomatically in the background during Merkel's visit, hoped that Berlin would make no further obstructions to Georgia's and Ukraine's programme of preparations for joining NATO. Officially, the issue will be addressed again in December.

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In Tallinn the opinion is that the West could do a lot more. A clear denunciation of Russia’s aggression would be the least. Furthermore, the EU should try harder to agree on a common energy policy in order to escape dependence from Russia. After that, a careful audit of the bank accounts of the state-owned Russian enterprises controlled by Putin’s KGB clans could be carried out. Also refusal to issue visas for visiting the western countries would hit a sore point of such groups – for it is in the West they would like to enjoy the fruits of their successful business activities. All Abkhazian real estate investors – former KGB employees – could also be brought to justice in the West, as they have acted illegally, without the consent of the Georgian government. Putin’s henchmen in Southern Ossetia, who banished the last Georgians living there, are for this reason also responsible of ethnic purge. As the example of Yugoslavia has demonstrated, such activities may be prosecuted in the West.

It has been observed in Tallinn with bitter satisfaction that even the President of France now feels deceived by the Russian leaders. „In Moscow, they are lying on the very next day about the content of the newly signed agreements.” Perhaps the experience of the Baltic States, who have for years endured such an attitude in relations with Moscow, will be better understood by the West in the future. Even the ceasefire agreement drawn up by Sarkozy still included a clause on withdrawal of the troops to the positions occupied before 6 August. Today, nobody mentions the areas of Southern Ossetia that were inhabited by Georgians. Foreign Minister Paet hopes that the forthcoming EU summit would launch a more comprehensive analysis of EU’s relations with Moscow.

Moscow must feel the pressure.

President Ilves sees no room for optimism. Our 21st century world, with its 20th century ideas, is facing Russia’s policy motivated by nationalist ideology and based on the imperialist outlook

of the 19th century.

A link to the article at the website of [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung](#) (in German)