

"Today we see around us a fracturing of Europe, perhaps even liberal democracy more broadly. We are figuratively as well as literally building new walls where instead we should be enjoying the freedom so many European countries fought for so long to achieve," said the President, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, last night in Prague, on accepting the 2015 Aspen Prague Award.

The 2015 Aspen Prague Award is being presented to President Ilves for his outstanding contribution to democracy building and his successful and safe leadership of Estonia as part of a united Europe; the award also acknowledges the Head of State for helping to maintain a strong Atlantic relationship between the countries of Europe and North America and for promoting regional cooperation between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

"The crises we have faced since the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall highlight the EU's limits in working speedily together. This is not to say we are unable to work together," said President Ilves, and he gave the unprecedented and historic consensus in response to the grave violations of international law in the Anschluss of Crimea as an example. "This shows that Europe can work when need be," he added.

In his address, President Ilves emphasised that conflicts in the Middle East all affect us directly. "The conflicts in Syria and Libya have set in motion a series of dominoes: conflict, refugees, massive movement of peoples escaping the violence to Europe. This, I worry, is changing the landscape of European democracies. We are witnessing rising support for far right or far left political movements, often fuelled by anti-immigrant, racist sentiments," said President Ilves. "Short-sighted, populist policies exploiting the fears of ordinary people will lead us, I fear, back to the 1930s," stated the Head of State.

President Ilves added that this does not mean that migration-related concerns and discussions in our public domain are not to be taken seriously or into account. "We have painful debates where various values either become mixed or clash with our tragic historical experience and demographics. Fear is often understandable because of lack of experience," he added.

The Head of State mentioned that genuine solidarity and a significant contribution are expected of European countries towards solving the problems that the migration crisis poses. "We want to build walls around us to keep out refugees, not realising that we are rebuilding the same walls we so desperately worked to tear down," President Ilves stated.

According to the Head of State, NATO is to turn to strong deterrence in addition to dialogue in response to the changed security situation. "The recent military escalation in Syria demonstrates yet again the need to adapt further to a new and changing security reality in and around Europe. We must move forward, improve our readiness and responsiveness. That is, we need to create a credible deterrence that sends a clear message to any potential aggressor. We need a long term strategy for long term problems," he added.

In his address, the Head of State also focused on one of the biggest shortcomings of Europe – the absence of a single digital market in the European Union. He stated that all the conditions have been met to allow the free cross-border movement of people and goods, yet the digital revolution will require some serious political will and contribution. "IT-based service companies must adopt and adapt to 28 different taxation, consumer protection and copyright regimes. The European Commission says that the annual cost of Europe's fractured digital market or waste is 340 billion euros a year," added President Ilves, who also emphasised that a fractured digital market is another "wall" that stands in the way of the economic development of Europe.

"It is also a fact that out of the 20 largest internet companies, 14 are American and almost all of the rest are Chinese," President Ilves said, and he added that the European Union is competitively lagging behind the USA and Asia.

The former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright became the first recipient of the Aspen Prague Award in 2014; she received the award at the institute's annual conference from President Ilves.

Aspen Institute Prague is an independent, non-partisan organisation, established in 2012, to promote the values of democracy, democratic leadership and international understanding, and to facilitate the debate about important issues of society, politics and economy. For that purpose, the institute organises international conferences and issues various publications. The Aspen Prague Award is presented to an individual or group with proven excellence in promoting the underlying values of the Aspen family, including social, political and economic debate that relies upon European values.

The full text of the speech by President Toomas Hendrik Ilves is available in English here: <http://www.president.ee/en/official-duties/speeches/11666-the-walls-we-build-ourselves/index.html>  
!

Office of the President  
Public Relations Department