

I am hardly presumptuous enough to echo Dean Acheson claiming "Present at the Creation" but I certainly believe that turning the Baltic American investment fund founded in 1994 into a scholarship or stipend fund five years ago was a great idea. A fund investing in education is probably the best kind of investment you can make. Because the returns are huge, though not always measureable in terms of dollars or euros. Speaking personally I ended up marrying a graduate. So I have personal gratitude for the investment you have made.

But I didn't come here to make jokes actually, because the word Baltic is resounding more and more, not just in terms of scholarships. Baltic is back, is back however in ways that we didn't really hope it would be back. We hear headlines such as "Is Narva Next?" "The Suwalki Gap" or "The Baltic Storm". We have become a frontline state, not that we did anything ourselves. What can I say. Think tanks are running war games involving Russian aggression against our countries. We live in a bad neighbourhood. I used to say that it's like trying to build a gentrified house in the South Bronx, but then now the South Bronx is gentrified.

Globally speaking, we live in an era where "ISIS" first means a terror organisation and only then an Egyptian Goddess. When we hear the word Minsk we think about a ceasefire agreement and only then do we think about the capital of an undemocratic and unreformed former Soviet republic. Little green men are not Martians in low budget 1950s science fiction movies but rather insignialess Speznaz commandos. So things have changed, and not necessarily for the better.

Yet today, a quarter century after the end of the Cold War on my home continent, Europe, and perhaps here as well, we are clueless amidst a transformational change. Amidst transformational change to which we do not know yet how to respond, because we do not now what is the end-state we wish to achieve. But we are all kind of running hard to make sure it goes in our direction. And fighting hard to make sure that whatever responses we come up with are ones that maintain liberty that we have enjoyed for the past quarter of a century and that we never ever want to give up.

Russia has gone off the rails. "It's back as a revisionist power pursuing a 19th-century agenda with 21st-century tactics and methods," wrote a group of leaders from Central and Eastern Europe already in 2009. In 2014, Jonathan Eyal of Royal United Services Institute, the UK military think tank, wrote in the Financial Times: "We spent 20 years telling the Eastern Europeans that they were paranoid, living in the past, that they should treat Russia as a normal country. Now it turns out they were right all along" But the problem is I have learned in my very long years that being right doesn't mean that you are happy or even alive sometimes.

So that's what we face today. Still, we have people who don't quite get it and who do think that having a modest defence is sabre rattling. That it's better to make money with deals than to stand up against the violation of virtually all the foundational agreements of the post world war two era including the United Nations Charter, the Helsinki Final Act, the Paris Charter all of which forbid use of military force to change borders.

What we need to do is to come to terms with what we face in our neighbourhood. We do need a decisive united response. We see to the east a long term military build-up all along the European eastern border which is now already 5.4% of GDP, compared to the 3.3% in the United States, and which is all much higher than the 2% that we are supposed to achieve in NATO. But which is met only by five European countries, including Estonia.

We have witnessed over the past two years increasingly provocative behavior, be it military exercises with extremely aggressive scenarios, including invasion of the Baltic countries; swaggering nuclear rhetoric and mock nuclear attacks; a build-up of troops and missiles behind our borders as well as nearly daily transponder-less military flights in international airspace around our borders as well as dangerous buzzing of NATO ships and planes in the Baltic Sea area.

These are the problems that we didn't really think about back when we were talking about the peace dividend. If you remember that it meant that we'd all stop spending money on defence. Where the future of NATO came down to "out of area or out of business". Finally we figured out that we better get back in the area or be out of business. But not all of us have figured out what we need to do for our defence.

Fortunately the Baltic countries do. This time around here at the BAFF alumni gathering we have lots of people who have actually spent time living in the United States, who have degrees, who have experience, who have colleagues. So this is the thing what I would ask all of you who are alumni of BAFF. That in addition to all the wonderful things you got out of your time in the United States, all of the things you've learned, all of the people you have gotten to know, you reserve a little patience and a little part of that experience to maintain those ties. Because we may end up needing them.

Every little thread that ties our region to the United States is vital. It is absolutely necessary for

our future survival. It is the kind of interstitial tissue that keeps us together with the leading power promoting liberal democracy in the world. And especially when you see that there is a strong isolationist tendency in the United States and fewer and fewer people who have that instinctual trans-atlanticism that kept Western Europe bound to the United States throughout the Cold war.

You are among those that we have to count upon, to keep those ties going, keep those ties important. So you do have a role. It's a cliché saying that you are our ambassadors - I mean you don't have to be the ambassador, you can be like the third secretary at the embassy - nonetheless you have an important role. You have been given the opportunity to excel in your home countries, to the point that you would meet the stringent criteria for entrance to this wonderful programme. I hope you say, "For my country I better keep those contacts going!" We count on you.

Finally, there is the issue of leadership. All of us need to be better, meaning our own leaders and politicians, both in government and in opposition. A simple catalogue of issues and crises I listed above should give us enough pause to realize those who want a secure safe liberal democratic Europe must pull together.

And voters must as well, and realize the seriousness of what we face when they make their electoral decision. Extremist parties and politicians exploit the current refugee crisis, 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 that the European Union as well as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation were created to rid Europe of forever.

We need leaders to lead, and we need to look to you - I'm going to become a pensioner soon, so I really do look to you - to lead. Because if every principle decision is postponed, or watered down by the latest poll, that is not leadership. That is holding on to your seat.

So we need you, we need you to be decisive, and we need you to start thinking about not only your careers, which have I'm sure have considerably benefitted from what you have done as scholars and interns and students at BAFF, but to think about what you can do for your country. Because in many ways, as I said earlier, you are doing those things, you have been able to do

the things offered, because you come from countries like Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania that gave you the opportunity to excel to the point where you would be accepted.

So I wish all of you to get involved and not to fixate only on what you do very well, or the enormous success. But to set aside a little time, tie some of your time to your country to make sure that we don't lose what we have fought for so many years, and that we've enjoyed for a quarter of a century this August. Keep going, keep struggling and give something back to your countries. Thank you.