

By Richard Milne in Tallinn

Toomas Hendrik Ilves is not afraid of standing out from the crowd. Estonia's president, habitually dressed in a bow tie, has long warned the west of the threat that Russia poses.

Once viewed as paranoid, Mr Ilves, since Russia's invasion of Crimea, is more sought out than ever for his views on Estonia's big neighbour to the east.

"The same people who said: 'It's just a normal country, why don't you just get along with them?' Suddenly they go: 'We're sorry. We take it back, we blew it'," he says in an interview in his presidential palace in Tallinn.

For Mr Ilves, a former journalist who was born in Sweden and grew up in the US, Russia's actions in Ukraine are nothing short of "an existential issue". Not for Estonia – despite the worries of some that Russia could turn its attention to the Baltics after Ukraine – but for the whole way of thinking about security in Europe in the past four decades.

"If you've been operating all this time with the fundamental assumptions [such as] you don't change borders through military intervention and you don't make this Sudetenland kind of appeal to co-ethnics, well if that doesn't hold any more then the whole thinking . . . is out of the window," he says.

A president with few formal powers in a country with just 1.3m inhabitants, Mr Ilves is used to punching above his weight. He is one of the world's most active leaders on Twitter where he weighs in on everything, from foreign policy to his liking of the latest Pearl Jam album.

It was on Twitter where he got into perhaps his biggest fight, taking on Paul Krugman after the US economist criticised Estonia's decision to embrace austerity after the global financial crisis. One post in the feud seems like it could just as well apply to his views on Russia: "Chill. Just

because my country's policy runs against the Received Wisdom & I object doesn't mean y'all gotta follow me."

Today, Mr Ilves says he is still worried that not everyone appreciates just how much has changed due to Russia's recent aggression. "I'm concerned about certain countries that don't quite get this yet and are looking to make sure they keep their profits," he says.

Asked to elaborate, he says the UK, France, Germany and Poland as big players "clearly get it". Although he is too diplomatic to say so, by implication it means Italy and Spain do not.

But even those countries that understand what is at stake are under pressure from business interests, Mr Ilves says. "[Businesses] don't have a 10-, 20-, 50-year perspective, which is absolutely vital to any serious country. Business is looking at one, three, five years but the governments of those four countries [have an] understanding that this is big. This is not a trade spat," he adds.

Mr Ilves says bluntly that the current sanctions cannot be "considered a deterrent". "On the ground, it's not working," he says. Instead, he favours an investigation into money laundering as a way of putting economic pressure on Russia. "When they basically are abusing our open, transparent, democratic systems then we have to use precisely what our advantage is, which is transparency, openness," he adds.

He argues that even in the cold war under the Helsinki Final Act – signed in 1975 – there was a principle of "no change of borders through violent means". He adds: "If you're in a situation in which not everyone plays by the rules or the rules don't apply to all, then you have to come up with a new game plan for yourself." He is unwilling to specify what the new rules should be, saying merely it is something the EU and Nato have to discuss.

They have plenty else to discuss, according to Mr Ilves. One theme is military issues such as his belief – shared by almost all politicians in the Baltics – that the best deterrent against Russia is to have "boots on the ground", namely Nato forces in the region.

He calls Estonia the "archetypal puritanical country" for being one of only five Nato members (out of 28) to spend the required 2 per cent of GDP on the military and the sole Baltic state to do so. He says countries that spend more should receive more from the alliance, suggesting Estonia sees itself in pole position should Nato decide to base land troops in the region.

Some politicians in the Baltics have suggested that after Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin could turn his attention to them as the only former Soviet states to join either Nato or the EU. Mr Ilves plays down the idea, saying: "I have no existential dilemmas about Estonia today."

But he recognises that Mr Putin is obsessed by tiny Estonia. Some ascribe this to Mr Putin's father reportedly being betrayed by Estonians in the second world war. But Mr Ilves thinks the explanation is more that Estonia has been so successful in embracing "liberal, democratic values", which in turn has attracted many liberal Russians to the country.

He recalls meeting a few weeks ago some members of Pussy Riot, the controversial punk rock band of whom he was one of the earliest supporters. Estonia's state radio "lambasted me" for doing it, he says.

"It actually made me feel good. I'm president of a country where the 100 per cent state-funded public radio can attack me for meeting Pussy Riot and nothing is going to happen to the editor. This is what Russians of the liberal sort like about Estonia," he adds.

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