

Estonia's president appeals to the East to pay its migration dues.

by Toomas Hendrik Ilves

The crises Europe has faced since the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, highlight the EU's limits in working speedily together. But this is not to say we are unable to work together.

The unprecedented and historic consensus in response to the grave violations of international law in the Anschluss of Crimea shows Europe can work when need be. The precise, even surgical sanctions have been successful. We have increased the cost of aggression and firmly responded to violations of international law – the United Nations Charter, the Helsinki Final Act and the Paris Charter – that is the foundation of our continent's security.

Admittedly, we are still in the early days of the sanctions, a policy tool that often brings too few visible results overnight. We have been this in the case of Iran. And we know from our continent's history that turning a blind eye to aggression leads to far greater tragedies in the future. Thus, we need strategic patience within the EU.

We also need strong deterrence. Dialogue itself is not a policy. NATO allies have reacted promptly to changes in Europe's security architecture after the aggression in Ukraine and in response to the military build-up and provocations beyond its borders. The recent military escalation in Syria demonstrates yet again in the need to further adapt to a changing security reality in and around Europe. We must move forward, and improve our readiness and responsiveness. We need a credible deterrent that send a clear message to any potential aggressor. We need a long-term strategy for long-term problems. We need to admit that we have been too slow to recognize how much the situation has changed.

What will come next? We don't know. We all have much to lose from a crumbling liberal international order.

Conflicts in our neighborhood also directly affect our own societies and politics. The conflicts in Syria and Libya have set in motion a series of dominoes: conflict, refugees, the massive movement of people seeking to escape violence and coming 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 fueled by anti-immigrant, racist sentiments. Short-sighted populist policies exploiting the fears of ordinary people will lead us, I fear, back to the 1930s. Our much-vaunted tolerance is evaporating, replaced too often by the sneer of the street thug. Politicians are using language that a few years ago appeared only in anonymous comments on the web.

Whithin the EU, the migration crisis has revived old stereotypes of Eastern Europe stuck in backwardness and xenophobia, a stereotype so many of us have labored for so long to overcome. I know all too well how much hard work our way to the EU and NATO required. We had to painstakingly convince Western Europe to overcome ignorance, stereotyped perceptions, and sometimes just plain arrogance. The momentous achievement of the EU's enlargement to the Central and Eastern Europe risks being undermined by this crisis.

This is not to say that public concerns and discussions should not be taken seriously. To the contrary, we're engaged in painful debates where the values expressed clash with our tragic historical experience and demographics. Under these circumstances, fear is understandable – often it comes from a lack of experience or encounters with people from other religions and cultures. We are different in this regard from our Western neighbors. And this difference calls for careful attention and mindful consideration not only from the media but from those seated around the negotiation table in Brussels.

We joined NATO and the EU more than a decade ago and are now full partners in deciding Europe's future. We are also Stammkunden – regular consumers – of solidarity and have benefited from cross-border cooperation in more ways than one: air policing, "borderless" travel within the EU, career possibilities across Europe, not to mention an entire generation of our youth that has benefited from scholarships for studies abroad.

The migration crisis is the first time since accession that the EU expects a significant contribution from our side. We must act responsibly – it is in our common interest to do so, and

at the service of a common cause.

Small wonder then, after all the freedoms and prosperity we have received from the EU, that when we refuse to help others in difficulty we see a return to old stereotypes. We profess to wanting to build walls to keep out the refugees, not realizing that we are rebuilding the very walls we so desperately worked to tear down.

Winston Churchill, arguing for European integration, said in 1946: "Small nations will count as much as large ones and gain their honor by their contribution to the common cause."

Let us then gain our honor.

Toomas Hendrik Ilves is the president of Estonia. This article is adapted from a speech he delivered recently at the Aspen Institute, Prague.