

I HAVE just been at the [Lennart Meri Conference](#) in Tallinn which I feel sets the standard for security shindigs (see [here](#) for the agenda), and not only because the organisers let me chair two sessions. The theme was "Making Values Count". Topics included

- Libya: what are we in for?;
- EU Foreign Policy: Failing, Flailing or Finding Its Feet?;
- Be Careful What You Wish For: Russia's Multipolar Blues;
- Lostpolitik: Can Germany Rise to Its Leadership Challenge?;
- Russia's Leadership and 2012: Election, Selection or Ejection?; and
- Europe's Energy Security: Geopolitics, Credibility and Corruption.

One of the highlights was a [speech](#) by the Estonian president, Toomas Hendrik Ilves (seen earlier sitting on the floor in a particularly packed session: name any other country where the head of state does that).

The title was "Getting to Turkey or Aquaria from Fish Soup". The latter reference is to a famous quote sometimes attributed to Lech Walesa but actually from Adam Michnik. It was memorably used by Estonia's first post-1991 president, Lennart Meri, in his [address to the UN in 1993](#). It is easy to turn an aquarium into fish soup, which is what Communism did to the countries on which it was imposed. It is rather harder to reverse the process.

The theme was reflections on the revolutions in North Africa from the point of view of one of the most successful ex-communist countries. Mr Ilves (Swedish-born and American-raised) is a former journalist, well-read with an acerbic turn of phrase. It was well on display in his speech. His launch-pad was a paraphrase of the opening line in Anna Karenina: "All successful post-despotic countries reformed alike. Each unsuccessful country finds its own excuse." Successfully overthrowing a despotic regime is just the first step:

That was the quick, and deceptively often, the easy part. Everything else that we consider to be the essence of creating a democracy: institution building, establishment of rule of law, development of civic society, fundamental rights and freedoms, economic growth, low corruption, turned out to take years and a lot of effort and political capital and will.

He continued with a sobering reminder of the limits of what is often seen wrongly as the triumph of 1989:

Plagued by corruption and kleptocratic rule, or subject to de-ideologised but still authoritarian despotism, it is a depressing empirical truth that most citizens of countries that escaped communist totalitarianism twenty years ago today remain under some kind of undemocratic rule. Indeed, of those 400 million (400 million!) people living in countries that comprised the audience of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, three quarters live today under rule rated by Freedom House as "Un-free" or "Partially free". While these citizens are arguably better off than a generation ago, they still live as subjects, not as free citizens.

And with this historical perspective:

Today, as the world watches fascinated—and in some cases, horrified—at popular rebellions against authoritarian rule in Northern Africa and in parts of the Arab world, what we here in the post-communist world sense first and foremost is *déjà vu*. We recognize ourselves just a generation ago. The feeling of now or never, the sense that at long last there is a chance to throw off the stagnant and thuggish rule that has held us back or been on our back for decades. An exhilaration at success, bewilderment at how weak tyranny turned out to be and how quickly the despotic clique that decades for decades had brutalized the citizenry collapsed, gave up or fled. To our democratic colleagues in Egypt and elsewhere, I would say: Cherish these emotions; they will be touchstones.

But the main thrust of the speech was not to advise the revolutionaries ("East Europeans" have plenty of experience with unwanted and often bad advice from outside). It was to lambast the prejudice that the secure, rich countries of the western half of the continent manifest towards the east and south alike. He drew a comparison with what Edward Said called "Orientalism": the idea that the Arab east is exotic and different, definitely backward and probably dangerous. He cited this comment, from a former president of the European Parliament on the eve of EU enlargement, as a prime example:

The forthcoming enlargement is not comparable to any previous one. This is true not only—and not primarily—because of the immense gulf between the West and the potential East of the Union in terms of the standard of living. More important is that the citizens and the politicians of

the Central and Eastern European countries differ fundamentally from those in the present EU Member States as regards their national emotional traditions, experiences, interests and value judgments. What needs to be overcome here is not only the legacy of 50 years of separate development but also far older and more fundamental differences rooted in European history.

Mr Ilves was too polite to name names, but a quick bit of research suggests that the person concerned was Klaus Hansch (however I can't find the exact quote in English). He continued:

I could say that is one of the silliest, crypto-racist, indeed orientalist things I have encountered, except it is not. It's just part of the narrative we in Central and Eastern Europe have endured for almost a quarter century, from „Lazy Latvians“ working for Laval in Sweden to „Polish Plumbers“ in Paris to Post-soviet, emotionally traumatized, hence foreign policy challenged Estonians right here in Tallinn. I mention all this to shame those that treated us that way, to chasten those of us who might behave the same way to others and to warn our democratic brethren in Northern Africa that even when you do your best, there will be those in Europe who don't get it. As the Turks well know.

He concluded:

Those who inherited a functioning democracy without having to fight to create it don't quite know what it means; those who had to build it do. I hope we who do know what it means are willing to work together with democrats in the Arab world to build their democracies. That we appreciate their sacrifices and now extend our hand to them... if we are asked.

I feel slightly sorry for whomever is asked to give next year's conference keynote. Mr Ilves has set a high bar.

Original article on the Eastern approaches [homepage](#) .