

President Toomas Hendrik Ilves at Churchill's Europe Symposium in Zürich, 17 November 2015.

Europe's transformational crisis

I am grateful and honoured to speak here today. This is, I must admit, a difficult task, a mere four days after the horrific and savage slaughter of innocents in Paris, when we all bore witness to the frailty of human life, the frailty of our open, liberal democracies in the face of barbarism, lawlessness and murder.

For nearly three quarters of a century we have repeated the mantra of Europe as project for peace. For the first part of three quarters of a century, Europe, half of Europe to be precise, thrived and grew under the protection of our trans-atlantic partner, the United States, even under the shadow of an aggressive totalitarian Soviet Union. For the past quarter century, in the absence of any external existential threats, we have pursued the reintegration of Europe, to bring back to the fold those nations forced to live under communist dictatorship.

Today, we are confronted with new existential, external, and as we were reminded in Paris four days ago, internal threats.

Let us face the reality before us and around us. Europe is in the middle of a transformational crisis. A transformational crisis where we shall put to the test all that Europe has achieved, step by step since Winston Churchill's clarion call here, 69 years ago, for a United States of Europe.

This transformational crisis was foreseeable. Yet, we put off thinking about it to deal with the domestic European crisis stemming from irresponsible and mendacious profligacy on the part of some European Union members. We thought until recently that that was the greatest threat to the European project. We were wrong.

Huge income and democracy differentials between Europe and its immediate neighborhood to the South and East was a time-bomb, ticking away, a time-bomb stayed more by the restraining influence of authoritarian regimes to the South, across the Mediterranean and the Middle East. In this context we should recall the threat made by Mihhail Gorbachev at the end of the 1980s that should the Soviet Union collapse 25 million people would flood into what was then Western Europe. Today the threat is real, not from a failed communist behemoth but rather from failed states along the arc of instability ranging across Northern Africa and through the Middle East.

Migration, massive migration in flight from the horrific slaughter of civil war and the systematic brutality of Daesh, together with economic migration from poverty and lack of economic opportunity today threatens, in the eyes of many, to swamp Europe. There are calls for borders in what was a singular and historic step, the borderless Schengen area, to be re-established. Countries refuse to take refugees, others feel overwhelmed by the numbers flooding into their countries. Populist politicians, often spewing rhetoric of the 1930s whip up anti-immigrant sentiment, often with racist undertones. Politicians' speeches today sometimes have adopted language that just a few years ago was found only in anonymous on-line fora. Democratic, centrist leaders advocating calm and responsible responses are under pressure.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are aghast when we hear of the numbers. A million refugees and migrants to Europe this year, predictions of another two million in the next two years.

Yes, these are large numbers. Yes, they will strain social cohesion, our budgets. Yet, yet. Let us return to the Europe of 1946, when Winston Churchill spoke here.

After the Second World War in Germany alone there were 12 million internal refugees and another 12 million slave labourers, prisoners and Displaced Persons of 20 different nationalities, who spoke 35 different languages. In the occupation zones, 15% of the population of the British zone, 18% of the American zone and 24% of the Soviet zone were refugees. Hessen, with a population of 4 million, took 1 million refugees. As late as 1949 in Brandenburg the almost 700,000 refugees living there constituted 25% of the population. I should add that my own uncle's family was in a Displaced Persons camp in Geislingen for four years, while my parents were among the 30 thousand Estonians who fled as erstwhile "boat people" to Sweden, fleeing both Nazi and Soviet ships trying to bomb those leaving.

To deal with these challenges 44 nations agreed in the middle of the postwar emergency to establish UNRRA, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. Between 1945 and 1947, when its tasks were largely overtaken by the Marshall Plan, it was staffed by 12 thousand civil servants.

And the costs, just to put our challenges in perspective? In three years UNRRA spent nearly 4 billion US dollars of the time. In today's money in Euros, this amounts to around 50 billion Euros. More than half of its budget was contributed by the United States \$2.7 billion, which today would be 33 billion Euros; the next largest donors were Britain €8 billion, and Canada €1 billion.

The principle beneficiaries were Poland, which in 2015 Euros received roughly 6 billion Euros, Italy 5 billion Euros. Greece 4 billion and Austria 1 billion.

I list these numbers, illustratively, to give us all a sense of perspective to understand how daunting a task was faced by our grandparents when Europe had no institutions, sometimes not even sovereign governments.

Let us keep in mind then, that all I have outlined here from the immediate post-war years, are concrete examples of the solidarity of countries toward Europe, which, with the exception of the UK, were not part of the European Union of today. We must also keep in historical perspective, from the perspective of Winston Churchill speaking here in 1946, the crisis we face in Europe today.

So let us now gather our wits and strengths, leave behind this indecision, finger-pointing and ducking of responsibility. We will handle this migration crisis.

We must act in solidarity with those member states who bear the brunt of the crisis, we must accept some form of burden-sharing. We must have a functioning common asylum policy, especially when it comes to rejecting spurious claims and returning illegal immigrants. We need a more common approach to guarding our external borders. Is this so difficult when we look back to what Europe faced in the years after the Second World War?

I do not think so.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While these foregoing facts and figures demonstrate how Europe has had to face far worse migration and refugee issues, and on a far greater scale than today, let us recall also why these measures as well as the Marshall Plan were enacted.

It was to prevent a replay of the causes that led to the carnage of World War II. Today we hear in the rhetoric of too many parties of the extreme Right and even the extreme Left across Europe a chilling echo of the 1930s; calls for isolationism, a re-legitimization for the first time since the war, of hatred, racism and intolerance. Some of these parties are funded via dubious means from an authoritarian Russia, some sport symbolism that only barely tries to disguise its form, redolent of the swastika.

These parties and politicians exploit the current refugee crisis, they exploit the economic crisis, they exploit the dissatisfaction of voters with the often anodyne and milquetoast resolve of European politicians. Voters crave decisive responses to crises and when traditional parties do not provide them, they look toward those whose rhetoric sounds decisive yet carries within it the "decisiveness" of reaction, of simple and not always European solutions.

This is yet another reason for Europe to respond through its democratically elected politicians, through its institutions and through rule of law and respect for the agreements we have made.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

After the horrors of the Paris attacks on November 13, I fear that the refugee crisis will only further fuel the rise of populist and extremist politics. We will see the argument, indeed we already have, that we cannot accept refugees because they are terrorists or carry the threat of terrorism, forgetting conveniently that the refugees streaming into Europe today have fled from the same regime, the same brutality and murder witnessed in Paris. Refugees have seen it up close and personal.

Yet there is one more dimension to consider, the challenges facing Europe's Common Foreign and Security Policy or CFSP. The triple crises of massive numbers of refugees streaming to Europe, along with Daesh and Al Qaeda and the Anschluss of Crimea together with the proxy (as well as overt) war against Ukraine in the Donbas, all add up to challenge CFSP more than any other events in Europe since its inception.

Some 25 years ago a certain European Foreign Minister in the middle of the Yugoslav crisis, proclaimed, "This is the hour of Europe. It is not the hour of the Americans." But Europe did nothing and it indeed took the Americans to stop the killing in Yugoslavia. This time, however, we do not have the luxury of inaction.

Today, we look at our watches and wonder, is this the hour? Europe's hour? Because today, we are far more on our own than a quarter century ago. Russia has violated every major European security treaty, beginning with the U.N. Charter, the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, and the 1990 Charter of Paris. It has violated as well the 1994 Budapest Memorandum that guaranteed Ukraine's territorial integrity in return for eliminating what was then the world's third largest nuclear weapons arsenal.

Europe has imposed sanctions that are to remain in place until the Minsk Agreement is implemented in full and the territorial integrity of Ukraine, including Crimea, is restored. Or

will we say that the conflict between civilization and barbarism is so fundamentally existential for our citizens that we must suspend the rules that have underpinned Europe's security since WWII and accept aggression, occupation and annexation, which were, as we know, the proximal causes of the Second World War? Is authoritarian rule and the violation of international law "secondary", a lesser evil compared to terrorism? Will we forget the post-WWII precedent of Ukraine, and focus on "more pragmatic" co-operation with Russia? How far will we be willing to go to stomach authoritarian rule, indeed restrictions on civil liberties in Europe itself as a "necessary evil" to stop terrorism?

In addition to Russia's behavior, our lack of resolve regarding one country, Turkey, needs to change. It is the key to so many of our issues: Without a coherent EU policy toward Turkey, too many of our current problems, including in Lebanon and Jordan, as well as Syria itself, will be difficult if not impossible to solve.

These issues – migration, burden-sharing of refugees, common approaches to Russia, to Turkey, to terror, to international law and to our own civil liberties – boil down to one question: Are we willing to defend our common values only as far as a Member State's narrow interests are involved? Or whether we do more?

These questions we will face sooner or later. If we do not find within ourselves the leadership that is the sine qua non of the creation of a unity of Europe; if we do not take a bold stand against all that violates the underpinnings of Europe, we will have to say almost three quarters of a century after Winston Churchill's speech here, that we have failed.

If on the other hand we find the resolve and courage of the Founding fathers of the EU, of those who, after the Second World War came together to deal with challenges far greater than any of those of today, then we have a chance. Let us admit this is a transformational crisis. Let us accept that history calls upon us, those entrusted to carry on the vision of a Europe, whole, free and at peace, to be decisive, to be united in our resolve.

For we cannot forget that Europe remains a beacon: to those nations that in the past quarter of a century have striven and succeeded to join; to those who have risen up for liberty, in Europe's name, to use Timothy Garton Ash's description to describe the universal quest for *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*. To all those for whom Europe's rebirth from the ashes of war and mass murder gives hope that it can be done.

It can be done... Europe has overcome far greater challenges than the ones we face today.

If, however, we do not rise up to these challenges, future generations will look back at us and say we failed, that we squandered our European inheritance, and ask why we did so little when so much was at stake.

Thank you.