

Egils Levits: Time for Europe to surprise Putin

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On 27 February, Ukraine submitted a formal application for membership of the European Union. Ukraine's request must be supported. The EU must be courageous and take an extraordinary political decision. This is an emergency.

Putin's war against Ukraine surprised many in Europe. For a rational person, an unprovoked attack on another country seemed irrational and therefore impossible. Contrary to common sense, Russia's President Putin has decided to take a risk and challenge Europe, the entire democratic world and the international order that was established after the Second World War.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, breaking out of Russia's oppression, numerous countries were able to choose their own independent path. A number of countries in Central and Eastern Europe, including Latvia, opted for EU and NATO membership, thus renewing their place in the West.

However, not all countries managed to escape Russia's magnetic field completely. We see the consequences today in Europe's eastern neighbourhood. The Lukashenko regime, from fear of its own people, has reintegrated Belarus into Russia. With varying success, the EU's Eastern Partnership countries Moldova and Georgia have strengthened their relations with the EU through reforms and financial and practical support.

However, since the Maidan Revolution, Ukraine has declared its determination to be part of the West, the European Union and NATO. Putin sees the successful development of Ukraine, a vital democracy, as a threat to his autocratic regime. For many years, President Putin, dreaming of rebuilding the Russian Empire, simultaneously lulled Europe into a warm sleep by not only by fostering dependence on Russian gas, but also sowing misinformation and a false narrative of history.

Our partners did not hear calls from the Baltic States and Poland to halt the construction of Nord Stream II and increase the

defence budgets of all NATO Allies to at least 2 % of GDP. Condemnation of Russia for occupying Georgia in 2008 and aggression against Ukraine in 2014 was muted. A certain naivety and romanticized view of Russia prevailed for a long time, especially among the politicians and business leaders of Western Europe.

Due to lack of agreement among member states, Ukraine is not being offered a NATO Membership Action Plan, which Latvia would support, while enlargement of the European Union has stalled. That is why Putin felt encouraged now to take risks and attack Ukraine.

However, the heroism of the Ukrainian people under the leadership of President Zelensky surprised Putin. Ukrainians will not give up their land so easily. All of Ukraine is currently fighting not only for its freedom, but also for the freedom of Europe and the entire democratic world. We in Europe must give a worthy answer!

I believe that Ukraine should exceptionally be granted candidate status by the European Union. On 28 February, I called for this in a joint statement with the presidents of seven other Member States of the EU. We have also advocated for this in conversations with other EU leaders in recent days.

Bureaucratic procedures must now be put aside. Later, on the way to full membership, we can apply them when the time is right. Granting Ukraine candidate status is a matter of political will, not legal and bureaucratic procedures. It would be our political message that Europe is united with Ukraine, which is now fighting for European values. It is also a matter of European self-esteem.

It is time for Europe to show its backbone and surprise Putin!

Egils Levits

President of Latvia

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