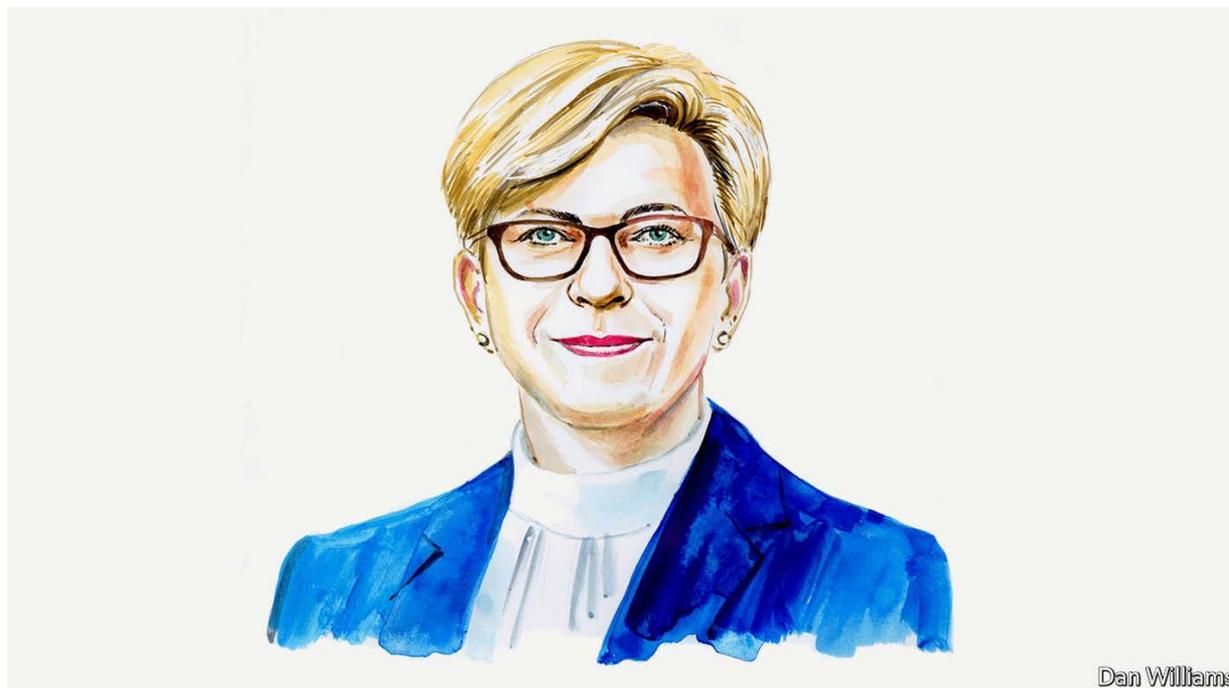


## Lithuania's prime minister, Ingrida Simonyte, says Russia's invasion was predictable

*The West was too greedy for Russian money and too delusional in its negotiations with a pathological liar*



Ingrida Simonyte, *The Economist*, Mar 2nd 2022

All this was bound to happen. Vladimir Putin's war on Chechnya did not serve as a wake-up call for the West in 1999. Neither did the Kremlin's cyber-assault on Estonia in 2007, its war on Georgia in 2008, the illegal annexation of Crimea, nor the start of its military aggression against Ukraine in 2014—all of which Russia denies. Numerous, blatant assassinations of "inconvenient" witnesses, opponents and journalists rang alarm bells, especially when carried out on European soil. But Western leaders pressed the snooze button time and again.

Western democracies introduced sanctions and expelled spooks disguised as diplomats. We expressed concern and condemned—sometimes, in the strongest possible terms—Russia's habitual acts of aggression. We rebuked violations of the territorial integrity of independent states by Russia or its proxies. Many thought this would somehow suffice as a face-saving alternative to real action that would be costly for our economies and that might provoke the aggressor.

The West continued to do too little, too late. We blacklisted officials but we kept building pipelines. We introduced sanctions but turned a blind eye to the companies circumventing them. Western politicians danced with Mr Putin (some of them literally) and retired to chair the boards of Russian companies. These firms funded the Kremlin's arms race and diverted billions to Mr Putin's entourage.

The West allowed Mr Putin's people to keep their fortunes in Western banks and spend them on Western education for their kids, villas and penthouses in Western resorts for their wives and five-star holidays with their mistresses on Western rivieras. All the while the Kremlin decried the rotten decadence and moral degradation of the West. *Pecunia non olet*: money doesn't smell. Or perhaps, to the contrary—Russian money smelled too good.

We cared too much about separating sports and politics, or culture and politics—and too little about separating freedom of speech and propaganda, political correctness and hard-headed analysis. “Crisis in Ukraine”, “Russia begins military aggression”, “Ukraine-Russia war”—these were the major taglines just a week ago.

No, the crisis is not in Ukraine—it is in Russia, and it has been deepening for decades. Russia’s aggression began long ago, and not just against Ukraine. The Kremlin used energy as a means of political pressure and employed cyber-attacks, hostile propaganda, proxy wars and, eventually, missiles. What we witness now is not the Ukraine-Russia war but the continuation of Russia’s war against Ukraine that started in 2014. It was *de facto* declared on the entire West in December 2021, when Mr Putin issued his ultimatums.

In Lithuania we saw Russia’s influence spreading dangerously and a coalition of dictators being built. The West has not recognised the legitimacy of Alexander Lukashenko, who claims he once again won an election in Belarus in 2020. Rather he stole the election and cracked down in a draconian way on the peaceful protests that followed. He had Mr Putin’s backing and now he is complicit in Russia’s aggression. I struggle to understand why Western politicians and media still refer to Mr Lukashenko as the president of Belarus. At the same time we saw that the opposition was being systematically wiped out of elections in Russia—but the West never dared to question Mr Putin’s legitimacy out loud. Democracies die in silence, they say. In silence, too, dictatorships grow.

As Russia massed its troops on Ukraine’s border the West tried to come to an agreement with Mr Putin. But diplomacy is impossible with a pathological liar who gives promises he never means to keep. The West hoped to negotiate a way out of this war, but negotiations work only when both sides want peace.

For a democratic leader, human life is more precious than anything else. For a dictator, no human sacrifice is too great a barrier to ambition. Russia’s neighbours, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland, have been trying to explain this for a long time. At times we have been ridiculed as solely focused on this issue. We kept warning that dictators only understand the language of brutal power—be it economic, or better yet, military—and take anything other than that as a sign of weakness that encourages them, and does not deter them. We have warned of growing security threats not just to our region but also to the eu and nato—and of the need to strengthen our defence.

It does not make me happy that countries in my region were right to warn others of the Russian threat. I wish we had been proven wrong instead. But what cheers me is that Ukraine is fighting back more successfully than many—except Ukrainians themselves—believed it ever could. I am also relieved that the West has awoken. It is too late to save the 14,400 Ukrainians estimated to have perished in Donbas between April 2014 and December 2021, but it is not too late to help Ukraine save its sovereignty and to protect Western civilisation.

I am proud that we are witnessing unprecedented unity among disparate democracies. I am also proud that our support to Ukraine and response to Russia is of unparalleled proportions, swifter than ever. At last we are investing more in our own security as we realise that neutrality is tantamount to self-deception.

It is crucial that we do not press the snooze button now. We must continue, increase and expedite lethal aid to Ukraine. We must disconnect all Russian banks, not just some, from swift to achieve the full effect of sanctions now—not after a year. And all the economic

sanctions we impose on Russia must be imposed on Belarus too. The regime there assists Mr Putin and we need to prevent Russia from circumventing sanctions by using Belarus.

As history unfolds before our eyes, I am glad that an increasing number of countries are choosing to be on the right side of it. I urge all those around the world who still hesitate to join us while it still matters. And when Ukraine and democracy win this war, I hope that the West will never fall asleep again. Thank you for your miscalculation, Mr Putin!

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*Ingrida Simonyte is Lithuania's prime minister.*