

Europe

Europe shiverin

By Jason Burke

Tensions are rising between Moscow and the West as the Russian giant flexes its muscles again in the old territories of the Soviet empire

AT the end of Europe yesterday afternoon, a man in a straw hat warmed up to go jogging, a father and teenage son in matching jeans and denim jackets shared a packet of cheap cigarettes, a small girl made sand-castles and two border guards strolled under the narrow single-span bridge over the swift-flowing Narva river. To their left lay Estonia, to their right, on the other bank, Russia.

"We are not too worried about politics here," said one guard, fiddling with his holstered handgun. "We prefer sitting drinking beer with friends on a bench in the sun."

Yet the bucolic scene and the border guard's insouciance seem increasingly out of place. For the slightly dilapidated, calm streets of Narva, Estonia's third largest city, are now at the centre of geopolitical tensions not seen in the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union nearly two decades ago. Some analysts are calling it "the new Cold War".

The concern spreads far beyond Narva and the frontier. Estonia, known in Britain largely for the bars and pubs of its capital city, Tallinn, has been hit by riots linked to the tensions. New disputes pit states that emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union throughout much of Eastern Europe against their former overlords. And there is an international crisis setting Moscow against the European Union and against Washington.

"I suppose we are in the eye of the storm," said Gregor Ivanov, a former factory worker, sitting on a bench in the sun on Narva's Puskini Street. "It's a shame... everything was going so well."

The storm is large and potentially very dangerous. Locally, Russia is blamed for stoking riots in Tallinn last month in which one died and 153 were injured, for the roughing up of Estonian diplomats in Moscow and for a massive 'cyber-attack' on the infrastructure of the small Baltic state.

According to Andres Kasekamp, director of Tallinn's Foreign Policy Institute, the Russian government is mounting a deliberate attempt to destabilise former Soviet republics. "This strategy is intensifying as Moscow's attitude to the US, the UK and the EU becomes more aggressive and assertive," Kasekamp said. "They are seeing how far

they can push us, the European Union, Nato, the Americans, everybody." Some Estonians even fear Moscow may be searching for a casus belli. At the international level the Russian testing last week of an inter-continental ballistic missile led to an extraordinary diplomatic spat between the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice - who deplored Moscow's 'missile diplomacy' - and Russian President Vladimir Putin, who attacked American 'imperialism'.

For the UK, already strained relations were put under new stress when the dispute with Moscow over the poisoning in London of Russian dissident and British citizen Alexander Litvinenko six months ago took another turn for the worse. Last week the prime suspect, whose extradition has been demanded by Britain and refused by Russia, surfaced on Wednesday in Moscow. Andrei Lugovoi told TV cameras that the British secret services were behind Litvinenko's murder.

Then there are profound disagreements over the future of Kosovo and policy on Iran, a row over the rights of major British commercial investors to parts of the massive Siberian gasfields, harassment of British officials and diplomats in Moscow, and a series of apparently state-encouraged propaganda pieces in the Russian media against the West. Analysts are talking of relations between Moscow and London being at a 25-year low.

"This is a delayed confrontation between the Soviet past and the European future," Igor Grazin, an Estonian MP, told The Observer. And his country, home to 1.3 million, is in the middle.

Narva is 130 miles from Tallinn. There is a huge difference between the depressed north-eastern old industrial town and the booming Estonian capital with its stunning medieval architecture, new industries, strip clubs and groups of drunken British stag-nighters staggering through the narrow streets in fancy dress, football strip or matching T-shirts saying "Well in Tallinn 07" or "The Tallinn Job".

It is at the gleaming new 9,000-seat Lillekula stadium on the outskirts of the capital that the England team will play their crucial qualifying European Cup match against Estonia on Wednesday night. The stadium is sold out.

"Of course, all the tickets have gone," said Jan Sepp, a newspaper seller near to the ground. "Beckham is coming." In fact, the Los Angeles Galaxy's new star signing is not the only cause of the recent Estonian enthusiasm

for football. As with so much in Estonia - such as the recent riots - the Baltic state's complex and painful history plays a part. For decades the favoured local sports were volleyball and basketball. There was no national team and soccer was identified with the Soviet Union and thus with repression and occupation. The result, analyst Kasekamp explained, was that, when Estonia formally won its independence from the collapsed USSR in 1991, football surged in popularity. Estonia's membership of the European Union, finalised three years ago, merely confirmed the trend.

"Now people look to the Premier League, the Italian teams, the European championship; soccer symbolises Europe and the new Estonian future," Kasekamp told The Observer.

This turning towards the West is repeated in almost every field. The ruling coalition in Estonia, returned to

Moscow's relations with three years ago with Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan. Lukashenko, the repressive Belarus, depend on his rhetoric at any given moment, similarly

power after elections in March, has continued the fiercely Thatcherite-Reaganite economics of its recent predecessors. A single flat income tax of 22 per cent, low business taxes and cheap, weak welfare provision have, government supporters claim, led to a spectacular annual economic growth of more than 10 per cent and negligible unemployment - outside the poorer industrial and agricultural areas. Even in and around relatively poorly off Narva, unemployment has dropped from 30 per cent 10 years ago to 8 per cent now - with a drop of 2 per cent in the past six months. Money is coming from the West too. The overwhelming majority of foreign investment originates in Finland and Sweden or Western Europe and less than a tenth of trade activity involves Russia. Huge numbers of Estonians now work in Finland, Ireland and, to a lesser extent, Britain.

In foreign policy, Estonia tilts towards the Atlantic. Its tiny army has deployed troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, where one was wounded fighting alongside the British in the south last week. "We are successful, democratic, Estonian"

ing in the new Cold War

economically liberal, pro-American, pro-EU. We are everything that the Russians are not," said Raimo Poom, political editor of the major *Esti Paevaleht* newspaper. 'It's no wonder they don't like us.'

For James Nixey, of Chatham House - the Royal Institute of International Affairs, based in London - Russia's recent broadside against Estonia is part of a wider vision of the region. 'It seems that Russia feels that those countries around it which are democratic and have liberal attitudes are a threat and those that are illiberal and autocratic are not,' he said last week.

So Moscow's relations with Latvia and Lithuania, which joined the EU three years ago with Estonia, are frosty at best, those with Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan warm, and those with Alexander Lukashenko, the repressive leader of the former Soviet republic

the 17th and 18th centuries. Kadri Liik, director of Tallinn's International Centre for Defence Studies, said it was 'very difficult for Moscow to accept that a part of the former Russian empire is now part of the EU'. That resentment has recently crystallised around one issue: a memorial to Russian soldiers killed in the Second World War, known as 'The Bronze Soldier'. It was the relocation of the memorial from the centre of Tallinn to a military cemetery on the city's outskirts that provoked the riots last month.

The riots were clearly orchestrated. The question is by whom and for what purpose. No one is sure of the answer. 'Reports that there were Russian state agencies involved in some capacity are credible,' said one Western diplomat in Tallinn. Others talk of SMS campaigns, secret networks, even money changing hands. Yet Moscow vehemently denies

After declaring its independence from Russia in 1918, Estonia was forcibly and bloodily incorporated into the USSR in 1940. A year later it was wrested from the Russians by the Germans. Just before Narva, war memorials and tombs line the Tallenberg Hills where German SS divisions held back a Russian onslaught for six months in 1944.

Over the four and a half decades that followed, after a period of massive purges, violence and emigration, the Soviet Union ran Estonia with an iron grip, settling hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russians in the small country, most of whom stayed after independence in 1991. Integrating this minority into a new Estonian nation has not been easy. Narva is considerably closer to St Petersburg, physically and culturally, than to Tallinn.

"This is a country in permanent transition," said Professor Rein Raud, chancellor of Tallinn University. "Its biggest challenge is to create political space for minorities and to engender loyalty to the Estonian state while allowing those that want it to maintain their traditions."

This bloody history explains why issues such as The Bronze Soldier can be so easily exploited. But though the Russian minority, concentrated in the northeast, is still poorer and less educated than most of the population and about 140,000 still do not speak enough Estonian to qualify for citizenship, the economic boom has meant that the chronic unemployment and hardship of the immediate post-communist time is almost gone. 'It's better now,' said 63-year-old Tamara Yevchenko, a flower seller in Tallinn. 'It's still tough, but it's better. Before, I wanted the USSR to come back, but now I am happy with the way things are.' And though HIV levels and drug use remain high and male life expectancy remains low, Grazin, one of seven MPs (out of 101) of Russian origin, plays down ethnic tension, dismissing recent claims by international human rights organisations of massive discrimination against Estonian Russians as exaggerated. 'There's work to do but a lot of progress has been made,' said one Western diplomat. Suggestions by others that the Russian minority should be 'sent home' are 'ludicrous', according to Poom.

But even if this particularly problematic legacy of Estonia's bloody past is slowly being resolved, the drive to Narva exposes other dark elements of the past of a country that many like to

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Belarus, depend on how vehemently anti-Western the latter's rhetoric at any given moment might be. Moscow, Nixey pointed out, similarly supported hardliners in Ukraine.

Analysts and diplomats are working to decipher the logic behind Russia's hardening stance. The missile test last week was partly provoked by American plans to install an anti-missile defence system in Eastern Europe. "The most explicit message from Moscow was that Russia is the main strategic partner for America," said Thomas Gomart, of the French Institute of International Relations in Paris. "It's a way of marginalising the Europeans and other emerging powers."

But domestic factors are also important. With parliamentary and presidential elections within the next year, Putin is playing to the crowd and strengthening the position of his possible successor, the Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov. "To an extent it's theatre," said one UK-based diplomat. "And it is logical that Estonia has a key role."

Part of the reason is simple pride. Estonia was ruled by Russia throughout

any involvement.

But, even if there was some outside interference, the demonstrations around the memorial and the riots were a powerful reminder to Estonia's government not to forget the country's ethnic Russian minority.

The road from Tallinn towards Narva follows the flat coastline of the Finnish Gulf, slicing through thick pine and birch forest, farmland and wide, empty marshes before reaching the open, windswept industrial heartland of the plains before the Russian frontier. Though some sections have been recently widened with some of the massive European structural aid now pouring into the country, along much of its length the road is little more than a rutted single carriageway running between the fields, old mines and historical memorials.

The drive reveals Estonia's chequered history - and explains why feelings still run so high that the relocation of a statue can cause chaos. "The statue is just a trigger, the issue has profound roots in recent and in ancient history," said Nixey.

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paint simply as plucky, outnumbered
democrats who have always stood up
brutal, conquering communists. The
German soldiers resisting the Russians
included many Estonians - and local
police battalions guarded the forced
labour camps where tens of thousands
of Jews from all over Eastern Europe
were worked to death. The process of
coming to terms with that history
continues. Last month a new synagogue
opened in Tallinn, replacing those
destroyed by the Nazis.

At the new synagogue, near the
docks in Tallinn, Chief Rabbi Shmuel
Kot said antisemitism in the region was
'more or less' a thing of the past. 'I feel
safer here than in London or Paris,' Kot
said. 'I can't say for sure, because the
Estonian way is to keep things hidden,
but in general we feel safe.'

But last week such confidence in an
entirely untroubled future was not
necessarily that widespread. On
Wednesday the G8 nations will meet for
three days of talks at the German Baltic
Sea resort of Heiligendamm. Estonian
leaders are looking to the EU nations
present to make their anger at Putin's
strong-arm tactics known. They may be
disappointed. The leaders of the United
States, Britain, Canada, Germany,
France, Italy, Russia and Japan will
debate climate change, efforts to stop
uranium enrichment by Iran, aid to
Africa, currency exchange rates and
global growth. Emerging economic
powers such as China, Brazil and India
are there as non-members. Diplomats
hope that it will be a chance to calm
angry tempers, not fuel fires.

Foreign Office spokesmen were
conciliatory last week. "There are areas
such as the rule of law and human rights
where there is not a meeting of minds
and we raise our concerns frankly with
[the Russians] there," said one. "(But)
Russia has to be part of our policy... we
have to engage."

For Liik, the Tallinn-based analyst,
there is a longer-term concern. She says
it is important to focus on the sentiments
of 120 million Russians, not just the
rhetoric of their leaders. "Putin is telling
the Russian people what they want to
hear and doing what he thinks they want
him to do. That says some very worrying
things about Russian society and does
not bode well for the future," she said.
"What sort of a generation are coming
through now who have been raised on all
this aggressive, belligerent propaganda?"

Few believe that the calm at the
border crossing over the
River Narva is anything but surface
deep. COURTESY THE OBSERVER