

HARI SREENIVASAN: Tonight, our series Fault Lines takes us to Estonia.

Unlike Ukraine, where we spent the last two nights, Estonia is a member of NATO, one of the alliance's smallest countries, but among its most committed members.

Today, Estonians say they need NATO more than ever because their fears about a resurgent Russia are the highest since the country gained independence when the Soviet Union collapsed 25 years ago.

With the help of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, special correspondent Nick Schifrin begins our report in the city of Narva, literally a stone's throw from Russia.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Welcome to the Friendship Bridge, even though things here aren't very friendly at the moment. Behind me is an Estonian castle from the Middle Ages. This is Estonia's easternmost border, the Narva River, which means it's the border between NATO and the E.U. and Russia.

This has been called NATO's most sensitive border. Ivan the Terrible built the Russian castle. And of the last 300 years, Russia has occupied Estonia for 250.

MEELIS KIILI, Estonian Defense League: We said, never again.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Fifty-one-year-old Brigadier General Meelis Kiili commands the Estonian Defense League, the equivalent of the National Guard. He met me in the Occupation Museum, surrounded by artifacts of the Soviet Union's occupation that began in the 1940s.

So, we're looking at a series of old radios here.

MEELIS KIILI: Me and my father were listening every night. There was a Voice of America that reached out behind the Iron Curtain.

NICK SCHIFRIN: When you look at today's Russia, do you see echoes of what we are looking at around us?

MEELIS KIILI: I remember the joy when we regained our independence. The message is clear. We are going to defend our liberties, our country and our pride.

NICK SCHIFRIN: To defend the country, all Estonian men are conscripted. But the army has only 5,000 active-duty soldiers. So the 15,000 volunteers whom General Kiili commands are the real tip of the country's spear.

TOOMAS VARVA, Estonian Defense League: I would like my child will also be in free Estonia, not, as I was born, in occupied Estonia.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Fifty-one-year-old Toomas Varva spends his weekends training as a sniper. His day job is CEO of a textile factory.

TOOMAS VARVA: You see what happened in Ukraine. You have to be ready for that.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Estonians watched in horror as Crimeans celebrated Russia's annexation, and Russian soldiers helped destabilize Eastern Ukraine. They fear Estonia might be next.

Across the border, Russia launches military exercises with as many as 80,000 soldiers. Nearby, Sweden's hunted for Russian submarines believed to have operated off its coast. And Russian jets have buzzed American warships.

JAAK TARIEN, Estonian Air Force: When Crimea started, several friends of mine, family members asked, hey, is it time to pack up our families, put them on ships, somewhere safe place, and get ready for war?

NICK SCHIFRIN: Forty-two-year-old Jaak Tarien commands Estonia's air force.

JAAK TARIEN: My grandfather was an officer in the Estonian army before war and he was deported to Siberia, never to come back. I hope that we can deter Russia from ever making a big mistake again.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Deterring the bear requires a lot of backup. Tarien commands an air force with no jets. He relies entirely on NATO and U.S. firepower.

CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER CHRISTOPHER MOORE, U.S. Army 1-3 Attack Recon Battalion: If Russia wanted to, they could come through very, very quickly. And so our response time must be much, much faster now.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Thirty-two-year-old Christopher Moore trains Apache pilots based in Germany. For 15 years, that training taught counterinsurgency for Iraq and Afghanistan. Russia's annexation of Crimea changed the training overnight.

CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER CHRISTOPHER MOORE: The pilots coming out of flight school now immediately building this idea of how to fight the disciplined fight.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Translation: After a quarter-century of looking elsewhere, NATO's refocused on its original enemy.

COL. JOHN MEYER, 2nd Cavalry Regiment: When I started this 27 years ago, we were trained to fight the Soviet Union.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Col. John Meyer commands the 2nd Cavalry Regiment. During the Cold War, the 2nd Cavalry guarded the Iron Curtain. Today, his troops are deployed in half-a-dozen countries behind the Curtain.

COL. JOHN MEYER, Commander, U.S. Army 2nd Cavalry Regiment: What has changed over the last 27 years is that there are nations now in Eastern and Central Europe that have volunteered to join in the alliance.

NICK SCHIFRIN: After Crimea, Estonia invited the U.S. to deploy 150 soldiers, and hold increasingly large exercises, like this one. Tomorrow, NATO will announce the deployment of a new 700-soldier unit to Estonia.

COL. JOHN MEYER: So it's that commitment of a unified alliance with 28 nations that is what deters.

NICK SCHIFRIN: But after Britain voted to leave the European Union, Estonians worry about European fortitude. And they fear the possible impact of presidential candidate Donald Trump.

DONALD TRUMP (R), Presumptive Presidential Nominee: Many countries are not paying their fair share. That means we are protecting them and they are getting all sorts of military

protection and other things, and they're ripping off the United States. And they're ripping you off.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Trump's criticism is economic. In the early 1980s, the U.S. accounted for half NATO members' military budgets. Today, the U.S. accounts for three-quarters of those budgets.

DONALD TRUMP: Either they pay up, including for past deficiencies, or they have to get out. And if it breaks up NATO, it breaks up NATO.

TOOMAS HENDRICK ILVES, President, Estonia: We cannot allow this very successful alliance to fall apart because, in one case, we don't want to do anything.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Toomas Hendrik Ilves has been Estonia's president for nearly a decade. NATO's Article V says if Estonia were ever attacked, the United States and every NATO country would be obliged to go to war with Estonia's attacker.

TOOMAS HENDRICK ILVES: If that political will is missing in one case, then the entire enterprise falls apart.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Why should Americans, who are skeptical about spending money on the military in other places, care about Estonia?

JAAK TARIEN: It's about the American values. It is important for the better world in the future that Estonia stays free and democratic country and that democracy spreads east from here, instead of vice versa, the tyranny spreading west from here.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Why is this important that you are training for this threat?

CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER CHRISTOPHER MOORE: If we continue to sit back and watch one country fall, and then another country fall, another country fall, well, now they are literally talking all of Europe. And now literally the only thing you have left is the U.S., but now they have all the resources of all those other countries. It's a dangerous mind-set to be passive and just sit back.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Estonians argue, unlike the vast majority of NATO members, they meet the military spending requirements. And when the alliance has called, they have answered.

TOOMAS HENDRICK ILVES: Article V has been invoked once, and that was by the United States, and that was in the wake of 9/11, in which we went to Afghanistan. We were smack in the middle of Taliban land. So we did it. We did our duty.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Is the end of that sentence that, you came to the United States' aid, you would expect the United States to come to your aid?

TOOMAS HENDRICK ILVES: We fulfilled our NATO obligations, and we would expect NATO to fulfill theirs.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Back in Narva, along the Russian border, the Soviet war memorial serves as a warning. In Crimea, Russia claimed authority to intervene on behalf of ethnic Russians. And more than 90 percent of Narva is Russian-speaking.

When you come up here and see this view, what do you think?

Fourteen-year-old Igor Shirai is the son of a Russian mother and Estonian father.

IGOR SHIRAI: We like pretty much have almost the same culture, like, Estonia and Russia.

NICK SCHIFRIN: From the castle, there is no sign of tension. Igor and much of this town wants to keep it that way.

IGOR SHIRAI: These provocations from both, from both sides, they're pretty much useless, because it just raises the tension even more.

NICK SCHIFRIN: That's because Narva feels calm, and Estonians have it pretty good. They make more money than their Russian neighbors. Their children can work across the E.U. That stability and prosperity keeps Russian-speaking residents pro-European.

VLADIMIR PETROV, Union of Russian Citizens in Estonia (through translator): This region economically is quite well off and self-sufficient.

NICK SCHIFRIN: Judging by the office of 62-year-old Vladimir Petrov, he's a Russian nationalist.

You have the magnets of Putin. We have Stalin. You have the newspaper. It seems like you're pro-Russian.

VLADIMIR PETROV (through translator): When I receive older people, they are familiar with all this. It's very dear to them. It makes them feel at home.

NICK SCHIFRIN: He is the chairman of the Union of Russian Citizens in Estonia. But even he wants his love of Russia to remain a long-distance relationship.

As you say, Russia could very quickly come in. Would the people of Narva welcome that?

VLADIMIR PETROV (through translator): The daily life that's continuing here is nothing like military intervention, and no one is hoping for that.

NICK SCHIFRIN: So Estonia's deterrents are economic enlargement and military might.

For both to work, they need a robust European Union and NATO. Without those alliances, NATO's most sensitive border could become its most vulnerable.

For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Nick Schifrin in Narva, Estonia.

HARI SREENIVASAN: Tomorrow in our final story, Nick will look at NATO's biggest buildup in Europe since the Cold War.

Original article on the [PBS webpage](#) .