

by Nikolaus von Twickel

Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves warned that Russia on the eve of its presidential election might be sliding into dictatorship, as Germany did in the 1920s.

"There is a mentality of being stabbed in the back that reminds me of the Weimar republic," Ilves said in an interview, describing the current atmosphere in Russia.

"The Weimar mentality ... is so similar that I really hope that we do not go off in the wrong direction," he said, speaking by telephone from the Estonian capital, Tallinn.

He refused to discuss the March 2 presidential vote specifically, saying that he would not comment on another country's domestic affairs during an election campaign.

Estonia is a vocal critic of Moscow and saw that difficult relationship embark on a collision course last year when it moved a Soviet war memorial in Tallinn, triggering riots among its Russian minority.

Ilves spoke on the eve of the 90th anniversary of Estonia's Feb. 24, 1918, declaration of independence. In weekend celebrations, Ilves conferred awards on Western scholars who have researched communist crimes, including U.S. journalist Anne Appelbaum and historians Robert Conquest, Anthony Beevor and Norman Davies.

A Kremlin spokesman declined to immediately comment on Ilves' remarks late last week and asked that questions be put in writing. He had not replied by Monday.

Moscow refuses to admit responsibility for injustices committed during the Soviet era and maintains that the Red Army liberated Estonia and the other Baltic states from Nazi Germany in 1944.

But Ilves, who was born to Estonian refugees in Stockholm, said it mattered little that he grew up in the United States and not in his homeland because Estonia had been occupied. "This is not ... what we consider part of our culture," he said.

The president rejected the notion that his country was obsessed with its communist past and accused Moscow of continued denial of Stalinist crimes. He said four major reports had recently come out in Russia denying Soviet involvement in the 1940 massacre of 22,000 Polish officers in the Katyn forest. In contrast, he said, denial of the Holocaust is illegal in Europe, and Germany has come to terms with its Nazi past. "Why is it that Germany is a respected country today?" he said.

Moscow, however, has seethed over attempts by Estonia and Latvia to rehabilitate some of its anti-Soviet resistance forces, who fought with the Germans during the war. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in January accused both countries of glorifying such collaborators.

Ilves also criticized the Kremlin's notion of sovereign democracy, formulated in response to Western criticism of deficits in political freedom.

He said Estonia and other former Soviet republics offered proof that democracy was possible in post-Soviet societies. "The color revolutions give the lie to the concept of sovereign democracy," he said, referring to the changes toward pro-Western governments in Georgia and Ukraine.

He said Moscow tended to have friendly relations with undemocratic countries. "Why is difficult to have good relations with countries that have come out of communism and are strong liberal democracies? Why is it that despotic post-communist countries are friends, and those that are not despotic are enemies? It doesn't make sense," he said.

Iives flatly denied that there was any particular reason that Estonia and Russia had especially bad relations. Rather, he argued, Estonia had probably become a "whipping boy" at a time when the Kremlin needed a foreign enemy. "It's convenient to have small little neighbors that you can kick," he said.

He said that the situation reminded him of "Wag the Dog," a 1997 film about a Washington spin doctor who orchestrates a fake war against a small, obscure country to distract voters from a presidential sex scandal.

Iives suggested that it did not actually matter what foreign policy Estonia followed. "That's why I personally advocate a policy of benign neglect. Until things settle, there isn't really anything we can do. We are the current whipping boy," Iives said.

Estonia, he said, should care less about Russia and instead focus on the West. "Ninety-five percent of my interest is the European Union, maybe even more," he said, adding that he wanted to make his country of just 1.3 million people "a player" in the 27-member union, focusing on shaping a common foreign policy.

Estonia has come under criticism from other EU members for its critical stance toward Moscow, and they have advocated a more pragmatic course.

But Iives insisted that Tallinn was not obstructing a more pragmatic policy toward Moscow. "Estonia's foreign policy has been fairly acquiescent," he said, pointing out that his country had not supported Poland's recent veto against talks for a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Russia.

Plans to get negotiations under way for a new long-term treaty to replace the current one, which dates from 1997, have been postponed several times as relations with Moscow worsened.

Iives accused the Kremlin of protectionist economic policies hostile to European interests. "The

problem is that the behavior on the other side is not improving," he said, stressing that economic relations were far more sensitive than politics.

Moscow has been flexing its muscles by repeatedly shutting off or diverting energy supplies to other former Soviet republics, decisions that have been described as punishment for their steps away from Moscow's sphere of influence.

Iives complained that kilometer-long truck lines at Estonia's borders were due mainly to the slow handling of customs on the Russian side and said this jeopardized his country's efforts to set up lucrative trading ports.

Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov last week blamed corruption in customs for the gridlock.

Iives said port deals provided evidence of his country's competitive edge. "This shows the advantages of having an uncorrupt country and integrity of your ports. People want to trade through your ports and not through other ports," he said. Last month, China's Ningbo Port signed a deal to build a \$220 million container terminal in the port of Muuga.

Within the EU, Estonia should strive to play a strong role, he said, citing Luxembourg as a role model. "It does not really matter whether you come from a small country or from a large one. ... What matters is that you come up with good ideas," he said.

As an example, he singled out strengthening legislation in cross-border crime and cyber crime.

During the dispute over the relocation of the Soviet memorial in Tallinn last year, Estonia said government and corporate web sites were attacked by Russian hackers, including some that it linked to the Kremlin.

The Kremlin has denied involvement.