

World

Baltic states fear Putin will cut them off from Europe

Kaliningrad

Ben Hoyle
Vistytis, on the Lithuanian border

From the top of his watchtower at the rural southeastern edge of Lithuania, Captain Donatas Ishkauskas could see where Europe's next ground war might soon start.

Shimmering in the distance across the frozen silver lake behind the border guard was Poland, a Nato ally. Much closer, a few hundred metres away through the pine forest below him, was Kaliningrad, a highly militarised but isolated pocket of Russia that military planners fear could become the launchpad for an invasion.

Captain Ishkauskas's typical dealings with the Russian agents on the other side include negotiating the release of ice fishermen who have got lost in the fog out on the lake and stumbled over the border. The talks could soon become much more dangerous.

Kaliningrad is home to the Russian Baltic fleet and has been the subject of an extensive re-armament programme over the past decade that is believed to include missiles that can hit Germany. Lithuania estimates that about half of Kaliningrad's population of 900,000 are serving or former military personnel or their dependants. Last month Sergei Shoigu, the Russian defence minister, declared that reinforcing its exclave was one of the military's three chief objectives this year, along with freshly annexed Crimea and the Arctic.

According to Juozas Olekas, his Lithuanian counterpart, the past two major military exercises carried out there, in 2009 and 2013, have practised a scenario in which Russia seizes the 80-mile corridor between Kaliningrad and Belarus, Moscow's close ally.



A man salvages cinder blocks from a building in Debaltseve, Ukraine. Leaders of Baltic states fear an attack on Lithuania might be next, triggering a full-scale war

Such an operation would cut the Baltic nations off from their Nato partners and trigger a counter-attack through Poland under the alliance's collective defence agreement. "We used to have an agreement to inform each other about these exercises," Mr Olekas said. "But in January 2014 they stopped this information."

With tensions rising between the West and Russia over the conflict in 2009 and 2013, have practised a scenario in which Russia seizes the 80-mile corridor between Kaliningrad and Belarus, Moscow's close ally.



east Ukraine, Nato commanders are updating their plans for how to respond if President Putin tests the alliance with an attack against one of its Baltic members. General Sir Adrian Bradshaw, Na-

to's deputy supreme allied commander Europe, said last week that Russia could try to seize territory from Nato states and David Cameron said on Tuesday that the Kremlin could create further destabilisation in "Moldova or one of the Baltic states".

Yesterday up to 2,000 Russian soldiers and 500 units of equipment took part in drills in the country's western Pskov region, which borders Estonia and Latvia. Estonia marked its independence day on Tuesday with a military parade featuring Nato hardware and troops on its eastern border with Russia. Lithuania is bringing back limited conscription to counter the new threat from Russia.

Leaders across the Baltic are strengthening their cyberdefence and planning how to resist the sort of deniable "hybrid war" tactics that Russia has deployed in Ukraine. They say that they are already fighting an information war with Moscow for the loyalty of their minority Russian populations, whose sympathies are engaged by Kremlin propaganda on Russian state television.

Lithuanians also worry about a conventional attack from Kaliningrad, possibly triggered by a staged attack on the military rail transits that transport supplies to and from the Russian exclave across Lithuania. Politicians admit that it is vulnerable to a staged attack that could then form the pretext for a Russian response.

In the corridors of power in Vilnius there is cross-party agreement that Russia is now a serious threat to national security. Algirdas Butkevicius, the Social Democrat prime minister, was part of a five-person panel that approved the return of the military draft.

Andrius Kubilius, the conservative leader of the opposition, has already spent years fending off charges of "Russophobia" and keeps a large Ukrainian sticker insulting Mr Putin prominently on display in his office.

He told *The Times* that if Mr Putin felt western weakness on Ukraine then, "knowing Russian gangster style ... he could try not a global war but perhaps a small nuclear war" in the Baltic.

"We don't know what we can expect. Our history is very simple. From 1795 until 1990 we were facing some sort of major geopolitical threat or tragedy each 30 years."

All of them involved Russia. Outside parliament, a section of the barricades from the revolution has been preserved. Fourteen protesters were killed when the Kremlin tried to regain control in January 1991, the last victims of Soviet repression.

Many young people have begun to worry about the prospect of an attack but, having grown up as children of independence, have struggled to adjust to the idea that Moscow could affect their lives at all. Visceral fears have resurfaced among the older generations, though. Simonas Gudmanas, 42, an IT expert, spent a year hiding from Soviet military recruiters as a teenager before joining the Lithuanian forces after independence. "I think Russia is a danger for us," he said. "It's not a fairytale."

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Whale of a time A young humpback

China makes social media users reveal real names

China

Jamie Fullerton Beijing

China is attempting to eliminate all online dissent and criticism of the government by forcing users of social media to register using their real name.

The rule, which will come into effect on Sunday, means that websites will be obliged to ensure that users submit their genuine identities and personal details alongside nicknames.

The move will give authorities more power to persecute dissenters. In 2013 the government started to clamp down



Whale of a time A young humpback bursts into the air off Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. The acrobatic animals are popular with whale watchers seeking a spectacle

Greek government split on bailout deal

Greece

Anthee Carassava Athens

The first cracks appeared yesterday in Greece's radical government as the left wing of the ruling Syriza party rebelled against last week's bailout deal with Europe and a senior minister reneged on one of its key pledges.

A day after Athens assured creditors that it would press on with privatisations, Panagiotis Lafazanis, the energy minister, announced that he was scrapping the sale of two state-owned power utilities. In the letter sent to European Union finance ministers on Tuesday, Greece had promised to improve government finances by selling off assets.

After weeks of euphoric declarations that Greece's bailout and accompanying austerity were "dead", Alexis Tsipras, the prime minister, was forced to capitulate under threat of national bankruptcy last week and accept a fur-

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Capitol Hill is fuming as Washington mayor legalises marijuana

United States

David Taylor Washington

Marijuana was due to be legalised in Washington last night, opening the way for a furious legal battle between the city's mayor and Congress.

The law, which was to come into effect at midnight, makes it legal for people over 21 to possess, use and grow cannabis in the capital.

The legislation will not apply to the White House or Capitol Hill, which fall under the jurisdiction of federal government, along with a total of 29 per cent — or 18 square miles — of the city.

Nonetheless, furious Republicans in Congress brought a legal action against the mayor, Muriel Bowser, as she handed out factsheets about the change. They claim that she has gone beyond her powers in enacting the law — voted for by residents last November — because last year's federal budget specified that the District of Columbia could not use any funds to enact marijuana legislation.

In their letter, they demand that the mayor hand over the name, salary and position of any employee who spent any time enacting "Initiative 71", suggesting that they could target individuals if the mayor defied Congress.

"If you decide to move forward tomorrow with the legalisation of marijuana in the district, you will be doing so in knowing and wilful violation of the law," said the letter, from the congressmen Jason Chaffetz and Mark Meadows.

As with issues such as gun control and gay marriage, there is now a confusing patchwork of laws across the 50 states of the US on marijuana. On Tuesday Alaska became the latest state to legalise its consumption and growth, following Washington state on the west coast and Colorado.

Voters in Oregon have also approved legalisation, and campaigners are hoping to end "prohibition" in 12 more states by 2019. In Colorado, which was

the first state to legalise cannabis shops last year, the effect of creating a legal — and taxable — industry is remarkable. In the first full year, marijuana sales hit \$699 million and tax revenues topped \$63 million.

A special clause in the Colorado law compels the state to set aside \$17 million for school-building projects.

The capital's decision to legalise pot is complicated because of the peculiarity of having 29 per cent of its land under the control of the federal government. This means that any user can still be arrested for possession if they are in a national park, a military base or on other federal land.

So as of today it possible for someone to carry two ounces of cannabis down Pennsylvania Avenue legally, but be arrested as soon as they reach the pavement outside the White House.

Leaflets produced by the mayor's office set out the new rules, including:

- Selling is not permitted, but people can give away up to one ounce.
- Cannabis can be smoked or ingested only in private: "Home grow; home use. Anywhere else isn't allowed."
- Up to six plants can be grown, of which only three can be mature.
- Under-21s are not allowed to possess any amount of marijuana.

People will still face up to 60 days in jail or a \$500 fine for smoking in public and the mayor's office emphasised that Washington was not "going to become like Amsterdam" as restaurants could lose their licence if they let customers use marijuana.

Flanked by officials and legal advisers, the mayor made clear that she would press ahead with the new law in spite of the threat of legal action from Congress. "We believe that we are acting lawfully. I have a lot to do here in the District of Columbia, so me being in jail wouldn't be a good thing," she said.

Ms Bowser's office blamed congressional interference for thwarting the legal sale of marijuana, which could allow the city to tax the proceeds.

Ukraine

Tom Coghlan
Hugh Tomlinson Dubai

A defence deal between Kiev and the United Arab Emirates has opened a new dimension to the military campaign in east Ukraine and fuelled speculation that the West is moving towards arming the country by proxy.

"The Ukrainian government said that it had signed a memorandum of understanding, opening the way for a weapons transfer believed to be worth an initial \$110 million. "We are in a very practical dialogue, and we hope in the very near future we have a decision to help us attain defensive weapons," said President Poroshenko at the IDEX arms fair in Abu Dhabi, where the deal was reported to have been agreed on Tuesday.

Ukraine has repeatedly been rebuffed by the United States and other western countries in its appeals for arms to counter the advanced Russian weaponry flowing to the separatist rebel forces. The US has said only that it is considering supplying defensive systems — but pressure on it has grown in the face of the repeated failure of

diplomatic efforts to end the conflict. Britain said this week that it would send a 75-strong military training team to Ukraine. The US has promised a battalion of trainers.

A spokesman for the government in Kiev declined to comment on the arms deal, saying that no details were yet available. Other Ukrainian officials, however, celebrated the news.

"The types and volumes of supplies cannot be disclosed on Facebook," said Anton Gerashchenko, an adviser to Ukraine's interior minister, on social media. "However, it is worth noting the fact that the Arabs, in contrast to the Europeans and Americans, do not fear threats made by Putin that a third world war will unravel."

Analysts said that the deal would fuel speculation in Moscow that the US was considering arming Ukraine by proxy — and sources in the Russian capital confirmed that the news had been greeted with suspicion and anger.

The UAE, one of America's closest allies in the region, has a history of military co-operation with Ukraine. It also has large stocks of advanced US military hardware of the type that Ukraine desperately needs, and of Russian-

made weapons systems. "It is a unique deal," said Igor Sutyagin, senior research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute. "The Ukrainians need secure communications, fire control, anti-battery radar and command and control. They need anti-tank weapons deal, saying that no details were yet available. Other Ukrainian officials, however, celebrated the news.

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