



RUSSIAN THREAT. Finland fears Russian aggression

Russian military drills near neighboring Finland have provoked concern that Northern Europe may be the next focus of Moscow's seemingly renewed appetite for redrawing its borders.

Troops and jet fighters from all four military regions of Russia were deployed Sunday about 150 miles east of the Finnish border, according to the English-language newspaper *Finnbay*. The Russian defense ministry said in a statement that the exercises were pre-planned and that more than 50 fighter pilots took part.

Finland was part of the Russian empire for 108 years, from 1809 until Russia's withdrawal from World War I in 1917. The Karelia region, where the war games are taking place, straddles the Finnish border and has historically been a heavily militarized zone for Moscow.

According to Dr. Jonathan Eyal, international director at London's Royal United Services Institute think tank, there is "no question" that these exercises show that Russia is testing its power in the region, which was reshaped by the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Eyal said that while Russia's annexation of Crimea has put a spotlight on its foreign policy, tension with Finland and Sweden is not new. This was shown as recently as last year when Russian jets flew toward Swedish airspace, causing Stockholm to scramble its air force, he said.

But he said that Scandinavia and the Baltic states have sensed renewed danger in recent days because "Putin is an opportunist, and if the opportunity arises he will pick up on it"ç

Andrew Kutchins, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the proximity of the drills had made the alarm most palpable in Finland.

"The people of Helsinki are nervous"ö he said. "What Putin is doing is sending shock waves through Europe".

This anxiety was heightened Sunday after one of Putin's closest former advisers told the Swedish

newspaper Svenska Dagbladet that the Kremlin would seek "historical justice" by reclaiming Finland and ex-Soviet countries as part of an enlarged Russian Federation.

"Putin's view is that he protects what belongs to him and his predecessors. Parts of Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic states and Finland are states where Putin claims to have ownership", said Illarionov, who is now a senior fellow at the Washington, D.C.,-based Cato Institute.