



# **FINLAND AND NATO**

## A Historical Foreign Policy Shift in 2022

JOLÁN MÁRIA BOGÁNYI

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# FINLAND AND NATO

## A Historical Foreign Policy Shift in 2022

JOLÁN MÁRIA BOGÁNYI<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

On 24 February 2022, the security policy environment in Finland and throughout Europe underwent a significant change. The Russian invasion of Ukraine sparked an unprecedented discussion about accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in Finnish society. This paper has two objectives. First, it examines the background and uniqueness of Finland's Cold War neutrality and takes a look at the concept of neutrality. Second, it provides an overview of the Finnish NATO discourse from the end of the Cold War to the present day and points out the path that led Finland to join NATO. For decades Finland's stance on NATO membership had been very cautious. A new era in Finnish foreign policy began in 2022. Finland submitted its application to NATO only three months after Putin's large-scale invasion of Ukraine and subsequently joined the alliance on the 4th of April 2023. The paper shows that the change in the geopolitical environment can be given divergent meanings. At different times, Finland had two mutually exclusive interpretations of Russian aggression. These were reflected in the attitudes toward NATO membership. Finland's decision to join NATO was therefore not predetermined. The focus is on the most significant justifications that politicians presented in favour of NATO before the Parliament's vote on

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membership in May 2022. The debate revealed a rapid shift in attitude among many former NATO opponents. The question of a NATO membership referendum and public opinion is also examined. Primary sources like minutes of parliamentary sittings were used. Due to its relevance, the latest Finnish discourse on NATO is still a little-researched issue.

**Keywords: NATO, Finland, neutrality, military non-alignment**

## Introduction

Finland's past has been shaped in large part by the fact that it has always been located in a “cultural between”; from the 12th century Finland was controlled by the Kingdom of Sweden, and from 1809 until 1917 by Russia. The policy of neutrality during the Cold War was an attempt to maintain a balance between the East and the West. The end of the Cold War resulted in the transition from a policy of neutrality to one of military non-alignment. With Finland's accession to NATO on 4 May, 2023, *finlandization* was eventually put to an end.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has awakened Finnish society in terms of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization debate. For decades, the question of NATO membership was seen as a very sensitive and controversial topic. However, Russia's “special military operation” led by Vladimir Putin has brought extraordinary shifts in Finnish foreign policy and has obliged Helsinki to reconsider the pillars of its foreign and security policy. Less than three months after the conflict began, Finland submitted its application to NATO on 18 May 2022. According to President Niinistö, “a historic turning point lies ahead” (Luotonen and Happonen 2022). Finland was officially admitted to NATO on 4 April 2023, consequently, the country abandoned its policy of military non-alignment.

The Russo-Ukrainian war could be considered an unprecedented conflict in the post-Cold War era, yet this does not necessarily imply that Finland's accession to NATO was an obvious outcome. Finland's entry to

NATO was not predetermined since politicians gave the same phenomenon, specifically Russian aggression, two mutually exclusive interpretations.

On 19 January in 2022, the Prime Minister of Finland Sanna Marin still said that Finland's application for NATO membership during her current term is "very unlikely" (Reuters 2022). However, four months later, the application to join NATO was already sent. General opinion on NATO membership has shifted very rapidly: during the autumn of 2021, around 26 % of Finns supported the NATO membership, while 40 % still opposed it (EVA 2021). Three months after the start of the war in a May 2022 poll, already 78 % of Finns supported the accession, while just 11 % opposed it (Kinnunen 2022).

Analysis of the Finnish NATO debate is a relatively new phenomenon. Accordingly, the topic is not much researched. The first significant study of Finland's relationship with NATO was Finnish political scientist Tuomas Forsberg's NATO book (2002).

The first part of the paper focuses on Finland's foreign policy prior to the NATO discussion. Here the objective is to point out that the Cold War neutrality of Finland was *sui generis* (Arter 1996). For this, the legal background of neutrality in international law and the concepts of neutrality and non-alignment will be investigated. This section is based on relevant research and articles from significant scholars, e.g. Hakovirta, Fischer and Agius among others. This part will additionally review the most important foreign policy actions of Finland during the Cold War, as it is essential to be familiar with the past in order to understand the evolution of Finland's special neutrality.

The second section offers an outline of the NATO discussion in Finland from the end of the Cold War up to the present day. The research questions are the following: How did the NATO discussion in Finland evolve? How did Finnish politicians justify Finland's decision to join NATO? I will review the evolution of the NATO discussion comparing the earlier and current arguments. For this, earlier parliamentary debates, government reports, interviews with Finnish parliamentarians and ministers, minutes of the most



significant parliamentary sessions on NATO membership in 2022 as well as relevant secondary sources are used. Critical analysis is made on the arguments on NATO accession. Public opinion as well as the question of holding a referendum is discussed. I use polls from official Finnish sources like Helsingin Sanomat and YLE, the former being the most widely read paid newspaper in Finland and the Nordic nations and the latter being the Finnish national public broadcasting company.<sup>2</sup>

Subsequently, within this section I shall investigate the reasons that politicians provide for their support of the choice to join NATO. I will focus on the most significant justifications that politicians have presented in favour of NATO. I examine two discussions about NATO membership that took place in the Finnish Parliament on 16 and 17 May 2022. Additionally, the paper seeks to demonstrate how politicians and the Finnish 2022 NATO debate interpreted the change in the geopolitical situation in comparison to earlier debates. The 2022 NATO debate was exceptional in the context of Finland's foreign policy. During the Cold War, NATO membership was little if at all discussed, because Finland was bound by the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance (FCMA treaty) it had signed with the Soviet Union following its two defeats during the Second World War. Throughout the Cold War, Finland's foreign policy line was shaped by Russia. NATO membership was not only practically unimaginable but ideologically rejected.

After the end of the Cold War, NATO membership discussions became possible. The so-called NATO option allowed Finland to enter the alliance whenever it deemed it necessary. However, it was not until 2022 that politicians expressed a desire to make this option happen. Finnish people understood the seriousness of Russian aggression. As President Niinistö said,

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<sup>2</sup> Helsingin Sanomat was founded in 1889 and is the largest subscription newspaper in Finland and the Nordic countries. YLE is a national public broadcasting company of Finland, created in 1926. It is a joint-stock business that is 99.98% owned by the Finnish government and employs over 3,200 Finns. YLE's organisational structure closely resembles that of its British rival, the BBC, on which it was based.

“The masks are off, but only the cold face of war is visible” (Pullinen 2022). The change in the geostrategic environment was given another meaning than before. What was a threat during the Cold War, became a reality in 2022, namely that Moscow is capable of launching a massive invasion of a sovereign nation. The decision of Finland to become a member of the alliance was based on the speech delivered by President Putin in December 2021, in which he called upon NATO to refrain from expanding towards the east. Accepting Russia’s demands would have meant that Finland would be again under Russian influence. This speech could be considered the starting point for the events that eventually lead to Finland’s accession to NATO.

## **Finland’s foreign policy before the NATO Discussion**

### Historical context

There are historical reasons why Finland’s foreign policy has been cautious and aimed at neutrality. Due to its geographical location, Finland was contested for centuries by two mediaeval European powers, the Kingdom of Sweden and the Russian Tsardom. Up to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Swedes conquered a growing portion of the land inhabited by Finns. However, beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the balance of power shifted, the Swedish-Russian boundary in Karelia moved westward, and in 1809, Tsar Alexander I. conquered the whole region as the Grand Duchy of Finland (Nortio et al. 2022, 864). The area of the Grand Duchy of Finland was of unique strategic significance to both Sweden and Russia.

Finland's autonomous government proclaimed its independence on 6 December 1917. Simultaneously with the nation's independence the country experienced a civil war. The southern provinces were under the possession of the red forces with Lenin's support, but the centre provinces were controlled by the white forces, who emerged as the victors of the civil war. This conflict resulted in significant and enduring effects that fundamentally impacted the structure of Finnish society (Bereczki 2010).

During the period between the two world wars, Finland pursued a foreign policy strategy that sought to strengthen its ties with the Soviet Union while maintaining relations with Western democracies. Neutrality was maintained, although it was unable to satisfy the Soviet Union's security concerns. The secret clause of the Soviet-German non-aggression pact signed on 23 August 1939 placed Finland within the Soviet sphere of interest. Stalin's Soviet Union attacked Finland without declaration in November 1939, forcing Finland to take part in the events of the Second World War. The over-optimistic Soviet Union did not count on Finnish resistance, and the operation eventually turned into a long 105-day campaign. Despite the extraordinary resistance of the Finnish army, Finland was obliged to sign the 1940 Moscow Peace Treaty, in which it ceded 10% of its territory. It is probably partly because of this that allowed Finland to retain its independence and avoid full Soviet military occupation. After Germany attacked the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, Finland re-entered the war on the German side, hoping to regain the territory it had lost. It should be noted that under international law, the Finns were not in a binding alliance with the Germans (Bereczki 2010).

Despite German demands, the Finnish army under Commander-in-Chief Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim occupied East Karelia and the southeastern Karelia territories annexed in the Winter War, but did not invade Leningrad due to the potential commitment it would create to Germany. Despite the Finnish army's success in stopping the Soviet invasion in 1944, it was unable to prevent the fulfilment of the peace treaty conditions imposed by Moscow. According to the armistice agreement signed on 19 September 1944, Finland had to return to the 1940 borders and pay reparations to the Soviet Union of 300 million dollars. The treaty also contained political provisions, including the authorization of the Communist Party and a ban on fascist organisations. Nevertheless, there was no takeover of power by Moscow in the leadership of the newly formed Finnish Communist Party (Bereczki 2010). This may have been one of the reasons why Finland successfully maintained its constitution and democratic institutions.



## Neutrality and military non-alignment

The current concept of international neutrality arose with the formation of the nation-state at the end of the Middle Ages (Hakovirta, 1988). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the notion of neutrality was largely established in Europe. The name derives from the Latin *ne uter*, which means "neither of two", and it originally indicated non-participation in a state-on-state conflict (Fischer et al. 2016, 6). It is often viewed as the security option of small and weak states, a view associated with self-interested isolationism (Agius 2006). There are both legal and political aspects to neutrality. Neutrality, in the context of international law, generally refers to a country's abstention from an armed conflict (Rolenc 2008, 11).

Under international law, two kinds of neutrality can be distinguished: *ad hoc* (temporary) neutrality and permanent neutrality (Kovács 2011, 593). The former is the original form of neutrality, which evolved as a result of the interplay among governmental practice, academic thought, legal agreements, and codification at the end of the Middle Ages. The international law of occasional neutrality applies to any state that stays neutral during a war, but only for the duration of that conflict (Hakovirta 1988, 9). In the event of permanent neutrality, the state pledges not to participate in military alliances or conflict, unless it is attacked. Permanent neutrality may be the result of a unilateral declaration of state will or an international agreement. This sort of neutrality is often defined in constitutions or treaties (Agius and Devine 2011). However, permanent neutrality is given its true weight when governments recognize it, particularly when there are guarantor powers (Kovács 2011, 593). For instance, the permanent neutrality of Switzerland was recognized by the powers during the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Austria for example did an unilateral declaration in 1955 which was followed by international recognition. In contrast, neither Swedish nor Finnish neutrality is supported by domestic or international law. Rather, it is founded on their foreign policy history and their decision to pursue a neutrality policy (Fischer et al. 2016).

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Hague Conventions of 1907 codified the behaviour of neutral governments during the war as the legal foundation for neutrality (Fischer et al. 2016, 6). The Hague Convention is to this day considered the ultimate institutionalisation of neutrality in international law (Karsh 2012). The most significant feature of the Hague norms is the right of a neutral state to the inviolability of its territory and the respect of its neutral status by combatants (Hague Convention 1910).

During the Cold War, neutrality for Finland as a policy was a balancing effort between the East and the West, often referred to as Cold War neutrality. Since neither international nor domestic laws supported Finnish neutrality, it is seen as a kind of political neutrality. However, after the end of the Cold War, neutrality developed into a policy of military non-alignment (Forsberg 2023, 89). It meant that Finland became a country that did not belong to any military alliance.

Furthermore, Finland has been a NATO Partner for Peace since 1994 and cooperates with other countries in the Partnership for Peace programme (Forsberg and Vaahtoranta 2001, 74). Moreover, concerning NATO-led operations and missions in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq, Finland has been one of the most active allies and a valuable contributor. Finland had already lost its neutrality when joining the EU in 1995 (Forsberg and Vaahtoranta 2001, 69), as it became part of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which allows the European Union to play a prominent position in peacekeeping activities, conflict prevention and the enhancement of global security. As a result of joining NATO, Finland ultimately abandoned its military non-aligned status.

### The uniqueness of Finland's neutrality

Finland's 1340-kilometre-long border with the Soviet Union (later with Russia) inevitably affected the country's military and foreign policy (Aunesluoma and Rainio-Niemi 2016, 53). Finland's international status during

the Cold War was distinct from Sweden's because the conclusion of the Second World War put Finland within the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union (Vaahtoranta and Forsberg 2000). As Finland lost two wars with its neighbour, it needed to adhere to the peace treaty obligations. In this sense, Swedish neutrality was distinct from the Finnish, as Sweden was outside the Soviet Union's area of influence. According to Alexander Stubb, former Prime Minister of Finland, unlike Switzerland and Sweden, Finland remained neutral throughout the Cold War purely because of practical considerations, not because of any ideological grounds (Stubb 2022). Swedish neutrality was an integral component of Swedish national identity (Agius 2006). In contrast, Finnish neutrality was "rather a necessity than an identity" (Danube Institute 2022). In contrast to Austria, Finland's neutrality during the Cold War was not declared legally, and in contrast to Sweden, it did not originate from historical tradition (Arter 2022, 6). Finland was forced to take a neutral stance; it had no other better option (Stubb 2022).

After the Second World War, Finland was left with few real strategic choices (Forsberg and Pesu 2016, 478). As a consequence of the defeat during the Second World War against the Soviet Union, Finland not only lost ten percent of its territory but also was obliged to sign the FCMA Treaty.<sup>3</sup> This treaty set the parameters for Finland's foreign policy and the circumstances under which Finland might consider itself independent (Lukacs 1992). Neutrality was not desired. It was a position imposed on Finland by the geopolitical realities of the Cold War. Because of the FCMA treaty, Finland's choices for forming alliances became rather limited. As a result of Finland's decision in the summer of 1947 to sign the FCMA treaty, and its subsequent

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<sup>3</sup> This was a bilateral treaty between Finland and the Soviet Union on which Finland's neutrality policy was based. The YYA Convention is an abbreviation for the Finnish *Sopimus ystäväydestä, yhteistoiminnasta ja keskinäisestä avunannosta*, as the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance (FCMA), signed between the Soviet Union and Finland in 1948 extended in 1955, 1970 and 1983. It was the basis for Finno–Soviet relations from 1948 to 1992. (Numminen et al. 1983)

rejection of an invitation from the West to take part in the Marshall Plan, no Western state seriously considered Finland to be a prospective ally.

## Finnish foreign policy during the Cold War

When talking about foreign policy in Finland, it is of utmost importance to emphasise that leading foreign policy is one of the most essential responsibilities of the president. President Urho Kekkonen (in office from 1956 to 1982) admitted that, unfortunately, the Finnish governments have a history of failing quickly (Kekkonen 1989). According to Kekkonen, it was the president's role to ensure the state's survival and continuation throughout time. For him, it was hard to conceive a scenario in which foreign policy is left in the hands of a series of administrations and prime ministers (Kekkonen 1989, 12).

Presidents in Finland have had a significant, even decisive impact on the overall direction of foreign policy and the resolution of key crises. During the post-Second World War years, Finland had to convince the Soviet Union that it posed no danger. Earning confidence was difficult when the Soviet Union, controlled by an increasingly paranoid Joseph Stalin, feared that Finland would join with the West in the event of a major conflict (Forsberg and Pesu 2016).

President J.K. Paasikivi (1946-1956), whose name is widely associated with the post-Second World War foreign policy doctrine known as the Paasikivi line<sup>4</sup>, has made arguably the greatest contribution to Finnish foreign policy (Nousiainen 1959, 267). The doctrine indeed intended to ensure Finland's existence in the face of intense pressure from the Soviet Union while maintaining its democratic and capitalist values. As Max Jakobson notes, Finland preserved its freedom in “apparent harmony” with the Soviet Union

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<sup>4</sup> The main point behind his doctrine, referred to as the Paasikivi-Kekkonen line, was to engage in *realpolitik*, free from ideological considerations and motivated primarily by the security of the Finnish people. It was thought to be suitable to the vital interests of both countries.

(Jakobson 1980). This was mainly thanks to President Paasikivi, who emphasised the need of maintaining good relations with the Soviet Union. (Forsberg and Pesu 2016). Following the Second World War, maintaining stable and friendly ties with the Soviet Union seemed to be a wise decision to avoid invasion and preserve national sovereignty (Forsberg and Pesu 2016).<sup>5</sup> Following the Second World War, maintaining stable and friendly ties with the Soviet Union seemed to be a wise decision to avoid invasion and preserve national sovereignty. (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016) Nousiainen (1959) in his book cites the 1955 interview of Paasikivi, who explained the theory of his doctrine as follows:

Although history does not always repeat itself, as was once believed, the fact remains that all the armed conflicts in which Finland has been involved with Russia over the past 250 years have ended unhappily for our country, whereas when we have faced Russians at the negotiating table, we have achieved many valuable results. For Finland, the most important thing now and always is that the country has good relations with Russia. This is determined by geography and history. We must think historically about our foreign policy.

Thus, it seems that Finland was working to develop the deepest and most confidential relations it could with the Soviet Union. It was engaging in *realpolitik*, free from ideological considerations, motivated primarily by the security of the Finnish people, and thought to be suitable to the vital interests of both countries. This was the main point behind his doctrine, later referred to as the Paasikivi-Kekkonen line. The FCMA Treaty served as the basic instrument for this particular approach to foreign policy. The FCMA Treaty

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<sup>5</sup> Nousiainen (1959) cites the 1955 interview of Paasikivi, who explained the theory of his doctrine as follows: “For Finland, the most important thing now and always is that the country has good relations with Russia. This is determined by geography and history. We must think historically about our foreign policy.”

symbolized Finland's adjustment to the new foreign policy line that was centred on good relations with the Soviet Union (Forsberg, 2018).

The leadership of the Soviet Union used the treaty as a tool to exert control over Finland's foreign policy. Nevertheless, unlike other Soviet satellites, Finland was never forced into a complete military alliance with its Eastern neighbour (Uutela 2020, 1). Finland was also able to prevent Soviet occupation partly because of the Finnish resistance during the wars, which made the Soviet Union unable to break into the whole territory of the country. Furthermore, there was no seizure of power by Moscow inside the Finnish communist party, which limited the Soviet Union's ability to have significant influence. What indeed made Finnish Cold War neutrality special, was the bilateral treaty with the Soviet Union. It was difficult for Finland to demonstrate that, despite its military commitments to a bloc's leader, it could maintain its neutrality. Neutrality was often viewed with scepticism on the Western side of the Cold War breach (Aunesluoma and Rainio-Niemi 2016, 55).

To make the 1948 treaty fit with its neutrality stance, Finland emphasised that this treaty is fundamentally distinct from military alliance treaties (Hakovirta 1988). Firstly, Finland stressed that the preamble of the treaty emphasises Finland's wish to avoid involvement in great-power conflicts (Hakovirta 1988). Secondly, military cooperation was only allowed on Finnish territory. Article 1 of the agreement makes it clear that if Germany or one of its allies launches an armed attack against the Soviet Union through Finnish territory, Finland will be obligated to repel the attack (Finno-Soviet Treaty 1948).

Although Finland was capable of maintaining its independence from Moscow because of its policy of neutrality, the Soviet Union was nonetheless able to interfere in Finland's internal affairs. The Finns understood that some degree of political adaptation was necessary to preserve their national culture and ability to defend themselves (Forsberg and Vaahtoranta 2001).

In order to express scepticism over this supposed independence, the concept of Finlandization was developed. The concept first arose in Austria in the 1950s with repeated references to Finland as an unwanted example of neutrality (Aunesluoma and Rainio-Niemi 2016, 54). Richard Löwenthal, a professor at the Free University of Berlin, is often regarded as the concept's inventor (Finnlandisierung) (Forsberg and Pesu 2016, 475). Finlandization is a foreign policy strategy where the smaller state adjusts its policies to the interests of a larger, often Great Power, neighbouring nation (Forsberg and Pesu 2016, 474). However, Forsberg and Pesu note that there are several definitions of Finlandization. For example, willingly accommodating interests and limiting sovereignty with the aim of maintaining independence and minimising political conflicts with the neighbouring country (Forsberg and Pesu 2016).

Finns considered this theoretical framework insulting during the Cold War years, because it connected Finland's name with negative associations. Because it was impossible to ignore the theoretical debate, the political leadership of Finland attempted to claim that such a concept did not exist (Forsberg and Pesu 2016). However, on the diplomatic level, during the Cold War Finns began to redefine Finlandization positively as a form of coexistence that is advantageous to both parties involved. The policy of neutrality was seen as a success of the Cold War (Forsberg 2018).

The term Finlandization was additionally brought up into discourse in 2014 with the Ukrainian crisis when Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger both stated that Finland may serve as a model for Ukraine's ties with Russia and that Russia needs a “Finland option” for Ukraine (Brzezinski 2014; Kissinger 2014). However, Finlandization is a one-of-a-kind phenomenon and

is “bound up with the specifics of post-Second World War Finnish history” (Arter 2022, 2).<sup>6</sup>

In 1955, Moscow permitted Finland to join the United Nations and the Nordic Council. Here, Finland had whole new possibilities to underline its state independence and attempts to remain outside of superpower conflicts, so long as it did so within the constraints imposed by the FCMA treaty.

Urho Kekkonen, the next and the longest-serving president (1956–1982) was trusted by Moscow to keep the FCMA line stable.<sup>7</sup> It was widely recognised that he had a “trump card” in his hand - Moscow's support (Meinander 2014, 251). As Kekkonen notes, the Finnish paradox was that the country could only approach the West if it approached the East at the same time (Kekkonen 1989). This foreign policy concept was successful. Kekkonen's diplomacy in the East brought economic and security policy gains. Finland was able to convince Moscow to accept a favourable deal with EFTA in the spring of 1961, guaranteeing crucial markets for its export sectors on the mainland and creating the basis for following agreements and integration decisions with the EEC, EC, and ultimately the EU (Meinander 2014, 252).

Until the 1990s, the security-political balance in northern Europe was based on the order established in the late 1940s. The FCMA agreement between Finland and the Soviet Union was counterbalanced by Sweden's stricter neutrality and Denmark and Norway's NATO membership. Any alteration to this order would have destabilised the situation (Meinander 2014).

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<sup>6</sup> Kekkonen stated: "We do not offer our 1948 agreement as a model for other nations, but we offer the result of it as a model: trusting and constructive cooperation between states with a different social order. That is true Finlandization" (Helsingin Sanomat 1973).

<sup>7</sup> It was no surprise that he was elected president by a large majority, and for the same reason, he was re-elected three more times (1968, 1974, 1978) without any serious opposition.



## Finland and NATO

### NATO discussion over time

The debate on membership began in the early 1990s, after the termination of the FCMA Treaty and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, there was little to no talk about NATO membership. Forsberg states that it was not only practically impossible but also ideologically rejected. Hardly any political support was present for NATO admission (Forsberg 2002). During the Cold War, Finland had no alternative but to conform to the environment's demands in order to keep the Soviet Union satisfied.

Right after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Finland desired to go in a more European and Western direction, and EU membership was seen as the key to achieving this goal. Ultimately, President Mauno Koivisto (1982-1994) said that security policy considerations were the driving force behind Finland's application to join the European Union (Forsberg 2018).<sup>8</sup> Finland joined the European Union in 1995 and started a close partnership with NATO, which was a huge step towards joining Western ideals.

At the end of 1991, by the suggestion of the United States, NATO established the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), bringing in a whole new era for the organisation. Institutional collaboration with NATO started in 1991 when Finland joined the NACC as an observer member. Finland still feared this position; hence the Council was perceived as a cooperative organisation of former communist nations interested in NATO (Forsberg 2022).<sup>9</sup> The next step between Finland and NATO took place in

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<sup>8</sup> Koivisto said, "The strongest reason for seeking EC membership seemed to me to lie in the realm of security policy. The economic reasons were secondary." (Koivisto 1997, 246)

<sup>9</sup> It could be argued that Finland was already committed to the US in terms of defence. On 5th of June 1992, Defence Minister Elisabeth Rehn announced that Finland and the United States had signed a contract worth thirteen billion marks for F/A-18 Hornet fighter jets. (Crossette 1992)

1994 which was the decision to join NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme (Arter 1996, 615). Since the very beginning, Finland has engaged in the NATO-led IFOR, SFOR, and KFOR operations in Bosnia and Kosovo. Since 1996, Finland has been participating in the NATO Intensified Dialogue (Forsberg and Vaahtoranta 2001). Finland became a member of the Western European Union as an observer in February 1995, not long after it joined the European Union.

The dialogue on NATO has often portrayed membership as a battle between proponents and opponents. NATO is frequently discussed with a great degree of passion, while the facts take a backseat (Särkkä 2019). The first significant study of NATO and Finland was Finnish political scientist Tuomas Forsberg's book *NATO* (2002), which covers the period up to 2002 and the time after NATO's second round of expansion.<sup>10</sup> Forsberg interestingly states that NATO discussion in Finland has not attempted to provide specific definitions of the conditions under which Finland would be advised to join NATO (Forsberg 2002). He believes that possible factors which would shift the opinion towards accession could include increasing Russian threat or Sweden's accession to NATO. In 2022 the first prevision turned out to be true. He also stated that the Finnish discussion over NATO had been based on insufficient information. Both opposition to NATO and its defence had been seen as based on emotion (Forsberg 2002, 14-15).

Forsberg considers the year 1992 the first period of the NATO membership debate. These first debates were not politicised, "as none of the major parties wanted to fly the flag for NATO membership" (Forsberg 2002, 265). This reflects the sensitive nature of the topic. Hence, NATO became a political issue from the start, with politicians highly labelled and positioned as NATO supporters or opponents (Särkkä 2019). It is important to understand this kind of polarised starting point, as it continued to influence the Finnish

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<sup>10</sup> Yet, it should be emphasised that, since the publication of the *NATO* book, no other similarly extensive academic study on NATO's contribution to the creation of Finland's foreign and security policy has been published.

debate on NATO membership. The first debate was therefore apolitical and considered NATO only from a theoretical point of view. As Forsberg notes, the argument was often about the necessity for a debate, i.e. whether joining NATO was really a realistic choice (Forsberg 2002).

The president at the time, Martti Ahtisaari (1994-2000) explained that the reason why NATO accession was not on the agenda, was that EU membership was a priority and that promoting EU membership and monetary union was enough of a task (Ilta Sanomat 2017). He also stated that Finland should not abandon its policy of military non-alignment at this time since NATO membership would neither enhance Finnish security nor promote stability in Northern Europe and the Baltics (Arter 1996, 626). Twenty years later, the discussion had changed completely, as in the 2022 debate one of the most important pro-NATO arguments concerned the overall stability and security of the northern region (Mika Kari, the Social Democratic Party, Finnish Government 2022b, 4).

In the 1990s, there was also a question among Finnish leaders, whether NATO had any intention of enlarging (Forsberg 2018). Foreign policy leaders of the time also felt that membership in the EU and NATO would have been too much for the Finnish people. In contrast, according to Alexander Stubb, prime minister of Finland from 2014 to 2015, Finland should have joined NATO when joining the European Union. However, he admits that public opinion for NATO was never a majority in the society back then (France 24 English 2022).

Public opinion in the 2022 NATO discussion also played a major, maybe the most important role, and could be considered a driving force. Parliamentary members during the 14-hour debate pointed out the utmost importance of having society's support for this historical decision. Minister of Defence, Antti Kaikkonen also stated that "the decision to apply seems to have the strong support of the majority of our nation, and that is very important"

(Finnish Government 2022b, 16). As Forsberg notes, a drastic shift in public opinion resulted in a change in policy (Forsberg 2023).

In 1995, along with the Finnish Government's security policy report, the term NATO option was developed, which meant that Finland did not seek full membership or Article 5 security assurances but kept the "option" to do so if conditions altered. The second phase of NATO discussion as identified by Forsberg, took place when the first round of NATO enlargement happened (1994-1999). Here politicians took a more concrete position on the subject. The primary argument of those in favour of joining NATO was that Finland needed security guarantees in the worst-case scenario and that it was not practical to seek them from the EU. Comparing it to the 2022 debate, this argument was maintained, as "there is no full security guarantee available through the EU, which NATO guarantees to its member states under the letter of Article 5" (Hannu Hoskonen Centre Party, PTK 56/2022, 109). Furthermore, as noted by Petri Honkonen, Minister for Science and Culture, "NATO gives us the security guarantees we need" (Finnish Government 2022b, 144). As Forsberg writes, in the second wave of NATO discussion proponents of NATO accession argued that it was preferable to apply for NATO during times of peace than to wait until the situation deteriorated (Forsberg 2002).

There was a somewhat increased debate after the Kosovo crisis in 1999, though NATO appeared in a rather negative tone. As the 2001 Security Policy Report states, NATO employed strong military action in the Kosovo crisis, which threatened the very foundation of international norms and could have escalated into a conflict that destabilised Europe (Finnish Government 2001). As former President Koivisto emphasised, NATO had violated both international law and its own charter<sup>11</sup> (Forsberg and Vaahtoranta 2001). In contrast, Pentti Sadeniemi, columnist of the newspaper Helsingin Sanomat,

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<sup>11</sup> The bombing of Yugoslavia was, in the view of President Mauno Koivisto, contrary to both the UN Charter and NATO's own decisions (Snellmann 1999).

said that NATO membership has grown more important, as a result of the Kosovo conflict, since the crisis demonstrated that a presence in NATO would be considerably more influential than EU membership (Forsberg and Vaahtoranta 2001).

According to Forsberg, the third wave (1999-2003) began when enlargement became a reality. Non-alignment was seen as a free ride that would erode Finland's credibility as a participant in the international community, and so, its involvement in security cooperation was viewed as crucial to Finland's influence. As Forsberg states (2002), it was believed that Finland's influence depended on its membership in the security community. In the 2000s Finland, the mainstream media seemed to help the pro-NATO side by often highlighting the voices of those in favour of membership. For example, *Helsingin Sanomat*, the most widely read newspaper in Finland, started to favour NATO membership (Rahkonen 2007).

The NATO debate in the early 2000s was largely guided by President Tarja Halonen (2000-2012), who considered her duty to defend Finland's military non-alignment and openly opposed Finnish NATO membership. Compared to previous presidents, she had the most reservations about NATO membership. She was convinced that small, militarily non-aligned countries can successfully tackle world crises (Kokko 2007). Halonen stressed the importance of Finland's role as a mediator for peace if the country remained militarily non-aligned (Forsberg 2018, 16). She also rejected the idea that NATO membership would make Finland a more capable international actor (Kokko 2007).

Public opinion did not change to pro-NATO in Russia's conflicts neither in 2008 nor in 2014. The 2008 crisis was thought to be a local conflict in the Caucasus which does not concern Europe. It was believed that the conflict between Russia and Georgia was taking place far away and would only have indirect implications for Finland (Hänninen and Rantanen 2008). In 2014, happenings were seen as a post-soviet conflict, and it was believed that it

would not expand to the Baltic Sea region. The military activities of Russia in the region of the former Soviet Union were not considered a threat to Finland's security strategy (Forsberg 2023). For instance, Prime Minister Katainen emphasised that the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 did not pose a serious security threat to Finland (Vuohelainen 2014). In the Government's security policy reports NATO accession was often concluded with the following statement: "While carefully monitoring the developments in its security environment, Finland maintains the option to seek NATO membership" (Finnish Government 2016, 24).

### Public opinion and the question of referendum

The contemporary Finnish President Sauli Niinistö's attitude towards the NATO referendum changed over time. In an interview for YLE in 2016, he pointed out that a referendum must be held on possible NATO membership (Palojärvi 2016). However, in 2022 when Finland declared its will to join NATO, the president claimed that there was no need for a referendum. The sudden change in the opinion polls gave a good reason for the president to oppose the referendum (Varmavuori 2022).

Since the 1990s, when the first surveys on the topic were conducted, the Finnish public's stance on NATO had been rather stable until January 2022. The proportion of supporters ranged between 20 and 30 percent, while the proportion of opponents ranged between 50 and 70 percent (Forsberg 2023). Even the conflict in Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 did not change much the public opinion in favour of NATO.<sup>12</sup> The shifts are hardly significant, and people's opinions nearly always returned to usual patterns (Forsberg 2023). Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in January 2022, still, 43% opposed NATO accession, and only 28% were in favour

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<sup>12</sup> After the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, support for NATO increased from 23% to 27%, but still 52% remained opposed. Fairly the same happened after the Ukrainian conflict in 2014. In March 2014, 22% of Finns expressed support for NATO. In August 2014, 26% of Finns supported NATO membership. 57% of the population, however, still opposed NATO participation. 17% were unsure (Elonen and Kinnunen 2014).

(Huhtanen 2022a). On 28 February 2022 - four days after Putin's invasion of Ukraine – 53% of Finns supported NATO membership, and by 9 May - nine days before the formal application was submitted - this number had increased to 76% (Kinnunen 2022). The president himself admitted in an interview for CNN that he did not foresee such a sudden change in opinions on NATO membership (CNN 2022).

According to Forsberg, the sudden change is rather unexpected, since Finnish public opinion on NATO membership has been very constant and homogeneous for thirty years. Alexander Stubb, former prime minister stated that people in Finland are being motivated by what he refers to as "rational fear" (Stubb 2022). The concern was that a similar conflict that has happened in Ukraine could happen in Finland as well. This caused fear in the public and a rush by politicians to join NATO, because although not explicitly stated in the minimum requirements, it is obvious that a nation on whose territory a conflict or any type of military action is present, cannot join NATO. Doing so would be in direct contradiction to the organisation's core idea: "commitment to resolve conflict peacefully" (NATO 2016).

Analysing opinion articles, essays, and speeches on NATO membership reveal three distinct categories of individuals, whose opinions are referred to: decision-makers, experts, and the society. Each of these groups refers to the other two groups while advocating or opposing NATO membership<sup>13</sup> (Mäntysalo 2022). Given the massive transformation in public opinion in 2022, Forsberg argues that political leaders were forced to take action, as the institutional decision-making was based on society's opinion. He states that even security policies are driven by public opinion. He argues that in the past, when public opinion appeared to be relatively stable, political leaders were hesitant to initiate a risky process. An emotional push was required for a transformation in perceptions toward NATO membership. The year 2022 was

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<sup>13</sup> Mäntysalo also points out the relationship between public opinion and politicians.

unique because Russia's invasion of Ukraine was unprovoked and extensive (Forsberg 2022).

The lack of a referendum raises the question of democratic decision-making. In a YLE poll of March 2022, two-thirds (65%) of respondents said that there was no need for a referendum on Finland's membership of NATO (Kinnunen and Koivisto 2022). For the first time in a YLE poll, a majority of respondents do not want a referendum on NATO membership.<sup>14</sup> There were a variety of concerns around the referendum. Ari Hakahuhta, a political journalist, analyses the reluctance to hold a referendum (Hakahuhta 2022). He states that some believe that holding a referendum would delay the membership and is unnecessary. However, according to him, some proponents of NATO membership worry that a referendum would threaten their own strong pro-NATO stances. Hakahuhta points out that others may assume that the referendum will be the subject of an unprecedented Russian lobbying campaign, such as on social media. Arto Jääskeläinen, Director of Elections at the Ministry of Justice, also believed that hostile hybrid influence is such a considerable problem that a possible NATO decision should be left to Parliament (Huhtanen 2022b). If a referendum was not held out of fear of being influenced by external powers, are we giving up too much on democratic decision-making?

On the other hand, the referendum was supported by a few members of parliament and other politicians. Johannes Yrttiaho from the Left Alliance argued that Finland's military alliance is a historic decision that will change the international position of Finland as a whole. Therefore, such a solution should be anchored in the clearly expressed will of the Finns in a referendum (Vasemmistoliitto 2022). President Niinistö still stated on 26 January 2022: "Major decisions such as EU and NATO membership require a referendum".

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<sup>14</sup> Of the current NATO countries, referendums on accession were held in Hungary, Slovakia (boycotted), Slovenia, Georgia and Macedonia.



(MTV Finland, 2022) However, the government did not declare the need for a referendum (Hakahuhta 2022).

The absence of a referendum was also explained by the argument that Finns have strong support for representative democracy. Researchers Johanna Vuorelma and Matti Pesu both added that they would rely on representative democracy. A majority of Finns have strong support in the Parliament, and in the elected representatives when it comes to decision-making<sup>15</sup> (Kaks 2021). According to Vuorelma and Pesu, NATO surveys have been carried out and will be carried out quite enough (Suomen Tietotoimisto 2022a). Finnish people consider that politicians may have information and access to knowledge that society does not (Simojoki 2022).

## Justification of the politicians, and decision-makers to join NATO

Until the events of 2022, political parties in Finland had relatively clear positions on NATO membership. As Forsberg (2018) reviews, the National Coalition Party (Kokoomus) introduced a positive NATO stance and the leaders (Stubb, Katainen, Orpo) openly supported NATO membership. The Centre Party (Keskusta) has been in favour of military non-alignment and members who have supported NATO's possible membership have been in minority. The vast majority of Social Democrats (Sosialidemokraatit) have been against Finland's membership of NATO, including long-serving (2000-2012) President Tarja Halonen. As the former leader of Social Democrats, Antti Rinne stated in 2015, NATO membership would only increase risks to the security policy (Forsberg 2018). The Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset) has favoured military non-alignment as they have stressed the importance of strengthening Finland's own defence. The Left Alliance (Vasemmistoliitto) has traditionally been against NATO membership, while the Swedish People's

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<sup>15</sup> KAKS - Foundation for Local Government Development Citizens' Survey in 2021 shows that trust in decision-makers at all levels has clearly increased since spring 2017. The strongest increase in trust has been in national decision-makers, from 33% to 51%.

Party has supported membership and many of the party's ministers have also taken a strong stance in favour of membership over the years (Forsberg 2018).

I examine two discussions that took place on 16 and 17 May 2022 in the Finnish Parliament. On the 16 of May, the Finnish Parliament discussed the Government's report on Finland's application for membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. (Finnish Government 2022c). The second day's plenary sessions were based on a previous report, the Government's report on the changing security environment (Finnish Government 2022a), and the statement of the Foreign Affairs Committee (Foreign Affairs Committee 2022).

These reports and the speeches made in the parliamentary sessions served as the basis for the Parliament's vote in favour of the Government's proposal at the end of the plenary session. The outcome of the Finnish parliamentary vote on NATO membership was a clear statement of a strong support: 188 in favour, 8 against, 0 withholding their vote, and 3 not present. Not one party as a whole opposed NATO membership, rather it was individuals who voted against membership. Six of the eight votes against NATO membership came from the Left Alliance, one from the Finns Party, and one from the Power Belongs to the People Party (Orjala 2023). The NATO discussion on 17 May lasted 14 hours. 212 speeches were heard with a five-minute limit each.

In the Government's report on Finland's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the primary explanation for NATO accession is the following: "Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Finland and Europe's security and operating environment have experienced a major transformation. International agreements and concepts of European security did not prevent war in Europe" (Finnish Government 2022c).

The primary starting point for almost all of the speeches is the fact that the security environment has changed and therefore joining NATO would improve the security and general stability of the nation considering the altered

strategic environment. As Marin put it, joining is necessary as, “the security environment has fundamentally changed” (Finnish Government 2022b, 2). According to Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto, Finland’s accession to NATO would “strengthen the security of the entire Nordic region” (Finnish Government 2022b, 15). It is interesting to note that in contrast, a previous concern had been that joining NATO would likely be seen as a provocation by Russia, moreover that “it would destabilise the security situation in Northern Europe” (Forsberg 2023). One of these arguments can only be fulfilled if the other is completely contradicted. Politicians' perception of the change in the security environment drastically changed. Another meaning was given to the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian conflict than to the 2014 one.

A strong argument and justification for NATO accession is the fact that the EU is not a defence union and does not seek to be one. Marin stated that the vast majority of EU members have organised their defence through NATO. Under NATO's security guarantees, the preventive effect of Finland's defence would be much greater than it is today. As Inka Hopsu from the Green League noted, “The European Union is also a security community, and strengthening its defence capabilities makes sense alongside and in support of NATO” (Finnish Government 2022b, 9). In contrast, President Tarja Halonen (2000-2012) underlined during her presidency that the relationship and cooperation between NATO and the EU is an important issue, but it does not drive Finland to join NATO (Kokko 2007). Perceptions changed also in this respect.

Article 5 guarantees were a driving force when advocating NATO membership. Members emphasised the significance of the collective security offered by Article 5 of the NATO Treaty of 1949. (E.g. Ville Kaunisto from the National Coalition Party Finnish Government, 2022b, p. 144) In light of Article 5, members highlighted the significance of avoiding the risk of becoming isolated again. Many MPs cited the famous words of infantry general Adolf Ehrnroth in the 1939-1940 Winter War: “Never again alone”.

NATO proponents stressed that the membership would seal Finland's belonging to the Western community. As Iro Särkkä notes, NATO is an alliance of liberal market economies and countries that adhere to the principles of the rule of law, a standard that Finland is also committed to (Koivisto 2022). In 2017, the former president of Finland, Martti Ahtisaari, addressed the Finnish Parliament on the topic of NATO membership as a natural sign that Finland belonged to the West (Auvinen 2017). During the NATO debate in May 2022, Minister for European Affairs Tytti Tuppurainen also emphasised the significance of common values between Finland and the alliance, such as democracy (Finnish Government 2022b, 24).

The incredibly quick shift in public opinion provided pro-NATO politicians with an additional convincing justification. Many members of Parliament thank the Finnish government, the Parliament and most importantly, the citizens for this broad consent. (E.g. Mari Holopainen Finnish Government 2022b, 126). Consensus is thus seen as an aim and a standard to be reached. The MPs are in a sense relieved and thankful because the decision was easy due to the consensus between citizens and the MPs (Sanna Marin, Finnish Government 2022b). On the other hand, opposition to the NATO application argued that there should have been a referendum on the matter because a lot of people were still against NATO membership. They also pointed out that the process was rushed and there was not enough time to discuss the consequences of the accession (Pia Lohikoski, Left Alliance (Finnish Government 2022b, 49).

The pro-NATO stance was overwhelmingly in a majority, and the arguments against it mostly vanished (apart from those previously mentioned eight people who voted against the accession). EU membership and the Nordic Defence Cooperation began to seem insufficient for Finland in the changed security environment. As Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto stated, there were very few alternatives to guarantee this security cooperation on the same scale as NATO membership (Finnish Government 2022b, 31).

President Niinistö noted that Putin's demands of December 2021 were also a driving force in deciding on NATO membership. In interviews with CNN (2022) and Fox News (2023) Niinistö mentioned that the moment Putin declared he would demand NATO not to expand further was a "game-changer" for the Finns (Tétrault-Farber and Balmforth 2021). According to President Niinistö, Finland was compelled by Russia to make a decision and opt for NATO (Pullinen 2022). The sovereignty of Finland's foreign policy-making, specifically its decision to remain non-aligned or join a defence alliance, was jeopardised. The NATO option, which had been available for Finland for more than 20 years, suddenly came into question. As Marin noted in the May 2022 NATO discussion, agreeing to Russia's demands would have meant a significant weakening not only of the right to self-determination but also of the security. Russia's demands were in direct conflict with the basic principles of European security on which Finland's foreign and security policy had been based (Finnish Government 2022b, 2). Russia also identified Finland as an unfriendly state because of the participation of Western sanctions (Forsberg 2023). Finland was left with no choice but to implement a NATO option that was part of government programmes from 2011.

It is an interesting aspect how differently politicians anticipate the Finnish-Russian relationship to change when joining NATO. Concerning the fear that the Finno-Russian relationship would be damaged by joining NATO, Riitta Purra (Finns Party) argued that relations would not be changing significantly, as they were already changed in February (Finnish Government 2022b, 5). In contrast, Jussi Saramo (Left Alliance) who opposed NATO accession claimed that it would worsen Finnish-Russian relations, creating tension between the two countries. "NATO membership is not the answer to the war in Ukraine, instead, it is the answer to possible future threats from Russia" (Finnish Government 2022b, 9).

The most important factor for the explanation of not joining NATO earlier was the fear of harming relations and provoking Russia. The wars in 2008 and 2014 were seen as post-soviet conflicts that would not challenge the

status quo in Europe. In 2022 this fear of how Russia would react almost completely disappeared because the Russian aggression was given another meaning. Namely that this was not only a post-Soviet conflict anymore, but Russia was capable of attacking a sovereign country, violating its territorial integrity. Furthermore, Ukraine and Finland share two closely related geographical and historical similarities that have significantly contributed to Finland's empathetic and profound comprehension of Ukraine; both are neighbours of Russia and were in their history part of Russia.

## Conclusion

Finnish foreign policy has been determined by the fact that it shares a 1340 km long border with Russia. This paper has examined the significance of Russia in Finnish foreign policy from 1945 to the present day. Russia's actions have had a significant, even decisive impact on Finland's foreign policy. As the paper demonstrated, the Finnish foreign policy of Cold War neutrality emerged because of Russia, and so did Finland abandon military non-alignment in response to Russia's action, by joining NATO in 2023. It was because of Finland's relationship with Russia which indeed made Finnish Cold War neutrality special. In the first part, the paper provided a brief historical overview of Finnish foreign policy and presented the uniqueness of Finland's Cold War neutrality. Namely, it was not Finland's decision; rather, it was a situation that was imposed upon the country.

In the second section, the paper offered an overview of the Finnish NATO debate from the 1990s to the present day. One of the most remarkable things I have noticed in this debate is, when making foreign and defence policy decisions in Finland, one geopolitical change can be approached from two very different angles. From the various waves of debate on the NATO question in Finland, it appears that change in the geopolitical environment can be given different meanings. (i) The Russians are disturbed and angry, therefore they shouldn't be provoked any further, or the other way around, (ii) it is necessary to take action in response to their current aggression. As seen, the Russo-

Georgian war in 2008 was not interpreted as a significant security threat to Finland, nor was the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in 2014. In 2008 and 2014 NATO membership was considered needless. Russia was not intended to be unnecessarily provoked by Finnish NATO membership, which was not viewed as having a significant purpose.

In 2022, it became widely recognized that Russia could attack an independent state and is capable of launching a full-scale war. It was therefore not seen as a post-soviet conflict anymore. In 2022 a new era of Finnish foreign policy was born. The fear of provoking Russia as an argument against NATO became irrelevant. Based on the 2022 parliamentary debate, it can be concluded that Russia continues to define Finland's foreign policy, but unlike in the past, when fear of provocation dominated. After February 2022, Finland overcame the concern of provocation. It can be argued that Russia's aggressive military actions provoked Finland to consider joining NATO. The direction of provocation switched. Previously, it was believed that Finland's actions could provoke its neighbour, whereas now it was the opposite. As President Niinistö, who has always been very diplomatic and restrained in his replies, stated about possible Russian responses: "Look in the mirror. You have caused this." (Pullinen 2022).

An interesting element also showed the importance of NATO membership for Finland. In its foreign policy, Finland has often kept an eye on the decisions of its neighbour, Sweden. Sweden's decision to join the EU also contributed to Finland's desire to become a member. The opposite happened in the NATO debate. The start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 did not trigger a broader Swedish desire to join NATO. Finland's decision to join contributed to the Swedish debate on possible membership.<sup>16</sup> For further analysis, NATO discussions in Sweden and Finland could be compared.

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<sup>16</sup> A detailed description of the application process in Sweden: Lundqvist S. (2022). A Convincing Finnish Move: Implications for State Identity of Persuading Sweden to Jointly Bid for NATO Membership. *Studia Europejskie – Studies in European Affairs*.

Some decision-makers pointed out that there had been little discussion of the accession's consequences and effects. No detailed information was provided regarding the modifications to security policy resulting from NATO membership. This allowed and allows for speculation about the future.

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