



President Biden signing the Instruments of Ratification to approve Finland and Sweden's membership in NATO (August 9, 2022).
Image source: [White House](#) / [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The Finland Factor in an Expanded NATO Alliance

By Olli-Matti Mikkola

When, as it now seems inevitable, the NATO alliance expands to include Finland and Sweden, NATO's border with Russia will double. This enlargement certainly has implications on both sides of the line. Finland's location as an immediate neighbor of Russia is of strategic importance, and its position in the Arctic would give the alliance tremendous assets in terms of countering any illegitimate Russian designs on the region. Finland also has a strong tradition of military service and preparedness that will serve NATO well. Yet as Russia's confrontation with the West continues, Finland's greatest contribution to the alliance may not be geographical or martial. Its main contribution will lay in its capacity for understanding and eventually engaging Russia.

Throughout its history, Finland has learned the importance of preparing for Russian aggression – and how to fight it successfully. Finland was a part of the Russian Empire for over 100 years in the 19th century until gaining independence in 1917, during which it succeeded in maintaining its own identity and culture in the face of oppression. Perhaps the best example is how it repelled Soviet Russia's invasion at the outset of WWII.

This history has prepared Finland and its citizens and has helped develop among the best connections and familiarity with Russian society of any foreign state. An example of this is the imperial legal deposit collection, housed in Helsinki. As an administrative

center within the Russian Empire, the University of Helsinki, or the Imperial Alexander University in Finland as it was called, received copies of all published material produced within the borders of the Russian Empire, and today remains a vital resource for researchers from around the world.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Finland maintained its policy of general conscription and substantial defense forces, unlike many other European states. That decision was based on Finland's memory and its analysis that Russia constitutes a permanent threat to territorial integrity. However, Finland never declared that assessment very loudly and maintained a calm calculation of its force posture within its borders.

Throughout the post-Cold War period, Finland's evaluation of Russian interests and goals heavily influenced its decision-making. Finnish society, by necessity, has always examined Russia and Russians from an immediate distance, not from hundreds or thousands of miles away. Everyday life, tourism, commerce, and various cross-border programs provided Finns with practical experience in dealing with the Russian state and with Russian society and culture. Even as positive contacts flourished and expanded, however, the historical memory of Russian treatment of Finland never faded.

Any neighbor of Russia develops a robust intellectual understanding of the country. For Finland, proximity and trade ensured a higher baseline of knowledge than many other countries. Many Finns are familiar with Russia, and with how Russians think, through close commercial and societal ties during the post-WWII era. Finnish companies and government administration needed and developed solid Russian language skills to advance profitable "clearing trade" relations with

the Soviet Union. For this reason, Finnish universities established vital Russian Studies programs.

Unfortunately, interest in studying Russian language and society has steadily declined over the recent decades (like in many other countries). But even today, Finnish universities have many experienced Russia scholars, many with personal experience and connections in Russia. International conferences on Russia are regularly organized at Finnish universities and research institutions. For instance, Finland's National Defense University (NDU) organizes prominent annual seminars on Russian military policy issues, and the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) is in Helsinki. This infrastructure has long benefitted international partners and will soon be a core asset within the NATO alliance.

Prior to February 2022, Finland traditionally based its foreign policy and diplomacy on practical problem-solving with its Russian counterparts. Instead of pointing out faults and blame, Finns usually tried to solve disagreements through pragmatism. The Finnish tradition of "sauna diplomacy," where politicians, diplomats, and experts gather in a sauna to speak frankly and off the record, has proven effective in politics and business during the past decades.

It is difficult to overstate the change in Finnish attitude towards Russia following its invasion of Ukraine. It was a true wake-up call, announcing that radical changes in Finland's policy towards Vladimir Putin's Russia were needed.

Finlandization, the Cold War era term describing how the Soviet Union intimidated Helsinki against opposing Moscow, existed on a mental as well as political level in Finland. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, that

mentality transferred to the Russian Federation. Rather than any concrete doctrine, it resulted in a naïve approach in Finland's evaluation of Russian aims. It was not unusual for Finnish policymakers to base their decisions in part on Moscow's attitudes, and to make it a priority not to irritate Russia. In other words, Soviet and Russian influence operations had achieved some of their greatest success in Finland.

After the Russian military crossed into Ukraine last February, a huge wave of hidden attitudes suddenly emerged among Finnish citizens. Almost overnight, a majority reversed course and favored joining NATO, with polls showing 60 percent in favor, up from 25 percent previously. The relatively young politicians in top political positions confirm this new attitude. The parliament voted 188 to 8 to apply for NATO membership. Almost no member of parliament expressed concern about Russia's attitude to the matter, which would have been unthinkable prior to its invasion of Ukraine.

The same shift in attitude is clear from Finland's attitude towards Ukraine. Before the war, its military support for Ukraine was minimal, as Russia's reaction was taken into account. Today, Finland is delivering weapons and other matériel to Ukraine with little internal opposition.

In short, sauna diplomacy with Putin's Russia is over. There is no prospect for normal interaction with Russia in its present state. Finlandization is a casualty of Russia's war. Another casualty, however, is the prospect of gaining direct information from inside Russia. The ties related to cultural and civil society co-operation are severed, businesses have withdrawn, and student exchange programs are halted. Over time, this will certainly have an effect on the entire Western understanding of the Russian way of thinking.

In this situation, informal and unaffected networks will be more valuable than before. Since many observers were willing to believe in the possibility of Russia's invasion of Ukraine only at the last moment, despite frequent warnings in real time during the months leading up to it from the U.S., improving the foresight capabilities and expertise regarding Russia, and spreading that capacity, should be a key goal now and in the future. Policymakers, leaders, and analysts without a background in Russian studies need to have a better understanding of Russia and its history, language, and culture. Finland will play a large role in contributing to the NATO alliance and the wider world, both in analysis and in resources for deep academic research on the historical and cultural context of Russian actions.

This expertise will be needed with post-war Russia. Before that, Ukraine needs all possible support in its fight for independence. It is a matter of life and death for them, and beyond Ukraine's borders as well. After the war, Ukraine and other European states must forge a peaceful and better future with Russia. That future must be based on a realistic view of the nature of the Russian state and its strategic aims. Finnish intellectual assets and its experience of casting off the mentality of Finlandization will prove key to creating and managing that better future.

The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the author.







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