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## Russia's Weaponized Migration: Analysing its Impact on Finnish-Russian Border Security

### Original article

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### Abstract

**Objectives:** This study aims to understand the frameworks of Russia's hybrid maneuvers, specifically the strategic use of migration, on Finland's security, as well as that of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The focus is on examining how migration is used by Russia as a geopolitical tool to influence the security landscape of these regions.

**Methods:** Employing a case study methodology, the analysis draws upon a diverse range of data sources and scholarly literature. It scrutinises Russia's tactical approaches towards Finland and other countries situated on NATO's eastern flank, shedding light on the broader implications for regional stability and security.

**Results:** The findings underscore Russia's deployment of migration as a geopolitical lever, exerting significant pressure on national security frameworks. In response, Finland has strengthened its defence mechanisms and sought to improve international cooperation to effectively counteract these challenges.

**Conclusions:** After joining NATO, Finland plays a key role in ensuring the security of the northern flank. Due to its location, this country is compelled to respond in real time to all possible threats that come with the direct proximity of the Russian Federation. Consequently, Finland is, in a sense, a frontline state and other countries should draw from its experience.

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## **Introduction**

The instrumentalization of migration is and will be in the coming years one of the most important types of hybrid actions used by Russia against the countries of NATO's eastern flank. At the same time, Russia recognises that one of the most effective tools to influence the political discourse in NATO and the EU is to maintain a crisis situation on the border using migrants (Dyner, 2024). Russia seems to pay special attention to Finland, which since the end of World War II was treated by the Soviet Union (USSR), and later Russia, as a natural sphere of influence (Kaczmarek, 2020, p. 45-46). Although Finland integrated with Western structures after the collapse of the USSR, it still pursued its foreign and security policy of balance between Russia and the West. The Finnish perception of security changed only when Russia attacked Ukraine on a full scale. Having already been prepared, Finland began the process of accession to NATO, and on April 4, 2023, it became a full member of the Alliance. Thus, Russia's direct border with NATO has been extended by more than 1,300 km. In the context of Russia's hybrid activities, it is important that this border runs largely through sparsely populated Arctic areas. Natural conditions make controlling this border a particular challenge for Finland, the European Union, and NATO.

It is hypothesized that Finland's accession to NATO not only elevates its strategic importance in protecting the Alliance's northern flank but also incites an escalation in Russia's deployment of hybrid strategies, such as the manipulation of migration, as a geopolitical pressure tool. This change in the security environment forces Finland and its NATO allies to seek innovative and strengthened collaborative defence strategies, particularly aimed at preparing for potential attempts at regional destabilisation.

The importance of this hypothesis is underscored by several key factors. First, it sheds light on Finland's enhanced role within NATO and the strategic consequences of its geographic positioning relative to Russia, which is pivotal for devising effective defences against hybrid threats. Second, it highlights the imperative for adaptability and innovation in NATO member defence strategies of NATO members, crucial to sustaining transatlantic security and stability amidst changing threat landscapes. Lastly, this investigation could provide critical insights for NATO countries that are confronting similar hybrid tactics, promoting a more unified and robust defensive stance across the Alliance.

### **1. Hybrid strategies on the Finnish-Russian border: instrumentalization of migration in the context of the intensifying conflict with the West**

Meanwhile, Russia is directing migrants to the border with Finland as part of a hybrid operation based on a deep conflict with the West. Currently, ensuring control over the border is based on unilateral actions by Finland. Russia has launched a hybrid operation against Finland based on the use of migration as a tool. This is part of a broader campaign in which Russia redirects migrants to the borders of countries it considers hostile. Immediately before the situation on the Finnish border escalated, Russia carried out similar operations through Belarus toward Latvia. Migrants from Russia were also allowed to the border with Estonia. Russia previously used migration as a foreign policy tool in northern Europe in 2015-2016,

when it sent approximately 7,200 people to the northern border crossings of Norway and Finland. This time, the political context of Russia's actions is different: a deep conflict with Western countries, the current stage of which began with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 ( Lavikainen , 2023).

Russia's actions are enabled by the country's command structure, designed to transmit the president's orders to the executive level. At the heart of the system is not formal bureaucratic power, but the haphazard circumvention of it. The Russian Border Guard is an integral part of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB). The commanding officer of the Border Guard is also the deputy head of the FSB. In the chain of command between him and Russian President Vladimir Putin, Putin is only the head of the FSB. The Border Guard is a disciplined organisation with strict command relationships, where orders are carried out strictly and methods of operation are not changed without a higher order from the hierarchy (Lavikainen, 2023).

In 2015–2016, Russia's hybrid operation was a pilot project that tested the use of migrants and the responses of Finland, Norway and the European Union. The background was the war in Ukraine, which began in 2014 after Russia's annexation of Crimea. Then Norway and Finland, along with other European countries, imposed sanctions on Russia and limited cooperation. Despite the sanctions, Russia's relations with Finland and Norway were functional at that time. Russia may have had a realistic goal of scaring Finland and Norway to restore bilateral relations. Russia managed to conclude a bilateral border agreement with Finland instead of the European Union resolving the matter (Lavikainen, 2023).

Currently, the situation is different due to Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, which led to a long and open conflict with Western countries. Finland is also described by Russia as an unfriendly country. This makes Russia's motives fundamentally different than they were eight years ago. Bilateral negotiations, ending support for Ukraine, or promoting joint commercial ventures are not realistic goals for Russia in the current environment. Furthermore, Russia's actions are based not only on the 2015-2016 operation, but also on the activities of the Belarusian security services, which have been organising the transport of migrants to the eastern border with Belarus since 2021 (Lavikainen, 2023).

Russia launched a hybrid operation in preparation for the invasion of Ukraine and played the role of a transit country. Currently, Finland is in a similar position to Poland and the Baltic states, which have been treated hostilely by Russia for years. Russia therefore has less reason to end its actions than in 2016, although it can always divert migrants to other countries, such as Norway (Lavikainen, 2023).

Previous operations show that Russia is able to send thousands of people to the borders of Finland or Norway during winter. Russian diplomatic missions can issue visas to those interested, and foreigners staying in the country can receive deportation decisions, as was the case in 2015–2016. Russia then suggested to Finland that there were millions of people in the country that it could send to the border. However, it is not realistic for her to be able to do this. The larger the group of people, the more logistics and infrastructure the Russian authorities need to control migration movements. Instrumentalized migration carries risk - if

crossing the border is impossible, migrants remain on the Russian side. Once the border is open, activities can continue in a controlled manner (Lavikainen, 2023).

One of the elements of strengthening the protection of Finland's eastern border is the construction of a barrier fence on some of its sections. According to the Finnish Border Guard (Finnish: Rajavartiolaitos ), this fence is intended to provide significant support in the management of incidents at the border, and a physical barrier is practically necessary in the case of large-scale instrumentalised or illegal immigration. According to the master plan, the fence will be built over a distance of approximately 200 km by 2026. The main part of the fence will be located on the southern border (Rajavartiolaitos).

However, the instrumentalisation of migration is one of the elements of Russia's hybrid activities. Finnish experts note that because Russia often surprises with its actions, one should be prepared for any, even unlikely, events. These experts emphasize that the common feature of many hybrid operations is that they take place within the framework of the law in force in the attacked country. And if not, even if illegal actions are attributed to Russia, it does not change anything in the context of Russia-West relations (Kuusijoensuu, 2023). In the past, like other EU and NATO countries bordering Russia or Belarus, Finland has experienced an organized influx of migrants, which was seen as an attempt to exert political pressure. The construction of this fence is also a signal of a new era in relations with Russia, regardless of the future development of the situation in Ukraine (Schultz, 2023).

## **2. Strengthening the border as Finland's response to hybrid and migration threats from Russia**

The Finnish authorities assess that Russia's actions, instrumentalisation of migration, and attempts to put pressure on Finland pose a serious threat to Finland's national security. The observations of border services and other authorities and the information received clearly show that the authorities of a foreign country or other entities play a role in facilitating the arrival of people who want to cross the border with Finland. This phenomenon and the threat of its expansion pose a serious threat to state security and public order. At the same time, according to the findings of the Finnish services, as migration increases, the risk of criminals, radicalised people, and other people threatening the internal security of the country increases. At the same time, members of criminal organisations and soldiers who pose as civilians may be among those entering Finland. The large number of applicants also allows for the deliberate sending to Finland of various people or soldiers who threaten national security (Hassinen, 2023).

It cannot also be ruled out that among the immigrants who came to Finland across the border with Russia there are collaborators of the Russian services whose task is subversion and causing crises in order to weaken resistance to Russia's imperial policy. Therefore, at the end of November 2023, Finland decided to completely close the border with Russia, initially for a period of two weeks (PAP, 2023). However, since then, due to the situation, the border closure has been extended. At the same time, supported by the European Border And Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX), the Finnish authorities have started to strengthen border protection in sections away from border crossings. It should also be emphasised that Finland's eastern border is also the border between NATO and Russia. Therefore, the infiltration of

potential Russian service collaborators into Finland may pose a threat to the security of the NATO infrastructure in this country.

In the face of these challenges, the Finnish authorities have intensified international cooperation, especially with the member states of the European Union and NATO, to increase the effectiveness of actions counteracting threats. Additional measures have been introduced to monitor and analyse migration traffic, which are aimed not only at identifying and preventing potential attempts to illegally cross the borders, but also at detecting and neutralising sabotage activities. In addition, Finland is actively working to develop technologies and methodologies to strengthen border security, including through the use of advanced surveillance and control systems. Priorities also include strengthening cooperation with local communities of inhabitants of border areas, which is crucial for effective monitoring and response to any disturbing phenomena. In this way, Finland aims to build a comprehensive defence strategy aimed not only at protecting state borders, but also at securing society against potential external threats, while remaining ready to respond to various crisis scenarios.

### **3. Potential threats to Finland's security in the face of Russian sabotage and espionage in the context of NATO**

The activities of Russian agents in Finland, taking into account its membership in NATO, may take the form of complex operations aimed at destabilizing the state and undermining its security and stability. However, from the point of view of Russia's interests, the most important thing is that its agents staying on the territories of hostile countries remain undetected for as long as possible. Another group is potential saboteurs.

One of the scenarios is the sabotage of key infrastructure, including energy networks, communication systems, and logistics points, which could significantly disrupt the functioning of the state and cause economic chaos. Saboteurs could also launch cyberattacks on important government and financial systems, seeking to disrupt public services, steal data, and spread disinformation. As a provocative act, they could exploit existing social or ethnic tensions by organising or fomenting protests and riots or even carrying out provocative attacks to sow discord and distrust among residents. Infiltration and espionage also come into play, with saboteurs sent to infiltrate state and military structures to gather intelligence to serve Russia. Disrupting communications and conducting disinformation campaigns are intended to hamper coordination between security and rescue forces and mislead public opinion, undermining trust in state institutions. As a NATO member, Finland can also become a target of attacks on military personnel and allied facilities.

At the same time, Finland, on its territory, has a network of fortifications hidden underground and in rocks. Information about them is not public and is protected against access by unauthorized persons. The only thing that is known is that they are not concentrated in specific places, and their location, according to Finnish experts, is crucial for conducting military operations in the event of an armed attack on Finland. According to the same experts, building any chains of fortifications and concentration of troops is unjustified on today's battlefield (Schönberg, 2024). In this context, protecting Finland's eastern border, even against single illegal crossings, is important for the security of the entire country and the

entire NATO. It should be taken into account that information obtained, even by individual people, about the location of hidden fortifications may be used by Russia in the event of a potential conflict with the North Atlantic Alliance.

#### **4. Finland's accession to NATO: defence, geostrategic, and cybersecurity implications for the Baltic Sea region**

Finland contributed significant defense capabilities to NATO, including one of the largest artillery forces in Western Europe and an extensive civil defense system based on a nationwide security strategy. With reservist resources reaching 900,000 people and high readiness in times of war, Finland offers a model of preparation that can be a model for other NATO member states. Additionally, Finland, as a technologically advanced country, brings significant capabilities in the field of 5G telecommunications and cybersecurity, which further strengthens the technological aspects of NATO defense (Forsberg, Kähkönen, Moyer, 2022). Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO also has geostrategic implications for security in the Baltic Sea region, increasing the length of NATO's border with Russia and doubling the number of military forces in the region. This, in turn, requires Russia to disperse its military resources and potentially limits its ability to concentrate forces along its current borders with NATO. Finland and Sweden bring new, strategically important areas to the Alliance that can serve as support points for defense and training operations (Forsberg, Kähkönen, Öberg, 2022).

The two countries' accession to NATO is seen as one of the biggest strategic shifts in the alliance's history, increasing overall defense spending in Europe and potentially changing the military balance on the continent in NATO's favor. Increased defence spending in Europe, including significant commitments by Finland and Sweden to increase security in the Baltic Sea region, responds to Russia's aggression and seeks to increase the ability to deter and defend against potential threats (Hickman, 2022).

A comparative analysis of the situation on the Finland-Russia border with other NATO and EU external borders indicates unique challenges and adaptation strategies. Finland, as a new NATO member, significantly increases the length of NATO's borders with Russia by 1,300 kilometres, almost doubling their total length to approximately 2,600 kilometres. The country is characterised by strong armed forces, with 24,000 active soldiers and 900,000 trained reservists, which, with a population of approximately 5.5 million people, constitutes a significant defence force. NATO emphasizes that Finland strengthens the alliance not only through its defense obligations, but also through its membership in NATO's defense structure. Meanwhile, Russia announces an increase in its military presence in the northwest in response to Finland's NATO membership (Riegert, 2023).

At the same time, there is an increase in cyberattacks carried out by Russia or its sympathizers against Finland. These are usually DDoS attacks. Financial, logistic, transport and central government entities are most often attacked. However, operators from the municipal and educational sectors are also targeted (Järveläinen, 2024).

## Conclusions

Finland, having strengthened its ties with NATO, is now a key element in the defence of the Alliance's northern flank, responding to growing threats from Russia. This decision, which was a direct response to Russia's imperial policy and aggressive actions, forced Finland to take measures to increase national and regional security. Finland's strengthening of defense is manifested not only through its accession to NATO, but also through the construction of a fence along part of the border with Russia, which is a physical and symbolic act that protects the country against unauthorized border crossings.

Russia's hybrid activities, such as information and cyber operations and the instrumentalization of migration crises, are examples of methods used to destabilize and influence the domestic policies of neighboring countries. Finland, aware of these threats, responded by expanding its defence capabilities and increasing its readiness for various types of attacks, showing that it is ready to face the challenges of the 21st century. This new security dynamic has far-reaching implications for all of Europe, especially for NATO countries that now see Finland as a strategic partner in defending against Russian expansion. Finland's accession to NATO not only increases the security of Finland itself, but also strengthens the northern flank of the Alliance, creating an additional barrier against potential Russian aggression.

Increasing support for NATO in Finland, as well as among its citizens, reflects changing threat perceptions and the need for stronger security. Russian actions towards Ukraine, as well as towards other countries, have made Finland rethink its role in the structure of European and transatlantic security. As a country bordering Russia, Finland is now in the vanguard of defense against Russia's expansionist ambitions, underscoring its importance as a strategic partner in the region. Finland's response to growing threats, including its decision to join NATO, is a clear signal that the country is determined to defend its sovereignty and security. By strengthening its defense and rapprochement with NATO, Finland not only protects itself, but also contributes to increased stability and security throughout Europe.

However, due to its geographical location, natural conditions and length, protecting the Finnish-Russian border is a particular challenge not only for Finland, but also for the entire NATO. It seems that in the current situation, when Russia is waging war against Ukraine, an attack on any of the Alliance countries seems unlikely. However, it is not impossible. It should be taken into account that Russia operates in a social, political and military culture different from that of Western countries. This means that defence strategies must be adapted to the specific methods and tactics that Russia employs in the event of aggression. Moreover, we should remember the growing geopolitical tensions in the international arena, which may influence Russia's possible political and military decisions in the future. Therefore, maintaining a high level of defense preparation on the Finnish-Russian border remains a priority to ensure security not only for Finland, but also for the entire Baltic region.

At the same time, the accession of Finland to the Alliance is also changing the security environment in the Arctic, to which Russia is trying to subjugate as many areas as possible, especially in the context of the mineral deposits and hydrocarbons found there. The subject of further research may be to supplement the analyses conducted in this article with the context

of Finland's membership in NATO and changes in the military security environment in the Arctic in the context of climate warming.

Upon analyzing the provided data and observations, the article presents substantial evidence supporting the hypothesis that Finland's accession to NATO significantly impacts the security dynamics of the Alliance's northern flank and the responses to Russian hybrid strategies, including the utilization of migration as a geopolitical influence tool. By thoroughly examining Russia's actions, which exploit migration as a form of pressure, and the reactions of Finland and NATO to these challenges, the article demonstrates how Finland, by strengthening its ties with NATO, becomes a key component in the Alliance's defense system against threats from the East.

As a new member of NATO, Finland has assumed not only the role of guardian of the northern flank, but also that of an innovator in defence, adapting to complex hybrid challenges, and enhancing international cooperation. The construction of a border barrier, the development of technology, and intensified cooperation with other NATO member states are examples of actions that meet the need for innovative and strengthened defense strategies posited in the hypothesis.

In the context of Russian hybrid actions, including the instrumentalization of migration, Finland and NATO have shown increased readiness to counter attempts at destabilization. The actions described in the article confirm that Finland is prepared for a variety of scenarios, underscoring its significance as a strategic partner in defense against Russian expansion.

In conclusion, the article provides important indications that Finland's accession to NATO contributes to changes in the defense strategies of both Finland and the entire Alliance in response to Russian hybrid threats.

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