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Russian Reactions to NATO's "Nordic Expansion"

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We welcome Finland as the newest member of our Alliance. This is an historic step for Finland and for NATO. For many years, we worked closely as partners; we now stand together as Allies. NATO membership makes Finland safer, and NATO stronger.

We reaffirm our commitment to NATO's Open Door policy and to Article 10 of the Washington Treaty. Every nation has the right to choose its own security arrangements. We look forward to welcoming Sweden as a full member of the Alliance and, in this regard, welcome the agreement reached between the NATO Secretary General, the President of Türkiye, and the Prime Minister of Sweden.

Peace in the Euro-Atlantic area has been shattered. The Russian Federation has violated the norms and principles that contributed to a stable and predictable European security order. The Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area.

NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué, 11 July 2023¹

Following Russia's unprovoked, full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, popular support for NATO membership surged in Sweden and Finland. Although both countries had tightened their working relationship with NATO in previous years, they maintained official policies of non-alignment. This changed when Stockholm and Helsinki submitted formal applications to join the North Atlantic alliance on 18 May 2022, with NATO heads of state inviting them to do so at the Madrid Summit on 29 June. Finland deposited its instrument of accession on 4 April 2023 after the last two Allies (Hungary and Türkiye) ratified the protocols in late March.² Sweden also is set to join after Türkiye's president withdrew his country's objections at the July 2023 Vilnius summit.³ This means two strong Nordic military powers entering the Alliance, while simultaneously undermining Russian President Vladimir Putin's messaging to his country's citizens that his war against Ukraine will strengthen Russia's security.

In the years leading up to the two Nordic state's membership bids, Russian messaging focused on the dangers to Finland and Sweden that NATO membership would pose. Consistent implications that membership represented a red line for Russia were married with veiled threats of either hybrid or conventional military repercussions. In May 2022, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov declared that Finnish accession to NATO would be a threat to Russia and, that same month, the Russian foreign ministry asserted somewhat ominously that Russia would have to take unspecified "military-technical" measures in response. When asked what these might include, Deputy Director of the Foreign Ministry Information and Press Department Alexey Zaitsev replied menacingly: "it will be a surprise." Only a month earlier, the deputy chair of the Russian National Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, had also issued an implicit nuclear threat, warning that Russia would consider new deployments of nuclear weapons and hypersonic missiles to its Kaliningrad exclave.

Despite this rhetoric, the application itself, however, met with a surprisingly weak Russian reaction as Moscow sought to downplay the NATO expansion, rather than escalate the situation. By 16 May 2022, it was clear that expansion was inevitable. With no realistic option to change this outcome, Putin dropped the menacing tone, insisting that Russia had "no problems" with Sweden and Finland and that, "in this sense," NATO expansion to include these countries "does not pose an immediate threat to Russia." Instead, Russia's concern related to what "military infrastructure" the alliance deployed into the Nordic region.⁴ Senior Russian officials soon adopted similar messaging,⁵ seeking to downplay the significance of two countries historically committed to non-aligned policies deciding to join NATO as a direct result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

This is, however, only one side of the narrative. The Russian foreign and defence establishment continues to frame the Nordic countries' decision as a threat to regional security. In July 2022, Deputy Director of the Foreign Ministry Information and Press Department Alexey Zaitsev declared the move "a step towards a political and military escalation in Europe. Helsinki and Stockholm should understand that their joining the North Atlantic bloc will aggravate the situation in the Baltic region and the Arctic, which after a new wave of NATO expansion, could transform militarily calm regions of Europe into a zone of a dangerous confrontation."⁶ Accordingly, Moscow has indicated that it intends to enhance its military posture in the Baltic and Arctic regions to counter what it depicts as NATO aggression.

This NAADSN Policy Primer provides an analytical overview of Russian responses to Finland's and Sweden's applications to join NATO, drawing upon Russian official statements, news media coverage, and intellectual and think tank commentators. We do not adopt a common framework for both sections, given the more modest Russian response to Sweden's application for NATO membership than to Finland's. Instead, we have taken a differed approach to describing Russia's reaction and respective information campaigns, although some of the narratives promoted by the Russian side relate to both countries. Furthermore, we have included a separate section on major themes from academic and think tank coverage which aim to unravel the complexity and multifaceted approach adopted in Russian propaganda.

Finland's path to NATO membership and Russia's reaction: key ideas and narratives

Historically, Finland has been cautious about being perceived as too close to NATO for fear of provoking a hostile Russian response. Periodic Finnish security reviews argued that the country should keep the “NATO option” open, although joining the alliance never enjoyed strong popular support until early 2022.⁷ For example, polls from 2019 suggested that 51% of Finns opposed membership at that time, with only 26% indicating support (and the remainder undecided).⁸

Following Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Finnish popular and political sentiment turned decisively against Russia and in favour of the Western alliance. A November 2022 national survey showed that negative feelings towards Russia had increased by up to 40% since 2020, with a broad political consensus favouring NATO membership: 89% of the Social Democrats, 87% of Center Party members, 68% of True Finns, and 51% of the traditionally socialist and anti-NATO Left Alliance.⁹ On 1 March 2023, Finnish parliament passed its NATO bill by a margin of 184-7 (with one abstention).¹⁰ Accordingly, the Government of Finland has adopted more equivocal messaging that describes Russia not as a friendly neighbour but as a potential threat. “Under the prevailing circumstances, there is not much left of our earlier relationship with Russia,” Finnish President Sauli Niinistö stated in August 2022. “The trust is gone, and there is nothing in sight on which to base a new beginning. This is not the right time to build connections. On the contrary: we must very carefully reconsider any dependencies that could be used against us.”¹¹

Finland's successful application for NATO membership has produced a much more visible impact on the Russian side compared to Sweden's (prospective) accession. This difference in perception of Swedish and Finnish membership in NATO is based on several different factors, including geographical, historical-cultural, and economic aspects. This section discusses how influential groups within the Russian state structure construe Finland's accession to NATO, which threats Russia is likely to face, and how Russia should respond to this new geopolitical reality.

The government: Russia's political elite responses

Russia's political architecture is complex and often opaque. It is a combination of a highly personified authoritarian style of governance and Moscow-centric structure with most Russian regions bereft of political or economic autonomy.¹² This framework is crucial to understanding the reaction of the Russian government (with particular emphasis on executive and legislative branches) to Finland's accession to NATO.

It appears that the decision of Finland to join NATO – even more so, the speed with which the whole procedure went (the fastest in history of the organization) – came as a total surprise to Russia's political leadership. Based on open-source documents, the Kremlin has not demonstrated the ability to formulate an effective response. Russian political leadership has been relying on intimidation since at least 2014 (when Putin stated that he was prepared to use nuclear weapons if the red line was crossed). Intimidation, however, leaves little room for manoeuvre once a bluff is called. Following the decision to join NATO, Russia has had to improvise.

One response has been an increased reliance on economic factors. The most notable statement on the subject came from Konstantin Kosachev, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Russian Federation Council, who hinted that Helsinki's decision could have negative consequences for cross-border trade and contacts between the

two countries. Specifically, he noted that “the regime of border functioning [between Finland and Russia] could be subject to changes” leading to “some sort of a zone of alienation ... which will lead to locals [living on both sides of the border] to suffer the consequences.” Kosachev also claimed that some Finnish border regions dependent on trade with Russia will be hit particularly hard. Kosachev also stated that Finland might lose an access to Saimaa Canal (located on the Russian territory) which he describes as strategically important for the Finnish economy, as well as navigation through the Baltic Sea.¹³

Given Russia’s lack of strategy and clear inability to convincingly threaten or intimidate Finland, Russian officials also chose to belittle Finland’s new status as a NATO member. For instance, Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov argued that the new wave of “NATO expansion”¹⁴ should be viewed as a “yet another attempt to encroach on Russia’s security and national interests,”¹⁵ but he emphasized that Russia is neither planning to answer this challenge symmetrically nor immediately. Instead, he argued, Moscow will “carefully study and observe what will be happening in Finland following its accession to NATO” in terms of deployment of military infrastructure, weapons, and the extent to which these processes will threaten Russian national interests.¹⁶

This focus on deployments over membership represented a significant shift in Russian messaging and was essentially a face-saving move forced upon Moscow by its weak hand. Russia’s war in Ukraine has limited its ability to militarily intimidate the Scandinavians. The step-down in the rhetoric likely sought to play down this geopolitical defeat while avoiding the further embarrassment that would have come from military and rhetorical escalation that seemed certain to fail. Instead, the Russian redline was moved from NATO membership to deployments.

Following Putin’s lead, other Russian officials echoed this line. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov noted that it probably makes “not much difference” as the two countries had long participated in the alliance’s military drills anyway. Lavrov highlighted instead the importance of seeing “how their territory is used in practice in the North Atlantic alliance.”¹⁷

Russia has also sought to cover its strategic impotence by belittling the impact of the Nordic NATO enlargement. Putin rationalized his position by saying that, “unlike with Kyiv, we [Russia] have no problems with Helsinki and Stockholm. We do not have any territorial issues¹⁸ with them. If they wish so, they can go ahead” and join the alliance. Putin also argued that NATO “started turning Ukraine into anti-Russia in order to affect Russia,” while in Finland and Sweden “nothing like this exists.”¹⁹ As such, a Nordic expansion was no big deal.

The attempt to belittle NATO’s northern enlargement and Putin’s conspicuous indifference seem rather perplexing given its messaging track record. For decades Moscow has been forging a strategic narrative about the existential threat that NATO “expansion” poses to Russia. In effect, Moscow has justified Russia’s unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine (its so-called “Special Military Operation”) as a response to NATO’s enlargement. After all, following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov released a video statement demanding that NATO dismantle its military infrastructure in countries that joined the organization after 1997.²⁰ As such, the nonchalant approach adopted by Moscow to the Nordics seems somewhat thin. Russia’s decision to feign apathy, however, indicates how weak it has become and how few military, economic, or grey-zone options it has at its disposal to defend this historic red line.

A third narrative presents Finland’s (and to some extent Swedish) decision to join NATO as the byproduct of a lack of strategic foresight, as well as severe pressure imposed from outside forces (namely the United States).

Simply put: the Nordics are foolish and used as pawns of the United States and NATO. Konstantin Kosachev articulated this thesis in an interview with *Parlamentskaya Gazeta* in which he made four key points:²¹

1. Finland's decision to join NATO is a "historic mistake" which had little to do with either Russia's "Special Operation" or changed security environment but should be primarily attributed to the image of Russia and its actions in Ukraine presented in Western media and information outlets. He argued that Russia has never threatened any of the Nordic countries. By joining NATO, they achieve no security objectives, and instead put themselves at risk of retaliation in case of hostilities.
2. The decision to join NATO will lead to Finland (and probably Sweden) losing its sovereignty in strategic issues related to defense and national security. Furthermore, Finland's diplomatic power, which it has wielded as an impartial broker and moderator flowing from its neutrality, with economic and political benefits – has been greatly reduced.
3. Most likely, Finland's accession to NATO will result in greater militarization (and thus destabilization) of both the Arctic and the Baltic regions – two areas that, Kosachev argued, enjoyed stability.²² He insisted that this did not have to happen, because "events²³ occurring in the south and are not connected to the situation in the Baltic region and the Arctic."
4. The procedural aspect of Helsinki's and Stockholm's decision to join NATO is an example of "Western hypocrisy." Specifically, Kosachev asserted that when politically charged issues promoted by the West's ruling elite (such as gender-related matters) are at stake, Western governments initiate referenda and encourage other forms of popular consultation. When it came to joining NATO, however, Western governments – exemplified by Finland and Sweden – refrained from debates and discussions on the matter because they "require disclosing classified information" and could lead to "polarization inside the society."

Sergey Boyarsky, the head of the United Russia branch in St. Petersburg, adopted similar lines when expressing regret about Helsinki's decision to join NATO. He stated that Russia and Finland shared "long-term friendly ties, which have been jeopardized by hysterical Russophobia that had started across the ocean [North America] and has now spread to Europe."²⁴

The open-source evidence suggests that Russia's political elite remains perplexed and even taken aback by Helsinki's expeditious accession to NATO. Moscow has no strategy to counter this move and, given its military problems in Ukraine and international isolation, is not able to make any punitive strikes against Finland.

The MFA: Russian diplomatic responses

Under Sergey Lavrov since 2004, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has become increasingly subordinated to the will of Vladimir Putin, with representatives often behaving more like aggressive and hateful propagandists than professional diplomats. Nevertheless, the official position of the MFA (and its individual representatives) on matters related to Finland's NATO membership remain important. The organization echoes many other Russian state narratives.

In line with earlier statement of the MFA, Lavrov accused NATO of enticing Finland to join the organization.²⁵ In another statement (like Putin's), the foreign minister stated that formal accession to NATO was largely a symbolic gesture, claiming that "Finland, Sweden and many other neutral countries have for years participated in

NATO military exercises, their territories are included in NATO's plans in terms of eastward expansion. That is why, in this sense, perhaps, there is not much of a difference."²⁶ Maria Zakharova, the MFA's Information and Press Department Director, shared Lavrov's ideas that Finland's accession to NATO is merely part of a larger trend²⁷ in which the European Union is losing its sovereignty in foreign policy decision making and transforming into a tool of US and NATO policymaking.²⁸

In a related statement, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Alexander Grushko also criticized the Finnish government for expediting its application for NATO membership without consulting with the Finnish people, arguing that such a step, which is likely to heighten security concerns and endanger strategic stability in the Baltic and the Arctic regions,²⁹ should be discussed and approved by the majority of population in a referendum or other public discussion.³⁰ In a separate statement, Grushko argued that "Russia has tried to normalize situation in the Baltic Sea region – where joint measures in the realm of environment protection and building transportation capacities are required – but NATO did not consider a single proposal [put forth by Russia]."³¹

Overall, opinions expressed by the Russian MFA and its individual representatives do not add notable new or original lines to the Kremlin's position, apart from claiming Russia's positive role in promoting peace and stability in the Baltic Sea region – a false claim that obfuscates Russia's (re)militarization of the Kaliningrad Oblast concurrent with deploying of nuclear missiles in Russia's westernmost region to intimidate and blackmail other regional actors.³²

The "power wing": MOD and the (near) military circles

Prior to the full-scale invasion in Ukraine in 2022, the "power bloc" primarily associated with the Ministry of Defense, and its head Sergey Shoigu, was perceived as one of the most influential forces in Russia that enjoyed Putin's trust. Despite military setbacks in Ukraine leading to the rapid growth of (semi)private security providers and the ongoing "privatisation of force" in Russia,³³ the MOD remains a critical actor in Russia's state architecture. Thus, its stance on and reaction to Finland's accession to NATO is crucial.

While there are different opinions in the Russian "military bloc" about the consequences and implications of Finland's accession to NATO, the general idea is clear: on its own, Finland is not a military threat to Russia, but the genuine purpose of its accelerated membership in NATO is Washington's plan to increase US presence and influence in the Arctic region, thus weakening Russia. For this purpose, the MOD's leading figures insist, the US is lobbying for a "trilateral regional military alliance" (Norway, Finland, and Sweden) supported by the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO).³⁴ Shoigu and the Head of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov both promote this narrative.³⁵ Gerasimov also claims that Finnish accession to NATO should be analyzed in a broader context, with the West "using Ukraine" as an instrument of hybrid war against Russia.³⁶ In separate interviews, top-ranking military officials emphasized that Russia will respond to military threats emanating from Finland's accession to NATO through new military reforms (to be discussed later) and the creation of Moscow and Leningrad military districts, as well as deployment of a separate army corps in Karelia.³⁷

Russian military experts have questioned the ostentatious confidence expressed by Shoigu and Gerasimov. Colonel (retired) Vladimir Popov, for instance, criticized this dismissive attitude, noting that Finland "has the largest potential in Western Europe in terms of its artillery capacities ... There are approximately seven hundred 155 mm howitzers, almost the same number of mortars and no fewer than one hundred multiple launch rocket systems ... that are capable of firing ATACMS missiles ... They are capable to reach Saint Petersburg, Murmansk and Severomorsk, areas where Russia's strategic command posts are located." Popov also noted that Finland's

ambitions for further militarization stem from its support for Ukraine, and that Russia should not underestimate its northern neighbour's military potential.³⁸ Leading Russian military expert Alexander Khranchikhin went even further, claiming that Finland and Sweden have more impressive military capabilities than their European neighbours already in NATO.³⁹

Other military experts closely connected with the MOD suggest that NATO poses a growing threat to the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation and upsets the geostrategic balance in the region. An article in the *Voyennaya Mysl* military journal, co-authored by Admiral Nikolai Yevmenov, who currently serves as the commander-in-chief of the Russian Navy, alleges that the US and NATO seek to reduce Russia's control over the Northern Sea Route (NSR). The article asserts that the lack of legal regulations to control specific areas of the Arctic entices "adversarial forces" (primarily the US and the UK) to pursue malign agendas in this resource-endowed macro-region by pushing their military infrastructure close to Russia's borders. "Given the scope and gravity of naval threats it might not be possible to ensure their neutralization by forces of land-based forces and the VKS [Air and Space Forces]," the article argues. Accordingly, "Russia needs to build up its naval capabilities [in the Arctic region] to be able to reduce looming threats."⁴⁰

Like its political and diplomatic counterparts, the Russian MOD's reaction to Finland's accession to NATO has been quite reserved. It has announced no concrete or realistic plans for retaliation, even though the military has been most vocal critic of NATO enlargement for more than two decades. Again, this muted reaction likely reflects Russia's poor military performance in Ukraine and the concomitant attrition of its conventional military capabilities. Some of Russia's premier Arctic units have been badly damaged. Research by the *Washington Post* showed that the 200th motorized rifle brigade was practically "wiped out" near Kharkiv. Fewer than 900 soldiers from the unit were left in late May 2022 of what was originally two battalion groups consisting of up to 1,600 men. The destruction of the 200th is relevant because it was one of Russia's two prestige Arctic brigades, having received some of the most modern Arctic-adapted weapons systems in the Russian army.⁴¹

Significant heavy equipment has also been moved off the Finnish border. Satellite images show that, over the Spring, the 80th Independent Motorized Rifle Brigade, consisting of 2,100 servicemen in Alakurtti, was stripped of MT-LB tanks, tractors, and self-propelled artillery units.⁴² The brigade's fleet consists of specific "Arctic" equipment like the DT-10 and DT-30 "Vityaz" all-terrain articulated tracked carriers and TTM-4902 "Ruslan" all-terrain tracked carriers. Equipment from St. Petersburg has also been moved to Ukraine, including S-300 anti-aircraft systems and other missiles. One missile basing area in the region, manned by Russia's 500th Anti-aircraft Missile Regiment, appeared to be abandoned entirely, according to the satellite imagery.⁴³

In late September 2022, European defense officials estimated there could be as few as 6,000 of the original 30,000 Russian ground forces left in Kaliningrad and near the Baltic region, with as many as 80% of them diverted to Ukraine.⁴⁴ "The drawdown we've seen from this region in the past seven months is very significant," said one senior Nordic defense official, who spoke to *Foreign Policy*. "Russia had this ground force posture facing us for decades that is now effectively just gone."⁴⁵

Depending on the ultimate outcome of war in Ukraine, however, Russia could take more assertive steps to confront Finland in the future as retaliation against its decision to join the North Atlantic Alliance.

Disinformation in action: propagandists and their take

Finland has become a target of aggressive disinformation in the aftermath of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea (March 2014) and beginning of hostilities in the Donbass (April 2014). From 2014-2021, Russia's disinformation efforts against Finland mainly revolved around the influx of migrants from Islamic countries of the Middle East and North Africa, which allegedly threaten Finnish (and in broader sense European) identity and could plunge the country into civil war.⁴⁶ Concurrently, Russian propagandists cited domestic experts as well as local pro-Kremlin supporters (such as Erkki Johan Bäckman) to promulgate a thesis about the rapid rise of far-right forces (including para-military groups) that were profoundly dissatisfied with both the number of incoming migrants and their allegedly uncivilized behavior in the country.⁴⁷ Russian propagandists depicted an avalanche of newcomers who, due to their religious and cultural background, did not fit in Finnish society but were allowed in the country by incumbent political elites who cared little about preserving Finnish national identity. Instead, the Russian narrative suggested that Finnish elites were primarily interested in promoting multiculturalism and other "Western values" that turned locals into xenophobes and stimulated the rise of neo-Nazi movements as a response to uncontrollable migration and its implications for national security.⁴⁸

Following the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine and Finland's decision to join NATO (as well as Helsinki's unwavering support to Kyiv), Russia's disinformation campaign acquired some notable new features designed to generate domestic instability in Finland:

1. Russia continues to develop a thesis about the ongoing demise of the Finnish culture and identity because of uncontrollable inflow of foreign migration. A new aspect here is the emergence of the "Ukrainian factor." In addition to Muslims, Ukrainians, who are coming to the country in large numbers, (with the Russian side providing no actual statistics) are flooding Finland. Russian propaganda now argues that the decision of the Finnish authorities to open doors to "massive migration" is primarily stipulated by demographics, with Finland a "dying nation" that cannot maintain its natural population growth.⁴⁹
2. According to Russian propaganda, the promotion of LGBTQ rights not only destroys Finnish identity and culture, it also creates internal divisions in the Finnish society between promoters of so-called non-traditional values and defenders of traditional lifestyles.⁵⁰ Russian propaganda argues that ordinary Finns are now being compelled to "develop positive sentiments toward homosexuality" through indoctrination of local youth who are compelled to study LGBTQ issues and even encouraged to change their gender.⁵¹
3. Russian propagandists now espouse a thesis about "perpetual Russophobia." While this narrative has been launched against other countries such as Poland, the UK, Ukraine, and the Baltic states, Russian commentators tended to avoid this frame when it comes to Finland. Russian propagandists now argue that "Finnish Russophobia" is not only visible in the realm of high politics but is also directed toward ordinary Russians living in Finland. Russian propaganda has gone as far as arguing that Finland has been transformed into a "fourth Baltic country,"⁵² with levels of Russophobia akin to those in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.
4. Russian narratives also allege irredentism and revanchism, claiming that Finland's ruling elite are determined to re-capture formerly lost territories including Vyborg, Karelia, Ingria, and Pechenga. Russian propagandists also claim that, prior to formal accession to NATO, Finnish information outlets launched a massive campaign asserting Finland's "historic rights" to some Russian territories.⁵³

Assessing key narratives developed by Russian propaganda about Finland's accession to NATO yields critical insights. In line with majority of Russian government agencies, propagandists construe this development through the prism of NATO-Russia and US-Russia confrontation, and not as a Finnish decision made by a sovereign actor.⁵⁴ While mainstream propagandist outlets refrained from making comments on the potential gravity of current NATO enlargement, others asserted that Finland's NATO membership may put Russia in a more "dire situation than the USSR on the verge of the Nazi aggression" in 1941.⁵⁵ In the face of this geostrategic defeat, Russian propagandists have shown little creativity in denouncing Finland's decision to join NATO, employing virtually the same toolkit that they have used to denigrate Poland, the Baltic states, Germany, and other European neighbours. This limited response stems from Russian weakness and a dearth of realistic messaging options that might resonate with a Finnish or Swedish population now resolutely opposed to cooperation with Russia.

Sweden's application for NATO membership and Russia's reactions: key ideas and narratives

Historically, Sweden was hesitant to place its neutral status in jeopardy though partnership in alliance activities. Nonetheless, the country has grown closer to NATO since the end of the Cold War, a process that accelerated after Sweden joined the Partnership for Peace in 1994. Since then, Sweden has gradually increased its cooperation, signing on as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner, regularly taking part in NATO military operations and exercises, and agreeing to a Host Nation Support Agreement with NATO in 2016. Still, full NATO membership was never a political possibility given broad public support for partnership short of membership. This was clear from polling data which showed that, until 2012 at least, Swedes were overwhelmingly opposed to NATO membership, with two to three times more respondents typically opposed than in favour. Following the 2014 invasion of Ukraine, however, opposition towards NATO membership decreased and, by 2015, support for NATO membership overtook opposition for the first time, with several Swedish political parties beginning to openly support joining the alliance.⁵⁶

Following Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Moscow's soft power and influence in Sweden have declined dramatically, decisively shifting Sweden towards NATO membership. A Gallup Poll from September 2022 revealed that only 2% of Swedes approved of Russia's leadership,⁵⁷ and a January 2023 Ipsos poll revealed that most Swedes are willing to make concrete sacrifices to counter Russian aggression (with only 31% support maintaining diplomatic ties with Moscow).⁵⁸ Sweden's government has explicitly condemned Russia. In a March 2023 speech that encapsulates Sweden's position, Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson told a public audience:

Russia's war crimes remind us of the absolute worst chapters in European history. But Ukraine's resistance also reminds us of the proudest moments... Just as generations before us, we have a decision to make. Do we stand completely with those who oppress freedom or those who are oppressed but defend freedom? There are some examples of this in modern history. The Norwegian resistance movement's fight against Nazi Germany. Finland's fight to defend itself against communism during the Finnish Winter War. There should be no doubt that Sweden supports the Ukrainians who are now following in their footsteps... Today, the choice is between Ukrainian democracy and Russian tyranny... We stand with Ukraine!⁵⁹

Accordingly, Sweden's political elite solidly oppose further engagement with Russia. In response to what it called "Sweden's confrontational course," the Russian Foreign Ministry expelled five Swedish diplomats in April 2023, and the Kremlin has declared that its relations with Stockholm are at "an unprecedented low."⁶⁰

Despite strong domestic support for accession to NATO, Sweden has faced roadblocks in securing the necessary ratification from all member states. In May 2022, the 349-seat Riksdagen (parliament) authorised Sweden's accession to NATO in a 269-37 vote. Six of the eight parties represented in parliament were in favour of NATO membership, with the Left Party and the Green Party condemning Russia's invasion but supporting Swedish neutrality (and arguing that Sweden should improve its own defenses).⁶¹ Data from a June 2022 Pew Research Center poll showed that Swedish views toward NATO jumped to a 79% favourability rating.⁶² Despite Sweden's eagerness to join, however, Türkiye and Hungary have yet to ratify its accession to the Alliance. After the NATO Summit in Madrid in 2022, Sweden amended its constitution, changed its laws, expanded counter-terrorism cooperation against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and resumed arms exports to Türkiye in hopes of addressing the latter's concerns. A 10 July 2023 meeting between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Türkiye, Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson of Sweden, and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the NATO Summit in Vilnius appears to have broken the logjam, with Türkiye agreeing to "transmit the Accession Protocol for Sweden to the Grand National Assembly, and work closely with the Assembly to ensure ratification."⁶³

Russia's reaction to Sweden's application to join NATO was not as aggressive as it was towards Finland's application. In fact, Russian politicians, experts, and propagandists have rarely spoken about Sweden's prospective accession to NATO. Instead, most statements and opinions on the subject alluded to Sweden in conjunction with Finland. Two main factors explain this lack of interest. First, Türkiye's opposition to Sweden's membership provided what Russian experts hoped would prove an insurmountable obstacle for Stockholm and that they could comfortably ignore the issue. Second, although Sweden occupies a strategic location in the Baltic Sea and maintains a strong defence-industrial complex, it does not have an extensive land border with Russia akin to that of Finland. Sweden is therefore of secondary concern for Russia's national security, even if NATO forces deploy to Swedish territory.

Accordingly, this section adopts a different approach than that on Finland. Instead of breaking down Russia's narratives by actor- and agency-related lines, we adopt a thematic approach that discusses and summarises key themes employed by the Russian side about Sweden's application. Specifically, we discuss several main themes actively exploited in Russia's disinformation efforts against Sweden, many of which are not new and have been used by Russian propagandists to distort and taint the image of Sweden for many years:

- LGBTQ rights and the "moral and physical degradation" of Swedish society;
- problems with Muslims and migrants that are intertwining with growing racism and Islamophobia;
- Russophobia and tilt toward cult of neo-Nazi ideology; and
- the illegitimacy of Sweden's NATO application.

Theme One: Sweden's inevitable decline and degradation due to immorality

Since 2014, Russia's propaganda narratives have increased targeted LGBTQ rights in Sweden as a source of moral decay. The Russians have advanced the notion that damaging information about sexuality and gender issues are targeting school children as a part of their "information package" to justify the full-scale war of aggression against

Ukraine.⁶⁴ In 2022, Russian media sought to create a scandal when a Swedish diplomat in Moscow presented a library with books intended for children and teenagers that “openly promote LGBT propaganda” and “light drugs.” One Russian news article alleged that “gender changes in Sweden have transformed into a mass pathology” and noted that “Swedish diplomats have increased their destructive activities [by promoting foreign norms and principles] in the Russian regions right after Sweden officially applied for NATO membership.”⁶⁵ Russian propaganda also alleged that Swedish masculinity is deteriorating (a thesis that is widely applied to all of Western society)⁶⁶ which is eroding Swedish national defence and security.⁶⁷

Theme Two: Sweden as Islamophobic, racist, and anti-migrant society

In January 2023, Danish far-right activist Rasmus Paludan burned the Quran outside of the Turkish embassy in Stockholm, sparking protests across the Muslim world. Russian propaganda depicted this disgraceful act not as an individual’s reckless protest but as part of a larger trend, with Sweden purposefully targeting Islam and its followers.⁶⁸ Russian commentators asserted that Swedish authorities must have supported the burning of the Quran,” given that the act “was conducted with a permit of the local authorities in the ‘diplomatic quarter,’ an area that has to be protected by the police.”⁶⁹ In this case, the Russian side managed to activate its favorite theme (“anti-Fascism”), with foreign minister Sergey Lavrov compared the burning of the Quran with “actions of the Nazis burning books... in conquered countries” and the alleged burning of “Russian language books, written by Russian authors,” in Ukraine.⁷⁰

The allegation of “growing Islamophobia in Sweden” is not a new topic in Russia’s disinformation toolkit. On many occasions, Russian commentators have promoted the idea that “foreign migrants” (mainly of Muslim origin) are unable and unwilling to integrate into the Swedish society, creating social distress, fomenting far right and anti-Islamic sentiments, and radicalizing Muslims living in Sweden.⁷¹

After launching its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian propaganda added a new dimension to its information operations against Sweden: portraying Ukrainian refugees and temporarily displaced persons currently residing in Sweden as living humiliating lives below the poverty line and having to “beg for food from various charity organizations.”⁷² In general, Russian narratives attempt to juxtapose Swedes and non-Swedish residents (foreign migrants) as a confrontation between “civilized” and “uncivilized” peoples.⁷³

Theme Three: Russophobia and neo-Nazism

Russophobia has become one of the favorite and most frequently employed themes in Russian propaganda since 2014, when the West first introduced sanctions against Russia following its illegal annexation of Crimea and destabilization of the Donbass. At that time, Russian propaganda made a concerted effort to connect any criticism of Russia (let alone sanctions or other forms of pressure) with one’s allegiance to the ideas of neo-Nazi ideology.⁷⁴

In 2022, when Western sanctions against Russia were expanded and Western support for Ukraine moved beyond economic and diplomatic measures, Russia’s use of the “Russophobia card” shifted to a new level, becoming a dominant narrative in Russian propaganda. Sweden, despite its nuanced historical relationships with Russia, was branded as one of the Europe’s most Russophobic countries – which also was used to explain its alleged inclination toward neo-Nazi ideology. Putin’s press secretary Dmitry Peskov, commenting on Sweden’s expulsion of several Russian diplomats from the country in April 2023, stating that Sweden had “intensified its anti-Russian course” and that the situation had “degraded to the lowest possible level.”⁷⁵

In exploiting the topic of Russophobia, Russian propaganda relies on four main narratives:

1. **Swedish roots of Russophobia are a by-product of long-term economic and political grievances that have been fortified by external forces (NATO/US) as a part of their anti-Russian hybrid war effort.** Some Russian sources have argued that Sweden’s “physiological Russophobia”⁷⁶ is a complex phenomenon that is premised on a synergy between economic⁷⁷ and information-psychological factors. Others claimed that Sweden’s deep and profound “rejection of everything Russian” is based on their military losses that date back to the “first crusade conducted by the Swedes against Russia in 1142.”⁷⁸ Official Russian sources (including Maria Zakharova) have specifically identified “external pressure ... from NATO” as another “source of Swedish Russophobia.”⁷⁹
2. **The Swedish (and North European) sense of exceptionalism,⁸⁰ and their perception of Russians as an “inferior nation,” feeds “routine Russophobia.”** Following Russia’s full-scale military attack against Ukraine in 2022 and Sweden’s prompt application for NATO membership, Russia’s information space was swamped with multiple “testimonies” of ethnic Russians in Sweden who were allegedly subjected to worsening forms of discrimination and humiliation (including physical abuse) solely because of their Russian ethnicity.⁸¹ Russian sources also claim that burgeoning everyday Russophobia feeds spreading paranoia in the Swedish society, which in turn heightens crime rates (including murder) against people on the basis of “imaginary ties with Russians.”⁸²
3. **Russophobia is causing major economic problems and results in a plummeting quality of life in Sweden.** Despite the absurdity of such claims (given Sweden’s quantifiably high quality of life and strong economy), an increasing number of Russian propagandists claim that, due to Western economic sanctions, the Swedish (and Finnish) economy is on the brink of collapse. Consequently, “many Swedish citizens are unable to feed their children ... and look for subsistence and economic help of the government” and charities, a May 2023 article alleges.⁸³ Russian propaganda also actively promotes the thesis that a combination of “growing economic hardships” (caused, in part, by Russophobia) and widespread criminality (depicted in Russian sources as a “dire” situation) is likely to result in tectonic political shifts within Sweden, with nationalists and neo-Nazis poised to take power in the country.⁸⁴
4. **Sweden is a staunch and long-term adherent to Nazi ideology.** While marginal Russian information outlets published articles about Sweden’s cooperating with the Nazis during the Second World War in the 1990s and 2000s, those ideas never entered mainstream Russian information channels. In 2022, however, the number of mainstream media outlets and platforms promoting this theme increased. One article published in the academic journal *International Affairs* (which Russia’s Foreign Ministry supports) on “Sweden and Switzerland: neutrality with Nazi tilt” contended that Sweden’s propensity for fascism has a long historical grounding, alleging that Swedish defence and steel-producing industries worked closely with the Third Reich and the government laundered money and gold from Jews murdered in the Nazi concentration camps for their German partners.⁸⁵ Since February 2022, other articles published by well-known disinformation platforms have sought to tie Sweden’s alleged “discrimination” towards Russians with Russophobia and Nazi ideology.⁸⁶

Theme Four: illegitimacy of Sweden's "NATO adventure"

Russian media and (dis)information outlets have criticized Stockholm's decision to set aside its "neutrality" and become a member of the North Atlantic alliance. Russia's narratives on the subject generally fall into three narrative sub-categories:

1. **Sweden is not a suitable NATO member.** Russian propaganda provides two main arguments to make its case. First, according to Russian propagandists, Sweden is unable to cope with emerging security challenges on the domestic front. In support of this notion, a 2023 Russian article stated that "the kingdom is drowning because of spiking criminality" and that "Stockholm is being terrorized by gangs of immigrants that are struggling for influence."⁸⁷ Second, even though Sweden technologically meets NATO standards,⁸⁸ Russian commentators suggest that ethnic issues (including alleged anti-Islamic sentiments) create serious issues with Ankara, which might pose an insurmountable barrier to Sweden's accession to the alliance.
2. **Swedish authorities have trampled the basic principles of democracy and disregarded public opinion.** Russian commentators (including Russian diplomats posted in Sweden) have accused Swedish authorities of ignoring public opinion on NATO membership,⁸⁹ suggesting that this generates growing public discontentment amongst a population that does not want to abandon its status as a neutral country. For example, *Russia Today* points to a rally in Gothenburg in April 2023 (reportedly attended by between 2000-2,500 participants) protesting Sweden's growing involvement with NATO.⁹⁰
3. **Sweden is hypocritical country ready to renounce its democratic principles in pursuit of NATO membership.** Russian propaganda highlights Sweden's readiness to fulfill some of Turkey's demands (including handing over representatives of Sweden-based Kurdish activists, full support to "Ankara's fight against national security threats," the end of support for Kurdish political forces and the pro-Gülen FETÖ, and the lifting of Sweden's embargo in arms/weaponry trade with Turkey)⁹¹ despite the Nordic country's adherence to democratic principles and values. Russian media outlets are also accusing the US of spying on Sweden and targeting its defence-industrial complex, with Stockholm refusing to defend Swedish interests out of fear of the Americans.⁹²

Academics and think tank commentators

Despite the lack of freedom to discuss sensitive topics, Russian intellectual circles have produced the most sober explanations of Sweden's and Finland's decisions to join NATO and offered the clearest analysis of the geopolitical environment in Northern Europe. For instance, leading conservative think tank analyst Sergey Yermakov argued that the Nordic countries' accession to NATO represents "the most urgent challenge to Russia's security in the Arctic, which requires the adoption of a set of adequate responses."⁹³ Other commentators have argued that it would be counterproductive to diminish or belittle the significance of NATO's Nordic enlargement. On the contrary, increased Nordic membership will strengthen NATO as a military organization: both Finland and Sweden are highly developed economically, have high living standards, effective governance, highly advanced armed forces, and a good international reputation.

While a clear majority of Russian experts agree that NATO's Nordic enlargement will pose challenges to Russia, mainstream experts still believe that this will not pose an existential threat to Russia. Kortunov contrasted the so-

called “Baltic model” pursued by the Baltic states and Poland (which turns the countries in question into “a military-political stronghold of the Western civilization against Russian barbarism”) with a “Scandinavian model” in which Finland and Sweden will seek to balance NATO membership and potential cooperation with Moscow. Kortunov argues that this outcome is likely owing to a distinct Nordic mentality and identity known for its cooperative spirit and desire to avoid conflict.⁹⁴ Following this logic, most mainstream Russian intellectuals do not believe that the Nordic enlargement of NATO will have the same impact on Russia and its regional interests as Polish and Baltic accession to the Alliance did.

Unlike any other group that has been discussed, some prominent Russian intellectuals (including those with strong ties to the Kremlin) have pointed out that developments in Ukraine triggered Sweden’s and Finland’s decisions to apply for NATO membership. For example, the editor-in-chief of *Russia in Global Affairs* Fedor Lukyanov argued that, in Finland, the issue of neutrality has always dominated public opinion and the “return of the reality of war which has shocked Europe” precipitated a change in mentality.⁹⁵ RIAC commentator Sergey Andreev has argued that while the “events in Ukraine in 2014” enticed Stockholm and Helsinki to join Western sanctions, their actual rhetoric and behavior toward Moscow was different from sentiments coming from Warsaw and the three Baltic states, noting that the majority of Finns and Swedes did not support joining NATO at that time. Russia’s so-called “Special Military Operation” in 2022 contributed to a “serious reconsideration of Sweden’s and Finland’s places in the security architecture.”⁹⁶ Although many experts correctly identified the root cause of Finland’s drive to join NATO as expeditiously as possible, many commentators still argue that “Moscow’s actions” were only a part of the reason and that the “strongest external pressure from the West” and “non-linear growth of public support for NATO membership” played a pivotal role in Helsinki’s and Stockholm’s hasty decision. Ultra-conservative, pro-Kremlin intellectuals have contended that Finland and Sweden’s application to NATO were a by-product of a combination of three factors:

- Western media portrayals of the so-called “Special Military Operation”;
- pressure by the US and UK (the most avid Western “Russophobes” with considerable influence) on Finland/Sweden; and
- an attempt to “devalue results of Russian operation in Ukraine” by bringing Finland and Sweden into the Alliance.⁹⁷

In terms of potential responses to the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, leading Russian intellectuals urge the Kremlin to abstain from intimidation or even harsh rhetoric. Instead, experts argue that Russia’s reaction (or a lack thereof) must be contingent on Finnish and Swedish behaviour, and particularly the extent to which both countries are integrated in NATO’s military architecture. Russian experts insist that, in working out its response, Moscow should remember its experience with Türkiye – by no means an easy relationship – and should tailor its strategy accordingly, without undermining or incurring irreparable long-term damage on relations with Finland or Sweden.⁹⁸

Russian sources identify several major consequences of Sweden and Finland’s accession to NATO for Russia:

- **The geopolitical aspect.** NATO expansion erodes Russia’s position in Northern Europe. In the Baltic Sea region, now described as the “NATO lake,” the Western Alliance’s dominance will be overwhelming. At the same time, the strategic environment in the Arctic region (which Russia has traditionally viewed as a zone of where it wields influence and control) will worsen for Russia. Russia will soon be the only non-

NATO state in both the Baltic Sea and Arctic regions.⁹⁹ Russian experts and academics, including political scientist Sergey Rogov (a member of Russian Academy of Sciences), agree that despite continuous rhetoric about a “stagnating security situation in the Arctic” and “growing conflict potential” (which the MOD has promoted actively since 2014),¹⁰⁰ competitors are forming instruments to contain Russia in the region – an unprecedented situation.¹⁰¹ Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) director general Andrey Kortunov notes that an “Arctic war” scenario remains implausible and certainly does not constitute a “main threat to international security,” leaving the Arctic a region of relative peace despite negative security-related trends.¹⁰²

- **The social-economic aspect.** The expansion of the NATO-Russia land border poses an economic challenge. Russia will have to invest financial resources to strengthen its border with Finland, requiring widespread renewal and modernization of its military infrastructure in Karelia and the Murmansk oblast. Furthermore, cross-border trade and cooperation will continue to decline, with significant negative impacts on Russian border regions.
- **The reputational aspect.** The Nordic countries’ accession to NATO has also shaken Russia’s claims about Ukraine’s NATO membership, posing “awkward questions with respect to Russian narrative about Ukraine and its neutral, non-aligned status.”¹⁰³
- **The Transatlantic aspect.** The European Union, which Russia’s pre-2022 academic and policy literature portrayed as a kind of feminine and conformist Venus in contrast to the bellicose and decisive United States (Mars), has become a NATO-centric organization¹⁰⁴ in which security-related issues (including military spending) will play an increasingly prominent place. This dramatic transformation is also reflected in Finland and Sweden forfeiting their neutral or non-aligned status, which might have a profound impact on the concept of “neutrality” in international relations.

Conclusions

Over the last decade, common Russian security narratives aimed at Sweden and Finland insisted that NATO sought to lure Finland and Sweden into joining the organization, and that doing so would provoke a strong Russian response.¹⁰⁵ Western analysts have identified forged documents and false claims about the supposed dangers of joining NATO that Russian outlets have broadcast and which have been amplified on social media.¹⁰⁶ Elina Lange-Ionatamishvili et. al. explain that this narrative sought (and continues to seek) to imprint the idea that Sweden and Finland will be pulled into NATO conflicts, not in defence of themselves but because of NATO’s broader plan to start a war with Russia. With the US running the NATO show, Sweden and Finland would lose independent decision-making power over their foreign policy and (ultimately) the decision to make war. As such, because Scandinavia is being used as a bridgehead to attack Russia, Russia will be forced to act in self-defence.¹⁰⁷ These narratives were supported by references to earlier official Russian statements, like Russian Ambassador Viktor Tatarinstev’s 2015 warning that a NATO-aligned Sweden will face “counter measures.” He emphasized that Russia “will have to resort to a response of the military kind and re-orientate our troops and missiles ... the country that joins NATO needs to be aware of the risks it is exposing itself to.”¹⁰⁸

Since Russia’s further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, NATO’s Arctic positions have hardened, spurring expected reactions in official rhetoric from the Kremlin. In April 2022, in response to NATO exercise *Cold*

Response, Russian Arctic Ambassador Nikolay Korchunov explained that “the internationalization of the Alliance’s military activities in high latitudes, which involves non-Arctic NATO states, cannot but cause concern. In this regard, there are risks of unintentional incidents that, in addition to security risks, can also cause serious damage to the fragile Arctic ecosystem.” He highlighted that “the recent increased activity of NATO in the Arctic is a matter of concern. Recently, another large-scale military exercise of the alliance took place in the north of Norway, which, in our opinion, does not contribute to ensuring security in the region.” He also expressed concern about potential NATO membership of Finland and Sweden at that time.¹⁰⁹

Despite the seriousness of the expansion for Russia, its messaging has demonstrated weakness rather than commitment to turning back the decisions. Threats of military action have been paired back and a veneer of apathy has been applied to Kremlin, MOD, and MFA statements. This step-down has been a matter of necessity following the Russian Army’s stripping of forces from the Finnish border and the destruction of many of those units in Ukraine. Simply put, Russia has been forced to adjust its narratives to match its diminished ability to retaliate or intimidate.

Instead, in response to the formal applications of Finland and Sweden for NATO membership, Russia has intensified its propaganda and disinformation efforts – in effect, as our research reveals, anti-Finnish and anti-Swedish propaganda campaigns have a long history and the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine only accelerated previously observed trends – levelled against Finland and Sweden. Russian narratives consistently hold up both Sweden and Finland as pawns of the United States and victims of an irrational and destabilizing American hybrid war against Russia. As a result, Russian messaging asserts that these countries will be less independent, less prosperous, and less secure.

Limited to this weak response, Russia has failed to foment divisions amongst the seven like-minded Arctic states and NATO, or to damage Nordic support for the alliance. Support for NATO amongst the Arctic states is stronger than at any point since the Cold War, with overwhelming political support in Sweden and Finland that extends across most major parties and nearly every social demographic.

There is reason to assume that the strategic pressure around Finland will intensify in the coming years if Russia is able to rebuild its forces and refocus its attention away from Ukraine. The accelerating confrontation between the West and Russia will also further degrade the stability of Northern Europe. Nevertheless, regardless of the result of the Ukrainian war, NATO’s position in the region will be strengthened, and the military alliance will be able to plan and practice defending Northern Europe as a more united whole than before. The membership will enable the defence of the north to be designed and operationalised even more efficiently, and the balance of power in the region will change. With NATO membership, the threshold for the use of military force against Finland will rise. At the same time, Finland will become more clearly part of the front between NATO and Russia.¹¹⁰ Russia’s war of aggression has cost it dearly in many ways, and the irrecoverable loss of its Nordic partnerships is likely to be one of the longest lasting.

Nato's European expansion since 1949



Source: Nato

BBC

Notes

¹ NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué, 11 July 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm?selectedLocale=en.

² NATO Parliamentary Assembly, "Finland & Sweden Accession," <https://www.nato-pa.int/content/finland-sweden-accession>.

³ NATO Press Statement following the meeting between Türkiye, Sweden, and the NATO Secretary General, 10 July 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_217147.htm.

⁴ John Drennan and Mary Glantz, “Russia Has Relaxed its Rhetoric on NATO’s Nordic Expansion,” United States Institute of Peace, 22 June 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/06/russia-has-relaxed-its-rhetoric-natos-nordic-expansion>. On Putin’s May 2022 statement, see “Президент Путин заявил, что вступление Финляндии и Швеции в НАТО не угрожает России [President Putin said that the entry of Finland and Sweden into NATO does not threaten Russia],” 16 May 2022, <https://iz.ru/1335147/2022-05-16/prezident-putin-zaiavil-chto-vstuplenie-finliandii-i-shvetsii-v-nato-ne-ugrozhaet-rossii>.

⁵ See, for example, “Russia’s Lavrov says Finland, Sweden joining NATO makes ‘no big difference,’” Reuters, 17 May 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-lavrov-says-finland-sweden-joining-nato-makes-no-big-difference-2022-05-17/>; “В Кремле прокомментировали решение о вступлении Финляндии и Швеции в НАТО [The Kremlin commented on the decision on the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO],” 16 May 2022, <https://iz.ru/1335040/2022-05-16/v-kremle-prokomentirovali-reshenie-o-vstuplenii-finliandii-i-shvetsii-v-nato>.

⁶ Briefing by Deputy Director of the Foreign Ministry Information and Press Department Alexey Zaitsev, Moscow, 6 July 2022, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1820886/#16.

⁷ See, for example, Tarja Cronberg, “The NATO Divide in Finnish Politics,” European Leadership Network, 2 September 2014, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/the-nato-divide-in-finnish-politics/>.

⁸ “Poll: Narrow Majority Oppose NATO Membership,” YLE, 19 July 2019, https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/poll_narrow_majority_oppose_nato_membership/10885637.

⁹ “Finns join NATO united,” EVA, 11 November 2022, <https://www.eva.fi/blog/2022/11/23/suomalaiset-liittyvat-natoon-yhtenaisina/>. See also “Finnish Support for NATO Membership Rises to 78 Percent, Poll Shows,” *Radio Free Europe*, 23 November 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/finland-nato-survey-membership/32145117.html>.

¹⁰ Essi Lehto, “Finnish parliament passes NATO bill with large majority,” Reuters, 1 March 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/finnish-parliament-passes-nato-bill-2023-03-01/>.

¹¹ Quoted in Timo Koivurona et al, *Arctic Cooperation in a New Situation: Analysis on the Impacts of the Russian War of Aggression* (Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, 2022), 18, https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/164521/VN_Selvitys_2022_3.pdf.

¹² Sergey Sukhankin, “Russian Regionalism in Action: The Case of the North-Western Federal District (1991–2017)”, Columbia University Press, October 2018.

¹³ ““Зона отчуждения”. Косачев о последствиях вступления Финляндии в НАТО [“Exclusion zone”. Kosachev on the consequences of Finland’s entry into NATO],” 17 May 2022, <https://radiosputnik.ria.ru/20220517/nato-1789034915.html>.

¹⁴ Russian officials use the term “expansion” (*ekspansiya*) instead of “enlargement.”

¹⁵ “В Кремле назвали вступление Финляндии в НАТО посягательством на безопасность России [The Kremlin called Finland’s entry into NATO an encroachment on Russia’s security],” 4 April 2023, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/2023441331-KY6jJ.html>.

¹⁶ “Что означает вступление Финляндии в НАТО И как менялось отношение России к этому шагу соседей [What does Finland’s accession to NATO mean And how has Russia’s attitude towards this step of its neighbors changed?],” 4 April 2023, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/04/04/2023/642c23fa9a79475d72a2eaf>.

¹⁷ “Russia’s Lavrov says Finland, Sweden joining NATO makes ‘no big difference,’” *Reuters*, 17 May 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-lavrov-says-finland-sweden-joining-nato-makes-no-big-difference-2022-05-17/>.

¹⁸ Please note that Russia claimed not to have had any territorial issues with Ukraine prior to 2013.

¹⁹ “Саммит ОДКБ” [Summit of the ODKB], 16 May 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68418>

²⁰ “Лавров потребовал вернуть инфраструктуру НАТО к состоянию 1997 года [Lavrov demanded to return the infrastructure of NATO to the 1997 scopes],” 1 March 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5238507>.

²¹ “Константин Косачев: Швеция и Финляндия сделали выбор в пользу конфронтации [Konstantin Kosachev: Sweden and Finland opted for confrontation],” 17 May 2022, <https://www.pnp.ru/politics/konstantin-kosachev-shveciya-i-finlyandiya-sdelali-vybor-v-polzu-konfrontacii.html>.

²² This statement is incorrect and does not consider militarization of Kaliningrad and the Arctic region. For more information see: Sergey Sukhankin, “Kaliningrad in the Post-Crimea Russia. A Bastion or a Weak Link?”, IFRI (Paris), September 2021, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/sukhankin_kaliningrad_2021_us.pdf; Sergey Sukhankin, “Russia’s War in Ukraine and Kaliningrad’s Final Farewell to the Gains of the Past”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume: 19 Issue: 90, 16 June 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-war-in-ukraine-and-kaliningrads-final-farewell-to-the-gains-of-the-past/>

²³ This is another example of new language in Russia (“Newspeak”), that has taken shape after the outbreak of Russia’s full scale war against Ukraine, where Russian propaganda is deliberately using words such as “events” to describe the war in Ukraine (the word “war” is prohibited in this context, it may entail legal consequences for the user).

²⁴ “Боярский: Вступление Финляндии в НАТО не останется без ответа [Boyarsky: Finland's entry into NATO will not go unanswered],” 13 May 2022, <https://www.pnp.ru/politics/boyarskiy-vstuplenie-finlyandii-v-nato-ne-ostanetsya-bez-otveta.html>.

²⁵ “НАТО хотел развалить РФ, а в итоге сплотил’: Лавров оценил тезис о противодействии России расширению альянса” [“NATO wanted to destroy the Russian Federation, but eventually rallied ‘: Lavrov appreciated the thesis about Russia's opposition to the expansion of the alliance],” 25 April 2023, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/20234252133-XrA6T.html>.

²⁶ “Лавров: НАТО давно считает территорию Швеции и Финляндии своей” [Lavrov: NATO has long considered the territory of Sweden and Finland its own],” 17 May 2022, <https://rg.ru/2022/05/17/lavrov-nato-davno-schitaet-territoriiu-shvecii-i-finliandii-svoej.html>.

²⁷ Aleksandra Yudina, “Захарова предложила НАТО «уйти на пенсию» [Zakharova suggested that NATO ‘retire’],” 6 April 2023, <https://vz.ru/news/2023/4/6/1206331.html>.

²⁸ “В МИД описали последствия вступления Швеции и Финляндии в НАТО [The Foreign Ministry described the consequences of the entry of Sweden and Finland into NATO],” 15 April 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220415/nato-1783692228.html>.

²⁹ “Замглавы МИД РФ: расположение Финляндии подстегнет НАТО к милитаризации Арктики [Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation: the location of Finland will spur NATO to the militarization of the Arctic],” 16 May 2023, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5986444>.

³⁰ Nataliya Portyakova, “«Поведение Брюсселя иррационально» Замглавы МИД РФ Александр Грушко — об отношении к Евросоюзу и глобальных амбициях НАТО [‘The behavior of Brussels is irrational’: Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation Alexander Grushko on attitude towards the European Union and NATO's global ambitions],” 10 February 2023, <https://iz.ru/1467855/nataliia-portiakova/povedenie-briusselia-irrationalno>.

³¹ Aleksandra Yudina, “В МИД заявили о возрастающих рисках военного столкновения с НАТО [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the growing risks of a military clash with NATO],” 13 April 2023, <https://vz.ru/news/2023/4/13/1207336.html>.

³² Sergey Sukhankin, “The End of ‘Hide and Seek’: Russian Iskanders Permanently in Kaliningrad,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15 no. 28, *Jamestown Foundation*, 23 February 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/end-hide-seek-russian-iskanders-permanently-kaliningrad/>; Sergey Sukhankin, “Russia Flexes ‘Iskander’ Muscles on Its Northwestern Flank,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 13 no. 163, *Jamestown Foundation*, 12 October 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-flexes-iskander-muscles-northwestern-flank/>.

³³ For more information see: Sergey Sukhankin, “The ‘Privatization of Force’ Presses on in Russia (Part One),” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 20, no. 34, *Jamestown Foundation*, 27 February 2023, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-privatization-of-force-presses-on-in-russia-part-one/>; Sergey Sukhankin, “The ‘Privatization of Force’ Presses on in Russia (Part Two),” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 20, no. 35, *Jamestown Foundation*, 28 February 2023, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-privatization-of-force-presses-on-in-russia-part-two/>.

³⁴ Igor Yavlyanskiy, “Финляндия пошла по натовским рукам [Finland went to the hands of NATO],” 10 June, 2022, <https://zvezdaweekly.ru/news/2022631456-aF14C.html>.

³⁵ “Герасимов: НАТО повышает напряженность на линии соприкосновения с Россией [Gerasimov: NATO increases tension on the line of contact with Russia],” 22 December 2022, <https://ria.ru/20221222/napryazhennost-1840586996.html> and “Расширение НАТО требует пересмотра подходов к обороне России, заявил Шойгу [NATO expansion requires a review of approaches to the defense of Russia, said Shoigu],” 16 August 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220816/shoigu-1809919118.html>.

³⁶ “Герасимов назвал угрозой для России вступление Швеции и Финляндии в НАТО [Gerasimov called the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO a threat to Russia],” 24 January 2023, <https://iz.ru/1459263/2023-01-24/gerasimov-nazval-ugrozoi-na-rossii-vstuplenie-shvecii-i-finliandii-v-nato>

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Vladimir Mykhin, “НАТО вышло на северные границы России [NATO has reached the northern borders of Russia],” https://www.ng.ru/armies/2023-04-04/2_8697_finland.html.

³⁹ According to Khranchikhin, Finland’s armed forces are particularly strong because they never concentrated on anti-guerrilla warfare (so-called “war on terror”), being rather prepared for a classical war. For more information see: Aleksandr Khranchikhin, “Хорошо вооруженный нейтралитет [],” 30 March 2023, https://nvo.ng.ru/nvo/2023-03-30/4_1230_neutrality.html. Khranchikhin (who is well known for his realistic and rather critical assessment of Russia’s military capabilities) also notes that the MOD’s plans to

restore the Moscow and Leningrad military districts remain extremely vague. See: Aleksandr Khranchikhin, “Москва задумала провести военную реформу [Moscow conceived to carry out military reform],” 20 January 2023, https://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2023-01-20/3_1221_moscow.html.

⁴⁰ “Основные тенденции изменения характера и содержания военных угроз Российской Федерации с океанских и морских направлений” [The main tendencies on the change of the character and essence of military threats to the Russian Federation from the oceanic and seaborne directions], 18 May 2023, <https://vm.ric.mil.ru/Stati/item/493331>

⁴¹ Thomas Nilsen, “Arctic brigade severely weakened,” *Barents Observer* (19 December 2022), <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2022/12/arctic-brigade-severely-weakened>.

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