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'Everything has changed': Inside Finland's bold bid to join NATO **«Все змінилося»: про сміливу заяву Фінляндії про вступ до НАТО**

Фінляндія зараз перебуває на порозі геополітичної метаморфози, яка відбувається раз у покоління, відмовляючись від свого традиційного статусу неприєднання і перетворюючись на повноправного члена НАТО. "Починається нова ера", - сказав президент країни Саулі Вяйняме Ніїністе. «Захищена Фінляндія народжується як частина стабільного, сильного та відповідального скандинавського регіону. Ми знаходимо безпеку та розділяємо її. Слід пам'ятати, що безпека це не гра з нульовою сумою». Своім доленосним рішенням Гельсінкі має намір спроектувати нову архітектуру безпеки не лише для країни, а й для всього військового альянсу: вступ Фінляндії до НАТО призведе до створення спільного кордону завдовжки 1340 км з росією. Фінляндія сьогодні є одним із найактивніших партнерів альянсу, взявши участь у кількох операціях під керівництвом НАТО, у тому числі на Балканах та в Афганістані.

<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/05/16/everything-has-changed-inside-finland-s-bold-bid-to-join-nato>

When Russian tanks broke through the Ukrainian border in the early hours of 24 February, Jari Iskanius couldn't believe it.

"It was unbelievable," he recalls. "People just didn't believe that it would happen."

Three days later, Iskanius, in his capacity as finance director of Lappeenranta, a Finnish city lying 30 kilometres from Russia, made a tough call: all joint projects with its large neighbour, from green tech research to cultural events, must be immediately suspended.

"We've had very close relationships over decades, but now everything has changed," Iskanius told Euronews. "People's minds have changed in a couple of months."

Lappeenranta, though, is not the only city in Finland being forced to reassess its long-established links with Russia. The whole country has been suddenly thrust into a collective reckoning to figure out what it means to be safe and secure in the 21st century.

Finland is now on the verge of a once-in-a-generation geopolitical metamorphosis, ditching its traditionally non-aligned status to turn into a fully-fledged member of NATO, the transatlantic military alliance.

"A new era is opening," said the country's president, Sauli Niinisto, speaking next to the prime minister, Sanna Marin, after the government confirmed its intention to submit a NATO application.

"A protected Finland is being born as part of a stable, strong and responsible Nordic region. We gain security, and we also share it. It's good to keep in mind that security isn't a zero-sum game."

With its momentous decision, Helsinki intends to design a new security architecture, not only for the country but also for the entire military alliance: Finland's admission to NATO will bring in a massive 1,340-kilometre border shared with Russia, further encircling Saint Petersburg and expanding Western presence across the strategic Arctic Circle.

The overhaul of the alliance's map is a remarkable twist for a continent that, until recently, had grown accustomed to an illusion of enduring peace, dismissing military might as a relic of a bygone era.

A galvanised country

Finland remembers very well its past dealings with Russia.

Between 1939 and 1940, the country managed to withstand a large-scale invasion launched by the Soviet Union, whose Red Army greatly outnumbered the Finnish forces.

The offensive failed to conquer the country, but Finland was forced to cede 9% of its territory, a painful memory that still resonates to this date.

Over the following years, Helsinki trod a fine line as a thriving liberal democracy living side by side with a towering communist regime. Acting as the buffer zone between the Western and Eastern blocs, Finland found prosperity and grew richer, with its GDP expanding almost three-fold during the 1980s.

It wasn't until the Soviet threat appeared to have vanished for good that Finland joined the European Union, a decision that moved the country decisively closer to the West. But NATO membership remained elusive and lacked traction. A naïve assumption that a post-Soviet Russia would become more open and democratic took hold in the 1990s, diluting the appeal of the transatlantic alliance.

Still, the entrance into the EU, which almost since its inception has tried to develop a common foreign policy, marked a new chapter in Finland's relations with the world and effectively ended its neutrality status, said Matti Pesu, a leading researcher at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA).

"When Finland joined the EU, it adopted a policy of military non-alignment, which is basically less extensive than neutrality," Pesu told Euronews.

"The practical relevance of military non-alignment has been decreasing for 25 years now. The defence policy has internationalised. And since [Russia's] annexation of Crimea in 2014, Finnish military relationship and the scope of cooperation with NATO has been extensive."

Finland is today one of the alliance's most active partners, having taken part in several NATO-led operations, including in the Balkans and Afghanistan. Since 2014, it has been involved in the Interoperability Platform, which aims to ensure that NATO and its partners can work better together in future crises. In 2017, Finland and NATO signed a political agreement for cooperation on cyber defence.

And yet, despite the ever-closer, ever-evolving links with the alliance, Finland kept a cautious distance from full-time membership. This calculated position, Pesu said, was based on two main factors: consistently low support among Finns for joining NATO and a "certain confidence" that Finland could manage its relations with Russia more efficiently as a non-aligned country.

In a matter of weeks, both reasons have been turned wildly upside down.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has galvanised public opinion: a poll released by public broadcaster Yle in early May shows support for NATO membership soaring to 76% of respondents, with just 11% of them flat-out opposing the idea. The numbers represent a stunning turnaround from the scant 28% who backed entering the alliance in January this year.

At the same time, the Kremlin's aggressive campaign has shattered all remnants of trust that Helsinki had in Moscow, pushing the peace-loving continent back into wartime.

"The war indicates that Russia is ready to rely on very extensive use of military force and has increased its appetite and readiness for risk-taking. But it has also changed the broader context," said Pesu.

"Countries like Germany have announced they will take major steps in their respective defence policies. Many pieces of this puzzle are currently moving."

The power of deterrence

As the circumstances in and outside the country began to rapidly pave the path toward NATO, the government published a security report to help lawmakers, who have the final say on accession, guide their debate and internal reflections.

The paper doesn't present any clear-cut conclusions or recommendations but serves to lay out the country's most pressing concerns and priorities. Chief among them growing anxiety that, as Russia advances its neo-imperialist vision, Finland's room to be strategically independent will decrease.

"Russia is likely to adhere to its demands concerning European security and keep them on the agenda in the future," the report says.

"In a situation where Russia aims to build a sphere of influence through demands and military means, failing to react to the changes in the security environment could lead to changes in Finland's international position and a narrowing of Finland's room for manoeuvre."

In this unpredictable and volatile landscape, the power of deterrence becomes even more indispensable. Finland, a country of 5.5 million people, is well aware of its own limitations before a neighbouring nuclear state endowed with the second most powerful army in the world.

Almost inevitably, NATO emerges as the most natural and compelling avenue to pursue. The alliance's cornerstone article 5 of collective defence can offer Finland the much-sought assurance that it won't be left to fend for itself should Russia launch an attack.

"Now we see that we have a neighbour who really goes like it was in the history books, that they do come with the traditional weapons across the border and start killing," Miapetra Kumpula-Natri, an MEP from the governing Social Democratic Party, told Euronews. "This was a wake-up call that it's time to act."

Unlike Ukraine, Finland currently benefits from the EU's article 42.7 of mutual defence clause, which introduces an "obligation of aid and assistance" in case a member state is a victim of an "armed aggression". The provision has little precedent and leaves the meaning of "aid and assistance" deliberately vague in order to give each EU country enough margin of interpretation.

NATO can provide Finland with an extra guarantee and help make a Russian incursion even less likely than it is today, said Kumpula-Natri, voicing similar concerns to the ones expressed in the government report.

"Putin has united the European Union," the MEP noted. "We see that our destinies are more bound together, that we need to work together and deepen our work in defence so that solidarity is not an empty letter."

"We have to think about security more than we needed before this last winter," she added.

NATO's renewed raison d'être

If Finland's NATO application is eventually approved by the 30 member states, the alliance will enjoy an immediate boost in its defence capabilities.

The Finnish army currently has 18,400 conscripts and 18,400 reservists at its disposal, with a wartime strength of 180,000 troops, according to the latest national figures. Its equipment includes 200 battle tanks, 200 mechanised combat vehicles and 800 field guns.

According to the Finnish Constitution, all citizens are obliged to take part in national defence, a mandate that reflects the country's hard-learned lessons from its fraught relationship with Russia. Every male Finnish citizen between the ages of 18 and 60 is liable for military service, while women can apply on a voluntary basis.

Finland's main contribution to NATO, experts say, will be its proven ability to defend the country, particularly its extensive land border, which could become a hotspot of tensions if the Kremlin feels cornered by the alliance's redrawn map and decides to retaliate.

Putin has already warned the policy shift would be an "error" and "negatively affect Russian-Finnish relations". Coincidentally, a Russian energy supplier announced last week it would cut electricity exports to Finland, citing failed payments.

"This is something that, frankly speaking, Russia was asking for. If they hadn't gone into Ukraine, Finland wouldn't have had this change in public opinion," Michał Baranowski, a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund, told Euronews.

"There is nothing else that put Finns so quickly towards NATO than Vladimir Putin."

NATO's sea border is also heading for a drastic redesign. The Baltic Sea, which Russia can access through Kaliningrad and Saint Petersburg, will turn into a "NATO lake" once Finland and Sweden, another Nordic country going through a similar national reckoning, join the 30-strong group, Baranowski said.

"The Baltic states used to be considered indefensible in conventional terms," he said. "Now the defences will be much clearer. Finland and Sweden will be right across the sea to bring military reinforcements. Deterrence around the Baltic Sea will certainly improve."

Finland's contribution, however, won't be confined to army troops and geographical borders.

For years, NATO had been searching for a raison d'être to justify its existence after the end of the Cold War and the consequent shift in the world order. Ironically, Vladimir Putin, a man who has vehemently denounced NATO's expansion, appears to have provided exactly what was missing:

his brazen decision to invade a sovereign country has reinvigorated the alliance's core purpose and made other countries gravitate towards its collective might.

Putin's forceful attempt to push Ukraine away from NATO is likely to conclude with a brand new 1,300-kilometer border with an enlarged and revitalised alliance.

"After February 24, NATO's primary mission is once again territorial defence. It's sort of back to basics," Baranowski said. "Putin has provided the face of evil. The terrible crimes Russia is committing in Ukraine are a reason for the alliance to exist and be strong."

Jens Stoltenberg, NATO's secretary-general, has welcomed Finland's change of heart and said the organisation is willing to fast track the accession procedure while addressing the concerns that some member states, like Turkey, might have regarding its application.

As the government presses on with its plans to forever alter the country's military standing, those living side by side with Russia continue their daily lives, with unassuming self-confidence and collected composure.

"I don't think there is a real fear because we have a very good level of preparation," said Jari Iskanius, from the city of Lappeenranta. "There is nothing to worry about."