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Public opinion and NATO: How different security environments influence the support for NATO in Finland

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Abstract

While foreign and security policy attitudes have been studied for decades, there is a research gap from a Nordic and small-state point of view. In addition, the formation of security policy attitudes has become an even more salient issue in times of a deteriorated security environment. This article provides insight into what explains public opinion on issues regarding military co-operation and alliances, especially in a geographically isolated country such as Finland. The main aim of this article is to study whether, and to what extent, support for NATO membership in Finland has increased in the aftermath of a changing and deteriorating security environment. By using multinomial logistic regression, this article shows that the Finnish public reacted heavily to a security crisis, more specifically Russian aggression in the vicinity, by becoming more likely to favour NATO membership. At the same time, as the proportion of NATO supporters increased, many Finns became more uncertain about their opinion. While confirming the results, it must be noted that the strength of the coefficients differs between years. The cross-sectional data used in the analysis originates from the Advisory Board for Defense Information (ABDI).

Keywords

NATO, security, public opinion, Finland, security crises

Introduction

It is important to understand how different individuals position themselves on military alliances when formulating general explanations for attitudes on foreign and security policies. This becomes an even more salient issue in times of a deteriorating security environment, which directly or indirectly affects the populous. Foreign and security policy attitudes have been studied for decades, but the literature in the field is dominated by studies conducted in an American context (Bjereld and Ekengren, 1999; Szeles, 2021). This can be seen as problematic because foreign and security policy attitudes depend on contextual influences, and one important contextual variable is the prevailing security environment. Previous research shows that public opinion on foreign and security policies overall is stable and robust, meaning that large shifts are seldom experienced.

Public attitudes do, however, react rapidly to larger world events and security changes in the ambient environment. The same patterns have been identified in both Europe and overseas (Zaller, 1990; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Parker, 1995; Holsti, 1996; Isernia et al., 2002; Eichenberg, 2007; Chubb and McAllister, 2021). Still, public attitudes are dynamic. This means that, at first, people desire more of the things that are lacking and deemed to be important. Later, when policy makers deliver more of what was lacking, people want less than originally asked for (Wlezien, 1995). An individual's worldview is, in many ways, shaped by their country's political climate, political history and political culture (Eichenberg, 1989; Kostadinova, 2000; Anderson and Reichert, 1996) in combination with many other factors, such as the individual's experiences, upbringing, interests and more (Zaller, 1992). In other words, a lot is affected by the contextual factors imprinted by both the national climate as well as other individual factors.

In the Nordic countries, research has been conducted on NATO opinions (Ydén et al., 2019). However, relatively few of these studies feature statistical explanatory models. Such an approach, for instance, is more common in studies in an Eastern European context (Kostadinova, 2000; Caplanova, 2004; White et al., 2006). Therefore, there is a research gap from a Nordic and small-state point of view, bearing in mind the contextual differences that characterise attitudes in these surroundings. The main purpose of this article is to study whether support for NATO in Finland increases in the aftermath of a changing and deteriorating security environment. Sociodemographic differences on an individual level are also controlled for. This article provides insight into how the contextual security environment influences support for NATO membership. It contributes to the field of public opinion research by testing earlier theories empirically with statistical analysis. It seeks to better understand specific mechanisms behind security policy attitudes, especially the effects of a more neglected variable in earlier research in smaller countries such as Finland.

This article argues that public opinion on security policy attitudes is contextual. When it comes to attitudes towards NATO membership, context might play an important role. Focusing on Finnish public opinion is, in many ways, an interesting and important undertaking as it deepens our understanding of attitude formation on security issues, especially in smaller states. Firstly, there is a long tradition of surveying the public on questions regarding national security.[1] Secondly, Finland is a relevant case due to its geographical location and geopolitical situation. Finland has, for a long time, adopted a liquid neutrality (Roitto and Holmila, 2021), balancing between the West and the East. In addition, in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and rising tensions between the West and Russia, both Finland and Sweden swiftly applied for NATO membership. A majority of Finns now support Finnish membership in NATO, which is a historical jump in opinion. The geopolitical factors surrounding Finland, and the fact that the question of NATO membership has been a recurrent one, makes the country's citizens and their attitudes both an interesting and a relevant case to study. A country's defence forces depend on public

1. For instance, The Advisory Board for Defence Information and Finnish Business and Policy Forum (EVA)

support (Chubb and McAllister, 2021), which further underlines the importance of studying foreign and security policy attitudes in more detail. In the next section, previous research on public opinion of foreign and security policies is introduced. The focus is mainly on research directly related to the purpose of this article, i.e., in what way do public attitudes respond to changes in the security environment.

Public opinion of foreign and security policies

One of the schools within public opinion research on foreign and security policies argues that citizens' attitudes on security policy issues derive from the elites, called the "top-down effect". For instance, Zaller (1992) claims that the elites heavily influence the public's formulation of foreign policy attitudes. Later research has challenged this school of thought with a bottom-up theory, criticising the statement that citizens largely formulate their foreign and security policy views based on elite indications. In fact, the effect has been shown to be the other way around. The bottom-up model regarding preferences on foreign and security policies suggests that individual preferences are formed more strongly by the information environment they live in, rather than by taking their ideas from political elites (Kerzer and Zeitkopf, 2017). Saeki (2013) found that the tendency of political elites is to shift their political standpoint in line with the voter's opinion, rather than the other way around. Results from Tomz et al. (2019) suggest that the political elite, or parliamentarians, are indeed influenced by where the public stands on issues regarding military force, for instance.

Early research on foreign policy attitudes has shown that public opinion on foreign and defence policy issues are incoherent, inconsistent, ill-informed, and easily changeable. Because of this, public opinion may be an obstacle to effective foreign policy making (Morgenthau, 1950). An irrational public opinion that is highly changeable and unstable means that an opinion on one foreign policy issue does not necessarily lead to similar views on other foreign policy issues. These factors have led to the belief that one could not find a credible relationship between these attitudes and world events (Eichenberg, 2016). This theoretical thinking is also called the Almond-Lippmann consensus (Holsti, 1992) and has been criticised by scholars (Graham, 1988; Isernia et al., 2002). Caspary (1970) concluded, contrary to Almond, that public opinion is steady and robust. However, studies have shown that people's attitudes are affected by, for example, economic and human casualties (Mueller, 1973).

The view of an ill-informed and irrational public opinion changed when Page and Shapiro (1992) conducted one of the largest studies on foreign policy attitudes. Their results indicated that public opinion is actually quite stable. Eichenberg (1989) found a similar pattern in his research of Western European attitudes on issues regarding, for instance, military balance, nuclear weapons, and defence spending. When public opinion fluctuates, it often does so due to external events in a rational manner, meaning reacting in a logical way due to, for example, a foreign actor, friends or foes (Page and Shapiro, 1992; Ziegler, 1998). Other researchers have confirmed this theoretical argument in both an American and a European context (Parker, 1995; Isernia et al., 2002; Kerzer, 2013). We can thus find certain generalisations within the field that researchers have been able to confirm. One is that the public reacts to changes in the security environment. Eichenberg (2007) confirmed this in his study of surveys on NATO from different European countries. He concluded that European citizens clearly react to security changes in the ambient environment. In Australia, there has been similar findings. Public attitudes are quite reactive and clearly respond to different types of security crises. The same is true for external security threats, which the public tend to react to in terms of a heightened awareness of and willingness for defence preparations and international co-operation (Chubb and McAllister, 2021). As previously stated, the similarities between the results from these different studies show that these theories are applicable to other geographical contexts.

As Eichenberg (2016) writes, some changes are instrumental, meaning that the public reacts to positive or negative outcomes of policies implemented by the government. Examples of this can be found when looking at attitudes towards,

for example, European integration (Eichenberg and Dalton, 2007). In addition to instrumental explanations, the public may react when it wants more "moderate" policies (Ninčić, 1988). This means that when the public thinks the government drives policies beyond their acceptance, they react with shifts in attitudes. The thermostat model by Wlezien (1996) implies that when, for instance, foreign policies shift outside of the level desired by the public, a shift in attitudes occurs in order to push the policies towards a desirable level. This theoretical argument has gained a lot of ground among public opinion researchers, both in the United States and in Europe. Wlezien (1996) develops this phenomenon through his thermostat visualisation. When defence spending, for instance, reaches levels not acceptable to the public, attitudes will shift towards the opposite direction, meaning higher defence spending in the following years. This phenomenon, according to Wlezien, can be found in both the United States and Europe. Research shows that governments adapt their budgets according to what the public prefers, a phenomenon again found in both the United States and European countries (Eichenberg, 2016).

Apart from supporting or opposing attitudes, there is the question of so-called non-attitudes, a term coined by Converse (1970). The discussion of non-attitudes, or the absence of an attitude, is a contested one and lacks a precise definition in the literature. A non-attitude on an issue can be caused by many factors. The respondent perhaps does not understand the question or lacks sufficient knowledge about the topic to present a clear opinion. It is also possible that the respondent does not want to present their opinion or feels conflicted. External stimuli, such as political events, may also cause disruption and confusion in the way individuals view an issue. Looking at which demographic variables might affect the formation of non-attitudes, researchers seem to agree on the notion that an individual's level of education has the largest impact on the tendency of having a non-attitude (Schuman and Presser, 1978; Bishop et al., 1980).

When a country's military is taking part in a conflict or operation, the public tends to increase their support for the military's activities. Mueller (1970) coined the phrase 'rally around the flag effect', which refers to the public supporting the government in their particular security policies when the nation is threatened. This support, however, is often short lived and dependant on many factors. International security crises often result in similar behaviour. For instance, survey research conducted after the 9/11 attacks in New York showed that people became more fearful of such attacks (Huddy et al., 2005). Citizens do not normally pay much attention to foreign policy issues because their everyday lives are rarely directly affected. However, attention resurfaces when war or other security threats are present. After the crisis has passed, public opinion tends to return to an earlier position (Holsti, 1996).

Kostadinova (2000) conducted a European study on the issue of NATO membership. She studied public attitudes on NATO in an Eastern European context and confirmed the "threat hypothesis", meaning that fluctuation in opinions on NATO is influenced by changes in the security environment. A similar situation can be observed in Finland. These states were invaded by Russia during the 20th century and have ever since been forced to take the threat of Russian aggression into consideration. Finland managed to retain its independence during the Cold War, while many Eastern Europeans states were so-called satellite states for a long time. In Eastern Europe, due to historical events, there is widespread suspicion among citizens towards Russia, which also affects public attitudes (Kostadinova, 2000). In Finland's neighbouring country of Sweden, the SOM-Institute has regularly measured public attitudes on Swedish NATO membership since 1994. During the first eight years of surveys, opinions were quite steady with most respondents opposing membership. This changed, however, in connection to Russian aggression and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, which resulted in a clear increase in the desire for Sweden to join NATO. These events, and other military disturbances from Russia, have resulted in growing support for Swedish membership (Ydén et al., 2019).

Data, variables and method

The individual level data used in the analysis has

been taken from The Advisory Board for Defence Information, or ABDI, which operates under the Ministry of Defence. The ABDI has regularly commissioned surveys on what Finnish citizens think about Finnish foreign security and defence issues. This makes the data exemplary for this type of analysis. The ABDI has conducted similar opinion polls since 1976 (Ministry of Defence, 2022). Each survey sample consists of around 1000 respondents. Taloustutkimus, a private company specialised in survey research, has collected the data. These surveys focus on national defence and security and foreign policy. Aside from questions about NATO membership, they include questions on various threats, national preparedness, the European Union, crisis management, etc. The respondents are Finnish citizens between the ages of 15 and 79 (excluding the Åland Islands). The sample data for each survey was created by quota sampling (age, gender, region and municipality).[2] The survey answers were mostly collected via face-to-face interviews. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2021 and 2022, answers were collected through computer-assisted face-to-face interviews and web-based self-administered questionnaires.

The units of interest in the analysis are Finnish citizens. In the main analysis, it is examined whether, and to what extent, support for NATO increases in the aftermath of a changing and deteriorating security environment. Several control variables are included in the analysis. Additional regressions are also run outside of the main analyses, including only individual level variables. This is to check whether similar patterns at the individual level hold over time, even though the security environment experiences major changes (see appendix Table A1). In the case of Finland's population, security crises mean Russian military interventions in the vicinity (the war in Georgia in 2008, the crisis in Ukraine in 2014, and the Russia invasion of Ukraine in 2022). These contextual factors are highly relevant for this type of study and are of particular interest in the case of Finland when considering the country's history with Russia.

The dependent variable of interest in this article is based on the survey question: "In your opinion, should Finland seek membership in NATO" with the response alternatives "yes", "no", and "can't say", a standardised survey question in the ABDI surveys since 2005. A standardised formulation is key for the analysis when comparing results between data sets (Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1990; Zaller and Feldman, 1992). For this analysis, particular interest is paid to the support for NATO. The first survey data to be analysed is from 2007, before the start of the Russo-Georgian conflict. The second data set used is from 2008, a survey conducted some months after the conflict started. The third is from 2013 and the fourth from 2014, before and after Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, respectively. The last two datasets analysed are from 2021 and 2022, the year before Russia invaded Ukraine and the year Russia began its invasion. In addition, several individual level background variables are included as control variables in the regressions. When using survey data, there is always a degree of skewness in the samples. It is therefore a strength to control for different background variables. As such, it is possible to make comparisons over time given that, in this case, there is control for gender, age, party choice, education, and area of residence. These variables are chosen based on previous research on which micro-level variables influence pro-participation attitudes towards large organisations (Anderson and Reichert, 1996; Berglund et al., 1998; Kostadinova, 2000).

Starting with age, there is not much evidence of age having an impact on support for defence cooperation. Early research shows that there are significant generational differences in how individuals respond to different events. Different generations have different experiences, which affect their views. External events and changes during a person's lifetime may therefore influence a person's attitudes (Mayer, 1992). This is also referred to as the generation gap (Holsti, 1996). There is nevertheless not much evidence for differences in attitude between age groups regarding support for military alliances (Kostadinova, 2000; Miller, 2021). For the analysis, the age variable is already on a ratio scale

2. In some cases, the sample has been weighted to represent the Finnish population more accurately at the time of the data collection. However, not all datasets include a weight variable. Therefore, weights will not be used in the analysis.

and does not require further recoding.

There is a wide consensus that there are clear gender differences in attitudes on defence and foreign policy issues. As an individual level factor, gender has turned out to be an important explanatory factor for foreign and security policy attitudes. Both in an American and European context, studies show that women are more responsive to casualties in war (Conover and Shapiro, 1993; Eichenberg, 2003). Men have also been shown to have a higher probability of supporting participation in military alliances (Zaller, 1992; Page and Shapiro, 1992). Eichenberg and Stoll (2012) found that even though women do not support defence spending to the same degree as men, the opinions among men and women fluctuate in the same way over time. This means that when public opinion reacts, there is a similar pattern among both women and men.

In Eastern European countries, there is clearly a higher probability of men supporting NATO than women (Kostadinova, 2000). In the United Kingdom, there are attitudinal differences between men and women on security policy issues, with men more likely to favour, for instance, support for the transatlantic relationship and nuclear deterrents (Clements and Thompson, 2021). Additionally, concerning trade, women have shown a lesser likelihood of supporting a liberalised trade in relation to men (Mansfield et al., 2015). In the analysis, the gender variable is coded as a dichotomous dummy variable (female = 1, male = 0).

Different education groups are coded into three education levels for the analyses, tertiary level, secondary level, and primary level. In the analysis, primary level education acts as a reference category. Education is an explanatory variable that is quite frequently highlighted in previous research (Zaller, 1992; Zaller and Feldman, 1992). A higher education means that a person has better information handling skills and thus is more reasonable about the future. More highly educated individuals have the capacity to form more comprehensive opinions about international issues and world events. This results in different attitudinal outcomes when compared to less educated people (Zaller, 1992). A higher level of education makes it thus more probable for a person to support different forms of international co-operation (Holsti, 1996; Schoen, 2007). There is a wide consensus among researchers that an individual's cognitive competence and ability to form more complex opinions increases when education level rises (Listaug, 1995).

Party choice and area of residence are also included as control variables. Previous studies show that partisanship is heavily correlated with a person's foreign policy attitudes. Scholars have highlighted clear polarisation between the left and the right on security issues when studying mass attitudes in different countries (Eichenberg, 1989; Everts, 1995; Isernia et al., 2002; Eichenberg and Stoll, 2015). Results from FPLP surveys[3] have shown great differences between members of the Republican Party and the Democratic Party (Holsti, 1996). Historically, leftist parties have preferred other types of investments than in defence. Those on the left are also less eager about the use of force in terms of conflict solution (Eichenberg, 1989). Left-leaning individuals also tend to be more inclined to oppose the use of military force and are overall more critical towards armed forces (Holsti, 1996; Juhász, 2001). In Sweden, support for NATO follows the traditional left-right scale (Berndtsson et al., 2016). Supporters of more right-leaning parties tend to be more prone to supporting NATO membership. Much lower support can be found among the left-leaning parties and their voters. Looking at Kostadinova (2000), attitudes in Eastern European follow the same pattern.

In Finland, most political parties have not been in favour of NATO membership, except for the National Coalition Party and The Swedish People's Party of Finland (Grönlund and Westinen, 2012; Roitto and Holmila, 2021). The party variable is coded into nine dummy variables. The parties are: the Left Alliance, Social Democratic Party of Finland, National Coalition Party, Centre Party in Finland, Swedish People's Party in Finland, Finns Party, Christian Democrats, and Green League. The last category includes all other answers ("Can't say", "Don't want

3. The Foreign Policy Leadership Project.

to answer", "Wouldn't vote", "Don't have the right to vote", "Other"). In the analysis, the Left Alliance is placed as a reference category. Regarding the party variable, it is interesting to explore whether there are differences between left- and right-leaning individuals. Unfortunately, the data sets do not include direct questions on where the respondents would place themselves on a left–right scale. Party predisposition as a control variable is therefore analysed through this proxy variable.

"Area of Residence" is coded into one (1) and zero (0), with one meaning more sparsely populated areas and zero urban areas (cities, towns). One (1) acts as a reference category in the analysis. Previous research indicates that there are differences in opinions on foreign and security issues between individuals living in rural areas and urban areas. In rural areas, for instance, individuals tend to fear terrorist attacks the most. Such fears, incidentally, are found in people who are least likely to become victims of such an attack (Ferraro, 1995). This coincides with Sunstein's statement that such a reaction is an emotional one rather than rational (Sunstein, 2003). Individuals in urban areas tend to be more in tune, or informed, about what is happening in the outside world.

In the analysis, the first aim is to investigate whether, and to what extent, support for NATO increases following a security crisis. In addition, a control is made to determine whether there are any associations on the individual level and if these associations hold over time. The method used in the analysis is multinomial regression analysis to test for the probability of an individual answering "yes" to Finnish NATO membership. The dependent variable has three unordered categories. An analysis is conducted regarding the effect on "yes" and "can't say", by placing "no" as a reference category.

The analysis has three major steps. Firstly, a brief presentation is made of the time series for NATO support in Finland. In the second step, three pair-wise models are run, meaning that an analysis is made of 2007-2008, 2013-2014, and 2021-2022, in three different regressions. The analysis contains pre- and post-logic, meaning that there is data both before and after a security crisis takes place. All models include control variables. The last part of the main analysis includes a pooled model. A regression is run with the year 2007 (non-crisis year) as a reference category and the remaining five years as dummy variables for each year. Using a pooled model with dummy variables for each year is to also control for individual level variables. The following section begins with a short overview of how NATO attitudes have developed in Finland over time followed by the regression models and a comprehensive analysis of the results.

Fluctuating NATO attitudes in Finland

Before the spring of 2022, overall scepticism of Finnish NATO membership was dominant among citizens. The proportion of pro-NATO attitudes had never been a majority before 2022. There have, of course, been many advocates for membership among Finnish politicians throughout the years. However, these politicians have most likely been overlooked due to weak support from the public. How Finnish citizens position themselves on foreign policy issues has had a big influence on the foreign policy orientations of Finnish decision makers, and this influence has clearly increased since the Cold War (Pesu, 2019). Relatively small changes in support have been documented over time with a couple of exceptions. Figure 1 presents the NATO opinion in Finland since 2005. As can be seen, there was a slight increase in support after the war in Georgia in 2008 and in the wake of the Crimean crisis in 2014. In 2022, the support increased dramatically when Russia invaded Ukraine.

The most likely, direct military threat since the Second World War has been perceived as possible aggression from Russia. This is why Finland's military neutrality and possible military alliances have been central topics in surveys on national security. In Figure 1, the wording of the survey question "In your opinion, should Finland seek membership in NATO?" in the ABDI surveys on foreign and security policies has not changed since 2005. First, the results from the first statistical analysis are presented in which multinomial logistic regression is used to measure whether the likelihood for supporting NATO increases in pair-wise models. In the first

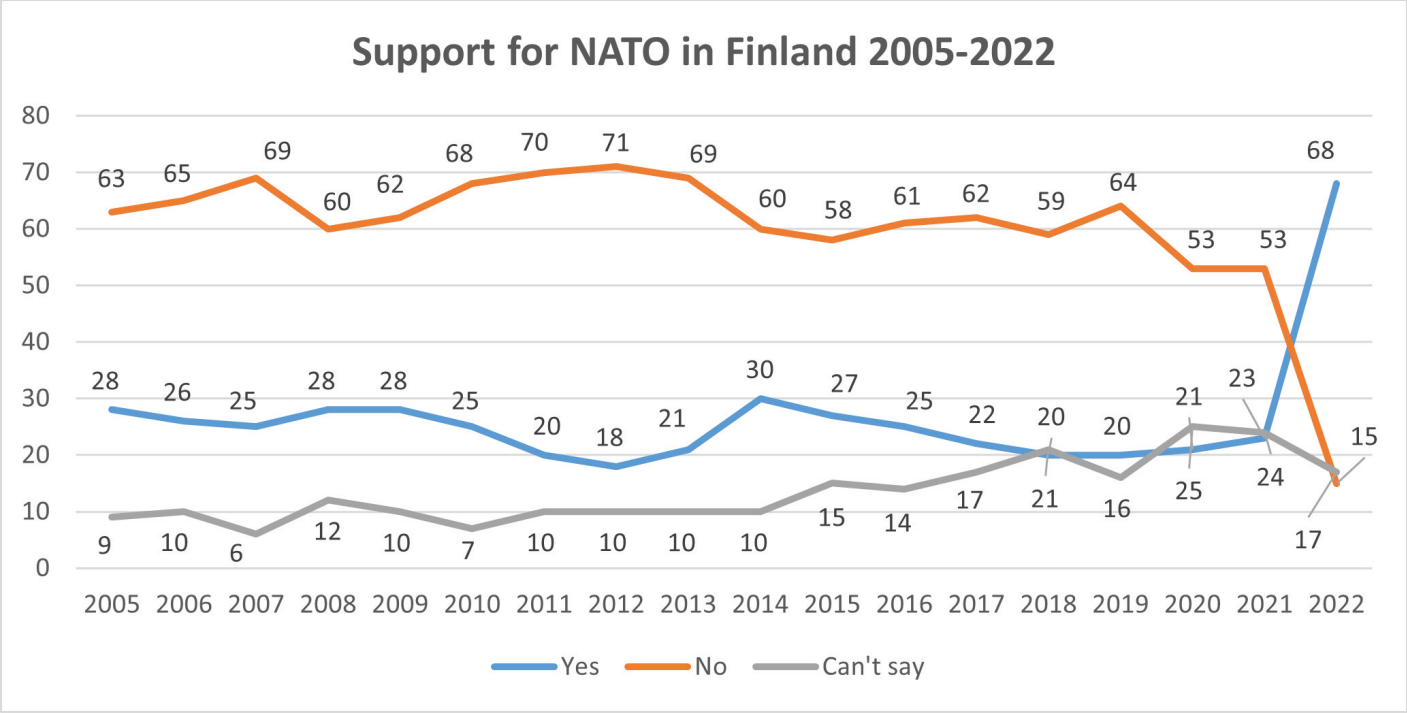

Figure 1. Support for NATO membership in Finland 2005–2022. The respondents answered the question: "In your opinion, should Finland seek membership in NATO?" Note: All entries are percentages. Unweighted data. Source: Advisory Board of Defence Information, ABDI.

model, in Table 1, 2008 is analysed with 2007 as a reference category. The other two models follow the same logic. Table 2 presents an additional, pooled model. In addition to the main analyses, six separate statistical models are run with only sociodemographic variables and the outcome variable (see appendix table A1). For consolidated viewing, those models are not presented in the text. In respective multinomial logistic regressions, the response alternative "no" acts as a reference category for the dependent variable.

Several significant associations can be identified in the regression results in Table 1. The first regression model includes data from 2007 (pre-Georgia crisis) and 2008 (post-Georgia crisis). The former year acts as a reference category. The two additional pairs of years represent models 2 and 3, following the same reference logic (pre- and post-Crimea crisis and pre- and post the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine). The control variables are not

Table 1. Multinomial logistic regression, Security crisis impact on support for NATO

	Model 1 2008 vs. 2007		**Model 2 2014 vs. 2013**		**Model 3 2022 vs. 2021**	
	Yes	Can't say	Yes	Can't say	Yes	Can't say
Post crisis	0.213	**0.907****	**0.556****	0.101	**2.557****	**0.923****
	(0.113)	(0.175)	(0.111	(0.148)	(0.130)	(0.139)
Intercept	-3.946	-3.002	-2.769	-2.758	-3.086	-1.064
	(0.561)	(0.539)	(0.381)	(0.553)	(0.363)	(0.350)
Pseudo R-Square (Nagelkerke)	0.165		0.123		0.354	
N	1968		2061		2003	

Note: **p<0.01; *p<0.05

presented in the first table. The results show that there is strong support for the hypothesis, meaning that the likelihood of a person supporting NATO increases in the wake of a security crisis, even though the associations vary between models. In all three models, the positive coefficients for the post crisis variable point toward this pattern. In 2008, it is possible to observe an increase in "yes", but the coefficient does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($p = 0.058$). The coefficient here is similar to the corresponding coefficient in the pooled regression analysis (see Table 2). An interesting outcome of model 1 is the increase in "can't say" among the respondents. This could be explained by the impact the war in Georgia had on Finns. This crisis might not have resulted in any large shifts towards a positive view of NATO membership. Instead, the crisis seems to have triggered a greater uncertainty among respondents. In 2008, 12 percent of respondents reported uncertain opinions on NATO membership. From that perspective, the results are robust.

Moving on to the second model in Table 1, there is a significant increase in support for NATO during the post crisis year. The difference between the coefficients in 2008 and 2014 is probably due to the nature of the crisis. The crisis in Ukraine, and with it the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, was probably perceived as far more severe from a Finnish perspective. The war in Georgia was a more distant world event, which would explain why there was not a significant increase in NATO support. However, the coefficient for "can't say" in model 1 indicates that citizens became more unsure in their opinions.

The strongest coefficient for support for NATO is found in model 3, where it is considerably higher than in the previous models. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in the spring of 2022 was followed by active political discussion in Finland concerning NATO. A significantly greater portion of Finnish citizens supported membership in the alliance compared to the year before. Simultaneously, as individuals became more positive towards membership, many became more uncertain. In Table 2 (pooled regression analysis), similar associations can be found to Table 1. The difference between 2007 and 2008 is quite small, and the support for NATO decreased in 2013 relative to 2007, after which it again increased in 2014. In 2021, the support among Finns again normalized, and then a large jump in support took place in 2022. The increase in "can't say" is of course a result of the peak in support, but also because many who were previously against membership became unsure.

When controlling for sociodemographic differences, men are more inclined, relatively speaking, to support NATO membership in relation to women and are more certain in their opinion. People living in urban areas are more likely to be supportive than people living in more rural areas. Party wise, right-leaning persons, in relation to those more left leaning, are more inclined to support NATO membership. In addition, highly educated people are more likely to be supportive in relation to those less educated.

Lastly, there is a brief examination of the regression in the appendix, which only includes the sociodemographic control variables. Here, some noteworthy patterns over time can be seen. All else equal, the tendency of men to respond "can't say" has decreased relative to women. In terms of gender differences, women have become more unsure of their views and at the same time, less negative towards NATO in the later models. There is a weaker non-significant association during 2022 for gender because the differences between the sexes have been levelled out due to the sharp increase in support for NATO. Nevertheless, the distribution of attitudes also shows that a large proportion of women became more unsure of their opinion in relation to previous years. There is a difference between parties in the middle and more right-leaning parties. These differences also increase over time, especially in 2022.

A notable observation is that the difference between the Swedish People's Party and the Left Alliance has decreased over time. Looking at the National Coalition Party, the difference has decreased in relation to the previous years. This is because supporters of the Left Alliance have become more positive towards NATO over time. The difference between the two opposites has

Table 2. Multinomial logistic regression, Security crisis impact on support for NATO

Variables	Model	
	Yes	Can't say
2008 (ref. 2007)	0.20	**0.85****
	(0.11)	(0.17)
2013 (ref. 2007)	**-0.30***	**0.65****
	(0.115)	(0.173)
2014 (ref. 2007)	**0.27***	**0.76****
	(0.11)	(0.17)
2021 (ref. 2007)	0.09	**1.79****
	(0.12)	(0.16)
2022 (ref. 2007)	**2.62****	**2.73****
	(0.13)	(0.18)
Gender (ref. female)	**0.21***	**-0.59****
	(0.07)	(0.09)
Area of residence (ref. rural)	**0.25****	**0.28***
	(0.08)	(0.10)
Education Secondary (Secondary ref.)	0.15	-0.077
	(0.09)	(0.11)
Education Tertiary (Primary ref.)	**0.36****	0.06
	(0.10)	(0.13)
PARTY (ref. Left Alliance)		
Social Democratic Party	**1.21****	**0.57***
	(0.18)	(0.20)
Green League	**1.22****	**0.67***
	(0.19)	(0.21)
True Finns	**1.29****	0.07
	(0.18)	(0.23)
Christian Democrats	**0.85****	**0.57***
	(0.26)	(0.29)
Centre party	**1.35****	**0.68****
	(0.18)	(0.21)
Swedish People's Party	**1.98****	**1.16***
	(0.32)	(0.39)
National Coalition Party	**2.74****	**1.14****
	(0.18)	(0.21)
Other party	**1.22****	**1.09****
	(0.17)	(0.18)
Intercept	-3.00	-2.85
	(0.22)	(0.26)
Pseudo R-Square (Nagelkerke)	0.29	
N	6032	

**p<0.01; *p<0.05

nevertheless remained at a high level. Generally, those voting for the National Coalition Party are the most supportive of NATO. It is worth noting that the attitudinal gap between the Green League and the Left Alliance increased when comparing the models. Higher educated people are more likely to support membership relative to less educated, and this difference increased in the wake of the war in Ukraine. No differences between urban and rural residency are found. This is probably due to the same reasons as the gender variable. Looking at age, there is a tendency for those who experienced the cold war to be more inclined to support NATO membership during later years. They have become more supportive than younger individuals but the change is limited and thus, no strong argument can be made.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this article was to study whether, and to what extent, support for NATO in Finland increases in the aftermath of a changing and deteriorating security environment. It was shown that the Finnish public does indeed react to such developments, becoming more likely to increase its support in the wake of a security crisis. It must be, however, noted that the strength of the coefficients differs between years. It should also be pointed out that attitude formation is a complex issue. This means that there is a vast number of variables that influence fluctuations in public opinion, many of which are not taken into account in the analysis.

The question then arises whether the increase in support for NATO membership is mainly a consequence of a deteriorating security environment or if it is a result of the increased saliency of national security issues. The analyses presented in this article are not sufficient to answer these questions. What the results clearly show, however, is that after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the likelihood of Finns supporting NATO clearly increased. The same phenomenon can be seen in 2014 but to a lesser extent. The increase may also be a result of an increased political awareness of these issues, making the question of national security and NATO a more prominent one. Even though the security environment experienced a major change in 2014, the support for NATO membership declined shortly thereafter. This decline was probably due to a decreased salience, or awareness, of the drawn-out conflict in Ukraine.

Simultaneously, as the proportion of NATO-supporters increased, Finns became more unsure in their opinions. This can be interpreted as people moving one step closer to supporting a NATO membership. It may also be a sign of resistance

or ambiguity towards this specific security policy issue. This is, however, less likely based on the overall distribution of opinions. The formation of non-attitudes might take place if the individual lacks sufficient knowledge about the issue at hand. Another aspect could be that the issue is not considered relevant or important at that point in the person's life. Individuals might also feel more conflicted than before, making them unable to form a specific opinion.

The results from the regression analyses are compelling, corresponding to findings in previous studies conducted in other parts of the world, both in Europe and overseas (Page and Shapiro, 1992; Holsti, 1996; Kostadinova, 2000; Eichenberg, 2007; Chubb and McAllister, 2021). For the Finnish population, Russian aggressions toward other countries changed the security landscape, and many Finns repositioned themselves on national security issues after these events. Furthermore, the results provide evidence of sociodemographic differences and support for NATO. As it turns out, men are prone to be more supportive of membership than women, and have, over time, been more certain in their views. During recent years, however, these differences have levelled out due to the surge in support across the whole population. Highly educated individuals differ from the less educated in their views, also confirming the findings of previous scholars (Holsti, 1996; Schoen, 2007; Kostadinova, 2000).

It needs to be pointed out, however, that the attitudinal differences between education groups only seem to really occur in connection to the war in Ukraine in 2022. In the aftermath thereof, many political parties that previously opposed NATO membership now supported it. Whether this shift was a result of a change in public opinion or not is beyond the scope of this analysis. Why people living in urban areas are more willing to join NATO than those living in rural areas is probably that, as Sunstein (2003) points out, rural citizens are less in tune with the outside world. Another explanation could be that the feeling of safety varies between those living in the countryside and those in cities. Perhaps living in a city makes one feel more exposed to the threat of military actions.

This article provided an insight into what explains public opinion on issues regarding military co-operation and alliances, especially in a geographically isolated country such as Finland – a country that, at the same time, shares one of the longest borders with Russia. Military actions by Finland's neighbour clearly results in a stronger will among Finns to further integrate with the West by joining NATO. Even though the question of NATO membership has been a recurrent one for many years, a completely new security situation is now being experienced with a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Will this rapid change in public support hold over time or will it revert to previous levels after the crisis? This could be the case, especially when and if the perceived threat from Russia decreases and the security situation changes. If this occurs, Finns will probably desire a more moderate NATO policy, resulting again in a larger opposition towards Finland's membership than experienced now.

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Table A1. Multinomial logistic regression predicting NATO support

	2007		2008		2013		2014		2021		2022	
	Yes	Can't say	Yes	Can't say	Yes	Can't say	Yes	Can't say	Yes	Can't say	Yes	Can't say
Gender (ref. female)	0.13	-1.18**	0.05	-0.52*	0.14	-0.48*	0.2	-0.54*	0.57**	-0.47**	0.21	-0.61**
	-0.16	-0.33	-0.16	-0.21	-0.17	-0.22	-0.15	-0.22	-0.18	-0.17	-0.19	-0.23
Age	0.01	-0.01	0	0	0	-0.01*	-0.01	-0.01*	0	-0.01*	0.01**	0
	0	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	0	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
Secondary education (ref. primary)	0.12	0.28	0.21	-0.49	0.14	-0.26	0.12	0.2	-0.17	0.04	0.54*	0.37
	-0.19	-0.33	-0.2	-0.24	-0.23	-0.26	-0.2	-0.28	-0.27	-0.25	-0.27	-0.32
Tertiary education (ref. primary)	0.24	-0.11	0.22	-0.56	0.49	-0.17	0.19	0.57	0.16	0.46	0.66*	0.14
	-0.25	-0.47	-0.25	-0.32	-0.26	-0.31	-0.24	-0.34	-0.28	-0.26	-0.19	-0.35
Area of residence (ref. rural)	0.47*	0.39	0.23	0.55*	0.46*	0.72*	0.21	-0.02	0.117	0.09	0.04	0.06
	-0.2	-0.35	-0.18	-0.25	-0.21	-0.28	-0.19	-0.26	-0.21	-0.2	-0.24	-0.29
Social Democratic Party (ref. Left alliance)	2.09**	17.83	2.12**	0.51	0.66	0.4	1.11*	2.01	0.44	0.19	1.62**	0.79
	-0.74	0	-0.75	-0.5	-0.51	-0.64	-0.45	-1.08	-0.44	-0.33	-0.37	-0.45
Green League (ref. Left alliance)	1.78*	17.60**	1.96*	-0.02	0.66	1.19*	1.13**	1.64	0.87	0.57	2.12**	1.65**
	-0.79	-0.59	-0.77	-0.58	-0.54	-0.61	-0.46	-1.12	-0.49	-0.37	-0.53	-0.59
True Finns (ref. Left alliance)	1.87*	0.12	2.01**	-0.61	0.74	-0.39	1.26**	2.19*	1.16**	-0.03	1.21**	-0.17
	-0.82	-4628	-0.78	-0.74	-0.49	-0.7	-0.43	-1.07	-0.41	-0.37	-0.36	-0.5
Christian Democrats (ref. Left alliance)	2.11*	0.104	1.93*	-0.041	0.54	19.43	0.08	2.163	1.02	0.754	0.15	0.545
	-0.86	-5899	-0.81	-0.7	-0.77	0	-0.85	-1.27	-0.6	-0.5	-0.52	-0.58
Centre party (ref. Left alliance)	2.66**	17.81**	1.84*	0.09	0.83	0.8	1.14**	2.24*	0.91	0.65	1.69**	0.78
	-0.75	-0.54	-0.76	-0.54	-0.49	-0.59	-0.43	-1.05	-0.49	-0.39	-0.49	-0.59
Swedish People's Party (ref. Left Alliance)	2.21*	0.08	3.40**	0.71	2.69***	1.89	1.11	2.42	1.42	0.67	1.35	1.04
	-1.08	0	-0.98	-1.22	-0.76	-1.02	-0.92	-1.51	-0.75	-0.7	-0.82	-0.92
National Coalition Party (ref. Left Alliance)	3.82**	18.95**	3.76**	0.99	1.83**	1.01	2.59**	2.34*	2.59**	0.87*	2.59**	1.08
	-0.75	-0.49	-0.75	-0.56	-0.48	-0.61	-0.43	-1.09	-0.42	-0.39	-1.62	-0.56
Other (ref. Left Alliance)	2.32*	18.65**	2.02**	0.62	0.77	1.17*	1.11**	2.97**	0.85*	0.82**	0.87**	0.59
	-0.74	-0.4	-0.74	-0.47	-0.47	-0.55	-0.4	-1.02	-0.4	-0.29	-0.3	-0.35
Intercept	-4.32	-20.09	-3.38	-2.3	-2.8	-2.3	-2.19	-3.62	-2.39	-0.86	-1.05	-0.6
	-0.79	-0.7	-0.79	-0.63	-0.57	-0.67	-0.5	-1.08	-0.55	-0.44	-0.49	-0.57
Pseudo R-Square (Nagelkerke)	0.2		0.15		0.12		0.13		0.16		0.16	
N	986		974		1036		1013		990		996	

**p<0.01; *p<0.05

Table A2. The distribution of attitudes towards NATO membership by party choice (%) 2007–2022

Political party 2007	Other	Green League	Christian Democrats	True Finns	Swedish People's Party	Centre Party	National Coalition Party	Social Democratic Party	Left Alliance
Yes	21.1	15.6	20.7	17.4	20	28.5	56.2	20.7	3.2
No	68.8	78.9	79.3	82.6	80	67.2	36.2	74.7	96.8
Can't say	10.2	5.6	0	0	0	4.4	7.7	4.6	0
Political party 2008									
Yes	21.6	23.7	22.7	25	54.5	20	60.7	24.4	3.8
No	62.7	67	68.2	70	36.4	70.8	29.6	61.6	84.4
Can't say	15.7	9.3	9.1	5	9.1	9.2	9.6	14	11.5
Political party 2013									
Yes	16.4	16	17.6	17.6	57.1	17.8	39.7	16.7	10.2
No	67.5	65.3	82.4	79.1	28.6	72.2	50.4	75.4	83.1
Can't say	16.1	18.7	0	3.4	14.3	10.1	9.9	7.9	6.8
Political party 2014									
Yes	23.3	30.1	11.1	28.8	25	25.3	60.3	26.9	12.3
No	58.6	63	77.8	63.2	62.5	65.7	33.6	65.4	86.2
Can't say	18.1	6.8	11.1	8	12.5	9	6	7.7	1.5
Political party 2021									
Yes	16.7	16.4	19.4	27	26.7	18.2	54.9	13.5	9.4
No	51	53.5	51.6	59.5	46.7	55.8	28.3	65.5	68.8
Can't say	32.3	30.1	29	13.5	26.7	26	16.8	20.9	21.9
Political party 2022									
Yes	57.1	70.3	45.2	71.3	62.5	77	87.7	74.5	44.2
No	19.4	6.8	25.8	19.4	12.5	9.5	4.3	10.2	33.7
Can't say	23.5	23	29	9.3	25	13.5	8	15.3	22.1

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Table A3. The distribution of attitudes towards NATO membership by gender (%) 2007–2022

Gender 2007	Male	Female
Yes	25.7	23.9
No	71.6	67.1
Can't say	2.7	9
Gender 2008		
Yes	29.4	25
No	61.3	60.7
Can't say	9.3	14.3
Gender 2013		
Yes	21.7	18.3
No	70	68.2
Can't say	8.2	13.5
Gender 2014		
Yes	31.3	25.8
No	60.7	60.5
Can't say	8	13.7
Gender 2021		
Yes	29.7	14.4
No	53	55
Can't say	17.3	30.6
Gender 2022		
Yes	73	61.4
No	15.2	15.1
Can't say	11.8	23.5

Table A4. The distribution of attitudes towards NATO membership by education level (%) 2007–2022

Education, 2007	Primary	Seconday	Tertiary
Yes	21.6	24.8	31.5
No	73.4	68.5	63.6
Can't say	5	6.7	4.9
Education 2008			
Yes	20.1	27.7	34.6
No	62.9	62.2	56
Can't say	17	10	9.4
Education 2013			
Yes	14.9	18.7	26.8
No	71.6	71.5	61.6
Can't say	13.5	9.9	11.6
Education 2014			
Yes	24.6	28	33.1
No	65	61.4	54.5
Can't say	10.3	10.6	12.4
Education 2021			
Yes	20.8	20.4	23.8
No	55.4	57.9	47.6
Can't say	23.8	21.7	28.7
Education 2022			
Yes	55.3	66.9	72.7
No	23.6	14.7	13
Can't say	21.1	18.4	14.4

Table A5. The distribution of attitudes towards NATO membership by area of residence (%) 2007–2022

Residence, 2007	Urban	Other
Yes	26.7	19.3
No	67	76
Can't say	6.3	4.7
Residence 2008		
Yes	28.1	25
No	58.9	65.9
Can't say	13	9.1
Residence 2013		
Yes	21.8	14.3
No	65.9	79
Can't say	12.3	6.7
Residence 2014		
Yes	29.4	25.1
No	59.8	63.7
Can't say	10.9	11.2
Residence 2021		
Yes	22	20.8
No	53	57.2
Can't say	25	22
Residence 2022		
Yes	66.9	69
No	15.5	14
Can't say	17.6	17

Table A6. The distribution of attitudes towards NATO membership by age group (%) 2007–2022

Age groups, 2007	**15-29**	**30-44**	**45-59**	**60-79**
Yes	22.3	24.3	23.9	28.2
No	69.3	68.1	72.3	68
Can't say	8.4	7.6	3.8	3.8
Age groups, 2008				
Yes	30.3	21	31.6	24.2
No	57.6	68.9	55.8	63.2
Can't say	12.1	10	12.6	12.6
Age groups, 2013				
Yes	19.5	20.2	19.4	20.5
No	65.6	66.8	72.8	71
Can't say	14.9	13	7.8	8.6
Age groups, 2014				
Yes	30.3	27.6	25.1	29.6
No	57.4	60	62.1	62.9
Can't say	12.3	12.4	12.8	7.5
Age groups, 2021				
Yes	16.8	20.4	22.2	24.2
No	48.5	52.6	57	55.2
Can't say	34.7	27	20.7	20.7
Age groups, 2022				
Yes	55.5	63.7	72.6	71.3
No	22	14.9	16.3	12
Can't say	22.6	21.4	11.2	16.7