

Discussion Article

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# Finnish orientation(s) towards Europe and the West

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## Abstract

Finland's accession to NATO in April 2023 has been celebrated as the final confirmation of the country's western orientation, also in identity-political terms. By reviewing the Finnish approaches towards European integratory processes since the early 1990s, including the field of security, the article argues that rather than as an effort to develop a new kind of westernised identity, one should perceive this orientation as an affirmation of the traditional Finnish and Nordic, pragmatic and protestant values.

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## Keywords

Finnish identity, EU membership, NATO membership, Nordic pragmatism

## Introduction

On April 4, 2023, Finland relinquished its long-standing neutrality and became full member of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO). For many, this decision represents the ultimate confirmation of the country's orientation towards, or alignment with, the 'West'. 'It is now fulfilled', has been a recurring contention over the past few months in Finnish public debates.<sup>1</sup>

This line of argumentation, however, poses an inherent risk for misinterpretation. It may begin to express a national need of sorts to develop into something 'more western', a unilinear identity-political transition towards an ideal type, however that may be defined. This article<sup>2</sup> – a sweeping overview rather than a detailed empirical analysis – seeks to argue that this is *not* how we should understand Finland's orientation towards the western integratory processes since the end of the Cold War. Rather than as a 'move towards something', we should perceive this orientation as an accomplishment determined by the ideals of active, hard-working protestant Nordicism – the fulfilment of an already extant traditional national identity, as it were.

To convince the reader of this argument, I will review Finland's approaches and attitudes towards European institutional cooperation over the past three decades. I begin with the possible explanations for Finland's decision to join the European Union, and then discuss some features of the country's EU policies and attitudes since 1995 – with the concomitant identity-political changes. In the final section, I will consider a few points related to the first steps of the country's NATO path. Continuity thus prevails: new identity layers develop and are mixed with old ones, while long-term institutional arrangements make this possible.

## Joining the European Union

For years, as I have been giving introductory lectures on International Relations to the Department's new students, I have tried to make sense of the basic theoretical toolkit of IR by referencing Finland's decision to join the European Union in the mid-1990s – before the current student generation was in fact even born. Each of the main components of this toolkit, the worldviews of 'realism', 'liberalism', and 'constructivism', seems to point to a different explanation for the willingness of the Finns to vote in favour of EU membership in the October 1994 referendum and thus relinquish a significant proportion of their national sovereignty, ultimately secured through the war sacrifices of 1939–45. The result of the referendum was unambiguous: 56.9 percent of voters cast their ballots 'yes', with a turnout of 74 percent. Finland joined the European Union the following year, together with Sweden and Austria.

The **realist** explainer would presumably contend that the primary reason for Finland's decision to join the EU was *security*. People sharing this perspective believed that membership would act as a security shield against the great power Russia with which the country shared a complicated history – and a border of well over 1000km.

In the country's public discussions, this storyline has arguably been and still is the dominant one, probably because security concerns indeed provided a central impetus for Finland's *foreign policy leadership* to embark upon the Union path (e.g. Paavonen, 2015, p. 15). Russia's weakness after the

1. E.g. former European Commissioner and presidential candidate Olli Rehn in Europe Forum, Turku, 30/8/2023.

2. The bulk of this essay was originally a lecture entitled 'Finnish Narratives on Europe and the European Union' that I gave at the University of Cologne in May 2019, as part of the all-European lecture series on 'Narratives of Europe, Narratives for Europe'.

collapse of the Soviet Union offered a window of opportunity for making this decision while, at the same time, an imperialist form of discourse seemed to re-emerge in Finland's neighbour, particularly apparent in the nationalist extremist rhetoric of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and his supporters. Zhirinovskiy openly suggested that Finland ought to be re-annexed to Mother Russia, and his Liberal Democratic Party of Russia even won the 1993 parliamentary elections with 23 percent of the votes (e.g. Bäck, 2017, p. 33).

It is noteworthy, however, that NATO membership never attained any significant support among the wider Finnish public during those early post-Cold War years (and its popularity remained relatively low, with only around 20 percent openly in favour, that is, until Russia launched the war in Ukraine in February 2022; Vogt, 2022); the policy of international neutrality had, after all, served the country well since its adoption in the aftermath of the Second World War. In other words, had military security been *the* overriding concern, one would have expected NATO to have already represented a more appealing alternative in the minds of the Finns.

The second reason for Finland's positive EU decision points to a **liberal** framework for understanding the world. From this perspective, the Finns were excited about the possibility that the European markets would open for them and for their businesses in a novel way. Given that the country had recently survived a major economic recession, possibly deeper than any Western country had experienced since the 1940s, there is, indeed, a substantial amount of credibility to this thesis. The country's economy was (and is) heavily export-oriented, and the recession had shown how vulnerable a small country's economy can be vis-à-vis the globalised economy. Belief in international cooperative institutions was also high, not least because of Finland's greatest Cold-War diplomatic achievement, the Helsinki process and the resulting OSCE, which had paved the way for the end of communism in the continent. This surely also reflected a sense of pragmatism: prior to the referendum, EU supporters repeated time and again that it is important to sit at the tables at which decisions were being made.

The **constructivist** frame of explanation focusses on the ways in which words, deeds and interaction with others constantly produce various types of identities. A constructivist would thus argue that the Finns wanted to become members of the (West) European family of countries in order to demonstrate their true Europeanness, to convince themselves and others that their identity was European and Western, not Eastern. This appeared particularly pertinent given that in the Western media, Finland had often found itself in the eastern part of the continent and as a subordinate of the Soviet Union; hence the pejorative term *Finnlandisierung* (Finlandization in English). Sami Moisio (2008, p. 82) has even drawn a historical parallel between the 1939–40 Winter War, that is, the country's heroic battle against the Soviet Union during the first months of the Second World War and its later decision to apply for EU membership. Both episodes demonstrated to the world that Finland wanted to belong to the western hemisphere – and to be *recognised* in these terms.

It is by no means easy to deduce which of these three principal theoretical explanations is in the end the most convincing or crucial one, even though, as indicated earlier, the security factor has definitely dominated public debates. The obvious conclusion is that Finnish EU support was a combination of all these three factors – in addition to a general enthusiasm towards the winds of change after the decades of the Cold War, which in many respects was a highly successful time in Finnish history,

making the construction of a modern social-democratic welfare state possible.<sup>3</sup> However, what is important from the present article's perspective is that identity-political concerns did play a central role and, as we will see below, their impact may have been even more central when the country's policies in the EU's institutional framework began to take shape.

The centrality of these three explanations also entails the contention that the original *raison d'être* of the European Union, integration as *a peace process*, hardly proliferated in the Finnish debates of the mid 1990s – in contrast to the war-shadowed political conditions since February 2022 with regular references to the EU's peace-related origins. The EU has *not* represented an *existential* or foundational institution for the Finns, as it possibly has in many western European countries in which the abolition of intra-European war has traditionally been *the* primary justification of the Union. For Finland, the choice to 'join' Europe was pragmatic and instrumental, even in identity-political terms (cf. Raunio and Saari, 2017).

## Finland in the EU: the first 13 years

With Finland's accession, the European Union appeared to have welcomed a model pupil to its ranks, a hard-working protestant one – or this was at least how the domestic Finnish debate depicted it. *The country's elites* wholeheartedly and virtually unanimously embraced their new status within the European family and EU critical voices by and large disappeared from public debate. Johanna Vuorelma (2017), in her illuminative text on Finnish EU attitudes, even names this original approach to the Union as the '*romantic narrative*'.

In this context, the initial guiding idea behind Finland's Union politics was to carry the country into all *cores* of the Brussels polity, to be able to sit at the tables where the decisions were truly being made. This also indicated proactivity in terms of policy formulations during those early years of Union membership; the *Northern Dimension* initiative of 1998, a comprehensive policy framework for advancing cooperation with Russia and the Baltic States, is the most famous example of this attitude (e.g. Ojanen, 2001). Liberal internationalist and institutionalist ideals thus seemed to prevail, coupled with some sort of aspirational constructivist identity politics with which the Finns sought to demonstrate their European credentials (Clunan, 2009). Realistic security concerns only appeared on the policy agenda to a very limited degree.<sup>4</sup>

There was also, from the beginning, the idea that with the accession of Finland (along with Sweden), the EU would in fact become an inherently *better* polity. It would assume at least some of the Nordic virtues: protestant work ethics, a developed sense of equality, openness, transparency, accountability – more democracy, if you wish. President Martti Ahtisaari (1994–2000), a future Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, expressed this view elegantly in a speech he gave in Denmark in September 1994, only a

3. All these three factors are also geography-related. (Moisio, 2008). 'Security' ultimately reflects the *geopolitical* predicament of the country; new markets and open borders are particularly important for this seemingly *peripheral* corner of Europe; and identity is also geographically defined, Russia representing the significant, traditional 'Other' for the Finns. Indeed, the decision to join the EU possibly reflects the old geographical foreign policy wisdom that has prevailed in the country – 'we first and foremost need to acknowledge the reality of our geopolitical position'. This seemingly simple point has been strongly present in the post-war tradition of Finnish foreign-policy making.

4. It is, however, noteworthy that these pro-integration attitudes were not necessarily shared by the wider public. During the first decade of Finnish membership, the EU's popularity was not particularly high; the country rather belonged to the EU-sceptical camp (Vallaste, 2013). The 'traditionalists', and to a lesser extent those who critically regarded the Union as *the* stronghold of neoliberalism, still enjoyed significant support among the population. According to Eurobarometers, during the first decade of EU membership, Finnish attitudes remained more sceptical than the EU average. However, after 2010 Finnish EU views eventually came very close to those of a typical EU citizen. (Bäck, 2017, p. 38).

few weeks before the EU referendum:

*'We Finns are [...] in rather basic agreement that the Nordic social model, based on equality, social accountability and open democracy, will on the whole remain a good model for the future, too, despite all the problems. It is a model that also allows us to play a part in broader integration of our continent. [...] If the Finnish nation votes "yes" on accession to the European Union, we [Finland and Denmark] shall work together as Union members on the basis of Nordic values. The Union will then take on an increasingly northern weighting which will benefit the Union as a whole and Europe in general.'* President Martti Ahtisaari, speech in the Danish Foreign Policy Society, September 7, 1994.

While this thinking may still be present among Finnish EU elites, and perhaps among the wider public, its strength has surely waned with the passage of time as a more realistic view about the internal intricacies of the Union has begun to reign. Something of this attitude may still remain, however. Risto Heiskala et al. (2022, Ch. 5) interviewed a significant number of EU-engaged politicians and EU civil servants, members of the Finnish euro-elite, in the late 2010s. The shared belief that these interviewees conveyed was that the Finnish EU policy-makers are, on the whole, exceptionally hardworking and deeply engaged in what they do in various EU contexts in order to build a better Europe for us all, perhaps not too far removed from the Nordic model.

There is, of course, an evident risk of hubris here, an unfounded conceit that the Finns might possibly maintain vis-à-vis other parts of Europe, particularly the southern member states. In Finnish *belles lettres*, there is a superb depiction of said arrogance, namely Hannu Raittila's ironical novel *Canal Grande* from 2004. In the book, a group of Finnish engineers, a band of true *homo fabers*, try to rescue the monumental buildings of Venice from drowning – thinking that the local actors would be unable to do it. Indeed, the ideals of the Nordic model represent an identity of *doing* rather than that of being. However, as I discuss later, this deep belief in the virtues of the Finnish or Nordic model has also provided the basis for the most significant counter narrative to the EU in Finland.

## A Nordic tech-miracle

Despite this continued importance of the culture of Nordicness, this first phase of Finnish EU-membership was in many respects re-constitutive in terms of Finnish identity politics. The country's mental horizons towards the outside world widened significantly and the closeness of state identity seemed to weaken (cf. Saukkonen, 1999). The economy boomed unexpectedly and its foundation became more diverse and more international. Nokia's domination in the global mobile phone markets epitomised these positive developments. One can even self-satisfactorily argue that as a frontrunner of mobile technologies, the peripheral state of Finland made it possible for others to enlarge their mental horizons as well – 'to connect people', paraphrasing Nokia's slogan. These technologies even seemed to initialise a change in the stereotypical introvert and reticent mentality among the country's citizens – ordinary Finns thus began to talk!<sup>5</sup>

Simultaneously, in many global comparative indexes Finland was suddenly ranked among the best in the world, often outright the best, in many instances alongside other Nordic countries. The PISA studies in the field of education were possibly the flagship of this ranking success, to the extent that

5. For example, Olli Alho (2002), a prominent intellectual, wrote about this on the main national web portal *Virtual Finland* as follows: 'Mobile phones have no doubt changed visitors' perceptions of Finland. Whereas a few decades ago a visitor might report back home on an uncommunicative, reserved and introvert Arctic tribe, the more common view today is that of a hyper-communicative people who are already experiencing the future that some fear and others hope for: a society where anyone can reach anyone else, no matter where or when.'

during the 2000s, a constant stream of foreign education officials visited the country to learn ‘how the Finns do it’ (e.g. Østerud, 2016). These types of successes have continued in a range of fields until the 2020s, from competitiveness to (non)corruption – and they may already have become an element of national identity construction. In the past four years, Finland has been ranked as ‘the happiest country in the world’, which some Finns for their part find bewildering.

Finland had thus seemed to evolve, or so it was believed, into a first-row modern high-tech state, displaying an exceptionally harmonious overall societal development, essentially based on the ideals of social-democratic equality (cf. Vogt, 2019). This new belief in international high-flier status contrasted strongly with the country’s traditional national self-image or even identity. The conventional narrative had long dictated that ‘we are a small, peripheral and poor country in the North’, with thin national layers of culture compared with the long-term civilised nations of Central and Western Europe.

Finnish identity, founded upon such rigid maxims, thus also naturally involved an element of uncertainty and perhaps insecurity – which, perhaps paradoxically, led to a relatively strong and closed nation-state identity, as Pasi Saukkonen (1999) once argued by way of his systematic comparison with the Netherlands. As the example of *Canal Grande* already indicated, this uncertainty is likely to have diminished with the successes of the new millennium – although to what extent, remains a moot question. However, what is important is that the successes did confirm that the chosen path of societal development was good and desirable, endorsing the virtues of traditional Nordic protestant identity. Perhaps even the NATO membership functions towards that same direction in many people’s minds.<sup>6</sup>

## Finland, the EU’s crises and the populist counter-narrative

All things considered, the romance between Finland and the EU nonetheless diminished as the Union encountered a series of economic shocks from 2008 onwards, in particular the Euro-crisis, culminating in the establishment of the European Stability Mechanism in September 2012. The Finnish EU debate now assumed much more critical undertones than before, with only a limited degree of understanding displayed towards such countries as Greece, which were apparently so poorly managed that they would not have deserved Euro-membership in the first place. Finland thus became a close ally of Germany in support of that country’s (and the European Commission’s) austerity policies towards the Euro-members in need of rescue from economic collapse. Vuorelma (2017), in the above-mentioned article, describes this new mood in terms of *tragedy* (or occasionally satire).

I am, however, not entirely convinced that this term points to the most essential new feature of the Finnish understanding of the country’s position vis-à-vis Europe at the time. A more informative term might be confusion or perplexity, springing from the Finns’ inability to see things in a genuinely European context and from the perspective of the troubled new allies, the co-member states – that perspective was not yet internalised (has it been internalised somewhere?). The confusion surely also reflected Finland’s own economic problems in the early 2010s. The decline in the world economy was aggravated in the Finnish context by the fact that Nokia practically lost the battle for the souls of mobile phone users against Apple – and the company’s influence in the country’s economy and its

6. Pertti Joenniemi (2002) has talked about an ambivalence between the Hegelian and Herderian traditions of Finnish nationhood and concluded that Finland has never really been able to decide to which of these traditions it belongs. On Finnish national identity, see also, e.g., Raento, 2008; Anttila, 2007.

newly-defined identity had indeed been immense until that capitulation.

Be that as it may, through the increased popularity of the Finns Party – then still known as the True Finns – the view of ‘the EU as a tragedy’ gained a mouthpiece in the country. The party earned a historic victory in the elections of 2011, gaining four times more votes than in 2007 – 19 percent. The then leader and founder of the party, Timo Soini, a former MEP, became famous for his provocative rhetorical skills, including critical EU slogans. ‘Where the EU, there a problem’, still rings a bell among the wider public. After the next elections of 2015, the party also managed to join the new right-wing government (with 17 percent of the votes).

However, under Soini’s leadership the party’s (right-wing) populist credentials remained comparatively moderate (a fact that foreign media did not understand), owing perhaps to its roots as a modest, agrarian smallholders’ party. Since 2017, however, after the dramatic ousting of the Soiniates from the party leadership, the Party has been clearly more radical and nationalistically inclined, embracing highly critical views towards the EU and European immigration policies. The tenor thus hardly differs from what one can find among the echelons of, say, *Fidesz* in Hungary or *Rassemblement National* in France. The logic of recognition seems to apply in a reverse manner: the Party’s supporters undoubtedly believe that traditional genuine Finnishness, a sub-branch of ‘true’ Europeanness, is no longer given the appreciation it deserves. The party’s EU election programme of 2019 made these points as follows:

*The Finns is the only Finnish party that nurtures, in its European politics, the Finnish values and the classical Western ones shaped by the antique era, a sense of Christian community and the Enlightenment. By contrast, the parties in power in Finland, with the assistance of Brussels, preach the gospel of open immigration, globalisation and neoliberal economic policies. Finnish mainstream parties are thus willing to bypass the western legacy of Finland and the rest of Europe, which has prevailed for several thousand years. (The Finns Party, EU election programme 2019; translation HV)*

Niko Pyrhönen’s doctoral dissertation (2015) offers a particularly interesting interpretation of this EU counter narrative. His main argument was that the Finns Party has been able to exploit a *welfare nationalist narrative*. Immigration has become an economic issue that potentially threatens the very foundations of the Finnish welfare model, thus undermining the well-deserved well-being of ‘ordinary hard-working, true and genuine Finns’. It is evident that my perspective in the present essay comes very close to this: the argument about the (imagined) fulfilment of traditional Nordic Finnishness by way of integration into European institutional arrangements originates, in fact, from the same source as this populist counter narrative.

It is worth bearing in mind, however, that public EU support has overall gradually increased in the country in recent years – the age of tragedy now appears to be a matter of yesteryears. After the Covid-19 pandemic, and particularly since the Ukraine war started in 2022, the support for EU membership has in fact been higher than ever, with almost two thirds in favour of the country’s membership and less than 20 percent against. The latter figure is approximately the same percentage that has turned out to vote for the Finns Party over the past 12 years but, remarkably, as much as one fifth of that party’s supporters now also see EU membership in positive terms. (EVA, 2023.) There may indeed now be a stronger sense of shared destiny with the rest of the European continent across the entire population.

## Two NATO-related points

The Finnish decision to join NATO in the spring of 2022 was surely not determined by identity-political matters, at least less so than in the case of EU membership. Hard, realistic security concerns prevailed – and a strong need to safeguard as much defence policy continuity as possible under the profoundly changed conditions. Identity politics, also in terms of continuity, did play a role, however, although possibly not to the same degree as in neighbouring Sweden, where the idea of being a dedicated part of the western community was and had been very strong – so strong that it could in the end undermine 200 years of beneficial neutrality (e.g. Hagström, 2022). Even though it may still be premature to form a holistic picture of the Finnish NATO process, I would like to emphasise two significant points here (cf. Vogt, 2022).

First, a strong emphasis on the country's own resources and traditional mechanisms of preparedness has featured systematically in the Finnish NATO debates of the past two years, also after the formal membership of the defence alliance was secured. The dominant form of parlance has been that, even under NATO's shield, the country still needs to be well prepared for all kinds of crises; there is no reason for unjustified optimism and the traditions of the conscription army ought to be cultivated further. Likewise, the long border with Russia will remain where it is. The message that the external affairs elites thus wish to convey is that 'we have always managed our security well and we will do that also in the future, ultimately on our own terms'. In one recent speech, President Sauli Niinistö, a hugely popular leader of the country's foreign policy, related this sentiment as follows:

*Being part of an alliance does not change everything. Even in the future, we are responsible for defending our own country. As part of the alliance, Finland is a provider of security. The foundations of fulfilling this duty are the Finnish defence system, based on conscription and large reserves and the exceptionally high willingness to defend our country. Our allies know our readiness, and we should cherish the good reputation we have. (Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the promotion and appointment of cadets on 25 August 2023)*

The second point is that, similarly to the EU almost 30 years earlier, an essentially European institutional arrangement becomes *better* when Finland (and, as it is hoped, Sweden) joins it. References to the ways in which NATO can benefit from the exceptional qualities of the Finnish defence forces have been common; 'we' can offer knowledge and expertise and an example of how a country ought to be prepared for crisis. It has also been frequently repeated how wise it was that the country did not disarm to any significant degree over the past 20 years, unlike many other European NATO states. The emphasis on Nordicism is, again, part of this: the hope that all the Nordic countries would belong to the same defence alliance has been very strong. Indeed, the goal is to preserve what we have, not to become more Western somehow – the West can learn from us. The newly appointed minister for foreign affairs Elina Valtonen expressed this unequivocally in August 2023:

*NATO membership will strengthen not only our security, but also the stability of Northern Europe and the European security architecture. Finland's strong defence capability and resilience will strengthen the whole Alliance. [...] But our membership in NATO will not be complete without Sweden. We will therefore do everything in our power to ensure that Sweden joins NATO as soon as possible. (Speech by the Minister for Foreign Affairs Elina Valtonen at the 2023 Annual Meeting of Heads of Mission)*

In comparison with the early EU years, in contrast, one can possibly detect one significant identity-political difference in the current situation. Because Russian aggression has been so utterly incomprehensible for virtually everyone, there may now be a more or less conscious need to do



away with the Eastern features of the Finnish national identity among the wider population through public debates (cf. Heiskanen et al., 1994). Historians have already been compelled to remind the public that during the Russian era of Finnish history, 1809–1917, a flourishing *national* culture in fact emerged, comparable with any other small nation in Europe (Meinander, 2023). It remains to be seen how the conceivable exclusion of the country's eastern cultural traits will develop in the future and what its practical implications will be, particularly in cross-border interactions between Finland and Russia.

## Concluding remarks

It seems thus that Finland's institutional position in the world has become consolidated, 'we are where we are supposed to be', people reason. *There is also a very broad consensus on this in the country*, possibly indicating that the Finns (still) *share* a strong nation-state identity. Analytically sound resistance to EU and NATO memberships hardly exists. In the parliamentary election campaign of the spring of 2023, for example, foreign policy or the country's external relations were hardly an issue. In a similar vein, in the presidential campaign currently underway (autumn 2023), the differences between the main candidates appear to be minimal in this respect. So how can we explain this *consensual* state of affairs?

One possibility would be to consult the triangle of IR metatheories once again. It is obvious that realistic security concerns are very widely shared under current national conditions – sometimes perhaps to *too* great a degree, undermining any efforts to think in terms of global and local peaceful connections, which remain important, even under wartime conditions. Simultaneously, however, people see the frameworks of international governmental organisations as ultimately beneficial for them; the basic principles of liberal (institutional) internationalism are thus still appreciated. Further, as regards the constructivist paradigm, as I have argued in these pages, the layers of Europeanism, perhaps even westernism or globalism, have gradually accumulated on top of the traditional protestant work-intensive Nordic values and mentality – but the latter still provide the core of Finnish national identity.

However, the explanatory value of these basic IR approaches could easily be challenged, the viewpoints remain almost too obvious. Instead, it might be possible to see the (identity-related) prevalent Finnish attitudes towards Europe and the world in terms of some sort of *historical institutionalism*. Well-functioning institutions, from schools and healthcare centres to political and legal bodies, have been an elementary aspect of Finnish national self-understanding. While an autonomous duchy in the 19th century, the country already established a range of social, political and cultural institutions of its own, and it was primarily through these institutions that independence was eventually achieved in 1917 and preserved afterwards. Civic attachment to these institutions has proved resilient: survey evidence frequently demonstrates that trust in central political and societal institutions in Finland is, on average, higher than elsewhere in Europe (e.g. Bäck, 2017, 45).

This historically induced appreciation of sound institutional frameworks possibly now also affects the Finns' predominant perceptions of the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, their primary international frames of reference. These also need to be well managed and cultivated further – in a pragmatic Nordic manner.

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