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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Bottom-up foreign policy? Finland, NATO and public opinion

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Abstract

Finland's decision to apply for membership in NATO is a case of bottom-up driven foreign policy. Public opinion had been rather stable for more than 25 years in the NATO issue with less than 30 per cent of the people supporting Finland's membership in NATO but almost overnight during the week when Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine, a majority of Finns were in favour of it. Only after that shift in public opinion did the decision-makers support the idea of joining NATO. How was the bottom-up driven change possible? First, the resistance to NATO membership in Finland was common but not deep. Second, in the run-up to the war, Russia had demanded that NATO put a stop to its open door policy not only with regard to Ukraine but also for Finland. Third, Russia's unprovoked war on Ukraine constituted a particular frame in Finland, because the 1939 Winter War analogy was a key part of the collective memory. Finally, due to a strong tradition of national consensus in foreign and security policy, the shift in the public opinion became overwhelming: when the tide had turned, only very few resisted. In sum, four factors enabled the public opinion change: a rational basis for opinion change, a sense of urgency, an emotional push and the consensus effect. Although public opinion is often seen as stabilising and retardant force particularly in foreign and security policy, it can also be a driver for change when suitable conditions such as those in Finland exist.

INTRODUCTION

Finland, together with Sweden, decided to apply for NATO membership in May 2022. This was a big shift in Finland's post-Cold War foreign and security policy, leading to membership in April 2023 (see, e.g., Arter, 2023; Nurmi, 2023;

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Penttilä & Karvinen, 2022; Pesu & Iso-Markku, 2024). Russia's invasion of Ukraine naturally explains this shift, but in what way? For decades, Finland's policy consisted of a close partnership with NATO and a stated 'option' to apply for membership should the security situation change. In this light, the change was predictable, or at least, logical (see, e.g., Thorhallsson & Stude Vidal, 2023). However, what was not so predictable was that the policy change was driven by a dramatic shift in public opinion. Still in January 2022, Finns were in favour of pursuing the policy of military nonalignment despite the growing international tensions but in the week when Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine started, a majority suddenly supported Finland's NATO membership. Only after this support became indisputable did the state leadership launch the process to apply for NATO membership.

Worldwide, there are very few similar cases of public opinion-driven foreign policy changes (see, e.g., Böller & Wenzelburger, 2024). Research on public opinion has focused largely on three issues: the rally-around-the-flag effect of public opinion supporting national leaders in crises, including support for the use of military force; the constraining role of public opinion on resorting to military force according to the democratic peace thesis; as well as the role of the mass media in shaping public opinion on foreign policy (see, e.g., Baum & Potter, 2008, 2015; Chan & Safran, 2006; Davis, 2012; Powlick & Katz, 1998; Sobel et al., 2012). In other words, public opinion is typically seen as a tool that can be used by leaders, and as something that constrains them, being shaped by the media, but not explicitly as a driving force behind foreign policy (see Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017).

Critics can argue that Finland's decision to apply for NATO membership is not a perfect case of a public opinion-driven foreign policy because the foreign policy elite had already supported NATO membership earlier. I concur that without the opinion of the elite and the role of the mass media, the opinion shift would hardly have occurred as quickly and had the repercussions that it did. However, the role of public opinion was still crucial in its own right and can be highlighted in contrastive terms leaning more on congruence analysis than process tracing (see Wauters & Beach, 2018). Hence, the preconditions for why public opinion could have this driving effect need to be specified.

I argue that four factors explain this change and its effect on policy. First, the resistance to NATO membership in Finland was common but not deep. A clear majority of Finns supported closer relations with NATO, and were flexible enough to change their minds if the prospect of membership became actual. Only one third of the population had a more principled stance against Finland's NATO membership. Second, in the run-up to the war, Russia had demanded NATO to put a stop to its open-door policy not only with regard to Ukraine, but also with regard to Finland and Sweden. Finns could no longer think that the crisis was 'somewhere over there' in the area of the former Soviet Union. Instead, with his demands, Putin broke the tacit agreement that Finland would

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not apply for NATO membership if Russia fully respected Finland's sovereignty. Third, Russia's war on Ukraine was unprovoked and large-scale. This constituted a particular frame in Finland because the 1939 Winter War analogy is a key part of the national collective memory. That is why the emotional reaction to Russia's use of military force was much more emphatic in 2022 than in 2008 or 2014. Finally, due to a strong tradition of national consensus in foreign and security policy, the shift in public opinion became overwhelming: when the tide had turned, very few resisted. Without this ideal of unity, it is impossible to explain the result of the parliamentary vote of 188 for and 8 against the NATO membership application. In sum, four factors enabled the change in public opinion and its impact on decision-making: the conventionality of the previous resistance; a sense of urgency; the combination of a rational basis for opinion change and an emotional push; and the consensus effect. I will start this article, however, by first discussing the relationship between foreign policy and public opinion in more generic terms.

FOREIGN POLICY AND PUBLIC OPINION

There are three main perspectives—or ideal-types—a traditional one stressing disconnectedness, as well as top-down and bottom-up views, about the role of public opinion in foreign policy. The traditional view of public opinion, known as the 'Almond-Lippmann consensus', regards public opinion as ignorant, volatile and disconnected from foreign policy decision-making (see Holsti, 1992). The public does not—and should not—have an effect on policymaking, particularly when it comes to foreign policy issues. This view is largely associated with the realist theory of IR according to which there is an objective national interest that the foreign policy leadership can and should pursue. The traditional view holds that the masses do not have the necessary information to make correct inferences and are too emotional in their logic. The public often react to foreign threats too slowly and then too strongly. When a crisis emerges, the public are passive to begin with, and then support the national leaders by creating the so-called rally-around-the-flag effect, demanding hawkish policies against others but are not willing to sustain such policies consistently.

The second perspective is the top-down model about the relationship between public opinion and the decision-making elite in foreign policy. According to this view, the public is typically more stable rather than volatile, but this is due to the capability of the power-holders to 'manufacture consent' (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). The decision-makers and the broader foreign policy elite can control and frame the information that is available to the public in the manner that suits their interests. The public largely supports the decision-makers and adopts their perspective along the lines of political affiliation and national loyalty. When the elite view changes, public opinion will change, too.

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According to the top-down model, the power-holders both create and control the rally-around-the-flag effect particularly when it is reminiscent of the 'wag the dog' imagenary.

Both the traditional view stressing disconnectedness and the top-down view, reflecting the world of the realist school in International Relations, can be contrasted with the more bottom-up liberal perspective, according to which public opinion in Western democracies is actually rather rational in its foreign policy beliefs and attitudes. Major changes in it can be explained by real-world events and trends. Therefore, public opinion should have a greater say in foreign policy formulation. This thesis is most famously put forward by Shapiro and Page (1988), who argue that public opinion changes rationally in response to international and domestic events. The bottom-up model implies that people are resistant to elite manipulation and can build their opinion independently, although as Kertzer and Zeitzoff (2017) argue, not as atomistic individuals but on the basis of cues from their social peers.

Both the empirical and normative debate over the significance of public opinion has continued (e.g., Canes-Wrone & Shotts, 2004; Isernia et al., 2002; Kertzer, 2023; Knopf, 1998). If the traditional view was dominant in the post-World War (WW) II era, both the top-down and the bottom-up views gained ascendancy in the United States after the Vietnam War. It is safe to conclude that the opinions of the public and those of the foreign policy leaders are seldom disconnected but both the top-down and bottom-up models are too crude to reflect the reality in liberal democracies. They are not mutually exclusive mechanisms. Even Shapiro and Page (1988) note that the way news have been reported by the mass media and interpreted by policymakers and other elites plays a role.

The role of intermediaries and social structures therefore becomes paramount. For example, Risse-Kappen (1991) argues that the main role of the public in liberal democracies is to influence the coalition-building processes among elite groups. Berinsky (2007) sees the degree of elite disagreement as being pivotal in shaping public opinion whereas elite consensus, according to Kreps (2010), diminishes the role of public opinion. Foyle (1997), in turn, emphasises that the beliefs of leaders about the value and significance of public opinion are crucial in determining how much influence public opinion actually has. Walgrave et al. (2022) argue that politicians invest enormously in reading public opinion, but they are likely to perceive the public as holding more right-wing opinions than they actually do. The bottom-up view often regards public opinion as being influential when it reflected liberal values and norms whereas the rally-around-the-flag phenomenon is seen as more jingoistic. Yet, moral values can drive public opinion in more militaristic as well as pacifist directions (Kertzer et al., 2014). Although the liberal view of the significance of the bottom-up role of public opinion has received more support, the jury is still out,

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even more so now that the effects of social media and populism have become palpable in foreign policy issues (see, e.g., Baum & Potter, 2019).

In Finland, the role of public opinion in foreign and security policy has changed during the more than 100 years of the country's independence (see Forsberg & Pesu, 2017). In the interwar period, public opinion was for the most part unrelated to foreign policy decision-making, while being subordinated to it during the Cold War. The post-WW II leaders were guided by the realist wisdom that the government should be 'the leader and not the slave of public opinion', but in their view, the public is not just passive but should be mobilised as a resource for the leadership. President Urho Kekkonen, in particular, regarded public opinion as important in supporting the Finnish foreign policy based on neutrality and friendly relations with the Soviet Union, but also in defining the limits that the Soviet Union could demand from Finland. When the Cold War ended, the liberal perspective became predominant. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the bottom-up role of public opinion applied to Finland far better than the earlier top-down model. Public debate on foreign policy accelerated and the influence of domestic factors grew. Finland's decision to join the EU on the basis of a referendum in 1994 was a sign of the increased role given to citizens in a crucial foreign policy decision. This trend was also reinforced by constitutional changes providing for direct election of the president by popular vote, and the possibility of citizens' initiatives to change legislation.

THE STABILITY OF PUBLIC OPINION ON NATO IN FINLAND BEFORE THE 2022 RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

The Finnish debate on joining NATO started in the mid-1990s when NATO announced its open-door policy and Finland decided to join the European Union (EU) (see Forsberg, 2023). However, in the 1990s, few public figures and hardly any politicians openly suggested that Finland should consider NATO membership. Max Jakobson (1996), a former diplomat and the grey eminence of Finnish foreign policy, argued in 1996 that Finland should apply for NATO membership because of the failure of democratisation in Russia. Politicians, however, mainly eschewed this question because they still wanted to focus on EU integration and the NATO applicants were mainly former Soviet allies or republics that were seen as the wrong reference group for Finland.

Since the early 2000s, the foreign policy elite, consisting of civil servants, the military, security policy experts and leading media representatives, had largely come out in favour of joining NATO. For example, the leading daily newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, announced in 2004 that it welcomed Finland's membership in NATO. The majority of commissioned officers in the armed forces also supported NATO membership (Niinivaara, 2010).

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The liberal-conservative National Coalition Party took a positive attitude towards NATO membership in its party congress in 2006, interestingly only after public opinion polls had indicated that the majority of its supporters were in favour of military alignment (e.g., Advisory Board for Defence Information [ABDI], 2004). However, political parties other than the National Coalition Party and the Swedish People's Party were only willing to support the option of joining NATO in the future if circumstances changed. Politicians in general were rather reluctant to openly advocate Finland's membership (see, e.g., Särkkä, 2019).

Public opinion was one of the reasons why leading politicians and the majority of the political parties did not want to support Finland's membership. Public opinion had, indeed, been rather stable on the NATO issue since the 1990s, when the first opinion polls on the issue were conducted, until the early 2020s: the proportion of supporters normally varied between 20% and 30%, and the share of opponents between 50% and 70% (see Table 1). The share of respondents who did not know, or who did not want to express their opinion, was typically higher than in other public opinion poll questions. External events rather than the domestic debate affected the popularity of NATO in Finland. The number of supporters was at their lowest after, or after the start of the US-led Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya military operations, but grew slightly after the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, when the threat perception of Russia increased. Nevertheless, the changes were moderate, and opinions always reverted closer to the average after these external events. There were more supporters among men, the educated, the more affluent, and supporters of the conservative-liberal National Coalition Party (see Weckman, 2023).

It is interesting to note that mostly pro-NATO media content and elite opinion did not make Finns adopt a more positive attitude towards NATO over time (Rahkonen, 2007). It is questionable how widespread the pro-NATO position was in the media and how it affected reporting and public debate, but the media content was not effective in changing the view of the audience. As long as the majority of citizens were against NATO membership, politicians tended to stick to the existing policy line of military nonalignment and retaining just 'an option' to apply for membership in the future. A self-enforcing loop between public opinion and party positions resisted any major changes in policy: the public did not support membership because the leading politicians did not do so and vice versa. Besides, changing a policy that has not fundamentally failed is always difficult: the slogan 'If it isn't broken, don't fix it' guided Finland's policy towards NATO membership in the post-Cold War era. Given that public opinion seemed relatively stable, political leaders were reluctant to embark on an uncertain process.

There has been a widespread belief among advocates of Finland's NATO membership that if the government had supported membership, public opinion would have changed. However, in only one opinion poll in 2005, which asked

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TABLE 1 Polls on Finland's NATO membership 1998–2021.

Date	Commissioned by	Yes/ agree (%)	No/disagree (%)	IDK (%)
1998/09	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	28	**39**	34
2001/01	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	20	**52**	28
2001/12	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	11	**65**	24
2002/06	Finnish News Agency	20	**66**	14
2002/11	Helsingin Sanomat	18	**62**	19
2003/01	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	19	**55**	26
2003/01	Helsingin Sanomat	24	**56**	20
2003/02	Finnish News Agency	15	**68**	16
2003/06	Helsingin Sanomat	16	**65**	19
2004/01	Helsingin Sanomat	22	**56**	22
2004/01	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	20	**55**	25
2004/06	Helsingin Sanomat	21	**64**	15
2005/01	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	22	**53**	25
2005/02	Helsingin Sanomat	23	**57**	21
2005/09	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	28	**63**	9
2005/11	Helsingin Sanomat	26	**55**	19
2006/01	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	20	**51**	29
2006/10	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	26	**65**	10
2006/11	Helsingin Sanomat	24	**59**	17
2007/01	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	20	**52**	28
2007/05	Helsingin Sanomat	27	**63**	11
2007/09	Helsingin Sanomat	25	**60**	16
2007/11	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	21	**54**	23
2007/11	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	28	**69**	5
2008/09	Helsingin Sanomat	23	**57**	20

(Continues)

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TABLE 1 (Continued)

Date	Commissioned by	Yes/ agree (%)	No/disagree (%)	IDK (%)
2008/11	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	28	**60**	12
2009/02	Helsingin Sanomat	27	**53**	20
2009/02	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	24	**48**	28
2009/10	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	28	**62**	10
2010/04	Helsingin Sanomat	26	**56**	18
2010/10	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	25	**68**	7
2011/02	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	19	**50**	30
2011/12	Helsingin Sanomat	16	**68**	16
2011/12	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	20	**70**	10
2012/01	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	14	**65**	21
2012/06	Helsingin Sanomat	17	**62**	21
2012/10	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	18	**71**	10
2013/01	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	18	**55**	27
2013/02	Helsingin Sanomat	19	**64**	17
2013/10	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	21	**70**	10
2014/01	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	18	**51**	30
2014/02	Helsingin Sanomat	18	**64**	18
2014/03	Helsingin Sanomat	22	**59**	19
2014/08	Helsingin Sanomat	26	**57**	17
2014/08	Finnish Broadcasting Company	26	**58**	16
2014/10	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	30	**60**	10
2015/01	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	26	**43**	32
2015/10	Finnish Broadcasting Company	22	**55**	23

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TABLE 1 (Continued)

Date	Commissioned by	Yes/ agree (%)	No/disagree (%)	IDK (%)
2015/11	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	27	**58**	1
2016/01	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	27	**46**	27
2016/10	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	25	**61**	14
2017/01	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	25	**46**	29
2017/02	Finnish Broadcasting Company	21	**51**	28
2017/10	Helsingin Sanomat	22	**59**	19
2017/10	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	22	**62**	17
2017/12	Finnish Broadcasting Company	19	**53**	28
2018/10	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	20	**59**	21
2018/10	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	23	**46**	31
2019/10	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	22	**47**	32
2019/12	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	20	**64**	16
2020/10	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	22	**45**	32
2020/10	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	21	**53**	25
2021/10	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	26	**40**	33
2021/10	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	24	**51**	24

Abbreviation: IDK, I don't know.

respondents whether they would be in favour of Finland's membership in NATO if state leadership recommended it, did a plurality (49%) support it (YLE, 2005). In most other polls using similar wording, the number of supporters was just slightly higher than it was in response to the standard question. However, the result of the 2005 poll led pro-NATO politicians and members of the foreign policy elite to suggest that politicians must take responsibility for making key foreign policy decisions and could not seek refuge in public opinion. Pro-NATO pundits argued, for example, that the post-war

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Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union had lacked the backing of the public, but over time, more than 80% of the population supported it. However, President Tarja Halonen (2000–2012), who regarded herself as the guardian of Finland's military nonalignment against the elite pressure for joining NATO, resisted this logic. She argued that 'today we have no guarantee that the people would follow the President' (Lehtilä, 2012, p. 143). Her successor, President Sauli Niinistö (2012–2024), took a more favourable view of NATO and had advocated a 'European NATO' when challenging Halonen in the 2006 presidential race. When Niinistö then became president in 2012, he was, however, less willing to promote Finland's membership in NATO and echoed his predecessor's view, stating that 'membership would also require the support of the majority of the public, and we should not think that public opinion could be swayed merely by a declaration of intent voiced by the political leadership' (Niinistö, 2012).

With regard to the stability of public opinion, it is interesting to note that the framing of the question did not really affect the outcome of the public opinion polls much, perhaps with the exception of the aforementioned YLE poll in 2005 (cf., Kleinberg, 2022). While framing certainly matters on new issues with which the public is not yet familiar, on established foreign policy issues, people are not so easily led astray by the wording. For example, the question used in polls commissioned by *Helsingin Sanomat* started with a statement about how many EU members states were also NATO countries. The public was also not in favour of NATO membership when asked whether they would support Finland applying for membership if Sweden did so. This largely contradicted the elite opinion according to which Finland could not remain militarily nonaligned, but should follow Sweden if the latter decided to launch an application process, as Finland had done with regard to EU membership in the early 1990s. For the Finnish foreign policy elite, Sweden was still an identity anchor and the closest reference. The expert review commissioned by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs recommended that if Finland were to join NATO, it should do so together with Sweden (Bergqvist et al., 2016). However, for the majority of the people, the Swedish factor seemed irrelevant.

THE CHANGE IN PUBLIC OPINION ON NATO IN FINLAND IN SPRING 2022

After years of stability, Finnish public opinion on the issue of NATO membership changed dramatically almost overnight in February 2022 (see Weckman, 2023). Russia started to concentrate troops on the Ukrainian border and carried out military exercises with Belarus in Autumn 2021; in December, it presented draft treaties to the United States and NATO about 'security guarantees'. Despite the international situation being extremely tense, only 28% of respondents in Finland supported the idea of Finland joining NATO in

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January 2022. In another poll, 44% of Finns were in favour of Finland joining the Alliance at some point in the future, but only 17% wanted to apply for membership immediately. There was a slight decrease in the proportion of those opposed to NATO membership and an increase in the proportion of those undecided, but otherwise there were no clear signs of a major upheaval.

The public debate on NATO intensified at the turn of 2022. National Coalition Party leader Petteri Orpo (2021), who had been in favour of Finland's membership in NATO since the mid-2000s, said that the time was ripe for politicians to take a position. However, only a few MPs who had not supported Finland's NATO membership openly before the Russian invasion of Ukraine did so (Eerola, 2022). For example, Green Party MP Harjanne (2021) and Adlercreutz (2021) of the Swedish People's Party of Finland were among the few who publicly announced that Finland should apply for membership.

Most leading politicians stayed silent before Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine, or urged prudence from others when engaging in the debate. Prime Minister Sanna Marin stated in an interview in January 2022 that NATO membership was 'very unlikely' during her current term (Reuters, 2022). In her view, Finland did not plan on joining NATO in the near future, but was ready to stand with its European allies and the United States by imposing tough sanctions on Russia. Moreover, Minister of Finance and leader of the Centre Party, Saarikko (2022), announced that her party did not support Finland's membership, although it was committed to the idea of keeping open the option to do so. Many politicians may have changed their opinion along with the general public but it was clear that in January or early February, there was still no shift in the opinion of the political elite. Retrospectively, some politicians somewhat implausibly explained that they had already changed their minds about Finland's NATO membership earlier, but had not announced that publicly (see, e.g., Muhonen, 2022 on Marin).

In February 2022, public opinion started to change. In social media, the public discussion was very intense. Its significance was even greater than before because of the prevailing coronavirus restrictions on public gatherings. The pro-NATO and anti-NATO camps on Twitter moved closer together, united by their shared perception of Russia, leaving only the societally marginal but vocal on Twitter anti-NATO and anti-vaccine 'conspiracy theory' camp as a more isolated bubble (Xia et al., 2022; see also Nisch, 2023). Two citizens' initiatives, one on holding a referendum on Finland's NATO membership application and the other for an application without a referendum, collected the required 50,000 signatures in record time.

However, the most crucial factor was the poll commissioned by national broadcasting company YLE and carried out in February during the week that Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine, in which the number of citizens in favour of joining NATO had risen to a majority: 53%. The support for NATO membership continued to grow during the spring. It was 62% in March, and by

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TABLE 2 Public opinion polls on Finland's NATO membership in 2022.

Date	Commissioned by	Yes/ agree (%)	No/ disagree (%)	IDK/ neutral (%)
2022/01	MTV News	30	**43**	27
2022/01	Helsingin Sanomat	28	**42**	30
2022/02	Finnish Broadcasting Company	**53**	28	19
2022/03	Helsingin Sanomat	**61**	16	23
2022/03	Helsingin Sanomat	**54**	21	25
2022/03	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	**60**	19	21
2022/03	Finnish Broadcasting Company	**62**	16	21
2022/03	Helsingin Sanomat	**48**	27	26
2022/04	Helsingin Sanomat	**65**	13	22
2022/04	MTV News	**68**	12	20
2022/05	Helsingin Sanomat	**73**	12	15
2022/05	Finnish Broadcasting Company	**76**	12	11
2022/05	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	**68**	15	17
2022/06	Helsingin Sanomat	**79**	10	11
2022/11	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	**78**	8	14
2022/12	The Advisory Board of Defence Information	**85**	12	3
2023/02	Ilta-Sanomat	82	8	10
2023/02	Helsingin Sanomat	80	8	11
2022/02	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	**72**	10	18
2022/06	NATOpoll	**81**	7	11
2022/06	Helsingin Sanomat	**79**	10	11
2023/09	Finnish Business and Policy Forum	**77**	8	15
2023/11	NATOpoll	**82**	7	11

Abbreviation: IDK, I don't know.

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May, when the decision to apply for membership was officially made and announced, it was already 76%. At the same time, the proportion of those opposed to NATO membership had shrunk to less than 15% (See Table 2). More than 10 different nationwide public opinion polls using different sampling techniques, and slightly different formulations of the question, were carried out in the spring and the results were largely very consistent with this trend.

Many politicians still regarded the first survey results on the changed public opinion towards NATO membership as inconclusive evidence of the real intention of the people. President Niinistö was sceptical towards the results of the public opinion polls, arguing that results could easily be manipulated by the wording, and that a decision such as the one on Finland joining NATO would be legitimate only if people felt that their opinions had been measured accurately (Koskinen, 2022). Political scientists in Finland also argued that the usual problem with opinion polls is that they just reflect the mood of the moment and that the formulation of the questions affects the results (Kulha et al., 2022). As noted earlier, this did not seem to be the case, however, as public opinion remained stable after the shift, and no systematic bias depending on the wording of the question or who commissioned or carried out the polls could be detected. Yet some inconsistencies could be observed when enquiring about the benefits of military nonalignment. For example, in March 2022, as many people agreed as disagreed with the statement that Finland's stability policy, which involves staying out of NATO and retaining the option of joining if necessary, was prudent.

Still in February, President Sauli Niinistö did not think that any swift decisions with regard to Finland's NATO membership were in sight. In a TV interview, a few days after the public opinion poll figures backing the Finnish membership were announced, the President contended that the result was rather expected. He was, however, reserved with regard to its implications, commenting that 'it is easy to get the feeling that in NATO, we are fully protected' (Lakka, 2022). Throughout his presidency, Niinistö's concern had been—and still was—possible Russian countermeasures if Finland announced that it was seeking to join the Alliance. In the interview, he also underlined that there was quite a difference between the thoughts of those who were responsible and those who were not. He said he understood people's deep concern but argued that one should remain cool-headed.

For years, the president had indicated that he would not be able to take Finland into NATO if the people were against it. Now that public opinion polls showed that citizens were in favour of applying for membership, he reasserted his leadership by launching what he called 'a process', without publicly revealing its ultimate goal (see Koskimaa & Raunio, 2024). In early March, Niinistö was ambiguous about whether the existing public opinion polls would suffice for a legitimate decision or whether a referendum would be needed, or something in between. In late March, he announced that a referendum was not

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needed, and that the opinion polls could be relied on as a clear enough indicator of the will of the people (YLE, 2022a). This was in accordance with public opinion. Since the early 2000s, a clear majority, sometimes close to 80%, had supported the idea that a referendum should be held before a decision about Finland's membership was made (see, e.g., MTV, 2002). However, in 2022, the proportion of those who thought that a referendum would be needed decreased first to 41% in February, and then to 15% in May (YLE, 2022b; see also Metelinen, 2022).

Paradoxically, many of those who had belonged to the pro-NATO expert elite before Russia's invasion of Ukraine were dubious about whether a crisis situation was the right moment to apply for membership. They feared that the application process could take years and increase security risks in a precarious moment (see, e.g., Elo, 2022; Koskela, 2022; Pesu, 2023). Public opinion was hence duly driving the agenda more than the experts who used to be seen as the spearheads of the Finnish NATO debate.

When public opinion became loud and clear, more and more politicians started to argue for Finland's membership in NATO (see Nurmi, 2023). Most of the MPs did not want to express their views on NATO membership at the beginning of March but by the end of March, the majority was in favour of it (Waris et al., 2022). However, none of the party leaders, with the exception of the National Coalition Party's Orpo and the Swedish People's Party's Henriksson, supported Finland's NATO membership in public in March (Tikka, 2022). The National Coalition Party's NATO stance was most likely the reason why the party seemed to gain in popularity in the spring. This was one way in which public opinion put pressure on other parties.

The key party in the political decision-making process in Finland was the Social Democratic Party of Prime Minister Sanna Marin. A few members of the party had supported Finland's NATO membership before 2022, but both the party leadership and the base had firmly defended the policy of military nonalignment: less than 5% of the candidates in the 2019 parliamentary election were in favour of Finland applying for membership in NATO (Tahkokorpi, 2023). The opinion poll conducted in February showed, however, that party supporters had changed their minds and were now in favour of Finland joining NATO. In mid-March, a majority of party activists had become supportive of Finland's membership (Nurmi & Hanska, 2022). The Centre Party had also traditionally been a vehement advocate of Finland's military nonalignment, but also in their case the party base had turned in favour of NATO membership in February. However, only a minority of the Party Council supported Finland's membership in March. The leader of the party's parliamentary group realised the change in public opinion, but warned of risks that he felt had not been considered (Kervinen, 2022). In April, the Party Council nevertheless decided unanimously to support the application for NATO membership if the state leadership proposed it.

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In sum, the whole process in public followed the bottom-up model: the President and the Prime Minister first announced their own positions publicly in May when everything was practically already set for the government to present the proposal to parliament (Finnish Government, 2022). When these leaders actually changed their view of Finland's NATO membership was not fully clear even inside the government, since they may have withheld their position for tactical reasons, but everybody seemed to understand the direction already in late February or early March. In an interview for a biography (Uimonen, 2023, p. 127), President Niinistö described 'the NATO decision as a triumph of democracy, when the people, the parties and the parliament started to move'. 'This is the order in which I list the merits', he added and admitted that public opinion also affected his stance when it was evident that a clear majority was in favour of the membership.

The main reason given for joining NATO was that it would strengthen Finland's security in the changed operating environment. The part played by public opinion was mentioned in a number of speeches in parliament. Some politicians emphasised that the change in public opinion was pivotal for the decision-makers when it came to revising their own opinion. For example, MP Purra (2022) of the Finns Party argued in the parliamentary debate that:

> The decision-makers have dared to change their minds in the face of facts and the strong will of the people. […] First the people's opinion changed, then that of the nation's leaders.

In his book, Kimmo Kiljunen (2022, p. 135), a Social Democrat MP who changed his stance just before the parliamentary vote, also regarded the role of public opinion as crucial in a democratic society. In his view, mutual agreement in foreign and security policy was wise in a small country: 'we are all in the same trench', as he put it. Furthermore, in private communication, many leading politicians readily admitted that public opinion had a clear impact on the stances of the politicians and the decision-making process (e.g., Vanhanen, 2023). Perhaps the change in public opinion alone without the change in the security environment would not have been enough to persuade the politicians to alter their mind, but it was seen as necessary for reasons of legitimacy. The sceptics felt that they would lose their say in future debates concerning Finland's role in NATO, if they resisted the membership. Interestingly, leading politicians were more influenced by the change in public opinion of the population as a whole than by the change of opinion among supporters of their own party. In sum, the public opinion change both put pressure on and enabled politicians to proceed swiftly without a need for a referendum.

Improved deterrence and military protection were also cited by citizens as the most important reasons for joining NATO (Huhtanen, 2022). They had

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been the main reasons for joining already in the past, but their importance increased as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Influence and identity were also seen as more important reasons than before, but they were still secondary as far as citizens were concerned. Most felt that Finland's choice of identity had already been made when the country joined the EU, and hence NATO membership was no longer crucial in underlining Finland's Western identity (see Browning, 2002). By contrast, identity had previously been a factor that rather decreased willingness to join the Alliance, since NATO enlargement was conceived as something that responded to the needs of the former Soviet satellites but not to those of the neutrals. The weakening of ties between Finland and Russia and the risk that citizens would be sent to fight wars far away from their country's borders were traditionally the biggest reasons for opposing membership. In 2022, they were still the primary reasons for those who did not support Finland's NATO membership, but the relative share of these motivations had decreased dramatically.

Public support for Finnish membership in NATO has remained at a very high level since spring 2022, when it turned positive. For example, Turkey's demands and delays in ratifying the accession treaty did not influence the ambition to join NATO. In public opinion polls carried out in 2023, the proportion of those favouring Finland's membership was consistently around 80%. At the same time, the role of the United States from the perspective of Finland's national security was also viewed much more positively than before (ABDI, 2022).

FOUR CONDITIONS FOR A BOTTOM-UP-DRIVEN FOREIGN POLICY

A similar episode of bottom-up-driven foreign policy is rare in the Finnish context, but perhaps another relatively recent example of such a policy on an entirely different issue in Finland was the adoption of the same-sex marriage law through a citizens' initiative in 2014. Nor is it easy to find similar international examples when it comes to key issues of foreign and security policy. However, there are several cases where public opinion has significantly constrained foreign and security policy decisions or where long-standing public pressure led to policy changes. Sweden's decision to apply for NATO membership was similarly legitimised by a shift in public opinion, but the shift was less drastic than in Finland and it was more of an enabling rather than a driving factor (see Kanniainen, 2022; Mitchell et al., 2023). It can therefore be difficult to generalise beyond the Finnish case, but it is possible to outline certain scope conditions that explain the change in public opinion and its impact on decision-making, but which are not directly related to the role of the media or elites. In addition to Finland being a democratic country, these include the conventional nature of public opinion, a sense of urgency, the coexistence of

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both rational and emotional reasons, and the tradition of consensus on key security policy issues.

First, the change in public opinion was possible because Finnish resistance to NATO membership had been wide but not deep. For many citizens, the opposition to military alignment was more a matter of convention than conviction. Only one-third of the population supported membership, but only one-third or less consistently opposed closer cooperation with NATO (on public opinion on NATO and its ambiguity in Sweden, see Ydén et al., 2019). During the post-Cold War era, there were roughly as many who thought that NATO had had a positive influence on Finland's security as those who regarded its influence as negative. However, there used to be a sceptical if not anti-American public sentiment in Finland, particularly during the Iraq War launched by the United States in 2003, which clearly decreased the willingness of the people to join NATO. During the Bush and Trump presidencies, negative perceptions of the United States were palpable, but Joe Biden as US president certainly made it much easier for many Finns to change their mind about NATO membership.

Public opinion changed in 2022 because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but why did it not change in 2014 when Russia supported the use force in Eastern Ukraine and annexed Crimea, or in 2008 when Russia marched into Georgia? These events did not have much impact on public opinion because the old logic still prevailed that if Finland increased its level of deterrence and protection by joining NATO in times of crisis, it would correspondingly increase its provocativeness towards Russia. It seemed that Russia's aggressive behaviour on the territory of the former Soviet Union had already been factored into the rational analysis supporting Finland's military nonalignment. Evidence of Russia's motives and inclinations to use force was interpreted to fit with existing beliefs supporting military nonalignment. Finland could not be compared to Georgia or Ukraine.

Second, the reason why Russia's war in 2022 was more shocking than in 2014, apart from being the third time that Russia had resorted to military force against its smaller neighbours, was that in the run-up to the invasion of Ukraine, Russia had demanded that NATO should end its open-door policy not only towards Ukraine but also towards Finland and Sweden. The Finns could no longer pretend that this crisis was just related to the post-Soviet area, as it concerned Europe as a whole and Finland directly (see Weckman, 2023, pp. 13–14). This was the moment that the President of Finland realised that the previous policy of just keeping open the option of joining NATO had collapsed (Waris, 2022). The option of joining the alliance was often seen as a strategic barometer: if Russia did not question Finland's right to join NATO in principle, there would be no concrete need to join in practice. The option of joining was seen as a kind of deterrent that had now failed. For many people, applying for

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NATO membership was a demonstrative statement against Putin's attempt to define new spheres of influence.

Third, a cognitive shift often requires an emotional nudge. Russia's wars in 2008 and 2014 had only brought about a slight change in public opinion because both were more easily explained away as tragic events in the context of international relations. Russia's attack in 2022 was different because it triggered a much more emotional reaction. Russia's war on Ukraine was unprovoked and large-scale: in Finland, the 1939 Winter War analogy, strongly embedded in the collective memory (see, e.g., Hakokoöngäs et al., 2021), was immanent, and was felt much more strongly than in 2008 or 2014 (see, e.g., Manninen, 2022; Olsson, 2024). People followed the news on the war very intently. In a comparative survey, Finland and Sweden were the countries where the largest percentage of citizens in Europe believed that Russia, rather than Ukraine or NATO, was responsible for the war. Finland also had the highest proportion of citizens in Europe who supported economic sanctions against Russia or the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine (Eurobarometer, 2022). Perhaps the long pandemic had also increased the sense of anxiety and uncertainty in society (see, e.g., Nordenstreng & Rahkonen, 2022).

Fourth, on national security issues, there was a clear behavioural tendency towards unity. Although the people's alleged willingness to follow leaders if they had recommended NATO membership was not based on any consistent survey results, the whole episode of Finland's NATO membership application demonstrated strong national cohesion. The realist rally-around-the-flag effect accelerated the change, but only after the initial change in public opinion had already occurred. The idea of unity and need for consensus in a crisis situation was the prevailing behavioural model in Finland during both WW II and the Cold War (see Forsberg & Pursiainen, 2006). Although the post-Cold War era seemed to have nullified these historical lessons, the collective memory had clearly not vanished when sovereignty and national security were perceived to be at stake—and was in fact recently strengthened by the experience of the pandemic. As in the case of COVID-19, the NATO membership question was not seen as an issue that divided government and opposition, or leaders and people. On the contrary, the opposition, which had previously supported Finland's membership in NATO, did not start mocking the government for their sluggishness. Despite the process being driven by public opinion, the trust in leaders remained at a very high level throughout (see E2, 2022). This disposition towards demonstrating unity, combined with the high level of political trust, explains why changes in public opinion remained moderate after previous instances of Russia using military force against its neighbour, but also why support for NATO membership, once it crossed the majority threshold, received the support of four-fifths of the population. Without this ideal of unity, it is also impossible to explain the result of the parliamentary vote, where 188 voted in favour and only 8 against the NATO membership application.

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The opposing view is that public opinion was not an independent driver of the policy change, but it was triggered by the pro-NATO media and expert elite rather than by the political decision-makers. As Arter (2023, 186) noted, 'the doubters viewed the NATO application as panic-based, "sold" to an emotive Finnish public by elitist propaganda'. However, the elite opinion and the media discourse, which was generally positive towards NATO, was not a sufficient reason for the transformation of public opinion. It is an open question as to whether it was even necessary. In any case, counterfactually thinking, it is difficult to imagine under what circumstances the media and foreign policy pundits would have started to paint a negative picture of NATO and show understanding towards Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The dominance of the bottom-up model does not rule out the existence of top-down elements in the process. It is also possible that some politicians changed their views independently of public opinion, but on the same grounds. However, most politicians from parties that had not supported NATO membership before 2022 were still hesitant after public opinion had already changed. After that many politicians also changed their views in line with public opinion in order to preserve their say and popularity. The broad popular support in any case made it easier for politicians to announce their changed stance publicly, although the state leadership did not do so until the process was almost in its final stage.

CONCLUSIONS

Although public opinion is often seen as a stabilising and inhibiting force, particularly in foreign and security policy, it can also be a driver of change, even in questions of national security when the conditions are right, as in the case of Finland's NATO membership. To start with, democratic countries are responsive to public opinion when it is clearly expressed through the results of opinion polls and the media. Politicians cannot easily ignore an unequivocal shift in public opinion on a salient political issue. A unified political elite did not induce this public opinion shift, but rather the reverse: a solid public opinion united the political elite.

On the issue of Finland's NATO membership, positive media and expert opinion were not sufficient to transform public opinion, but external shocks were. Of course, no event is an external shock in itself: public opinion might not have changed if the public discourse had not already been largely positive about NATO, and if Finland had not been framed as a Western country. There was a broad consensus on NATO membership as an option, with some political parties as well as the expert elite largely in favour. However, this was a constant for most of the post-Cold War era and does not account for the timing of the change.

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Both rational beliefs and emotional reactions can explain why Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 so radically changed the public support for NATO membership in 2022, while Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, or the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 increased support only a little. The rational reasons had to do with the diminished value and credibility of the idea of preserving good neighbourly relations with Russia and merely maintaining the option of joining NATO. The emotional reactions were triggered by Russia's demands to stop NATO's possible enlargement for good and its unprovoked and brutal war against Ukraine. Emotions, both anger and fear, certainly contributed to the change in public opinion, but this does not make the adopted position on NATO membership purely 'emotional'. While the Finnish case clearly argues for the liberal, bottom-up view of the role of public opinion in foreign policy, the traditional realist insight that public opinion often changes belatedly and is then more hawkish than the expert opinion is also valid. However, the shift in public opinion seems to be more sustained and consistent than just a short-run popular support for hawkish measures in times of crisis.

Without certain historical preconditions based on the collective memory of Russian invasion to Finland and a national unity ideal, the swift and comprehensive change would not have been possible. These preconditions may be specific to Finland, as in Sweden, for example, the change and the effect of public opinion was much less pronounced. Finland's decision to apply for NATO membership showed that a small country can be both united and agile at the same time. Although the change in public opinion was swift and triggered by emotional reactions to Russia's behaviour, it is unlikely to change back without a completely different but similarly exceptional combination of both rational and affective factors forcing people to reconsider their attitudes. As the worldview has changed, the public now interprets events from a perspective that lends support to the adopted position.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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