

Destabilisation by Design: Finland's Response to Russian Hybrid Threats

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Introduction

Once a frontier of controlled stability, Finland's 1,343-kilometer-long border with Russia is now emerging as a focal point for escalating geopolitical tensions in Europe.¹ Following Russian aggression in Ukraine, Finland applied for NATO membership, becoming an official Member State in April 2023. Relations between the two countries deteriorated rapidly, with suspected Russian cyber attacks and sabotage of infrastructure. Amidst continuous hybrid warfare, Helsinki accused Moscow of weaponizing immigration, facilitating border crossings to destabilize Finland politically.²

Beyond border politics, Russia's actions serve as a broader reflection of the shifting security landscape in Europe. As tensions escalate, the Nordic region risks becoming another frontline of geopolitical confrontation. The question remains whether Finland and its allies can successfully contain the situation through strategic deterrence, or if the circumstances are inevitably veering towards deeper escalation—one that could redefine the entire region's security landscape.

Background

Since Finland's independence from Russia in 1917, the two nations have navigated a delicate relationship shaped by wars and diplomacy. Despite its sovereignty being tested during World War II, Finland has historically pursued a policy of military nonalignment until Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which fundamentally shifted Finnish interest towards a Western military alliance.³ This geopolitical shift culminated in Finland's NATO membership, a move that ultimately concluded decades of diplomatic caution and doubled NATO's direct border with Russia.

Nations like Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania have previously been victims of Moscow's hybrid warfare through weaponized migration in 2021, when a Russia-backed Belarus directed thousands of

¹ Filip Bryjka, "EU and NATO States Investing in Protection of Borders with Russia and Belarus," *The Polish Institute of International Affairs*, October 24, 2024, <https://pism.pl/publications/eu-and-nato-states-investing-in-protection-of-borders-with-russia-and-belarus>.

² Armida van Rijn, "Russia's withdrawal from its border agreement with Finland is an expansion of its hybrid warfare on the EU," *Chatham House*, February 2, 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/01/russias-withdrawal-its-border-agreement-finland-expansion-its-hybrid-warfare-eu>.

³ Pierre Emmanuel Ngendakumana, "After Putin Vowed 'problems,' Russia Ends Cross-Border Deal with Finland," *POLITICO*, January 24, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-terminates-cross-border-cooperation-agreement-with-finland/>.

migrants to EU borders to provoke political unrest.⁴ The tactic seeks to exploit internal divisions on immigration, deepening social polarization while fueling political unrest and straining border security.⁵

Between August and December 2023, the Finnish Immigration Service recorded an unprecedented influx of 1,323 asylum seekers at the border, signaling an abnormal surge in applications.⁶ The Finnish government has attributed the rise to Russian tactics, accusing the Russian Border Service of coordinating the transport and document-free entry of people into Finland as part of a broader strategy to destabilize its NATO-aligned neighbor.⁷ With already limited asylum infrastructure, the attack has placed immense strain on Finland's public systems, resulting in overcrowding, delayed processes, and shortages in necessities like housing and legal assistance.⁸

Financially, the surge has depleted public resources, burdened taxpayers, and diverted public funding from other national interests, such as defense.⁹ As designed, the Russian actions have deepened political polarization, pushing the population towards more extremist politics, with 83% of the population supporting stricter border controls.¹⁰ Other social impacts include a surge in organized crime and the facilitated spread of Russian disinformation.¹¹ Faced with growing pressure and escalating threats, Finland was forced into a vulnerable state requiring a rapid and decisive solution.

Finland's response

After receiving more than 900 immigrants in November alone, Finland swiftly closed all major border crossing points, increasing investment in border security.¹² The Parliament began to draft a bill for

⁴ James Carafano, "Russia's Not-so-Secret Weapon against NATO and the West: Refugees," *The Heritage Foundation*, March 17, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/russias-not-so-secret-weapon-against-nato-and-the-west-refugees>.

⁵ James Carafano, "Russia's Not-so-Secret Weapon against NATO and the West: Refugees," *The Heritage Foundation*, March 17, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/russias-not-so-secret-weapon-against-nato-and-the-west-refugees>.

⁶ Greta Rosen Fondahn, "Asylum Seekers 'missing' after Crossing Russia Border to Finland," *Reuters*, January 19, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/asylum-seekers-missing-after-crossing-russia-border-finland-2024-01-19/>.

⁷ Fondahn, "Asylum Seekers."

⁸ Bryjka, "EU and NATO States Investing in Protection of Borders with Russia and Belarus."

⁹ James Carafano, "Russia's Not-so-Secret Weapon against NATO and the West: Refugees," *The Heritage Foundation*, March 17, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/russias-not-so-secret-weapon-against-nato-and-the-west-refugees>.

¹⁰ Jorge Liboreiro and Vincenzo Genovese, "Half of Europeans Disapprove of EU Migration Policy, Poll Shows," *euronews*, March 27, 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/03/26/half-of-europeans-disapprove-of-eu-migration-policy-and-demand-stronger-border-controls-po>.

¹¹ "Russia's Hybrid Operation at the Finnish Border: Using Migrants as a Tool of Influence" *FIIA*, December 13, 2024, <https://fiia.fi/en/publication/russias-hybrid-operation-at-the-finnish-border>.

¹² Fondahn, "Asylum Seekers."

the Act on Temporary Measures to Combat Instrumentalized Migration, which was passed midway through 2024, authorizing the government to restrict visa applications under suspicious circumstances.¹³ Described as a “strong message to Russia” by Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo, Finland’s response has received mixed reactions domestically and internationally, some supporting its security approach and criticizing asylum rights.¹⁴ Geopolitical tensions have further escalated as the Kremlin continuously attempts to deny these allegations, arguing that Finland is acting in an “unequivocally provocative manner.”¹⁵

In 2019, the Finnish-Russian border had 9.5 million crossings, serving as a key route for travel, trade, and tourism.¹⁶ Thus, Finland’s response of closing major crossing points represents a major shift in policy, burdening Eastern regions socially and economically. For example, ethnic Russians residing in Finland have staged protests, resisting the restrictions on cross-border movement and demanding a more lenient approach. Meanwhile, regional businesses have encountered losses due to declining customer bases and restrictions on trade.¹⁷ Similarly, tourism in the Eastern stripe has dwindled, increasing economic pressures on small domestic enterprises. Lastly, increasing border security costs have further burdened state budgets, requiring finances for trained personnel, surveillance technology, and border infrastructure like fences.¹⁸

According to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, individuals facing persecution have the universal right to seek asylum, which requires countries like Finland to provide the opportunity and resources for their protection.¹⁹ This is why, organisations like the UNHCR have expressed concern over Finland’s strict border controls, arguing that its refusal to accept immigrants on its Eastern border is an explicit violation of

¹³ Finnish Government, “Finland Enacts Legislation to Combat Instrumentalised Migration,” July 16, 2024. <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/1410869/finland-enacts-legislation-to-combat-instrumentalised-migration>.

¹⁴ Finnish Government, “Legislation to Combat Instrumentalised Migration.”

¹⁵ “О Решении Финляндских Властей Закрыть Ряд Пунктов Пропуска На Границе с Россией,” *Внешняя политика*, November 20, 2023, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1916021/.

¹⁶ The Finnish Border Guard, “Rajavartiolaitoksen Tilinpäätös 2019,” accessed March 14, 2025, https://raja.fi/documents/44957406/64377821/Tilinpäätös_2019_v.pdf/dc1520bd-d5e5-b6af-d4ec-e68df4ae05d3/Tilinpäätös_2019_v.pdf?t=1625038338563.

¹⁷ Armida van Rij. “Russia’s withdrawal from its border agreement with Finland is an expansion of its hybrid warfare on the EU,” *Chatham House*, February 2, 2024. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/01/russias-withdrawal-its-border-agreement-finland-expansion-its-hybrid-warfare-eu>.

¹⁸ The Finnish Border Guard, “Rajavartiolaitoksen Tilinpäätös 2019.”

¹⁹ “Who Is a Refugee, a Migrant or an Asylum Seeker?,” Amnesty International, July 22, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/>.

international and European law.²⁰ In addressing these concerns, Finland defends its measures by highlighting the exceptional nature of the conflict, underlining its priority to national security. Officials have also noted that legal entry channels continue to exist, providing the opportunity to enter the country through airports and maritime entry points.²¹ Despite these concerns, Finland's response has influenced broader European security policy, prompting countries like Norway to reinforce border control and strengthen their stance against Russian hostility.²²

Considering the Future

With only 41 recorded illegal entries in 2024, Finland's border measures have proven highly successful, reducing unauthorized border crossings from Russia by over 95%.²³ While continuing its border policy, Finland must ensure that its asylum system remains fair and effective, allowing regular migration to resume while preventing Russian-orchestrated entries. As all movement through the Eastern border is prohibited, Finland should actively inform potential migrants about the closure of crossing points to encourage them to seek entry through legal channels and alternative routes, such as seaports.

Finland's successful policy of countering Russian hybrid warfare provides Europe with valuable security insights, as reflected in the European Commission's decision to appoint former President Sauli Niinistö as a special advisor on military preparedness.²⁴ By advancing and promoting its "whole-of-society" approach against disinformation and other hybrid tactics, Finland must set an example through comprehensive education campaigns that equip individuals at all levels with the ability to recognize and resist external threats.²⁵ Greater awareness reduces the public's susceptibility to Russian ploys, averting the risk of extreme political polarization and national fragmentation. While Finland excels in its resilience against Russian hostility, its next step should be expanding its global role—helping other NATO Member

²⁰ "Closing Borders to Those Seeking Asylum in Finland Sets a Dangerous Precedent, Warns UNHCR." *UNHCR Europe*, May 22, 2024. <https://www.unhcr.org/europe/news/press-releases/closing-borders-those-seeking-asylum-finland-sets-dangerous-precedent-warns>.

²¹ "Redogörelse Om Förändringarna I Den Säkerhetspolitiska Miljön - Valto," Stärkande av resiliensen, 2022, <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/164001>.

²² Bryjka, "EU and NATO States Investing in Protection of Borders with Russia and Belarus."

²³ "Situation at the Eastern Border - Sisäministeriö - YJA." *Sisäministeriö*, January 10, 2025. <https://intermin.fi/en/current-issues/situation-at-the-eastern-border>.

²⁴ European Commission, "Safer Together: A Path towards a Fully Prepared Union," accessed March 13, 2025, https://commission.europa.eu/topics/defence/safer-together-path-towards-fully-prepared-union_en.

²⁵ Armida van, "Russia's withdrawal from its border agreement."

States reinforce their national resistance and form a unified frontier capable of withstanding and countering Russian threats.

Conclusion

Finland's response to Russian hybrid warfare marks a critical moment in Europe's evolving security landscape, setting a precedent for neighboring countries. With growing uncertainty in global security, including wavering U.S. support, the urgency for a strong and unified European response has never been greater.²⁶ European states must strengthen the coordination of security policies to prevent authoritarian regimes from exploiting internal political fragmentation. While the Finnish security model appears to have successfully curbed instrumentalised migration, effectively conjoining national preparedness with public resilience, Finland should focus on leveraging its expertise in international conferences, advising countries facing similar threats. By enhancing intergovernmental cooperation, Finland could take on a role in promoting the formation of a resilient and unified European front against hybrid warfare. Ultimately, Finland's vigilance today is not just about defense—it's about establishing preparedness for future threats, as Russian hybrid operations are feared to escalate.

²⁶ Armida van, "Russia's withdrawal from its border agreement."

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