



# In it Together? How Russia Pushed Finland and Sweden to Join NATO

Eero Suominen | 17 February 2023

## Key Issues

- The changed security environment and a shift in public opinion induced Finland and Sweden to apply for NATO membership. This is clearly supported by both parliaments.
- NATO's defence will be strengthened in the Baltic Sea region, in the Arctic and North-East Atlantic with Finland and Sweden's modern and strong defence forces.
- Turkey and Hungary are holding up the ratification process; negotiations are ongoing to meet Turkey's security concerns.

Russia's "Special Operation" against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was a surprise for some, even if there were very public warnings by Western intelligence services. The signs were already there: the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Putin's article in July 2021 about the '[historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians](#)' and [Russia's list of demands](#) to NATO in December 2021. Russia's demands concerning NATO's potential enlargement and a limit to the deployment of troops and weapons in NATO's eastern members are alarming, as well as Russia's attempts to limit the freedom of sovereign countries to choose their own security policy. The claims that Ukraine needs "denazification" and that there was a genocide of the Russian speaking population in Ukraine is an absurd pretext.

Not only was the attack a surprise, but it also had consequences.

Ukraine is putting up a brave, resilient and successful defence. NATO and the European Union (EU) have provided Ukraine support for its defence by supplying the country with arms. The EU along with the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK) and other countries have adopted unprecedented sanctions against Russia, have accepted millions of refugees and provided the funds necessary to keep the country running.

On top of these measures, Finland and Sweden have decided to apply for NATO membership. This Policy Brief explains the starting point for this decision and how the quick and dramatic decision was made. The Brief also comments on the future potential Finnish and Swedish contributions to NATO, and the unfolding problems in the ratification process.

## Longstanding public support for staying outside military alliances

Sweden has avoided all military alliances for more than two centuries. In 1809, Sweden lost Finland in one of the wars against Russia. This was the beginning of its orientation towards neutrality, which kept the country out of the First and Second World Wars. In addition, the conviction grew that the country's military independence allowed it to be a force for peace in the world. After joining the EU in 1995, Sweden and Finland redefined themselves as "countries who do not belong to military alliances".

Finland has always had a complicated history with Russia and the Soviet Union, respectively. After having been part of Sweden for centuries, Finland was an autonomous Grand Duchy of Russia from 1809-1917. Finland lost two wars against the Soviet Union in 1939-1940 and in 1941-1944, though during and after the Second World War Finland was not occupied by Soviet forces.

In 1948, Finland reluctantly signed "The Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance" with the Soviet Union. The agreement included a mutual defence provision and prohibited Finland from joining any organisation hostile to the USSR. The agreement recognised Finland's desire to remain outside great-power conflicts and thereby laid the basis for the country to adopt a policy of neutrality during the Cold War. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in January 1992, this treaty became void.

Public and political support for NATO membership in both countries has traditionally been low, even after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. In the autumn of 2019, 22% of [Finns](#) were in favour of membership and 47% against. In December 2017, 31% of [Swedes](#) were for NATO membership and 44% were against.

In Sweden, the Social Democratic Party, the Left Party and the Green Party have traditionally been against NATO membership. The Moderate Party, the Liberals, the Centre Party and the Christian Democrats have been in favour. The nationalist, right-wing, Sweden Democrats were originally against membership but have recently changed

their position for Sweden to join NATO if Finland does the same.

In Finland, the centre-right National Coalition Party and the small Swedish People's Party have been in favour of NATO membership. The rest of the parties have been negative or sceptical. Relations with Russia were stable and facilitated over many years by regular dialogue between the Finnish presidents with Vladimir Putin. Trade, direct investments and tourism with Russia were considerable. For Finland, NATO membership was not necessary. It was preferable for Finland to retain an independent defence policy, but, if conditions changed, Finland retained the option to join NATO.

Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022 changed the situation drastically for Sweden and Finland. In May 2022, nearly 60% of [Swedes](#) were in favour of NATO membership and only 19% against. In [Finland](#), support for NATO membership was even more pronounced with 76% in favour and 12% against.

The governments in both countries had to react to this dramatic change in the security environment and in public opinion. In Sweden, the minority government led by the Social Democrats ruled with a thin majority of one vote, but it got support from the Left Party and the Green Party (both originally against membership), and the Center Party and one independent member of parliament, an ethnic Kurd. In Finland, the Social Democrats led a centre-left majority coalition. The alternatives were either joining NATO or creating a stronger military arrangement between Finland and Sweden.

## Overwhelming parliamentary support

Both parliaments debated the issue at length in spring 2022, but faced time-pressure as the appropriate venue for a membership application was the July 2022 Madrid NATO Summit. In April, the Finnish government provided the parliament with the "[Government Report on Changes in the Security Environment](#)". During the spring, the political parties formed their positions towards NATO membership resulting in a mostly positive stand. Consequently, on 17 May 2022 the Finnish [parliament](#) voted with an overwhelming majority thanks to seamless cooperation between the main political actors and

political parties: 188 voted in favour and 8 against NATO membership. Similarly, on 16 May 2022 the [Swedish Government](#), with broad support in the Riksdag, decided to apply for NATO membership.

During the parliamentary debates in both countries the main concerns were: 1) getting drawn unwillingly into a conflict caused by another NATO member; 2) the establishment of NATO bases in the countries; and 3) deploying and stocking nuclear weapons on their respective territory. Nevertheless, no conditions were attached to the membership applications.

Both countries heeded the tight timetable and on 5 July 2022, at the Madrid NATO Summit, all NATO countries signed the accession protocol for Finland and Sweden. As Finland and Sweden are politically like-minded neighbouring countries, with a long-standing military cooperation with each other and with NATO, they proceeded together in the membership process. This approach is not only political but also practical. As [President Niinistö](#) stated in an interview,

NATO's border further to the North-East. In practice, the Baltic Sea would turn into a "NATO sea". The small Baltic states would be easier to defend in the future. Finland and Sweden also contribute to the defence of the Arctic region and the North-East Atlantic, and have know-how and experience in winter warfare.

These developments are problematic for Russia. St. Petersburg, the second largest Russian city, and the city of Kaliningrad are on the shores of the Baltic Sea. In the Arctic region, NATO will be strengthened and closer to Murmansk, the harbour of the Russian northern fleet with its nuclear submarines. Militarily, NATO would get two relatively strong members. The [Swedish defence budget](#) in 2022 is [\\$8.6 billion](#), which is 1.3% of GDP; Finland's budget amounts to [\\$6.3 billion](#) and it already meets NATO's "2% of GDP" target. The goal for the Swedish government is to reach the 2% threshold by 2026.

[Finland's defence forces](#) have about 22,000 conscripts and 12,000 military or civilian personnel

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Sweden's membership would bring about depth for Finnish defence and both countries could further develop common defence structures and defence planning. Logistically, Sweden is important since the straits of Denmark and the Baltic Sea are vulnerable in a crisis.

### Stable democracies, strong militaries

Politically, when and if Finland and Sweden join NATO, the alliance will get two stable democracies with a strong emphasis on human rights, rule of law and freedom of speech. Finland and Sweden have a long history of defending these values. They are both technically advanced and innovative in terms of military technology.

The [Baltic Sea region](#) covers 85 million people in eight EU Member States and it produces about a fifth of the EU's GDP. An enlarged alliance would move

annually. The war-time force comprises 280,000 well-trained persons which, if needed, can be further reinforced with a total reserve of about 900,000.

Sweden's active military personnel is 24,000 with 31,800 persons in reserve. The active personnel includes 14,500 military personnel and 9,100 civilians. In 2017, the Swedish government reintroduced military conscription and over 4,000 men and women have been called to service each year since 2018. [Sweden's air force](#) is one of the most capable in Europe, leveraging its own production of military airplanes and submarines. In December 2021, Finland announced it will buy 64 F-35A fighters to replace its 62 aging F-18 Hornet multi-role fighters. All planes will be in operation by 2030. Finland is also said to have some of Europe's best artillery capability.

Cooperation between Sweden, Finland and NATO

dates back to the 1990s, when both joined the Partnership for Peace in 1994. This helped build trust between NATO and other European states and improved the ability of partner countries to cooperate with NATO. In 1997, Sweden and Finland became members of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, a forum for political dialogue. Following these steps, the armed forces in both countries have increased their interoperability by adopting NATO standards and participating in NATO-led operations.

Since 2013, Sweden has participated in NATO's most advanced exercises which involved collective defence. Sweden (in 2014) and Finland (in 2015) became so-called "Enhanced Opportunities Partners" of NATO, which led to an in-depth security policy dialogue on the Baltic Sea region and a closer exchange of information, including on intelligence between Finland, Sweden and NATO. In 2014, Finland and Sweden signed an agreement on host nation support which made it easier to receive support from NATO in the event of crises. After the Russian attack on Ukraine, Sweden, Finland and NATO have enhanced their cooperation in strategic communication and exchange of information.

### **Frustration about Turkey's concerns**

Pending complete ratification of the Accession Protocol by the NATO members, Sweden and Finland remain applicant countries or "invitees". To reduce their security risks during the accession period, both applicants were granted security guarantees from France, Germany, the US and the UK. By the end of 2022, 28 NATO members ratified membership except for Hungary and Turkey. Hungary has stated it will proceed when its parliamentary session opens in February 2023.

Before the Madrid NATO Summit, Turkish President Erdogan threatened to veto membership talks because of Finland's and Sweden's refusal to deport alleged members of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) which is categorised as a terrorist organisation by the US and the EU. After long negotiations, Turkey lifted its opposition. A trilateral memorandum between Turkey, Finland and Sweden was signed in Madrid on 28 June. In this memorandum, Finland and Sweden pledged to not provide support to certain Kurdish organisations considered terrorist

organisations by Turkey, to strengthen their national legislation against terrorism and to cooperate on counterterrorism. Negotiations about the implementation of this memorandum continued during autumn 2022.

In early 2023, however, frustration is growing in Sweden and Finland. At the Security Conference "Folk och Försvar" ("Society and Defence"), the new Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson clarified that Sweden had fulfilled its commitments to Ankara, but '[Turkey wants things that Sweden can't and won't give](#)'. He made it clear that the decision is now in the hands of Turkey. The Turkish deportation requests for terrorists conflicts with Nordic principles on the rule of law, human rights and respect for an independent judiciary. High level contacts between the US and Turkey continue. A decision by the US to sell or withhold F-16 fighter jets could impact the ratification process.

In January, two events in Sweden led to a pause in the negotiation process. On 13 January, [pro-Kurdish protesters](#) hung an effigy of Turkish President Erdogan from a lamp post in Stockholm. A week later, a far-right politician burned the Quran outside the Turkish embassy in Stockholm. In reaction, President [Erdogan](#) stated that Turkey will not allow Sweden to join NATO as long as it permits protests desecrating the Quran to take place.

[President Erdogan](#) stated on 29 January that Turkey could accept Finland into NATO without Sweden. However, the [Finnish Foreign Minister](#) confirmed that joining together with Sweden remains the priority. When the two prime ministers met in Stockholm on 2 February, Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin reiterated that the security of both countries is bound together and that it is the interest of the whole Alliance that '[we will join together](#)'.

Progress happening before the elections in Turkey in May is unlikely. This leaves a window of time for further potential provocations that may anger the Turks even more. In turn, Finland has parliamentary elections in April in which the question of maintaining the nexus with Sweden will be on the agenda. However, barring a major change in the security environment, Finland and Sweden will stay together in their membership process.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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