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Putin, Finland, and NATO in Far North in 2024–2025

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ABSTRACT

In May 2022, Finland applied for NATO, and in late 2022, launched talks on bilateral defence cooperation with the US. The country joined the alliance in April 2023; eight months later, Helsinki and Washington D.C. signed DCA. From the first days of Finland's NATO process, Moscow anticipated the outcome: according to President Putin, the alliance is not a threat but its role as a camouflage of the US interests. In this article, I employ a mitigation- and legitimization-oriented discourse analysis to probe Putin's Finland-related utterances from January 2024 to August 2025. Through the stratagems Putin utilizes in his public appearances, I differentiate Moscow's standpoints on NATO's enlargement in Far North and Finland's position as of today. Putin does not consider Finland as a risk, despite its substantial military power. Rather, the country was ensnared in NATO. First, these explanations are targeted to domestic spectators, to moderate the paradox of now having NATO next to the Russian Arctic. Second, Putin deems Finland's membership as "absolutely senseless"; combining storytelling and history, he insists "ideal relations" reigned between Moscow and Helsinki. Above all, militarization of the Arctic – Russia's core nuclear base and its key source of critical minerals and raw materials – legitimizes Moscow's equal measures in Far North. The number of Russian soldiers rise to 70 to 100 thousand, and their readiness is enhanced. On Putin's words, these steps are aimed at no one, as history testifies. Quite the opposite, it is Russia to uphold the fragile balance in the Arctic region.

KEYWORDS

Vladimir Putin; Finland; Russia; NATO; DCA; Discourse analysis.

1. Introduction

In mid-May 2022, shocked by the Russian incursion into Ukraine, Finland's top leaders voiced their support for NATO membership. Particularly, they exhorted the legislators "to undertake the national steps as rapidly as possible". (FG 2022.) In less than a year, in April 2023, the Finnish flag was solemnly raised at NATO HQ. This development ended Finland's military neutrality that had been valued as the country's prime foreign doctrine for 80 years. Such a policy, initiated by President Paasikivi in 1946–1956, and elaborated by his successor, President Kekkonen in 1956–1981, was essential for a small state, squeezed between the great powers of the Cold War era. It preferred personal ties with the Soviet leaders, and at the same time, amicable interaction with the West. Finland and the USSR signed the Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance agreement (YYA) in 1948 which for forty years regulated their bilateral collaboration. The heyday of the YYA eon proved the 1970s,



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with a substantial financial advance in Finland, and intense cultural exchange across the Finno-Soviet border (Finland's non-alignment policy in 1945–1989, see Rainio-Niemi, 2014; Dinçer, 2022, pp. 401, 407; neutrality as an identification, see Aunesluoma & Rainio-Niemi, 2016; Vezhlytseva, 2019).

Along and after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, Finland reassessed its foreign orientation. Ponomaryeva seems to consider the year 1994 as the expiry date of Finnish general and military neutrality. Then, Finland joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. (Ponomaryeva, 2022, p. 18). In a way, she has right: this marked the beginning of building common capabilities and a Western-style defence. On the other hand, Aunesluoma & Rainio-Niemi date the turn in 1995, and especially, in Finland's EU membership. Or, as they put it, a total neutrality now "decreased" into a military one (Aunesluoma and Rainio-Niemi, 2016, p. 68). However, even this interpretation can be questioned; in 2005, Finland launched its cooperation with NATO's Rapid Deployment Forces. Simultaneously, the country – side by side with Sweden – took part in the alliance's operations in Libya, Afghanistan, Kosovo and Bosnia. (Ponomaryeva, 2022, p. 18.) Whether Helsinki and Stockholm did perceive these actions rather as peacekeeping than breaches of their non-alignment doctrine, it requires a separate probe. What is certain that after the NATO accession ceremony in April 2023, and the signing of the Defence Co-operation Agreement (DCA) between Helsinki and Washington D.C. eight months later (FM-DCA), Finland has permanently renounced its neutrality. Just days later, Russian President Vladimir Putin slammed the American units freshly dislocated at the vicinity of Russia, assured Moscow to monitor the development, and to react with "mirror-like" measures (Putin 2023).

To the surprise of many, in 2024–2025 Putin does not overtly refer to Finland's (or Sweden's) DCA, even after the pact entered into force in September 2024 (FM-DCA). Instead, he constantly takes up broken economic ties and almost laments their fate. Also, he often comments on NATO's military endeavours in Finland and Far North. In this article, I examine Putin's Finland-related speeches between January 2024 and August 2025 to unravel the strategic accounts and plausible incongruities in Moscow's standpoint on the Arctic and Finland's security. I employ a legitimization- and mitigation-oriented discourse analysis, widely defined by Fairclough. For readability and to evade reiteration, the analysis chapters are thematically organized. The scrutiny discloses that although his tender approach to Finland's NATO bid in 2022–2023 was not enough to impede Finland's accession nor the subsequent DCA, Putin yet narrates the events as if the ordinary Finns were misled, ~~thus~~. Thus, he, mitigates the unsolicited outcome, i.e., the alliance now standing next to the Russian Arctic. Through allusions to past cordial contacts, Putin aims to hamper Finland's advancing collaboration with Western allies. However, it is not decisive whether he triumphs or not; in any case, militarization of the High North legitimizes Russia's similar steps.

1.1. Methods and Material

While this inquiry is fundamentally qualitative, and due to its striking contemporaneity, in part exploratory, it is hard to place within strict scientific frames. Cross-disciplinary describes this investigation quite well, perhaps we could say it merges IR, security, Russian and general area studies as well as sociolinguistics (to say the least). The latter one is visible in my methodology, Norman Fairclough's theory on the (use of) language in a systematic nexus with its social environment. Fairclough divides his technique – called discourse analysis – in three levels. On the textual one, the attention is paid to solitary words and phrases. Secondly, the so-called production level comprises the resources and the production processes. Thirdly, on the sociocultural level the academic pays attention to the text's past and present ties. At the same time, the presentation farther construes its social framework. (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 1, 38, 62–63, 87.) Logically, language is therefore the foundation for global politics, as insisted by Balzacq (2011, p. xiv). Although Fairclough some years afterward developed his ideas to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), I prevalently employ his prior theorisation. As CDA focuses on power and social wrong, to avoid any ideological bias (Pälli & Lillqvist, 2020, pp. 387–388), I just lend a few conceptions therefrom.

Since the player here is the Russian presidential administration, resources are smoothly available. Therefore, throughout my scrutiny, I concentrate on the textual and the sociocultural levels. I seek *hedges*, that is, those discursive means by which Putin interprets any given action or information as unsure, or by which he mitigates the substance. CDA, in turn, assists me with its concept of *legitimation*. (Pälli & Lillqvist, 2020, pp. 392–393.) Van Leeuwen divides this in four categories, all of which include sub-types: Authorisation, Moral evaluation,

Rationalisation, and Mythopoesis (see Van Leeuwen, 2007.). The last we may translate as storytelling, to keep it simple. It is particularly intriguing whether Putin legitimises his stances through references to history and/or to the future; these, of course, do not exclude mythopoesis, rather, they can go hand in hand. Thence, not only to trace the semantic context but the political stimuli and intentions of the Russian president, it proves imperative to differentiate the axioms, indications and gaps he voices. The adjuvant questions are:

- how does Putin explain the development in Finland?
- what kind of implications does he utter?
- how does the sociopolitical environment impact Putin's communication?

To base my findings on authenticity, I employ Putin's live discourses, held in Russian. In the Kremlin search engine, I used the entire voice 'Финляндия' (Finland in Russian) because partial nouns return zero hits. In total, there are thirteen results during the research cycle from January 1, 2024, to August 30, 2025; markedly, it is only one less than during Finland's NATO steps in 2022–2023. Within each of these utterances, I searched with a shortened voice 'Финлянд*', to enable all the grammatical spellings, e.g. genitive or instrumental. Out of the thirteen hits, many include one or two mentions of the country (e.g., Putin, 2024d; *ibid.*, 2024h; *ibid.*, 2025d), at times the word is not even expressed by the Russian president (for instance, Putin, 2024b; *ibid.*, 2024c; *ibid.*, 2024g; *ibid.*, 2025e). As a substitute, the allusion to the northwestern neighbour comprises a few sections (e.g., Putin, 2024e), or the Russian leader utilizes Finland as an example within the European/global/Arctic framework (Putin, 2024a; *ibid.*, 2025b; *ibid.*, 2025c). As such, the topics contain rather detailed cases, say, two comparisons of Russian, Finnish etc. birth rates, rouble as currency in Helsinki, and references to Finns during the Second World War (ahead of the Victory's 80th commemoration). Principally, the translations from Russian, Finnish, Ukrainian and Swedish are courtesy of the author of this text, except for a few official news and addresses that were also available in English.

Only three themes traverse the entire period. Foremost, the Russian president deplores NATO's enlargement in Far North, with its military consequences. Side by side, Putin comments on today's Finland and Sweden. Thirdly, Putin constantly regrets the lost economic interaction between Helsinki and Moscow; since this topic encompasses various branches – for instance, the financial decay in Finland's eastern regions (Putin, 2025c), collapsed nuclear projects (*ibid.*, 2025a) and the envisioned Finno-American atomic icebreaker deal (*ibid.*, 2025b) – I leave it for a distinct inquiry. Also, as discourse analytical principles prefer ample material, it is well-grounded to focus on the Russian leader's prolonged rationalizations on the military evolution in Far North. To illuminate the sociopolitical context, and Putin's implications, secondary material consists of international news and facts from Nordic authorities. Thus, this article forms a compilation of statements, interpretations and inferences pronounced by Putin, carefully probed, set in their proper connections, and posed in a structured account.

1.2. Literature overview

Obviously, Putin's 25 years in power has stimulated plenty of investigation on his motivations and speeches; it is the Russians themselves or Russian-speaking academics that have conducted most of these (e.g. Prozorov, 2004; Dement'yeva, 2009; Koteyko & Ryazanova-Clarke, 2009; Sedykh, 2012; Bekoyeva, 2015; Andronova, 2015; Sedykh, 2016; Galyamina, 2016). By and large, Sedykh suggest that the Russian president highlights his message with associations that blend actual and abstract significances, and thus, he renders the clarification more vivid (Sedykh 2012, pp. 40, 42). Bekoyeva insists that Putin often takes advantage of "I", with corresponding grammar. Also, this manoeuvre does not impede him to tackle issues in "we". (Bekoyeva, 2015, p. 30.) As for "morphology", Blackburn offers interesting details from Putin's early terms. Orderliness and independence constituted the nucleus, freedom and modernisation situated next to these, while multipolarity, fairness, common will and preserving society located far from the core. (2024, p. 4–6.) Dement'yeva discloses how Putin in the beginning of his career juxtaposed his language with that of his patron, Boris Yeltsin: while the latter "conservatively" stood against the Soviet speak, Putin utilised "a fresh young" idiom. The Russian leader employs graduation (which from 2000 to 2008 frequently read 'very good') and personal pronouns. His reliable tone re-

inforces the message. Unlike his then-successor Medvedev, Putin is inclined to an exclusive 'we'. Unfortunately, Dement'yeva proceeds with a closer look at Medvedev's tongue, leaving that of Putin aside. (2009, pp. 82–85.)

The dichotomy 'we' vs. 'they' in Putin's discourse is farther examined by Galyamina. According to her, Putin initially delivered his speeches from the perspective of the entire government; since 2014, he speaks for the whole nation. The same year saw the appearance of 'the other': the threat now consisted of liberals in opposition, defined as "the fifth column" of foreign powers, instead of left-wing groups and Islamists. (Galyamina, 2016, pp. 160, 165). Regarding Russian legitimisation of the strife in Ukraine circa the same years, Shevko suggests that all above-mentioned four categories were applied. Moscow referred to authority of traditions, customs and laws; it appealed to altruistic and humanitarian values; rationalisation and theorisation, such as allusions to polls and research, were employed; Russia fuelled emotions and cast projections on future to legitimise its actions now. (Shevko, 2020, pp. 51–54.) The outbreak of the full-fledged warfare in Ukraine prompted global research on Putin's utterances, e.g. in 2022 only, a plentiful of topical studies were published. Myasnikov differentiates the Russian president and Ministry of Foreign Affairs' discourses to corroborate Russian military operations in Georgia, in Crimea and the peninsula's subsequent merger with Russia, and Syria. Here, the most fascinating are the allegations Russia voiced. For example, during the Georgian operation in 2008, Moscow did not blame a particular Western state but NATO. Instead, in the case of Syria seven years later, the guilty one was the US. (Myasnikov, 2022, pp. 110, 113, 115.) Burret analyses Putin's internal legitimacy, his imago, and the president's "populism" in relation to domestic finances, mainly from 2000 to 2020. We are interested in the part concerning Putin's patriotism and traditionalism since his return to the Kremlin in 2012. Even though Burret casts an overview on such irrelevant topics here as Russian minority laws and Orthodoxy, the section also illuminates the recent confrontations with the West. (2024.)

Mölder & Berg explore the Kremlin's discourse regarding the current conflicts and judge that after 2008 Moscow's views on international order indeed hardened. At the same time, the Kremlin step by step introduced cooperation with non-Western states in its speeches. (Mölder & Berg, 2022, pp. 12, 17.) It is though worth noticing that Mölder & Berg's findings are based on the English-language documents of the Kremlin (translated by Kremlin officials), and not on the authentic Russian versions. Mal'chenkov sheds more light in Russia's third world connections. He describes the three phases of Putin's "civilisational" addresses in 1999–2006, in 2007–2014 and from 2015 on. By 2006, the wording 'Russian world' – in contrast to the occidental liberalism – occurs in Putin's idiom. Therefrom, the Russian president emphasizes the uniqueness of Russia, and especially, the "great mission of the Russians" – i.e., to civilise. From 2015 to our days, the conflict between the two civilisations dominates Putin's tongue. (Mal'chenkov, 2022, pp. 57–60; 63–64, 66.) Equally, Blackburn sets the rise of tensions in this era. Moscow's ideology established between 2014 and 2018, with the then-fresh National Security Strategy and Foreign Policy Concept as its codifications. (2024, pp. 14–16.) Tepe & Chekistrova compare Putin's discourse with those of the Indian premier Modi and with those of the Turkish president Erdogan. Discursively, Putin seems the slyest of these leaders. E.g. his reference to 'the people' turns out to be far more abstract than Modi's or Erdogan's. For Russia's sovereignty, in Putin's mind, Orthodoxy and nationalism are indispensable; implicitly, the Russian president knits these together. Consequently, it is critical to keep the country's foes at bay, indifferent of their origin. (Tepe & Chekistrova, 2022, pp. 3, 10–11.)

Surprisingly, although Finland's position in the eyes of the Kremlin is neatly connected to Moscow's Arctic discourse – per se a topic widely studied (e.g. Conley & Rohloff, 2015; Sergunin & Konyshev, 2016; Baev, 2018; Godzimirski & Sergunin, 2020; Marsili, 2022; Sinyayeva & Samodurov, 2024; Lamminparras, 2025a) – probes on Russia's assessments on Helsinki's increasing cooperation with NATO and the US are missing. For instance, in new Russian research, there are merely a few quotes from Putin in each inquiry; besides, these tackle Putin's standpoint on Finland's initial NATO steps. Chiefly, the Russian academics rather examine the opinions of Finnish top decision-makers and citizens than those of the Kremlin. (See, e.g., Ponomaryeva, 2022; Lyuttser, 2022; Zhilkin, 2022.) An equal disinterest appears to reign in Finnish domestic examinations. For example, in their case study of Finland as an arena of Russian information influence, Kari and Hellgren quote President Putin only once (2021). As such, Forsberg's article is a detailed report on NATO's popularity in Finland throughout the latest two decades. However, he only in passing indicates "the Russian demands" between Autumn 2021 and early Spring 2022. (2024.) My recent exploration on Putin's discourse on Finland's NATO bid is purposefully limited to the years 2022 and 2023. Still, I demonstrate how Putin distinctly anticipated the future Finno-American defence cooperation, namely DCA and American troops soon to dislocate next to the Russian Arctic. So, the Russian president legitimised Moscow's countermeasures, that is, strengthening its northwestern frontier. (Lamminparras, 2025b.)

2. Reinforcing the (North)west

As stated above, Finland's (and Sweden's, for its part) NATO membership is tightly intertwined with the Russian fundamental perspectives in the Polar region. The Arctic Zone is Russia's core producer of copper, tin, antimony, tungsten, platinum elements, cobalt and nickel, chromium and manganese, to speak nothing about rare earth minerals (Conley & Rohloff, 2015, p. 56; Sergunin & Konyshchev, 2016, p. 27). Most of these prove essential for naval industry. Military aviation and missile production require raw materials, especially tungsten. If one considers the elongated war in Ukraine and Kyiv's highly developed long-haul drone capacity, it is understandable that President Putin already in Summer 2024 highlighted these assets, i.e., "the fundamental mineral resources" (RÄLamminparras 2025a, 46.) And even the war in Ukraine notwithstanding, it is obvious that any rise of tensions in the High North would largely jeopardize Russia's core industrial base.

Putin overtly referred to such a scenario in the yearly international Arctic forum in March 2025.

- нас, конечно, беспокоит только тот факт, что страны НАТО в целом всё чаще обозначают Крайний Север как плацдарм возможных конфликтов, отрабатывают применение войск в этих условиях, в том числе силами своих «новобранцев» – Финляндии и Швеции --

- we are, of course, concerned only about the fact that the NATO countries, as a whole, more often indicate the Far North as a platform for plausible conflicts, work out deployment of military within these circumstances, among them forces of their "newcomers" – Finland and Sweden --. (Putin, 2025c.)

First, the "we" in Putin's description alludes to the nation, that is, the president personifies Russia. In general, Putin mixes formal – e.g., "are concerned", "a platform" and "deployment" – and colloquial expressions, say "of course" and "more often". His tone occurs calm and balanced. Perchance, the reason for this clever combination is the audience of the Arctic forum; it consisted of (local) politicians, international guests, university lecturers and students, entrepreneurs etc. However, the verb he utilizes – "are concerned" – does not express a profound anxiety. Rather, it mitigates the entire course of the events, that is, NATO's enlargement northwards.

Oddly enough, a mere year earlier Putin had strongly emphasized the need for military reinforcements, due to the alliance's recent activity.

Серьёзно необходимо укрепить группировки на западном стратегическом направлении, чтобы нейтрализовать угрозы, связанные с очередным расширением НАТО на восток, втягиванием в альянс Швеции и Финляндии.

It is seriously indispensable to strengthen groupings in the western strategic direction, to neutralise threats that are related with NATO's further expansion to East, by drawing Sweden and Finland in the alliance. (Putin, 2024f.)

Here, Putin's idiom was far more official, with such words as "neutralise" and "expansion". The Russian president's typical graduation manifested in "seriously". Putin posed NATO's enlargement as a question of life and death for Russia – an act of legitimisation par excellence. Moreover, such an approach fits and serves Putin's internal ambitions, as insisted by Burrett. According to her, to pose the war in Ukraine as a strife against the US and NATO assists to uphold Putin's imago as Russia's prime defender. (2024, p. 13.) Logically, as the alliance just proceeds its expansion, the president does not miss his chance to reinforce the picture.

It is worth noticing that the event was Putin's yearly speech to the Federal Assembly, consisting of the State Duma (parliament) and the Council of Federation (Upper Chamber), in February 2024. This not only explains Putin's formality; due to the occasion's nature, the utterance factually serves as a policy declaration (cf. the same address a year prior, e.g. Burrett, 2024, pp. 13–14). Just as in 2008, when Russia conducted a military operation in Georgia, NATO only is presented as responsible for one-sided acts, leading to instability. Also, Putin's notion on "neutralising threats" can be read as a similar hint of an aggression from the alliance's side he had pronounced sixteen years earlier. (Myasnikov, 2022, p. 110.) Likewise, the explanation echoes the tone of the justifications of the SMO. Readily then, Moscow framed Ukraine as one of NATO's main military strongholds, targeted against Russia. (Blackburn, 2024, p. 20.) Obviously, any extension thereafter only augments the risks. Thence, legitimisation stands loud and clear: NATO's "further expansion" triggers Moscow's steps, or more precisely, turns them "indispensable".

In early 2024, the estimates spoke of an enormous restructuring of the Russian forces along the country's northern, western and north-western frontiers. The Western Military District is split in two – in Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts, as they were during Soviet years – whereas the Northern Fleet maintains its district-like status (Joint Strategic Command Northern Fleet, JSC). Marine Corps brigades by Russia's western boundary will be turned into divisions. If these visions succeed, there might dislocate 65 to 70 thousand Russian combatants in the Polar region. (Panschin, 2024, pp. 40–45.)



Fig. 2 DCA premises in Finland (extract)

Numerically, this would triple their staffing. The wildest conjectures put the future number of Russian soldiers East of Finland to a hundred thousand. Nonetheless, these assumptions are greatly theoretical, if not outright click-bates. One issue remains the manning: will there be enough voluntary to enrol in the ranks? Their military education until a unified and efficient unit is fit takes years. Therewithal, Ukraine's June 2025 strikes as far as to Olenya, an air base packed with strategic bombers TU-22M3 and TU-95MS, in the Kola Peninsula (Humpert, 2025), let alone the brand-new allegedly 3000km range projectile Flamingo (see, e.g., Vedmedenko 2025), today question the reasonableness and advantages of immense troops concentrations.

Despite these obstacles and open questions, according to the Kremlin, a large development program is to take place.

- **выстраиваем адекватную линию реагирования, повышая боевые возможности Вооружённых Сил и модернизируя объекты военной инфраструктуры.**
- we are building an adequate line of response, enhancing combat possibilities of the Armed forces and modernizing objects of military infrastructure. (Putin, 2025c.)

Nonetheless, though massive they may turn, these actions are not directed at any state or player. Or, in Putin's ambiguous wording:

Подчеркну: Россия никогда никому не угрожала в Арктике. Но мы внимательно следим за развитием ситуации.

I underscore: Russia has never threatened anyone in the Arctic. But we closely monitor the evolution of the situation. (Ibid.).

Ensuing Putin's language, Moscow has throughout the past decently behaved in the Polar region, albeit he voices this in a negative form "has never". Again, he mitigated the imminent militarization of the High North, seemingly for Russia's part. Clandestinely, the word choice infers a continuum, i.e., authorisation by traditions. It accentuates legitimization of the envisaged steps. However, the expression constitutes the opposite of the president's narration about annexation of Crimea. A decade ago, Putin insisted that if Russia had not overtaken

the peninsula, it would have been NATO's land and naval forces to seize Crimea, and thus, to encumber Russian entrance to the Bosphorus. (Myasnikov, 2022, p. 112.) There is yet a hedge, "we closely monitor the evolution". That is, a similar restriction in the Polar waters is not totally excluded.

3. Finland's "absolute senselessness"

As much as Putin slams NATO for its fresh expansion, it is not the "newcomer" Finland (nor Sweden) to pose a hazard. The term the Russian president utilised in February 2024 exposes this: according to Putin, the enlargement took place "by drawing" (Putin, 2024f). Markedly, the choice is similar with his wording in December 2023, immediately after Finland had signed DCA, i.e., "dragged in" (ibid., 2023; Lamminparras, 2025b, p. 16). In fact, Putin lauds the pre-NATO Russo-Finnish (and Russo-Swedish) encounters:

С Финляндией у нас вообще были идеальные отношения, просто идеальные. У нас не было ни одной претензии друг к другу, тем более территориальной, я уж не говорю о других областях.

With Finland, we maintained entirely ideal relations, just ideal. We did not possess a single pretension on each other, least territorial, other spheres not to mention. (Putin, 2024e.)

- Финляндии и Швеции, с которыми, кстати говоря, у нас до недавнего времени не было вообще никаких проблем. Сами своими руками зачем-то создают. Зачем? Совершенно непонятно.

- of Finland and Sweden, with which, so to speak, we until recent times had no issues. They with their own hands for some reason create [those]. Why? Completely incomprehensible. (Putin, 2025c.)

What first strikes in the eyes is Putin's all-encompassing "we", pronounced three times. Again, he impersonates the whole Russia. In both speeches, the tongue of the Russian president widely involves a colloquial vocabulary; the exceptions are "pretensions" and "spheres". The informality is probably due to the occasions, the former is a face-to-face interview, and the latter Putin's message during the Arctic forum. Substantially, his allusions to the utmost cordial interaction with the Nordic states are on one hand aimed to moderate the domestic interpretations on the factual political development, and on the other, perhaps to remind Nordic dwellers of the gone mutual benefits. Apart from legitimising Moscow's stance (if not disappointment?) with reference to the shared profitable past – authorisation by tradition – Putin perchance tends to foment emotions on 'those good old days' during the YYA too. Thence, he practices moral evaluation. His note on the zero "pretensions" serves as a tool of rationalisation.

Likewise, it is important to see that in Moscow's eyes not even the combined military might of Sweden and Finland did (nor does) constitute a risk. To exemplify, Finland is capable to raise a war-time army of 180 000 soldiers. The armoured corps take advantage of two hundred Leopard 2A4–2A6 main battle tanks, the same number of CV9030 and BMP-2M mechanised infantry combat vehicles, seven hundred armoured person carriers, 1200 tracked vehicles, and 800 field guns. (FDFA.) A part of these consists of armoured 155mm self-propelled howitzers, that is, they assist to an enhanced combat resilience. Moreover, the multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) units are modernised with GMLRS AW, ATACMS, UNITARY and GMLRS ER projectiles, extending their maximum range to 150–300 km. (FDFA, 2024; Reserviläinen, 2024.) Additionally, Sweden's intelligence services are highly appreciated, and the Swedish Navy fields submarines. The Finnish Air forces shall host some sixty F-35 multirole fighters, and together with their Swedish equivalents, number a few hundred. In case of a serious conflict, it would be an option to seal the Finnish Gulf, if one aspired to encumber Russian naval actions from/to St. Petersburg to/from Kaliningrad. (Hallamaa & Heikinmatti, 2022). In other words, a Bosphorus-scenario might take place in the Baltic, instead of Black, Sea.

On the contrary, as Putin twice denotes, Russia had removed its forces from the vicinity of Finland.

У нас и войск-то не было, мы войска оттуда все убрали, с российско-финской границы.

We did not have troops, we withdrew all troops therefrom, from the Russo-Finnish border. (Putin, 2024e.)

У нас там не было войск, теперь будут. Не было там систем поражения, теперь появятся.

We did not have troops there, now [there] will be. There were no strike systems, now they will appear. (Ibid.)

Once again, the “we” occurs throughout the utterances, marking exclusivity. The double notion on “did not have troops there” only accentuates this. As if Russia, despite (or perchance, for?) its grandeur, could pay an outstanding compliment to its precious neighbour and diminish its forces by the common boundary. Legitimation here occurs retrospective: since there were no Russian combatants by the Finno-Russian boundary, there was neither any motivation to seek security from NATO. Observing Putin’s rationalisation, the withdrawal was undertaken even though the High North is the main base for Russia’s strategical submarines, with most of Moscow’s maritime nuclear warheads on their long-range missiles. From/to the US, the straightest route for any hypothetical projectile flies over the North Pole. Therefore, the zone is utmost crucial for early warning and defence installations. (Baev, 2018, pp. 410, 412–414, 420.) Furthermore, the Russian Arctic between Novaya Zemlya and the Kola Peninsula is occasionally referred as vital for Moscow’s military and/or security prospects (Godzimirski & Sergunin, 2020, p. 40). Much of Russian arms testing is conducted here.

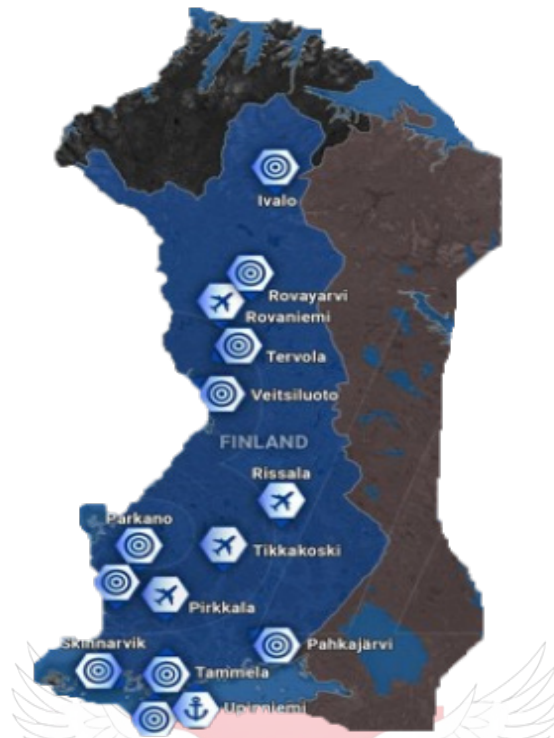
As of today, not only has the Baltic Sea turned into NATO’s internal waters, but the alliance’s northernmost border closes to 1000km. Nevertheless, what is still missing is that Putin would harshly condemn Helsinki for the necessity to strengthen the Russian military presence in the Polar region. Rather, he insinuates foreign misleading, or at least a weak understanding among the Finnish politicians on NATO, its assets, and plausible effects for the nation:

Зачем они это сделали? -- из чисто политических соображений. Очень, наверное, хотелось быть членами западного клуба, под каким-то «зонтиком». Зачем им это нужно, я, откровенно говоря, не понимаю.

Why did they do it? -- for purely political reasons. Apparently, there was a huge will to be part of Western club, protected by an «umbrella». Why is it necessary for them, I, frankly speaking, I do not understand. (Putin, 2024e.)

Thematically, a contemporary parallel is to be found in southeastern Europe, aka the Moldovan EU referendum in October 2024. Moscow, impersonated in the MFA’s spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, condemned the very plebiscite as thoroughly have breached basic civil and human rights. As for foreign politics, the spokesperson accused the western states of a deliberate “fraud” and an immense “meddling”. According to Zakharova, these were performed for one single reason – to transform Moldova into a NATO base, via its EU membership. Nonetheless, the West failed to deceive the valiant Moldovans living within the republic; almost 55 per cent rejected the course. (RNLamminparras, 2025c.) In theory, unlike in Moldova, the foreign powers’ success was better than perfect in Finland; no NATO referendum was deemed necessary.

Except for delivering his stance in “I”, there is a semantic cross-reference to Putin’s initial commentary on Helsinki’s decision to apply for NATO. While the Finnish president Sauli Niinistö in May 2022 informed Moscow on the conclusion, Putin largely bemoaned the turn of the tide; in particular, he notified his counterpart that such a move is “erroneous” since there are no menaces to Finland’s calm. (Putin, 2022.) Contrastively, at the time, Spring 2024, seventy-six per cent of Finns voiced their support for NATO. What is interesting is that Putin sharply describes the roots of this alignment and the mindset of his neighbours. Just as he rationalises, the Finns truly aspire to situate in the West: more than a half opined that “Finland would not constitute a fully western state without NATO membership”. (Simojoki, 2024.)



If one judges by the date of Putin's interview (March 13, 2024) and the concurrent political evolution in the Nordics, it is possible to discern implications to the ongoing DCA processes. In Sweden, less than two weeks earlier, the debate on DCA took new rounds, after Hungary finally ratified the country's NATO accession. For example, left-green parties voiced their clear rejection of the DCA agreement. (DN, 2024). It was factually from these discussions the Russian president's conversation set sail; according to the interviewer Kiselyov, Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tobias Billström, had informed the Turks [the penultimate to ratify Sweden's NATO membership] that Stockholm objects NATO bases on the Swedish soil. Kiselyov inquired whether the Swedes really had understood where they were going. (Putin, 2024e.) Clearly, Kiselyov spoke of the envisioned US military presence, albeit his term was incorrect. Six days prior, Sweden had already become a member of the alliance.

In Finland, President Sauli Niinistö, one of the key initiators of Finland's NATO bid in 2022, inaugurated the new president, Alexander Stubb, on March 1, 2024 (Niinistö, 2024a; *ibid.*, 2024b). Even though the presidential connections between Helsinki and the Kremlin terminated in May 2022, it would be a gross understatement to claim that the Kremlin did not follow the discourses and actions of its counterpart. Not least because of Niinistö's decisive role in Helsinki's path to the alliance. Moreover, it was exactly Niinistö himself to associate Russia's invasion into Ukraine, NATO and DCA in his farewell speech afore the Parliament:

Tämän vuosikymmenen alussa Venäjän julma hyökkäys Ukrainaan muutti ratkaisevasti turvallisuustilannetta koko Euroopassa. Suomessa vastaus haettiin hakeutumalla Natoon ja neuvottelemalla sen jatkoksi DCA-sopimus Yhdysvaltain kanssa. (Niinistö, 2024a.)

Russia's cruel invasion of Ukraine in the early years of this decade dramatically changed the security situation in the whole of Europe. Finland responded by joining NATO and continued by negotiating the DCA agreement with the United States. (Niinistö, 2024b.)

In both languages, DCA is perceived as "a continuum" ("jatko" in Finnish) of NATO, as if it naturally was linked to, and unquestionably followed, the membership. It is worth pondering that if the alliance itself would satisfy security needs and guarantee peace of its members, why Washington prefers bilateral defence cooperation agreements at once the flag of a fresh NATO country is raised in Brussels. Readily in Summer 2022, the Russian president anticipated Finland to turn into a US military stronghold in Far North. After Finland signed DCA in December 2023, Putin speculated there would situate 21 American military bases on the soil of the northwestern neighbour. (Lamminparras, 2025b, p. 18.) Notably, at its time legitimization was expressed by referring to the future; in March 2024, the procedure was in full speed. Ultimately, fifteen Finnish garrisons, harbours, airdromes and storage areas were in part or fully transferred to American jurisdiction. Many of these

situate next to the Russian Arctic regions, or no farther than 200km (by air) from the border. Furthermore, the US units and installations enjoy large extraterritorial rights, non-subjugation to Finnish Penal Code included. (FM-DCA.)

Hence, taken in consideration the then-heated debates in both Sweden and Finland, it is well-grounded to presume that DCA was Putin's chief point of reference, instead of NATO as such. Save that Kiselyov erred in terminology. Not least, because already by the Syrian intervention in late 2015, the Russian reasonings concentrated in defaming the western countries, and particularly the US for its alleged strive for hegemony (Myasnikov, 2022, pp. 110, 113). That Putin alluded to (warned of?) a sheer loss of sovereignty further speaks for the interpretation:

- Это абсолютно бессмысленный шаг с точки зрения обеспечения собственных национальных интересов.
- It is an absolutely senseless move from the perspective of safeguarding proper national interests. (Putin, 2024e.)

As for the contents, the formulation does resemble a euphemism of the Russian president's harsh note on Occident a mere year prior. Then, Putin overtly slammed "the West seeking unlimited power" (Burrett, 2024, p. 14.). In the Finnish context, Moscow likely implied the soon-to-be-promulgated American extraterritorial privileges. However, the source material regarding DCA, or the US interests in Finland, is minimal. Therefore, I warmly encourage my fellow scholars to deepen this preliminary assessment. Perhaps, the inclusion of the concurrent Swedish debate clarifies the issue. Nevertheless, about Putin's general view (and disappointment?) on the two Nordic states there is no doubt:

- мне думается, что они больше выигрывали от того, что они придерживаются нейтралитета
- I believe that they benefited more if they adhered to neutrality -- (ibid.).

4. Conclusions

It is not Finland – nor Sweden, for its part – to cause major concerns in Moscow, despite their recent NATO accessions. Neither does the sizable joint Finno-Swedish military might, be it under their own flags or that of the alliance. On the contrary, Russia – personified in President Putin's all-encompassing "we" – until recent years nurtured friendly and profitable bilateral relations with both Nordic states. Here, the Russian leader unites storytelling (mythopoesis) and authorisation by tradition; also, he seeks to stir emotions on those golden days of collaboration, especially among Finns. This manner mostly falls in the category of moral evaluation. More of a legitimisation by rationalisation is Putin's notion on no "pretensions" on either side of the boundary. An equal tool is his claim that afore NATO there was not a single need to field major contingents by the Finno-Russian border. In fact, in the eyes of the Kremlin, Finland "was drawn" in the alliance. Somewhat paradoxically, Putin is profoundly aware of the true background: it was the Finns' will to be part of the West. Nonetheless, his word choice yet implies that the Finns were rather lured, or at least they failed to see the whole picture on NATO's essence and its consequences.

Through these justifications, Putin on one hand mitigates the course of the events – NATO's enlargement next to north-western Russia – afore his domestic audience. It is pertinent to note that most of the above-mentioned stances were pronounced during interviews or his addresses to federal decision-makers. On the other hand, the Russian leader tends to exhort the Finns, and the Swedes, to hamper their countries' deepening western defence collaboration and estrangement. The fascinating alteration in his wording likewise points to this assumption. In Spring 2024, Putin perceived strengthening the Far North as a choice between life or death for Russia, due to "NATO's further expansion to East". Markedly, the tones and words were not far from those utilised to justify the SMO in Ukraine. A year later, his attitude is by far softer: Stockholm and Helsinki's decisions to join the coalition are just "completely incomprehensible". To discern an overall picture on this discursive turn, I encourage reassessments on the topic, say, in spring or autumn 2026.

Foremost, the Russian president legitimises Russia's ongoing program to reinforce its Arctic. As the Polar region produces most of Russia's raw materials and minerals, vital for both maritime industry and aeronautics, any foreign foothold at the vicinity of the Arctic resources calls for countermeasures. One step consists of testing brand new arms in the Polar waters. Apart from reorganising its military districts, the number of Russian

combatants by the country's northwestern boundary may also rise to 66 thousand, or up to 100 thousand if one considers the vilest speculations. On Putin's words, as in the past, Moscow does not threaten anyone. Here, the historical continuum serves for further legitimisation. Indeed, in the Russian leader's idiom, the militarisation is only "a mirror-like action". The hedge here reads: there is someone else to put the Polar calm in danger. Whether Putin indicates Finland's Defence Cooperation Agreement with the US, and the fifteen American military bases in Finland, appears probable. However, this presumption requires further inquiries, with a wider corpus. What yet becomes evident is Putin's conviction: the Nordic states would be better off if they still observed their traditional non-alignment doctrine.

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