

SEARCHING FOR A POLICY: FINLAND'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE UKRAINE CONFLICT

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Abstract. *The Ukraine conflict has put to a test Finland's foreign policy in its historically seen new capacity as a non-aligned country. This article investigates the conflict's implications on Finland's foreign policy: It focuses on Finland's reactions to the conflict and changes in Finland's foreign policy role, thereby paying attention to the EU's role within foreign policy making, as well as Finnish-Russian relations in a changing security environment. This article covers a period ranging from the onset of the Ukraine conflict in the spring of 2014 until early 2016. The findings suggest that Finland's foreign policy remained embedded with the EU, although the Ukraine conflict challenged Finland's foreign policy role conception as well as Finnish-Russian relations.*

Keywords: *Ukraine, Finland, crisis, war, Russia, security, foreign policy.*

Introduction

The disagreement on Ukraine's future made international headlines during the 2013 Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius, and within months escalated into a conflict that has been compared to a new Cold War (CW). The deteriorating US-Russia relations were soon in the spotlight, along with the conflict resolution capability of major European Union (EU) member states and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The conflict however had implications beyond the central stage of world politics. To Finland, the situation resembled the CW setting when the country was caught between the conflict adversaries, however with the big difference being that Finland now was aligned in its EU member capacity. Thus the Ukraine conflict put to a test Finland's foreign policy and especially the balance between international cooperation and national security.

This article addresses the implications of the Ukraine conflict on Finnish foreign policy. It investigates Finland's reaction to the conflict, thereby paying close attention to the EU's role within Finnish foreign policy. Further, the article studies the Ukraine conflict's effects on Finland's perceived security and especially looks at the development of Finnish-Russian relations. In doing so, it focuses on a period ranging from the escalation of the Ukraine conflict in the spring of 2014 until early 2016. The findings suggest that Finland's foreign policy is firmly embedded in the EU policy. Nevertheless, the Ukraine conflict has revealed ambiguity surrounding Finnish foreign policy roles, and has brought about a reassessment of Finnish national security and the conduct of Finnish-Russian relations.

This article proceeds as follows: First, it outlines Finland's foreign policy identity and discusses the contest between the country's competing

foreign policy roles. Second, it addresses the Europeanization¹ of Finnish foreign policy in the post-CW time and the consequences this brought about in Finnish foreign policy making, most notably the multilateralisation of relations with Russia. Third, the article presents Finland's Eastern Policy², including the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy and Finland's focus on Russia. Fourth, Finnish reactions to the Ukraine conflict are discussed and analyzed, and are also placed in their historical context. Lastly, the findings are summarized and the article is concluded.

Finland's foreign policy identity

Finnish foreign policy making is plagued by a disagreement on what constitutes the country's role as an international actor. Underlying Finland's consensus-oriented politics is a contest between the ideological strands of realism and liberalism, which manifest themselves in distinct foreign policy roles. Penttilä (2008, p. 9-10; 42-50) distinguishes between the 'lonely wolf' role, representing a realist approach, and the 'apt student' role, which is inspired by liberalist thinking in international relations (IR). The realist approach is characterized by an emphasis on Finland's alleged *sui generis* status, arguing that the country stands out as a 'lonely wolf' in IR due to its unique history and geopolitical position, and thus needs and deserves special treatment. The realist approach advocates national ownership in policy making, which within foreign policy has translated into a focus on bilateral relations and non-alignment. Advocates of this approach support Finnish EU membership, but traditionally argue that Finland stands outside the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Instead, these issues

¹ Haukkala and Ojanen (2011, p. 150) understand Europeanization as “a process of foreign policy convergence between the EU institutions and its member states”.

² The concept of 'Eastern policy' (Finnish: Itäpolitiikka) refers to Finland's foreign policy on its Eastern neighbours. It is thus to be distinguished from the European Neighbourhood Policy.

are preferably dealt with on the national level. As opposed to this, the liberalist approach highlights Finland's belonging to the 'Western' community within the international system. This approach relies on a strong international system, and emphasizes the need for common rules and the rule of law. According to this approach, Finland is a "mainstream country," a liberal democracy that in no relevant regard differs from other European countries. This translates into the role of the 'apt student' where Finland behaves like a conventional model student in school: Finland is ready to learn without questioning too much, adheres to common rules, and engages in an active and constructive manner in international organizations.

These ideological strands have succeeded each other as the dominant foreign policy approaches throughout modern Finnish history, although the realist approach tends to dominate in the general perception. Both roles date back to the 1800s and the Russian empire, when Finland was simultaneously regarded a special case due to its unique autonomous status and a loyal entity within the empire. Looking at recent history, the realist approach was predominant in the CW period. During this period, Finnish foreign policy relied on the „Paasikivi-Kekkonen policy“, which was guided by the idea of national survival (Penttilä, 2008, p. 10; 48-51). This translated into a cautious and accountable national foreign policy characterized by a low profile in international politics and an appeasing approach towards Russia. Nevertheless, Finland aimed to stay neutral and maintain good relations with both CW blocks (Aunesluoma and Mitzner, 2014, p. 11).

It was only in the post-CW time that the liberal approach became predominant as Finland's international role (Penttilä, 2008, p. 42-45). The dissolution of the Soviet Union opened up for a re-orientation of Finnish foreign policy towards an internationally oriented approach and more

active engagement in international organizations (Forsberg and Vogt, 2008; Paloheimo, 2003, p. 230). This was manifested through Finland's EU membership in 1995, and Finland's adherence to common goals and rules within the Union proved the country's role as an apt student. (Penttilä, 2008, p. 42; Raunio and Tiilikainen, 2003, p. 149). This interpretation has been contested by advocates of the realist approach, who have downplayed the significance of the international orientation and have argued that EU membership merely led to replacing one power center by another. The predominant view has however held that Finland since has embarked on a value-based foreign policy, reflecting a change in foreign policy that led to the adoption of the apt student role (Forsberg and Vogt, 2008). This perception prevailed until the early 2000s when an emerging focus on national affairs was followed by rising support for the „lonely wolf“ role again. Consequently, Finland has adopted neither role, but meanders between the two existing roles (Haukkala and Ojanen, 2011, p. 151; Penttilä, 2008, p. 54; 50-51).

Finnish foreign policy has also been characterized by unclarity regarding foreign policy leadership in terms of the distribution of power between the president and the cabinet. Due to historical reasons, the president has traditionally held a central role in the conduct of Finnish foreign policy. When Finland's constitutional design was agreed upon in wake of the 1918 civil war, a semi-presidential system was established that appeased both parties. This endowed the president with extensive powers, among others in the conduct of foreign policy (Saukkonen, 2008). However from the 1980s onward, changes have been introduced that have reduced the powers of the president and instead strengthened parliamentarism (Nousiainen, 2001; Paloheimo, 2003, p. 219). The introduction of a new Constitution of Finland in 2000 marks the latest milestone in this process (1999, Chapter 1; 66§, 93§). As of today, the Constitution states that the

president directs Finland's foreign policy together with the cabinet, however the cabinet is in charge of EU affairs and the prime minister represents Finland in the EU when representation of the highest level of State is required. This wording has left the power division between the president and the cabinet unclear and caused confusion regarding Finnish foreign policy leadership (Haukkala and Ojanen, 2011, p. 155). The issue is closely linked to Finland's role in international affairs as the realist approach advocates concentration of foreign policy leadership in a strong presidential office, while the liberalist approach generally favors increased competencies for the prime minister and the cabinet (Penttilä, 2008, p. 45; 48). Thus a political power struggle underlies the debate and is reflected in the conduct of foreign policy.

Considering these developments, Finnish foreign policy is best portrayed as a hybrid model that aims at accommodating all strands. The old opposition between a realist and liberalist approach to foreign policy remains, although neither approach seems to dominate in foreign policy making. Further, the once clear division of work in foreign policy leadership is blurred by the constitutional change that left unsettled the issue of foreign policy leadership. Despite its shortcomings, the hybrid model works in times of peace, but Penttilä (2008, p. 12) points out that this might not be the case during a crisis when foreign policy making is put to a test.

Finnish foreign policy during EU membership

Europeanization in the post-CW period

Finnish foreign policy has undergone a process of Europeanization in the post-CW time. Attempts to capture this transformation illustrate the fundamental changes it has brought about in foreign policy: connotations include a "Westernization" of Finnish politics; a focus-shift "from Moscow

to Brussels”; as well as a “going from special to normal” (Forsberg and Vogt, 2008). Europeanization thus refers to an orientation towards European politics in the post-CW time where the EU has become a reference point for politics in general and for foreign affairs in particular (Paloheimo, 2003; Tiilikainen, 2006, p. 77). It reflects a change of foreign policy that stands in contrast to Finland's post-CW foreign policy that rested on the three principles of neutrality, sovereignty of foreign policy making, as well as the maintenance of good relations with the Soviet Union/Russia (Raunio and Tiilikainen, 2003, p. 2-9, 129-131). Thus the Europeanization also reveals a change in foreign policy roles where the apt student approach has been the predominant one.

Although the shift is often portrayed as abrupt, EU membership is the result of continuity and pragmatism in Finnish foreign policy thinking (Raunio and Wiberg, 2001, p. 79-80; Tiilikainen, 2006, p. 76-77). It represents an adaption of policy to the deepening European integration and concurrent events in Finland's neighborhood, including Swedish EU membership and the developments in the Soviet Union and later in Russia (Möttölä, 1993). For Finland, EU integration has been an attempt to secure a place in the international community and to promote its national interest through EU decision-making (Raunio and Wiberg, 2001, p. 4). Simultaneously, the orientation has had an underlying aspect of national security. The political developments especially in the early 1990s changed the assessment of Finland's security environment and room of manoeuvre for policy making. Although security issues were downplayed in the debate preceding the EU membership vote, national security aspects were considered a central argument for membership (Tiilikainen, 2006, p. 77; Jakobson, 1998, p. 111). The national security aspect was however one of the major tumbling stones for EU membership as there were concerns within the EU that Finland's foreign policy tradition would be hard to

streamline with the CFSP and CSDP (Forsberg and Vogt, 2008; Raunio and Tiilikainen, 2003, p. 140). Those early doubts proved groundless since Finland promoted a strengthening of the CFSP (Raunio and Tiilikainen, 2003, p. 132-133) and in general was supportive of EU policy during the early days of its EU membership (Jakobson, 1998, p. 107; Tiilikainen, 2006, p. 82-85).

In the post-CW period, changes to Finnish foreign policy were to be seen both on the domestic and international level. Domestically, Europeanization contributed to blurring the lines between domestic and foreign affairs, and the general public was invited to participate in the foreign policy debate that had previously been considered an issue for the political elite. (Raunio and Wiberg, 2001, p. 65-66). Internationally, the Europeanization of Finland's foreign policy strengthened Finland's international position and enhanced its integration in international institutions. Most importantly, the EU became Finland's main point of reference and an important channel for influence in international affairs for the small state. EU membership also broadened the scope of Finnish foreign policy to embrace new geographical areas (Forsberg and Vogt, 2008; Raunio and Tiilikainen, 2003, p. 136-137). These changes might have come about regardless of EU membership, but the Europeanization of Finnish foreign policy enhanced the integration process and supported Finland's international orientation.

Finland's Eastern Policy

This re-evaluation of foreign policy towards Europe in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union was at first not accompanied by a corresponding assessment of Finland's 'Eastern policy'. The Finnish Eastern policy approaches lacked the forward-looking nature of the policy towards European countries: practices and priorities largely remained the same as during the late CW period, and the Eastern policy was dominated by

assessing risks and potential security threats. Most notably, the policy merely focused on relations with Russia and overlooked the other post-CW states (Saari, 2014, p. 39-40).

The Europeanization of Finnish foreign policy nevertheless brought about changes to the conduct of relations with Russia. Throughout the CW period, Finland's lonely wolf approach was manifested in its relations with Russia: Finnish-Russian relations were characterized by close bilateral ties and high-level meetings with an emphasis on personal relations (Etzold and Haukkala, 2013, p. 137). With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, however, the impediment for Finland to choose sides or facilitate between the CW blocks disappeared (Haukkala and Ojanen, 2011, p. 152; Saari, 2014, p. 39). EU membership has induced a shift in Finnish-Russian relation as they are being dealt with through the EU and Finland can refer to the EU framework when dealing with Russia. European integration has thus both normalized and multilateralized Finnish-Russian relations (Pursiainen and Saari, 2002, p. 22). Despite this, bilateral ties have continued to play an important role in Finnish-Russian relations, and in the post-CW time a 'golden rule' in Finnish foreign policy has been that Finland considers itself in a position of responsibility when there are issues between the former CW adversaries (Etzold and Haukkala, 2013, p. 138).

The changing conduct of Finnish-Russian relations has left unchanged the central position of Russia in Finnish foreign policy, including Finnish policy within the EU. This is evident in Finland's CFSP agenda as Finland has highlighted Russia's central role in European affairs, along with the need for constructive engagement with Russia in order to ensure European stability and security (Forsberg and Vogt, 2008). The mainstay of Finnish EU policy has been the cultivation of a coherent approach on Russia (Haukkala and Ojanen, 2011, p. 158), and a central aim has been to move beyond the mere 'strategic partnership' towards a EU-

Russia relationship based on cooperation and interdependence (Government of Finland, 2009). Towards this end, Finland has actively promoted the 1999 Common Strategy on Russia, as well as the Northern Dimension policy. However, Finnish attempts to upload policies have proven rather unsuccessful, and it has been realized that a joint EU policy on Russia is challenging, or entirely lacking³. This has led domestic voices to question the Finnish foreign policy orientation, and the liberalist approach has been challenged by the realist approach. Consequently, the issue of bilateral relations has been brought back on the agenda as a viable option to conducting Finnish-Russian relations (Etzold and Haukkala, 2013, p. 138-140), e.g. the Finnish Government's (2009) Russia Action Plan dealt with how to enhance Russia-related activities. It has also been debated to what extent Finland's national policy towards Russia has actually changed with EU membership: while some scholars argue that Finland has had to download a set of rules on EU-Russia cooperation (Haukkala and Ojanen, 2011, p. 157), others claim that Finland has kept its national Russia-policy in principle. Proponents of the latter argument suggest that a parallel conduct of bilateral and multilateral policies has been able to go unnoticed as long as the national one has not been in conflict with the EU policy (Pursiainen and Saari, 2002, p. 22).

The EaP: Ukraine and Russia

Finland's Eastern Policy has however not been restricted to Russia. After the introduction of the EaP in 2009, Finland's foreign policy scope was broadened to include the Eastern partners among the EU and Central Asian countries. Especially the geographical proximity made the area important to Finland, as "relations with the countries in the region are guided by Finland's national interests and the common policy of the

³ This can be seen especially in the difficulties to develop a joint EU position on Russia after the 2004/2007 EU enlargements.

European Union.” Within the EU framework, Finland’s main goals for the region have been to enhance economic and political relations, foster stable societal development, engage in conflict prevention, as well as to strengthen cooperation with the European Union (MFAF, 2010, p. 3-4).

During the early years of the EaP, Finland focused on fostering a stable EU neighborhood. This was primarily done through economic integration with the EU (Kantanen, 2009, p. 4) and in addition, Finland’s policy emphasized the common values of the rule of law, democracy, and civil society (MFAF, 2010, p. 11-12). These issues remained central on the Finnish EaP agenda (FAC, 2009; Peltokoski, 2012, p. 3-4; Stubb, 2010, p. 5), and were adopted by the new cabinet of Finland in 2011: Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen’s⁴ government program explicitly mentioned the role of common values, as well as the more-for-more principle that highlighted Finland’s emphasis on each country’s individual progress as a condition for further integration (FAC, 2013, 2009; Peltokoski, 2012, p. 3-4). At this stage, Ukraine was recognized a central player within the EaP due to its political and historical characteristics. Despite this, Finnish-Ukrainian relations were largely restricted to the economic field in the time preceding the Ukraine conflict (FAC, 2013). Successive Finnish governments have supported the EaP since its introduction in 2009 (MFAF, 2010, p. 5; 11). However, EaP support has been of a rather principal nature and neither EU nor bilateral relations with the EaP countries seem to have been a political priority to Finland.

In addition to these central issues, relations with third country partners and especially Russia counted to Finnish EaP priorities. Already Finland’s 2009 EaP policy statement highlighted the salience of engaging

⁴ Katainen’s Cabinet (June 2011-June 2014) was a coalition government consisting of six out of the eight parties represented in Finnish Parliament: The National Coalition Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Left Alliance, the Green League, the Swedish People’s Party, as well as the Christian Democrats.

third partner countries in the integration process, and explicitly mentioned the involvement of Russia (Kantanen, 2009, p. 4). Thus despite the unsuccessful uploading of its Russia policy on an EU level, Finland continued to pay attention to EU-Russian relations. The importance of Russia within Finnish Eastern Policy was reflected in Katainen's government program: Although it is supportive of the development of the ENP and strengthening of the EaP, the focus of Finland's Eastern Policy lies with Russia. "Finland will strengthen its close, encompassing, and multilevel bilateral ties with Russia," in addition to actively contributing to the EU's Russia policy and encouraging Russia's European integration (Government of Finland, 2011, p. 18-20). Concerns of deteriorating relations were noted in Finland's 2010 Eastern Policy guideline that recognized on the one hand Russia's aims to maintain its former geopolitical influence in the region, and on the other hand Moscow's perception that the EU and US presence there was counter to Russian interests (MFAF, 2010, p. 7-8). This got clearer over time: In 2013, Finnish policy makers acknowledged growing EU-Russia tensions as well as the risk of Russia perceiving the EaP (by means of the prospects of a free trade agreement) and the Eurasian Customs Union as a zero-sum game. Finland however remained supportive of the EaP as a stable Eastern neighborhood considered crucial to the EU, and the relative geographical proximity made the region important to Finland (FAC, 2013).

The Ukraine conflict

Signs of Europeanization

With the escalation of the Ukraine conflict in early 2014, the EaP and especially Ukraine were placed at the center of Finnish foreign policy. The events unfolding in Ukraine were considered breaches of international law and international agreements; they constituted a showcase of power politics

that challenged what Finland perceived as the pillars of liberal world order and the fundament of the country's national security. Thus from the onset of the conflict, Finland strongly condemned the violations of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty (Tuomioja, 2014a, 2014b).

In doing so, Finland firmly placed itself within the 'Western community'. Especially the EU stood out as the main framework of and channel for Finnish foreign policy: Following the annexation of Crimea in February 2014, Finland adopted the EU policy on Ukraine and promoted a peaceful solution to the conflict within an international framework (Government of Finland, 2014a; MFAF, 2014a). In the wake of the conflict, the fundamentals of Finnish foreign policy remained unchanged, and Finland emphasized the core elements of the EaP: In its early reactions to the conflict, the Government of Finland stressed that the reforms and integration efforts underway in Ukraine be continued, and later favored the signing of EU-Ukraine agreements. Also, the introduction of sanctions towards Russia was supported (Hurttu, 2014, p. 4; Hurttu and Ohls, 2014, p. 3; Pursiainen, 2014a, p. 3; 2014b, p. 3). Finland's reaction could easily be ascribed to the country's apt student role, where Finland would automatically position itself as an EU member and follow the EU's policy. This can however be contested considering that the domestic debate on foreign policy and the official foreign policy emphasized EU unity when dealing with the Ukraine conflict (Pursiainen, 2014a, p. 3; 2014b, p. 3), pointing towards a firmly grounded European and international orientation of Finnish foreign policy. The importance of these shared values and EU unity are captured in a speech given by President Sauli Niinistö (2014a):

“Finland's position regarding the events in Ukraine has been clear ever since the beginning of the crisis. We condemn any and all violations of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine. We have been involved in setting up sanctions

imposed by the EU on Russia. We cannot excuse ourselves from responsibility regarding the principles employed in resolving conflicts in Europe. We can also not just look to our own narrow interests when our common values are trespassed upon. We are part of the West and share the Western value base. However, our foreign policy cannot consist solely of declaring our opinions and principles to all and sundry. We also need to think about what practical measures we want to and can undertake. And then we need to try to undertake them.”

The value-based orientation and especially the action-focused approach promoted by Niinistö were evident in Finland’s OSCE commitments. The OSCE became the main forum for Finnish engagement in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Ukraine. Not only did the organization enjoy strong political support (PMO, 2015; Tuomioja, 2014c), but Finland also supported OSCE activities in Ukraine: At the onset of the projects in 2014, Finland was one of the main contributors to both the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission and the OSCE Border Observer Mission. Further, Finland supported Ukraine with relatively big contributions within humanitarian assistance and reconstruction, donating 2 million euros to OSCE projects alone in 2014, and providing 12,5 million euros in humanitarian aid and related projects in Ukraine in 2014-2015 (MFAF, 2015b).

Finland also engaged in diplomatic efforts and both within the EU and the OSCE advocated a negotiated solution to the conflict. Finland supported the implementation of the Minsk agreement (Government of Finland, 2015a; MFAF, 2014b; PMO, 2015), and emphasized the salience of keeping communication channels open between the actors involved regardless of tensions (Niinistö, 2014a; Government of Finland, 2014b, 2014c; Tuomioja, 2014c). Towards this end, Finland made an effort to maintain communication with Russia, and President Niinistö repeatedly met

with his Russian counterpart to discuss the situation. These efforts reflect the President's stance (quote above) that it is a responsibility to stand up for core European principles and contribute towards finding a solution to the conflict. The engagement can thus be seen in the broader context of Finland's apt student role where Finnish efforts to find a peaceful solution to the Ukraine conflict are in line with the country's peace-building tradition and the aim to maintain rule of law. These attempts, claimed to improve the information flow between the EU and Russia, however became subject of criticism from actors demanding stronger protests against Russian aggression in Ukraine (Niinistö, 2014a). The bilateral meetings resemble Finland's CW policy where these very meetings were a central element of foreign policy making. Thus it can also be argued that the engagement had an underlying aspect of national interests, and was a way to safeguard among others national security. This would indicate a return to the realist thinking that puts national issues in the foreground of foreign policy.

In Russia's shadow

Finland's strong emphasis on international norms and peacebuilding efforts were accompanied by an awareness of growing EU-Russia tensions. As discussed previously, these were acknowledged prior to the Ukraine conflict, as already the 2010 EaP guideline pointed out Russian geopolitical interests in Eastern Europe. At the early stages of the conflict, Finnish policy makers recognized an opposition between Russia and the EU, and highlighted that the Ukraine conflict needs to be situated in its broader context:

“A wider confrontation between the west and Russia underlies the Ukraine conflict. ... Of course, it is natural that we view the issue from our own starting points. But so too do the Russians. Herein may lie the basic problem (Niinistö, 2015a).”

Finland's early approach to the conflict built upon the premise that it could not be solved without a thorough understanding of the conflict dimensions. In line with the President's view, then Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja (2014d) argued that the Ukraine conflict was a showcase of a clash between opposed logics in world politics where the EU's approach was guided by liberalist ideas and Russia understood the world in realist terms of power politics. According to Tuomioja, this binary opposition however provided a simplified picture of the conflict, and he called for an approach that acknowledged the conflict's multi-dimensionality: In addition to the bilateral conflict between Ukraine and Russia, the simultaneous domestic issues in Ukraine, as well as the state of EU-Russia relations added to the complexity of the issue. As a solution would only be possible if all elements were addressed, the Finnish approach emphasized the need to restore both EU-Russia and Ukraine-Russia relations (Tuomioja, 2014c).

Thus relations with Russia were early on placed at the heart of Finland's approach to solving the conflict. Most notably, Finland actively promoted this position on an international level. Finland repeatedly highlighted Russia's central role for bringing about a solution to the conflict (Government of Finland, 2015a, 2014b, 2014c; MFAF, 2014a, 2014c) and called for a better understanding of the conflict's context, including an overall deeper insight into Russia's perspective (Tuomioja, 2014c, 2014d). The pragmatic approach could also be seen in Finland's stance on EU sanctions on Russia: Sanctions were supported, however reluctantly, and Finland promoted a careful approach that emphasized a gradual implementation of sanctions and a strong legal base to enable their reversal when needed (Autti, 2014, p. 2; Pursiainen, 2014a; p. 3; 2014b, p. 3). In doing so, Finland balanced the interests of on the one hand respect for the international norms, and on the other hand good relations with Russia on a bilateral and international level.

However, this approach did not turn into the appeasement of Russia or careful balancing of relations that had once been a common element of Finnish foreign policy. Instead, it was accompanied by relatively harsh critique on Russia. From the onset of the conflict, Finland joined the EU in criticizing Russia for its role in the conflict, and domestic critical voices grew stronger over time (Government of Finland, 2014b, 2014c; MFAF, 2015a). In addition, President Niinistö went on to criticize the international community for not strongly enough condemning and reacting to Russian activities in Ukraine (Niinistö, 2014b). Although these reactions might not intuitively appear harsh, they stand out in the context of Finnish foreign policy where open criticism of Russia is an exception rather than a rule (Raik et al., 2015, p. 6). In calling upon the international community to react and stand up for international norms, Finland placed an international orientation at the center of its foreign policy. The reactions thus revealed a strong support for the apt student role in foreign policy.

Changing security outlook

Apart from growing EU-Russia tensions and Russian action in Ukraine, also the state of European security was a cause for concern to Finland. In the spring of 2014, President Niinistö warned that the escalation of the Ukraine conflict had “shaken and undermined the European system” and would threaten European security if not dealt with (Niinistö, 2014c). This frank wording reflected the increasing worries about the future of European cooperation and the European security architecture at large.

Underlying this was amongst other things a concern related to Finland’s precarious national security situation. Finland’s aspirations to integrate in international organizations in the early post-CW period had a security aspect to them as Finland not only tried and adapt to the country’s changing security environment, but also sought to avoid ending up balancing between two blocks like during the CW. The Europeanization of

Finnish foreign policy had brought about a normalization and multilateralization of Finnish-Russian relations, but had not been put to a strong test in the post-CW time, and it is debatable whether the multilateralization of foreign policy had even been institutionalized in favor of the traditional bilateral approach ahead of the Ukraine conflict. In addition to this, Finland lacked security guarantees despite its Western orientation: not being a NATO member country and with the EU not being an established security actor, Finland was left with a political agenda but with little leverage. This placed Finland in a challenging foreign policy situation as the country was expected to take a clear political stance towards Russia, yet had no established mechanism for doing so.

These aspects turned Finnish foreign policy into a balancing act where the security aspect was present early on. Finnish policy makers stressed that Finland was not threatened (Niinistö, 2015b; Tuomioja, 2014d), but nevertheless looked seriously at the security situation: In 2014, President Niinistö explicitly argued that the conflict had implications for Finland, and therefore required action within the EU framework (Niinistö, 2014a). One year later, the President pointed out that “Our Western partnership is one of the pillars of our security. Membership of the EU is an important security solution for Finland, even if it is not a defense solution,” while “Russia is aware that Finland is and will remain part of the West” (Niinistö, 2015b). This assured that Finland was firmly embedded in Western institutions and stayed committed to shared international values and norms. Simultaneously, it reflected an awareness of the changing national security situation and its possible implications for Finland.

After the initial strong support for the EU policy, an ambiguity started to show in Finland’s policy. While it was still in line with EU policy, it grew more cautious and did not fully side with the EU’s dealing of the conflict. Most notably, Finland expressed criticism about the EU’s handling of the

EaP process, and called for the EU to assess its approach to relations with Russia and the EaP countries (Tuomioja, 2014c, 2014d). As the Ukraine conflict continued, this position translated into a more cautious Finnish EaP approach: In early 2015, Finland clearly distinguished the EaP from EU enlargement (Veikanmaa, 2015, p. 3), and called for a more holistic approach that would take as its starting point the progress made by individual countries, and would better define and communicate the EU's aims (Hurtta et al., 2015, p. 3-4).

While this can be seen as a natural adaption to changing conflict dynamics, it can also be viewed as a consequence of the lack of a coherent and encompassing EU policy towards Russia. Although Finland's early attempts to upload its Russia policy had proven unsuccessful, the reactions to the Ukraine conflict indicate that Finland in the early days of the conflict still wished to form a joint EU foreign policy position and act accordingly. However, disagreement remained within the EU on how to deal with Russia. Thus Finland's initially strong emphasis on shared values was increasingly influenced by a realist approach to foreign policy that relied on strong bilateral relations, resting on the assumption that Finnish-Russian relations were special. Alternatively, it can be argued that Finland's reaction to the conflict shows that the EU policy was never downloaded. Following this line of argument, Finland simply kept its old foreign policy throughout EU membership, which did not openly conflict with the EU policy until the start of the Ukraine conflict. Either way, it calls into question to what extent the Finnish engagement in the Ukraine conflict sprung from a concern about Ukraine's sovereignty and Finnish peacebuilding efforts, as it seems that Finnish engagement was also aimed at finding a new way to conduct Finnish-Russian relations. Thus at the core, the Ukraine conflict became an issue of Finnish foreign policy and security, where the engagement for Ukraine seemed secondary.

New government, new policy?

In 2014, Finland experienced two changes of government. In June, Alexander Stubb⁵ succeeded Katainen as prime minister. No big changes were introduced with regard to Finnish foreign policy, and in terms of the Ukraine conflict, Stubb's government program only noted that "Finland emphasizes the necessity of respecting international law and supports a negotiated solution to the (Ukraine) crisis" (Government of Finland, 2014d, p. 6). Following 2015 parliamentary elections, Sipilä's⁶ cabinet assumed office in June 2015. The cabinet assessed Russian action in Ukraine and EU sanctions on the same ground as its predecessors, and adopted the policy of the Katainen and Stubb governments (MFAF, 2015c). Thus Finland continued to promote a peaceful solution to the conflict that placed at its center the implementation of the Minsk agreement, and repeatedly called for Russia to contribute to the stabilization of the situation in Ukraine (Birkstedt, 2015; MFAF, 2015c; Niinistö, 2015c; Soini, 2015a). In terms of international cooperation, Finland reiterated the salience of EU unity in face of the Ukraine conflict, while the OSCE remained the main framework for action (Birkstedt, 2015; MFAF, 2015d; Soini, 2015b). In addition, forthcoming societal reforms and the humanitarian situation stayed on the agenda (Birkstedt, 2015; MFAF, 2015c; Soini, 2015a).

Although officially Finnish foreign policy remained unchanged, Sipilä's government brought about a focus shift from the international system to Finnish sovereignty. The government program prioritized domestic issues, while it downplayed EU affairs and described Finnish EU

⁵ Stubb's cabinet (June 24, 2014 – May 29, 2015) was formed after Katainen resigned as chairperson of the National Coalition party. Apart from the Left Alliance and the Green League leaving government, the constellation of Stubb's coalition government was the same as his predecessor's.

⁶ Sipilä's cabinet (May 29, 2015-) consists of the centrist, agrarian and liberal Centre Party, the right-wing populist Finns Party, and the conservative National Coalition Party.

membership as a mere “political choice that connects Finland to the Western community of values” (Finnish Government, 2015, p. 32). Increasingly, European unity was interpreted not as a community, but as form of cooperation that was suitable for dealing with such common issues that cannot be dealt with on a national level only (Soini, 2015c). This shift can be explained by the government constellation, where two out of three parties have a record of EU-skepticism. It is also possible that the changing security environment fostered a narrowing down of Finland’s foreign policy agenda. At this point it is however hard to assess the underlying causes of this change, and whether it represents a permanent shift in foreign policy.

Although the EU’s importance and foreign policy making was downplayed, the EU remained central to Finnish national security. The 2015 government program stated that “the EU is an important security community to Finland” (Finnish Government, 2015, p. 33), and in line with this, Foreign Minister Soini referred to the EU as “a key cooperation forum for Finland and a fundamental choice in terms of security policy” (Soini, 2015a). The weakened European security environment constituted a matter of concern to Finland, and events were increasingly viewed through a lens of security (Government of Finland, 2015b; Soini, 2015a): The ENP and EaP were considered important due to their positive implications for European stability and security (Finnish Government, 2015, p. 33), and also the Ukraine conflict was increasingly considered a security issue and a mere a trigger for both the worsening EU-Russia relations and the Baltic Sea region. Thus while Finland stayed committed on paper to working towards a solution to the conflict, there seems to be a focus shift from the actual conflict to its implications for Finland (Soini, 2015a).

Instead, Finnish policy makers focused more on the security situation in Finland’s immediate neighborhood. Especially, there was an increased awareness of the changing security situation in the Baltic Sea region: A

perception of increased insecurity of the Baltic States and a following increase in NATO presence, along with repeated air space violations by Russia all direct attention towards the region. According to Foreign Minister Soini,

“The effects of the Ukraine crisis also extend to the bilateral relations between Finland and Russia and the security situation in the Baltic Sea region. Coordination of the Government’s Russian policy is now even more important than before. In these conditions, it is essential to maintain regular dialogue with Russia with regard to not only the international situation but also the neighbouring regions and the Baltic Sea region” (Soini, 2015a).

Thus the national security aspect lay at the heart of Finland’s foreign policy. Although this had been on the agenda from the onset of the conflict, the focus on security and Russia in particular became stronger during the early days of the government’s tenure. This showed in an eagerness to foster Finnish-Russian relations and find an approach that suited the new political climate, as well as uploading its Russia policy on the EU level and restore EU-Russia relations (Finnish Government, 2015, p. 33; Soini, 2015a). This was accompanied by a waning rhetorical emphasis on international norms and cooperation, and a reluctance to take initiatives on the international stage (Soini, 2015c).

Role confusion

Finland’s foreign policy on Ukraine might appear consistent throughout the conflict, but a closer look reveals that foreign policy roles altered and mixed during the period studied. At the onset of the conflict, the foreign policy of the Katainen and Stubb governments followed the liberal approach: In line with the apt student role, Finnish foreign policy

was embedded with EU policy and emphasized international cooperation and the rule of law. While there was awareness of the conflict's potential security implications for Finland, it was not dominating the agenda. Instead, this period was marked by strong international advocacy and a continuation of Finland's peacebuilding tradition. In contrast, Sipilä's government relied on a realist approach to foreign policy. This brought about a fundamental change in foreign policy as it placed at its core national interests. Hence Sipilä's government distinguished itself from its predecessors by taking an approach to foreign policy that placed at its heart Finnish sovereignty and viewed issues through a lens of security. Simultaneously, the role of international cooperation was downplayed on behalf of bilateral ties, and there was reluctance to international engagement. Thus the government deviated from what had been Finland's predominant foreign policy role throughout the post-CW period.

Although the change of foreign policy roles during this period is evident, there were also signs of the hybrid model being at play. It must be recognized that although one role was predominant, there were always elements of the other role present. As a telling example, throughout this period there were challenges to establish a way to deal with Russia in a time when Finland was balancing not between CW blocks, but between a multilateralism embedded with the EU and traditional bilateralism. Hence regardless of foreign policy role, all governments relied on both international settings for cooperation as well as bilateral relations with Russia. This struggle was reflected in the ambiguity regarding Finland's foreign policy role. As pointed out previously, it is also hard to say at this point whether the changing foreign policy roles are due to a change in government constellation, reflect an actual permanent shift in Finland's foreign policy role, or to what extent this is a consequence of the hybrid model. It must also be recognized that the political and security

environment underwent considerable changes in the period studied, and that this in turn might have affected the foreign policy decisions by the governments. Yet it is clear that there was ambiguity regarding Finland's foreign policy role.

In addition to this, the unsettled issue of foreign policy leadership added to the foreign policy role confusion. Although the president and the cabinet coordinated their policies closely, the differences in their policies during the period studied stand out. Throughout the conflict, Niinistö's approach reflected an international orientation in foreign policy that highlighted good relations with Russia and a peaceful, negotiated solution to the conflict (Niinistö, 2015a, 2015c). This was however accompanied by an emphasis on national security implications of the Ukraine conflict as Niinistö repeatedly pointed out Finland's security and sovereignty, as well as the worsening European security situation (Niinistö, 2015a, 2015d). These concerns grew more salient over time, which was reflected in Niinistö's 2015 statement: "Everywhere we look, textbooks on political realism are being re-opened. In Finland, such books were never quite closed. Our history saw to that (Niinistö, 2015a). Niinistö thus situated himself in between the three governments: In terms of international cooperation, his policy was more in line with the liberalist approach of the Katainen and Stubb governments, while his emphasis on security resembled the realist approach of Sipilä's government. Taken together, this adds an element of unclarity to Finnish foreign policy, as the leaders of foreign policy do not seem to have been in agreement. On the one hand, Niinistö brought stability to foreign policy as his policy was clear over time, but on the other hand the differences in the policies confuse the audience and beg the question of who is in charge of Finnish foreign policy. As the governments played different foreign policy roles and the president played both of them, it is also unclear what foreign policy role tradition Finland aims to follow.

As discussed, Finland's constitution rules that the president is in charge of foreign policy together with the cabinet, although the latter is in charge of EU affairs. The Ukraine conflict thus constituted a delicate situation as it involved both non-EU countries and the EU, and Finnish foreign policy making therefore required involvement of both the president and the cabinet. The Ukraine conflict thus revealed that Finland considered Europe a continent of peace and had not envisaged conflicts in Europe when adopting the Constitution. As Penttilä (2008) pointed out, the hybrid model works during peacetime, but not necessarily during times of crisis. This however puts Finland in a precarious situation, as it indicates that the foreign policy leadership issue might prove an obstacle to Finnish policy on any conflict in Europe.

Against this backdrop, it is evident that the Ukraine conflict has revealed the tensions underlying foreign policy making and the downsides with Finland's foreign policy hybrid model. Finnish foreign policy would gain in credibility and efficiency from settling the issues of Finland's foreign policy role and leadership. This would require an active debate that addresses the issues at their core, instead of meandering and dealing with them as they emerge, as was the case with the Ukraine conflict.

The Ukraine conflict also showed growing ambiguities in Finland's EU relations. Although Finland's policy was in line with EU policy throughout the conflict, the country's future role as an apt student within foreign policy making can be questioned in light of the handling of the Ukraine conflict. Although EU unity was central to Finland during the Ukraine conflict, developments indicated that the EU has not delivered on foreign policy as well as Finland hoped for. Instead, Finland's bilateral ties with Russia were an important compliment to the EU policy throughout the conflict. As future EU actions largely depend on overall developments within the EU and its neighborhood, it is interesting to ask what will guide Finland's future

engagement in the CFSP: will it be a genuine interest for a joint EU foreign policy? Will it be motivated by Finnish sovereignty and national security? Or will future engagement be motivated by the possibility for a small country to gain influence beyond its size internationally? The answer will condition Finnish future engagement in the CFSP and CSDP.

The same questions about the future of Finnish foreign policy roles can be asked outside the EU context. What is Finland's role and ambition in international affairs, and who is in charge of foreign policy? Will Finland continue its peace-building tradition or withdraw from international engagement? What will guide foreign policy making now that the consensus that used to underlie Finnish policy making seems to be absent? Currently, the debate seems to assume that Finland needs to choose either foreign policy role. However, the current hybrid model could be an adequate approach to meet today's political realities where global and local affairs are intertwined. Finland's foreign policy could then be characterized by a strong international orientation and a concurrent focus on bilateral ties, that would however need to be guided by the same principles and rest on a clear policy. Nevertheless, Finland's foreign policy leadership would need to be clarified in order to avoid confusing situations in foreign policy to occur. Regardless of the outcome, these issues need to be addressed and any decisions should be preceded by an open debate on Finland's core foreign policy idea as well as Finland's role and aims within the international community. Ideally, this debate should be anchored not only among key policy makers, but with the general public as well. Otherwise, the lack of a clearly defined foreign policy idea and role will make challenging the future foreign and security policy making, both on a domestic and EU level.

Conclusion

Finnish foreign policy has undergone fundamental changes in the post-CW time. The changing political realities have enabled a Europeanization, an orientation towards “the West” that has brought about a normalization and multilateralization of relations with Russia, but also extended Finnish foreign policy focus to new areas, such as Eastern Europe. Despite this clear international orientation, Finnish foreign policy is today characterized by ambiguity, as there is a lack of clarity regarding Finland’s foreign policy role and its leadership.

The Ukraine conflict makes a peculiar case as it entails all these elements, and has put Finnish foreign policy to its biggest test in the post-CW time. The analysis of Finnish reaction to the conflict has shown a foreign policy supportive of the EU, however with underlying tensions. Most notably, the conflict has revealed ambiguities in Finland’s foreign policy role, as there is disagreement on whether Finland should follow a liberalist “apt student” approach emphasizing international cooperation, or a realist “lonely wolf” approach highlighting national security. Thus, the Finnish reaction has followed the “hybrid model”, which has entailed an unforeseeable mix of both, which can also be seen in the changing level of support for and engagement in EU foreign policy. Further, the unclarity regarding Finnish foreign policy leadership has added to the confusion about the country’s foreign policy role.

Above all, the Ukraine conflict has led Finland to reassess its relations with Russia. Finnish-Russian relations have undergone a multilateralization in the post-CW time, but Finnish attempts to upload a Russia policy within the EU have been rather unsuccessful. Thus Finland’s situation during the Ukraine conflict is delicate, as the country has not established a new way of dealing with Russia, yet lacks external security guarantees. Simultaneously, Finland’s international orientation in the post-CW period makes it

impossible to revert to the CW practice of balancing the CW adversaries. Instead, the result seems to be to follow the EU policy but complement it with the traditional, bilateral ties with Russia.

Relations with Russia over time overshadowed the actual conflict. In fact, due to changes in foreign policy roles, Finnish sovereignty and Finnish-Russian relations were at the forefront of Finnish foreign policy, overshadowing conflict resolution in line with Finland's tradition of peacebuilding. It remains to be seen whether this aspect will condition Finland's future engagement in the EU CFSP and CSDP.

Nevertheless, attention needs to be directed towards Finnish foreign policy: As this case has shown, the hybrid model of Finnish foreign policy works during peacetimes, but the underlying tensions cause confusion in times of crisis. Therefore, a thorough discussion is needed on the core idea of Finnish foreign policy. This debate should not limit itself to the current dichotomous ideological division, but open up for a more nuanced foreign policy that accommodates different strands. This could bring about more stability and credibility to Finnish foreign policy.

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