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THE IMAGE OF RUSSIA IN FINLAND'S HISTORICAL POLITICS AMID NATO ACCESSION: A CASE STUDY OF PRESIDENT SAULI NIINISTÖ'S SPEECHES

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The study focuses on the image of Russia in Finland's historical politics in the context of the country's accession to NATO. Its aim is to identify changes in the place attributed to Russia in the Finnish political elite's references to Finland's own past, shared Russian—Finnish history, and world history. To achieve this objective, the author analyses speeches by the President of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, on foreign policy issues delivered between 2021 and 2024: prior to the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, during Helsinki's accession process to NATO, and after Finland obtained full membership in the Alliance. The theoretical framework of the study draws on the concept of historical politics as interpreted by Alexei Miller, as well as on the theory of historical narrative developed by Eviatar Zerubavel. The primary research method employed is discourse analysis in accordance with the approach of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The analysis reveals that Sauli Niinistö referred most actively to the past during the first year of the conflict in Ukraine and following Finland's application for NATO membership. Since 2022, the Winter War and other episodes of Russian—Finnish confrontation have assumed a far more prominent role in historical politics than the 1975 Helsinki Accords. These references contribute to the construction of Russia's image as an enemy and a threat in both the present and the past, and serve to mobilise public support within Finland for Ukraine. As a result, the historical narrative increasingly takes the form of a prolonged and continuous struggle between the two nations, devoid of any experience of mutually beneficial cooperation or sustained dialogue between the two countries.

Keywords:

Russia, Finland, historical policy, historical narrative, 'Lieux de Mémoire', NATO, Winter War, conflict in Ukraine

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Introduction

In recent years, politicians from different countries have increasingly referred to the past to achieve certain goals in the present. Finland is no exception: its elites often use historical analogies when discussing the conflict in Ukraine or Russian politics. They also reinforce their ties with the Nordic countries, the EU member-states, and the US by using their historical experience. A striking example of this trend was the recent speech of President Alexander Stubb at the meeting of European leaders and President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy with US President Donald Trump in August 2025, when the head of the Finnish state compared Ukraine's position to that of Finland in 1944.¹

Nevertheless, the practice of referring to the past had become a significant feature of Finnish political discourse even earlier, especially in the context of the country's accession to NATO in 2022–2023. It was the images of history that served as an additional argument for emphasising the threat from Russia, which is crucial for justifying shifts in Finland's foreign policy strategy, the need to support Ukraine and closer military-political cooperation with European countries and the United States.

To date, a substantial body of research has examined Finland's path to NATO and, in particular, Russia's role in this process. The possibility of Helsinki joining the Alliance was discussed even before the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine (e.g., in Gromyko and Plevako [1], Khudoley and Lanko [2]), who framed it as a Finnish security dilemma. However, after the decision to apply, scholars began to explore various aspects of this process. These include papers offering a comparative analysis of Finland's and Sweden's path to NATO (Sidorova and Ryabinina [3]), studies on the prerequisites for joining the Alliance (Danilov [4], Christiansson [5], Gunter [6]), analyses of the public opinion factor (Ponamareva [7]) and examinations of the foreign policy decision-making process during a crisis (Koskimaa and Raunio [8]). The impact of systemic changes was particularly emphasised, with specific discussion of the consequences of NATO expansion for regional security and the security of Russia (Ryabinina [9] and Smirnov [10]). At the same time, the factor of memory and the use of this instrument by the Finnish authorities to justify their decision have not been examined separately, with the exception of a single English-language study by David Arter [11]. In this work, Finland's historical experience, above all the Winter War, is presented as one of the reasons for framing Russia as a threat and, consequently, for joining the Alliance. However, changes in commemorative practices themselves are not analysed.

On the other hand, a body of scholarship can be identified that addresses topical issues of memory politics in Finland, despite the fact that the country remains largely on the periphery of Memory Studies, which have tended to

¹ Presidentti Stubb: Löysimme ratkaisun Venäjän kanssa vuonna 1944 ja löydämme sen myös vuonna 2025, 2025, *Yle*, 18.08.2025, URL: <https://yle.fi/a/74-20177652/64-3-275912> (accessed 28.08.2025).

focus more extensively on Central and Eastern Europe. In foundational works examining the role of memory in international relations, including the classical edited volumes by Bell [12], Langenbacher [13], and Resende and Budryte [14], as well as the study by Kopstein and Subotić [15] devoted to Holocaust memory in the international context of the 2020s and Mälksoo's typology of approaches to the study of memory in world politics [16], Finnish cases are notably absent.

Research that does address Finnish contexts of memory politics tends to concentrate on specific *lieux de mémoire* within national historical narratives, often only indirectly connected to Russia. This includes studies on the significance of the Second World War for contemporary Finnish society, such as works by Wallenius-Korkalo [17], Kolodnikova [18], and Vitukhnovskaya-Kauppalä [19] on the Winter War; Holmila's research on Holocaust memory in Finland [20]; and Davydova-Minguet's analysis of commemorative practices related to the Second World War among Russian Finns [21]. Other studies focus on earlier historical episodes, including the Great Northern War (Liman [22]) and the Finnish Civil War (Heimo and Peltonen [23]; Kuzmenko [24]), as well as on local and regional memory practices—for example, memory of opera in the Kymi region (Hautsalo and Westerlund [25]) and nostalgia for Petsamo in the context of the Russian–Finnish border (Lähtenmäki and Colpaert [26]).

The objective of this research is to identify transformations in Finnish historical policy and in the role attributed to Russia during discussions surrounding Finland's accession to NATO. The study seeks to examine how references to the past have evolved within Finnish political discourse, what new features have emerged in the historical narratives articulated by political elites, and how Russia is positioned within these narratives. To achieve this aim, the analysis compares key discursive practices from the period prior to the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, during Finland's path towards NATO membership, and following its accession to the Alliance.

Materials and methods

The primary sources for this study are speeches delivered by the then-President of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, between 2021 and 2024 on issues of foreign policy. These speeches reflect several stages in the transformation of Finland's foreign and security policy: the period before the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine and Finland's decision to join NATO; the accession process in 2022–2023; and the first year of Helsinki's membership in the Alliance. Unlike long-term strategic documents, the President's relatively frequent public statements make it possible to trace the dynamics of these changes and to identify which representations of Finland's past were constructed at each stage, as well as which *lieux de mémoire* became most salient. It should also be noted that the role of the President of Finland was significantly curtailed following the adoption of the 2000 Constitution, which substantially reduced the head of state's influence in domestic politics [27].

However, in the sphere of foreign policy, particularly in relations with Russia and the United States, the president remains a key actor. Consequently, his rhetoric on these issues plays a pivotal role in shaping Finland's external political discourse.

The theoretical framework of this work, on the one hand, is the concept of historical policy, that is, a set of practices through which various political forces seek to establish their interpretations of historical events as dominant [28, p. 10]. In this study, the concept is used to analyse the appeal to the past in the context of foreign policy activities. At this level, referring to the past serves as a tool for political elites to achieve certain goals (in this case, to justify joining NATO and to form a new system of relations with Russia), and success in consolidating an interpretation is a demonstration of the state's strength in the international arena.

To examine appeals to the past, the author draws on the structuralist approach to historical narratives developed by Eviatar Zerubavel in "Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past" [29]. Zerubavel argues that certain schematic formats for narrating the past are more prevalent in some cultural and historical contexts than in others. He identifies a number of sociomnemonic structures, including "progress" (in which the present is depicted as more prosperous than the past), "decline" (a narrative centred on a "glorious past" contrasted with a less favourable present), "zigzag" (a narrative of alternating advances and setbacks), and "circles" (a non-linear representation of historical events).

Within this framework, particular attention is paid to the organisation of the narrative: how its beginning and end are constructed, which actors are included in the narrative, and how different images and meanings are interconnected within the overall narrative structure.

These individual images may be understood as "*lieux de mémoire*" (Eng. sites of memory), a concept introduced by the French historian Pierre Nora [30] in the context of his project on French collective memory, which was structured around emblematic representations of past epochs. *Lieux de mémoire* can be defined as "any significant entity, whether material or ideal in nature, which, through human will or the passage of time, has become a symbolic element of the heritage of a particular community". A *lieu de mémoire* may take the form of a geographical site or an intangible phenomenon; more broadly, it refers to historical focal points that help define group cohesion in the present and play a significant role in the collective identity of a community (for example, the French or the Finns).

The main research method employed is discourse analysis, drawing on the approach developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe [31]. This approach conceptualises reality as socially constructed through discourses that can be identified in a variety of texts, including statements by political actors and media publications. At the same time, the authors emphasise the inherent fluidity of discourses and their continual competition with one another, which makes it necessary to identify the dominant discourse and assess its significance at a particu-

lar stage. The content of a discourse is shaped by its nodal points, which serve as organising centres and may be articulated within chains of equivalence alongside other images that are essential for the construction of a coherent narrative.

Sauli Niinistö's appeal to the past in 2021 — early 2022

Before the deterioration of EU—Russia relations, the Finnish president rarely used the tools of historical policy in speeches on foreign policy topics. In addition, these issues did not become key in his traditional addresses to the Finns. For example, in his New Year's speech in 2021, Sauli Niinistö did not discuss Finnish foreign policy at all and, therefore, did not attempt to justify any steps with historical analogies.

Nevertheless, certain references to the past can be identified in the speeches of the Finnish president during 2021. Most frequently, he referred to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), held in Helsinki in 1975. This event occupies a central place in the Finnish historical narrative, underscoring Finland's significance in the international arena. Notably, Sauli Niinistö invoked the CSCE in a variety of settings, including at the United Nations, where he called for the principles of the CSCE Final Act to be extended to all countries worldwide, emphasising the pivotal role of the "Helsinki spirit" in fostering dialogue and trust.¹ He also referred to the CSCE at the Crimea Platform, stressing that these principles continue to constitute the foundation of European security, while portraying Russia and the Soviet Union not as enemies or adversaries of Finland and Europe, but as participants in the Helsinki process and co-founders of the continent's security architecture.²

The "Helsinki spirit" and the year 1975 were also invoked by Sauli Niinistö in a speech marking the 225th anniversary of the Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences in Stockholm, where relations with Russia were presented as one of the four pillars of Finnish security policy at the time. The Helsinki meeting was framed as a counterpoint to Cold War confrontation and as a model for future dialogue. More notably, in this address, the president outlined a broader Finnish historical narrative, observing that Finland had historically been part of both Sweden and Russia, while emphasising that the "Western ties" forged during the period of Swedish rule played a particularly pivotal role in the development of Finland's political system and culture. These ties, he argued, now underpin Finnish–Swedish cooperation in the field of defence. In addition, at the 2021 Democracy Summit, the president referred to the early extension of voting rights to Finnish women, which took place at a time when the Grand Duchy of Finland

¹ Statement by President of the Republic of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, at the 76th General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly, 2021, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 21.09.2021, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/statement-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-76th-general-debate-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-21-september-2021/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

² Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the Crimea Platform in Kyiv, 2021, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 23.08.2021, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-crimea-platform-in-kyiv-on-23-august-2021/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

was part of the Russian Empire. This indirectly indicated, among other things, the positive contribution of this historical period to the development of the democratic traditions of the Finns.¹

At the turn of 2021–2022, amid debates on NATO non-expansion and the possibility of a conflict in Ukraine, a noticeable shift in Sauli Niinistö's historical policy became apparent. In his New Year's address, which devoted considerable attention to foreign policy, the Finnish president spoke of the definitive end of the Cold War era, contrasting the contemporary situation not only with that period but also with the earlier great-power policy of "spheres of influence". He also invoked Henry Kissinger to illustrate the complexity of preventing wars and managing security threats. Finland's own narrative, however, was framed in terms of continuity: the country was presented as having pursued a consistent foreign and security policy amid numerous international crises, with the preservation of its distinctive international status portrayed as the central objective throughout its history.²

Particularly interesting in the context of these changes is the speech of the Finnish president at the Munich Security Conference on February 20, 2022. In it, he directly compared and contrasted the situation around Ukraine with the period before the start of the Winter War in Finland. Sauli Niinistö pointed out that, unlike the Finns before that conflict, the Ukrainian people were consolidated in the face of a threat,³ and therefore were ready to resist even more successfully.

The analysis of Niinistö's speeches from 2021 to early 2022 demonstrates a clear transformation of his historical policy in the context of international politics. Before the onset of tensions around Ukraine, the central image and culmination of the Finnish narrative had been the Helsinki 1975 meeting, which was portrayed as a symbol of reconciliation between the opposing sides and a beacon of hope for future dialogue. This idea was further developed through proposals for a "Helsinki 2.0" aimed at resolving contemporary tensions between the Russian Federation and NATO. At the same time, Russia, in its historical incarnations as the USSR and the Russian Empire, was portrayed not as an enemy of Finland or Europe, but rather as an important participant in international affairs on an equal footing with other powers. However, by early 2022, references to the history of conflicts with Russia began to emerge, including the invocation of the Winter War as a frame for interpreting the situation in Ukraine. At this stage, such references remained isolated and were not extended to the imperial period.

¹ Statement by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the Summit for Democracy, 2021, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 09.12.2021, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/statement-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-summit-for-democracy-9-december-2021/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

² President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö's New Year's Speech, 2022, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 01.01.2022, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinistos-new-years-speech-on-1-january-2022/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

³ President Niinistö at the Munich Security Conference: "When we are challenged, we are together", 2022, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 20.02.2022, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/news/president-niinisto-at-the-munich-security-conference-when-we-are-challenged-we-are-together/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

Images of Finnish history in the context of Finland's accession to NATO in 2022 — early 2023

After the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, Sauli Niinistö first turned explicitly to historical analogies in the sphere of foreign policy in a speech delivered to the Swedish Riksdag in May 2022. On this occasion, he argued that the ongoing conflict marked the end of the tradition of trust and the previous approach to ensuring Finland's security, which, in his view, had now been supplanted by the pursuit of NATO membership. In this context, he recalled the words of U. S. President Harry S. Truman in 1948, at the outset of the Cold War, when Truman declared a willingness to accept foreign policy risks. Finally, the Finnish leader began to articulate a distinct narrative of the conflict in Ukraine itself. In his view, the starting point of the conflict is not February 24, 2022, but the discussion on NATO non-expansion in December 2021,¹ which also concerned Finland.

During this period, new images of the past related to the Russian-Finnish conflicts of different eras appeared in Sauli Niinistö's speeches. At the Flag Day parade in June 2022, talking about the efforts to ensure the defence of Finland, he recalled General Adolf Ehrnrooth, who is associated with the Winter War and the Continuation War.² In another speech, the president mentioned the Finnish proverb "the Cossack takes everything that is loose",³ referring to an even more distant past — the invasion of Russian troops into the country during the wars with Sweden. Finally, he spoke about the pan-European *lieux de mémoire* of the Cold War, such as the construction of the Berlin Wall,⁴ which reminded him of Russia's hostility to the collective West.

By contrast, references to the CSCE and the Helsinki Final Act disappear from the speeches of the President of Finland during this period. In his address at the United Nations, Sauli Niinistö made no mention of these frameworks, although

¹ Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the Swedish Parliament, 2022, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 17.05.2022, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/speech-by-the-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-at-the-swedish-parliament-on-17-may-2022/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

² Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the Finnish Defence Forces' Flag Day parade in Helsinki, 2022, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 04.06.2022, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-finnish-defence-forces-flag-day-parade-in-helsinki-on-4-june-2022/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

³ Keynote speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs in Oslo, 2022, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 10.10.2022, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/keynote-speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-norwegian-institute-of-international-affairs-in-oslo-on-10-october-2022/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

⁴ Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the opening of the 242th National Defence Course, 2022, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 07.11.2022, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-opening-of-the-242th-national-defence-course-on-7-november-2022/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

he did recall a quotation from the Swedish diplomat and former UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld in the context of the Cold War. He also referred to arms reduction agreements between the United States and the USSR, and later Russia, notably the START III Agreement,¹ indicating that this remains a significant issue and that the conflict can be resolved. Even at the Helsinki Security Forum, the Final Act of 1975 was not mentioned. When Sauli Niinistö addressed the possibility of a new international order and the creation of a new organisation after the end of the conflict in Ukraine, he referred to the OSCE alongside other institutions established in the context of, or immediately following, major military conflicts, such as the League of Nations and the United Nations.²

Niinistö's speech at the Nordic Council in November 2022 was also symptomatic. He included the creation of this institution in the context of the Cold War and actually compared Finland's slightly later accession to it with its current "belated" accession to NATO. In addition, he emphasised that the Cold War was much less dangerous than Russia's current actions, and the support of Nordic countries for Ukraine stems from their unity over the past 70 years.³

In his New Year's address in 2023, references to Finnish historical experiences related to Russia became particularly pronounced. Sauli Niinistö explicitly drew parallels between the conflict in Ukraine and the Winter War, as well as between Vladimir Putin and Joseph Stalin, and between the resistance of "free" Ukrainians and that of the Finns. These analogies were employed to justify the need for Helsinki to support Kyiv and to strengthen European unity. At the same time, the conflict in Ukraine was situated within a broader sequence of recent wars — most notably those in Yugoslavia and Georgia — thereby framing it as evidence of the aggressive nature not only of the Soviet Union in the past, but also of the contemporary Russian Federation.⁴

¹ Statement by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the 77th General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly, 2022, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 20.09.2022, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/statement-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-77th-general-debate-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-20-september-2022/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

² Keynote address by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the Helsinki Security Forum, 2022, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 30.09.2022, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/keynote-address-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-helsinki-security-forum-30-september-2022/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

³ Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the 74th Session of the Nordic Council in Helsinki, 2022, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 01.11.2022, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-74th-session-of-the-nordic-council-in-helsinki-on-1-november-2022/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

⁴ President of the Republic Sauli Niinistö's New Year's Speech, 2023, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 01.01.2023, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/president-of-the-republic-sauli-niinistos-new-years-speech-on-1-january-2023/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

Similarly, Sauli Niinistö spoke about the “echo of one’s own history” at the 2023 Munich Conference, where, however, he did not directly address the specific images of the Winter War, emphasising that the similarities are self-evident.¹ The president further developed this thesis during his visit to Washington in March 2023, where he not only referred to the Soviet–Finnish conflict but also noted that U. S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had supported Helsinki at the time, thereby positioning the United States as being on Finland’s side — just as, in his account, it is now on the side of Ukraine. At the same time, to legitimise the contemporary Finnish — American partnership, he referred to Finnish immigration to the United States and even to the sauna tradition that has taken root there.²

In comparison with 2021, during the process of Finland’s accession to NATO, Sauli Niinistö increasingly replaced references to the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and pan-European cooperation with narratives centred on the Cold War, Russian — Finnish conflicts, and Russia’s alleged aggressiveness across different historical periods. Within this interpretative framework, Russia’s actions in international affairs are presented through a narrative of decline, acquiring an ever more aggressive character, while Finland’s own history is depicted as cyclical, marked by recurring confrontations with Russia. At the same time, to underscore ties with the United States — an element crucial to legitimising Helsinki’s NATO membership — the Finnish leader increasingly invoked a shared historical experience with the United States, which, in his narrative, is portrayed as having frequently found itself on the same side as Finland in past conflicts.

Historical politics of Sauli Niinistö after Finland’s accession to NATO

In conclusion, it is necessary to turn to the peculiarities of Sauli Niinistö’s politics and policy after Finland’s official accession to NATO on April 4, 2023 and before the end of his presidential term on March 1, 2024. However, at the ceremony of joining the Alliance, the Finnish leader only spoke about the beginning of a new era and the end of the period of non-alignment in Finnish history.³ At the same

¹ Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the Munich Security Conference Ewald von Kleist Award ceremony, 2023, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 18.02.2023, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-munich-security-conference-ewald-von-kleist-award-ceremony-on-18-february-2023/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

² Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at a Joint Session at the Washington State Capitol, 2023, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 06.03.2023, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-a-joint-session-at-the-washington-state-capitol-on-6-march-2023/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

³ Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the NATO accession ceremony in Brussels, 2023, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 04.04.2023, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-nato-accession-ceremony-in-brussels-4-april-2023/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

time, he assigned the act of accession itself a significant place within the historical narrative. However, subsequently, for example, in his New Year's address in 2024, Sauli Niinistö emphasised that Finland had remained the same subject of international relations and that its foreign policy priorities had not changed.¹

The president began to elaborate in greater detail on Finland's relations with Russia, for example, in a speech delivered in Johannesburg at the South African Institute of International Affairs. In addition to referring to the Winter War, which he linked with the Continuation War as a phase of resistance to Soviet invasion, Sauli Niinistö also addressed Finland's period as part of the Russian Empire. Although he did not characterise this era as a "dark past", the repeated use of the term "empire" may resonate differently with African audiences, for whom it is closely associated with experiences of colonial rule. According to the president, it was the collapse of the Russian Empire that enabled the emergence of a democratic welfare state in Finland.

More broadly, the Johannesburg speech appears to have been aimed less at justifying Helsinki's accession to NATO or its support for Ukraine and more at articulating the Finnish perspective on the current conflict to countries of the Global South. In this context, he explicitly contrasted the history of relations between African states and the USSR (portrayed as largely positive) with the history of Russian–Finnish conflicts.

In his speech at the UN General Assembly in September, which was Niinistö's last as president, he used his 12-year rule to highlight the changes in international relations, which have become more conflictual compared to 2012, the year his presidency began. In addition, the president again emphasised the similarity of the Ukrainian and Finnish peoples in their struggle with Russia and the USSR for freedom and independence, but at the same time included them in the chain of resistance of all small countries to great powers.²

Finally, in his speeches, Sauli Niinistö referred to Russia's alleged goal of re-establishing the Soviet Union. In order to underscore the complexity of the present moment, he also invoked historical analogies with the interwar period, the Great Depression, and the Second World War.³ On the other hand, following

¹ New Year's Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö, 2024, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 01.01.2024, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/niinisto/en/speeches/new-years-speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-on-1-january-2024/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

² Statement by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the General Debate of the 78th United Nations General Assembly, 2023, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 20.09.2023, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/statement-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-78th-general-debate-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly-in-new-york-on-20-september-2023/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

³ Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at Max Jakobson Memorial Lecture, 2023, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 28.09.2023, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/niinisto/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-max-jakobson-memorial-lecture-on-28-september-2023/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

the death of former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, Sauli Niinistö noted that Ahtisaari originated from Karelia, a territory lost by Finland after the Second World War, although he did not further elaborate on this aspect of the narrative. Instead, emphasis was placed on the former president’s role in facilitating Russian–American dialogue, within which Finland, by implication, could continue to play a mediating role.¹

Thus, during the last year of Niinistö’s presidency, after Finland joined NATO, his historical policy became less active. For example, without resorting to historical analogies, the Finnish leader commented on the closure of the border with the Russian Federation by comparing migrants to a “Trojan horse” and adding that the Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees could no longer be applied in the current circumstances.² At the same time, his speeches further reinforced the images of the Winter War and other episodes of conflict in the broader history of Russian–Finnish relations that had emerged earlier, while references to cooperation with European countries and the United States became less prominent. By contrast, the president increasingly addressed audiences in the Global South, seeking to draw on Finland’s historical experience in order to persuade these countries to support Ukraine and to convey the position of Western states on the conflict.

Results and discussions

The results of the analysis of President Niinistö’s speeches can be summarised as follows (Table).

The analysis of President Sauli Niinistö’s speeches (2021 – 2024)

Period	01.2021 – 02.2022	03.2022 – 04.2023	04.2023 – 03.2024
Number of speeches	5	10	6
Context	Consequences of COVID-19, discussion on the non-expansion of NATO	Conflict in Ukraine, Finland’s accession to NATO	Conflict in Ukraine, Finland as a NATO member
Key lieux de mémoire	The CSCE and the Helsinki Act of 1975, the Cold War, Winter War	Winter War, Cold War, Stalin, Roosevelt, and Truman	Russian Empire, USSR

¹ Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö following the passing of former President of the Republic Martti Ahtisaari, 2023, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 16.10.2023, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/niinisto/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-following-the-passing-of-former-president-of-the-republic-martti-ahtisaari-on-16-october-2023/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

² Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the opening of Parliament, 2024, *President of the Republic of Finland*, 07.02.2024, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/niinisto/en/speeches/speech-by-president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinisto-at-the-opening-of-parliament-on-7-february-2024/> (accessed 28.08.2025).

The end of Table

Period	01.2021—02.2022	03.2022—04.2023	04.2023—03.2024
Chains of equivalence	Dialogue in the Cold War and in 2021; the eve of the Winter War and the conflict in Ukraine	Winter War and the conflict in Ukraine, Russian Empire — USSR — Russian Federation	Winter War, the conflict in Ukraine, resistance of small countries; Russian Empire — USSR — Russian Federation
Examples of discursive practices	“The letter of Helsinki, the commonly agreed principles of the CSCE Final Act of 1975, remain a valid foundation for a cooperation-based security system of our continent”. “Spheres of interest do not belong to the 2020s”. “The situation in Ukraine also reminds of the period before the Winter War. Instead of dividing the nation, people united”	“The atmosphere is even chillier than during the Cold War. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine brought war to Europe”. One cannot avoid thinking about the similarities the situation has with our Winter War when the Soviet Union assumed that they would march into Helsinki within two weeks. “For Finland, Russia’s invasion brought back echoes of our own history”	“The era of military non-alignment in our history has come to an end. A new era begins”. “With Russia, many African countries have memories of close ties during the Soviet times. Finland’s experience is totally different”.
Features of historical narrative	The year of 1975 is the “mountain” of the Finnish narrative, with elements of decline in the description of the international security system	1939—1940 as the “mountain” of the Finnish people, circles of conflicts between Russia and Finland, a decline in the description of the system of international security and foreign policy actions of the Russian Federation	1939—1940 as the “mountain” of the Finnish people, circles of conflicts between Russia and Finland, a decline in the description of the system of international security and foreign policy actions of the Russian Federation

Prepared based on the analysed publications from the portal of the *President of the Republic of Finland*. *Sauli Niinistö’s website 2012—2024*, URL: <https://www.presidentti.fi/niinisto/en.html> (accessed 28.08.2025).

The study demonstrates that each of the periods examined was dominated by its own set of *lieux de mémoire*, mobilised to serve different objectives of the Finnish president. In 2021, references to dialogue and the overcoming of Cold War divisions associated with Helsinki in 1975 were intended to underscore Finland’s significant role in the international arena. In subsequent periods, however, memory sites linked to the conflictual history of Russian—Finnish

relations came to the fore, serving to construct an image of the enemy and to justify Finland's accession to NATO. Moreover, in the context of joining the Alliance, references to Finnish—American history gained particular importance as a means of emphasising Finland's belonging to the Euro-Atlantic community.

At the same time, across all periods, the image of the Winter War remained present as a central element of the Finnish historical narrative. In Eviatar Zerubavel's terms, it functioned as a "mountain", that is, a historical episode of paramount importance that is repeatedly invoked. References to this *lieu de mémoire* peaked during the process of NATO accession and in the first year of the conflict in Ukraine, whereas in 2021 they were clearly secondary to appeals to the Helsinki Final Act. In Niinistö's discourse, invoking the Winter War served primarily to draw parallels between the Finnish and Ukrainian "struggles for freedom", thereby justifying support for Ukraine and rendering the conflict more intelligible and emotionally resonant for Finnish audiences. In other respects, however, the two narratives diverge significantly: it is consistently emphasised that the West is united in its support for Ukraine, whereas Finland stood alone in 1939–1940, and the outcome of the Winter War (the loss of territory) was presented as unacceptable as a possible model for the resolution of the Ukrainian conflict.

In addition, it is noticeable how the image of Russia in the Finnish historical narrative is becoming more detailed over time. In addition to general references to the Winter War and Russian rule in the 19th century, Niinistö's speeches present their own heroes and antiheroes, and the conflicts of the Second World War are only one of the circles (but more significant) of the confrontation that began two hundred years ago. One cannot but note the absence of references not only to examples of mutually beneficial cooperation between Russia and Finland, which could complicate the construction of an enemy image (for instance, by presenting Russia in the past, particularly in the 1990s, in contrast to Russia in the present), but also to a number of figures traditionally associated in Finnish collective memory with resistance to Russia, for instance, Nikolai Bobrikov, Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, and Urho Kekkonen. The exclusion of these more complex and ambivalent images renders the narrative advanced by the Finnish leader relatively linear and simplified, framing Russian–Finnish relations, and Russia's relations with Europe more broadly, as a story of prolonged and continuous confrontation.

At the same time, the transformation of Sauli Niinistö's historical policy has not become a subject of reflection in Finnish society and academic circles. This topic has not been part of public and scientific discussions in recent years. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the appeal to S. Niinistö's past had a definite impact on the attitude of Finns towards Russia. For example, according to a survey by the EVA Analytical Centre in early 2024, 94 % of Finnish citizens reacted

negatively to Russia,¹ while in 2021, this figure in the same studies did not exceed 45%.² However, the survey results were shaped not only by Finns' perceptions of current Russian policy; perceived threats rooted in the past also reinforced this negative image. A related trend can be observed in surveys examining perceptions of future Russian—Finnish relations. In 2024, according to a study conducted by the Foundation for the Development of Local Self-Government (KAKS) and published by Yle, these perceptions likewise reflected heightened scepticism regarding the prospects for relations between the two countries,³ 84 % of Finns did not believe in the possibility of developing ties between Moscow and Helsinki, considering this friendship historically not predefined.

To corroborate the findings outlined above, the source base could be expanded in several directions. On the one hand, it would be useful to examine the rhetoric of other representatives of the Finnish political elite, including prime ministers, ministers of foreign affairs and defence, and, more recently, the new president, Alexander Stubb, who has also begun to make active use of historical references. On the other hand, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of Finnish memory politics and to account for competing historical narratives, it is essential to analyse the positions of different political parties and media outlets representing a broad spectrum of political orientations with regard to Russia's past. Such an approach would also make it possible to assess the potential for future shifts in the image of Russia within Finnish collective memory.

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¹ Hyvät, pahat ja rumat — Näin suomalaiset ajattelevat Yhdysvalloista, Venäjästä ja Kiinasta, 2021, *EVA*, 16.01.2021, URL: <https://www.eva.fi/blog/2024/01/16/hyvat-pahat-ja-rumat-nain-suomalaiset-ajattelevat-yhdysvalloista-venajasta-ja-kiinasta/> (accessed 14.10.2025).

² Suomalaiset suhtautuvat itänaapuriinsa aiempaa kriittisemmin, 2021, *EVA*, 25.10.2021, URL: <https://www.eva.fi/blog/2021/10/25/suomalaiset-suhtautuvat-itanaapuriinsa-aiempaa-kriittisemmin/> (accessed 14.10.2025).

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