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Frontier Dynamics: Unraveling the Situation on Finland's Border with Russia

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This comprehensive analysis delves into the multifaceted dynamics of the Finnish-Russian border, examining its historical backdrop, contemporary challenges, and geopolitical significance. The main objectives are to elucidate the border's historical evolution, explore its current state, and analyze the strategic aims behind recent developments. The analysis is structured into several sections, including a historical overview of the border's establishment and key events, an examination of contemporary challenges and tensions, and an exploration of Russia's strategic objectives in the region. By delving into these aspects, the analysis seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the Finnish-Russian border's complexities within the broader context of European geopolitics and Russo-Finnish relations.

Something new, something old: the historical background of the Finnish-Russian relations

The border between Finland and Russia has been a focal point of geopolitical dynamics, shaped by historical events, shifting power dynamics, and contemporary political complexities. This analysis delves into the historical background and current state of the Finnish-Russian border situation, highlighting key factors influencing bilateral relations and border management.

The historical backdrop to the Finnish-Russian border is characterized by a complex interplay of territorial disputes, wars, treaties, and geopolitical realignments. Until the early 19th century, Finland was part of the Kingdom of Sweden. However, in 1809, following the Finnish War, Sweden ceded Finland to Russia, leading to the establishment of the Grand Duchy of Finland within the Russian Empire. This period marked the beginning of Finnish-Russian relations, characterized by a delicate balance of autonomy and Russian influence.

[In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and subsequent civil war, Finland declared independence in 1917, leading to the Finnish Civil War.](#) The Treaty of Tartu in 1920 between Finland and Soviet Russia delineated the border between the two countries, solidifying Finland's independence. However, tensions persisted, particularly during World War II, when Finland fought the Soviet Union in the Winter War (1939-1940) and the Continuation War (1941-1944). The Moscow Peace Treaty of 1940 forced Finland to cede territory to the Soviet Union, altering the border and further shaping bilateral relations.

Following World War II, Finland signed the Paris Peace Treaty in 1947, formally ending hostilities with the Soviet Union and acknowledging the territorial changes. The Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance in 1948 between Finland and the Soviet Union aimed to ensure Finland's neutrality and security while maintaining Soviet influence in the region. This period of the Cold War saw Finland adopting a policy of neutrality, known as the "Paasikivi-Kekkonen Line," named after Finnish presidents Juho Kusti Paasikivi and Urho Kekkonen, which aimed to balance relations between the West and the Soviet Union.

The current Finnish-Russian border encompassing diverse terrain, including forests, lakes, and rivers. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. As a result Finland's border with Russia has become an external border of the European Union (EU) and the Schengen Area, posing new challenges and opportunities for border management and security cooperation.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the situation along the Finnish-Russian border underwent significant changes, mirroring the broader geopolitical shifts in the region. Firstly, formalizing the border became a priority as Finland's eastern frontier transitioned from a border with the Soviet Union to one with the Russian Federation. Negotiations and agreements were crucial in establishing precise boundaries between the newly independent states. Moreover, the end of the Cold War ushered in a period of normalization in relations between Finland and Russia. Both nations embarked on efforts to cultivate diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties, recognizing each other as independent sovereign entities. [Concurrently, the Finnish-Russian border assumed greater significance as an external border of the European Union following Finland's accession in 1995.](#) This necessitated alignment with EU standards in border security and management, albeit while maintaining vigilance against illicit activities such as illegal migration and smuggling.

In a bid to promote regional development and cooperation, numerous cross-border initiatives were launched. Programs like the European Union's Cross-Border Cooperation facilitated joint projects

between Finnish and Russian border regions, spanning infrastructure development to environmental conservation. [Such as Karelia CBC \(Cross-Border Cooperation\) Program. This program, funded by the European Union, aims to promote sustainable development and enhance the quality of life in the Karelia region, which spans both Finland and Russia.](#) Under it, various joint projects have been undertaken to address common challenges and seize opportunities for collaboration. One such project focused on improving water quality in shared rivers and lakes, which is vital for both environmental conservation and public health. Finnish and Russian experts worked together to implement measures such as wastewater treatment facilities, pollution monitoring systems, and public awareness campaigns to reduce pollution and preserve freshwater ecosystems. The Finnish-Russian border served as a vital conduit for EU-Russia trade, with concerted efforts made to streamline customs procedures and enhance trade facilitation mechanisms.

Another example is the development of cross-border transport infrastructure to facilitate trade and mobility between Finland and Russia. Joint projects have been launched to upgrade roads, bridges, and border crossing points, reducing transit times and improving connectivity for businesses and communities on both sides of the border. One specific example of joint projects to develop cross-border transport infrastructure between Finland and Russia is the improvement of the E18 highway, which connects the Finnish city of Kotka to the Russian city of Saint Petersburg. This highway serves as a vital transportation corridor for trade and mobility between the two countries.

Notably, Finland's policy of military neutrality influenced its approach to security along the Finnish-Russian border. While maintaining a credible defense posture, Finland opted to refrain from joining military alliances, adhering to a policy of non-alignment to avoid provoking Russia. Despite occasional tensions and challenges, both nations demonstrated a commitment to nurturing peaceful and mutually beneficial relations along their shared border.

Overall, the post-Soviet era witnessed efforts to constructively engage with Russia, enhance border security, foster economic cooperation, and bolster regional stability along the Finnish-Russian border.

Characteristics of the Current Finnish-Russian Border

The Finnish-Russian border is the international border between Finland and Russia. It stretches approximately 1,300 kilometers (800 miles) from the northeastern part of Finland to the northwestern part of Russia. This border is one of the longest land borders in Europe. [Murmansk, the nearest big city on the Russian side, is 240 kilometres away.](#)

The border runs primarily through sparsely populated areas of forests and lakes, especially in the northern regions. The region features diverse natural landscapes, including forests, lakes, and wetlands. Efforts have been made to preserve the unique biodiversity of this area, which is home to various species of flora and fauna. It starts in the north near the tripoint border with Norway and Russia, then extends southeastward to the Gulf of Finland. The Finnish-Russian border holds geopolitical significance due to the historical relationship between Finland and Russia, as well as broader regional dynamics in Northern Europe. While Finland is a member of the European Union, it shares a long history and cultural ties with Russia.

It was established following Finland's independence from Russia in 1917. The border was formally delineated in the Treaty of Tartu in 1920. Prior to this, Finland was a part of the Russian Empire, and the border was largely internal within the empire. Since Finland's accession to the European Union in 1995, the Finnish-Russian border has become an external border of the EU and the Schengen Area. This designation imposes EU regulations on border controls, immigration, and customs procedures,

necessitating cooperation between Finland and Russia to ensure compliance and facilitate legitimate cross-border movements.

There are several official border crossing points along the Finnish-Russian border. These crossings facilitate trade, tourism, and diplomatic relations between the two countries. Some of the major border crossings include Niirala, Vaalimaa, and Salla. Like many international borders, the Finnish-Russian border is closely monitored for security purposes. At these checkpoints both countries maintain border guards and surveillance systems to prevent illegal immigration, smuggling and other illicit activities: a myriad of products, including machinery, electronics, chemicals, timber, and agricultural goods, traverse the border daily, reflecting the depth of bilateral trade relations.

Despite the formal delineation of the border, there have been occasional disputes and tensions between Finland and Russia over various issues, such as:

- Firstly, it is important to mention the recurring instances of border violations that have strained relations between Finland and Russia. [Over the years, there have been reports of Russian military aircraft and vessels trespassing into Finnish airspace and territorial waters.](#) These violations often lead to diplomatic protests and heightened tensions between the two nations. For instance, in 2016, Finland accused Russia of multiple airspace violations, prompting the Finnish government to summon the Russian ambassador to express its concerns.
- Another issue that has fueled tensions is the sporadic territorial disputes, albeit less pronounced in recent times. Finland and Russia have had disagreements over the delineation of maritime borders in areas such as the Gulf of Finland and the Gulf of Bothnia. These disputes primarily revolve around fishing rights, resource extraction, and maritime navigation, reflecting historical tensions that occasionally resurface between the two countries.
- Furthermore, military activities conducted by Russia near the Finnish border have been a cause for concern for Finland's security and sovereignty. Large-scale military exercises, troop movements, and heightened presence in the Baltic Sea region following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 have raised alarms in Finland and neighboring countries. Russia's assertive military posture in the region has prompted Finland to bolster its own defense capabilities and deepen cooperation with Western allies, contributing to a sense of insecurity and unease.
- Cybersecurity concerns also feature prominently in the bilateral relationship. Finland has expressed apprehensions about cyber threats originating from Russia, with reports of alleged state-sponsored cyberattacks targeting Finnish government institutions, businesses, and critical infrastructure. These incidents have underscored the vulnerability of Finland's digital infrastructure and strained diplomatic ties between the two nations.
- In addition, Finland's previous increasingly close ties and then its accession in 2023 to NATO, have raised further contentious issues and added difficult factors to the bilateral relations with Russia. While Finland participates in NATO-led military exercises and cooperates closely with the alliance on security and defense matters, Russia views such engagements as a threat to its security interests. Russian warnings against [Finland's potential NATO membership reflect Moscow's concerns about NATO's expanding influence in the region](#), further exacerbating tensions between Finland and Russia. But Finland joined in 2023 please check and rewrite
- Lastly, the competition for resources and influence in the Arctic region presents another potential flashpoint. Both Finland and Russia have interests in the Arctic, which is becoming increasingly accessible due to climate change. [As the Arctic's strategic importance grows, competition for control over shipping routes and natural resources intensifies.](#) While cooperation within the Arctic Council framework has mitigated some tensions, conflicting

claims and interests could escalate disputes between Finland and Russia in the future. However, both countries have generally maintained peaceful relations and have cooperated on various economic and diplomatic matters.

Differences and Similarities: migration crisis in 2015 and the effect of the growing pressure in 2023

Since the onset of the refugee crisis in 2015, it has become an increasingly recurring challenge for the member states of the European Union. Most recently, Finland has found itself grappling with a surge in asylum seekers crossing its eastern border, spanning over a thousand kilometers, without visas or passports. The issue began to escalate in the autumn of 2023, as the number of individuals attempting to cross the eastern border on foot saw a significant increase, although on a daily basis, it did not exceed one hundred individuals across the entire Finnish border section.

It is important to note that the asylum seekers on the Russian side of the border are of Middle Eastern origin and lack any documentation for entry into Finland. While the number of migrants alone may not have warranted concern, the Finnish government has nevertheless taken extraordinary measures to address the problem: on December 15, 2023, they closed the entire length of the eastern Finnish border. This decision stems from the fact that the crisis caused by refugees from the Middle East is not unfamiliar in Finland: in 2015, there was immense pressure on the eastern border shared with Russia, which spans 1,343.6 kilometers. At that time, the number of asylum seekers hovered around one thousand daily, significantly higher than the current figure. It is common among those attempting border crossings to use bicycles from the Russian side into Finland, as pedestrian crossing is prohibited, but bicycles are considered vehicles. Similar incidents occurred in 2015 along the same border stretch and in Northern Norway. It can be stated, that refugees are used by Russia as a threat.

However, compared to the refugee crisis of 2015, we can discern a marked difference in the Finnish government's response. From the outset, the government treated the influx of arrivals from Russia as a threat; [Prime Minister Petteri Orpo described it not as individual asylum seekers, but as a hybrid attack and a national security risk](#). Initially, some crossings along the land border with Russia were to remain open, but ultimately, all were closed. Such resolute and wide-ranging action had not been seen from Finland in response to the refugee situation before.

In Europe's northern reaches, a captivating game of strategy unfolds between Russia and Finland. It commenced with Russia orchestrating the movement of a substantial migrant population towards Finland's border in late November, prompting Helsinki to react with celerity. Swiftly, border crossings were shuttered, a resolute stance against Russia's attempts to sow discord and unsettle the status quo. Despite this decisive action, Russia persisted, necessitating further measures from Finland to maintain control and order.

By the 22nd of November 2023, nearly a thousand migrants, seemingly guided by Russian assistance and bereft of Finnish visas, had amassed at the border, a calculated maneuver to disrupt tranquility. Finland's response was resolute, progressively sealing off access points. Yet, Russia's persistence proved unyielding, forcing Finland into a cycle of strategic adaptation, each closure met with a calculated countermove. Yet amidst this dance of diplomacy and border tensions, Finland has displayed a commendable blend of agility and resolve. Even as the border briefly reopened in December, facilitated by Russian maneuvers, Finland remained steadfast in its commitment to safeguarding sovereignty. The Kremlin's broader geopolitical machinations, alluding to Finland's NATO ties and the resurgence of the Leningrad Military District, only added layers to the complex tableau.

The situation reached a zenith when Finland, in response to an influx of asylum seekers, opted to completely shutter its border with Russia. [Prime Minister Petteri Orpo labeled this surge as a manifestation of Russian influence](#), a sentiment echoed by Finland's interior minister. Despite international reservations, Finland stood resolute, prioritizing national security amidst escalating tensions.

At the focal point of this geopolitical drama lies the remote Arctic crossing of Raja-Jooseppi, thrust into the forefront of contention. Its closure symbolizes the gravity of the situation, disrupting the flow of migrants and necessitating heightened vigilance from Finnish border guards. Amidst the pristine yet unforgiving wilderness, Finland's resolve remains unshaken, fortified by a spirit of resilience embodied in the Finnish concept of *sisu*—a steadfast determination to persevere in the face of adversity. As the standoff persists, Finland remains poised, fortified by a commitment to interagency cooperation and a readiness to confront hybrid threats. The closure of border crossings, though disruptive, underscores Finland's unwavering dedication to safeguarding its territorial integrity. However, amidst the geopolitical shadows cast by the Kremlin's relentless maneuvers, Finland's resolve shines brightly, a beacon of stability in an uncertain landscape.

From a national security standpoint, it comes as no surprise that the Finnish government has implemented a complete eastern border closure. However, it is unprecedented that this move also suspends the possibility of asylum applications at Finland's land border crossings. Previously, the Finnish government consistently adhered to international rules ensuring refugee rights, including measures within the European Union based on freedom, security, and justice for refugees and migrants. Meanwhile, Finnish citizens continue to utilize closed crossings. One might question the appropriateness of a full border closure for such a low daily influx of migrants. Since the onset of this wave, the Finnish government has emphasized indications suggesting organized efforts to ferry arrivals to border crossings from Russia. Thus, there looms the danger of instrumentalization, where among those arriving at the border, terrorists or individuals capable of destabilizing the Finnish state might lurk. The Finnish stance suggests clear support from Russian authorities in transporting migrants, as undocumented individuals would not otherwise reach the border; this would imply the ineffectiveness of Russian internal security forces. Accounts from those who have crossed into Finland also corroborate Russian involvement. Moreover, the situation at the Finnish border mirrors events seen in 2021 when migrants from the Middle East gathered at the Polish border via Belarus. Although that scenario involved a much larger influx, the primary concern remained the same: national security risks. Similarly challenging, akin to the 2021 Polish situation, is the winter ordeal faced by those arriving at the border, enduring temperatures as low as -30 degrees Celsius. This could also serve as a means of pressure for Finnish authorities to allow the gathered migrants to cross the border. The situation vividly illustrates how the migration crisis can engender successive crises within EU member states, potentially evolving into EU-wide security risks. Finland has thus far relied on national measures, namely border closures, to mitigate potential threats. However, given that Finland's eastern border is simultaneously an EU and NATO border since April 2023, threats at the Finnish-Russian border may pose significantly greater potential risks than currently perceived.

Thus far, Finland has availed itself of EU assistance by increasing the previous ten-person Frontex team to fifty, providing additional equipment for border control. [The Finnish government has announced the closure of border crossing points at the land border with Russia until January 14, 2024, with the decision taking effect from December 15, 2023, at 20:00](#). Applications for international protection will no longer be accepted at these border points. since the closure of other border crossings farther south 63 asylum seekers have arrived at Raja-Jooseppi. [But as a Finnish border guard said they had had a](#)

[“peaceful day”, with just 14 people leaving Finland, three people entering and no asylum-seeker arrivals.](#)

The decision, made during an extraordinary session of the Government on December 14, follows the reopening of the Vaalimaa and Niirala border crossings on December 14. Despite plans to gradually ease restrictions, continued unauthorized entry into Finland has prompted the closure, attributed to a perceived ongoing hybrid operation by Russian authorities, which Finland views as intolerable. This irregular immigration, suspected to be facilitated by foreign authorities or actors involved in international crime, poses a significant threat to Finland's national security and public order, leading the Government to restrict international protection applications to airports and seaports. On the 11th of January, the Finnish government announced the extension of the border closure by an additional month, and last month, they extended entry restrictions until April 14.

On the other hand Russia's exploitation of migrants as a hybrid warfare tactic is not new. In 2021, Belarus, [a close ally of Russia, deliberately orchestrated the movement of predominantly Iraqi and Afghan migrants to its borders with Poland and Lithuania, resulting in protests and clashes with border forces.](#) This strategy aims to exploit internal divisions within the EU regarding migration, ultimately weakening the bloc's cohesion. The recent withdrawal from the border agreement with Finland marks a significant expansion of its hybrid warfare tactics aimed at the EU. As Russia persistently weaponizes migrants to undermine EU unity, Finland emerges as a beacon of resilience from which the EU can glean valuable insights. [The country's unilateral termination of the Finnish-Russian border agreement, albeit largely symbolic](#) due to its suspension following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, underscores Russia's willingness to heighten tensions along its northernmost boundary with the EU and NATO. This move follows a period of instability on the border, initiated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which prompted a surge of Russian nationals fleeing conscription into the war effort, seeking refuge via the Finnish border and other crossing points. Moscow's subsequent tightening of border controls aimed to stem this flow, indicating the instrumentalization of migrants as a strategic element in Russia's war in Ukraine, designed to sow discord within the EU and weaken support for Ukraine. In November 2023, an unexpected rise in migrant traffic along the border, albeit at low levels, prompted alarm in Helsinki. Finland responded by initially closing some land border crossings with Russia before completely shutting down the entire border. Finland's swift response underscored its adeptness in handling the tactics of its aggressive neighbor, offering valuable lessons to the EU in fostering societal resilience.

INFO MIGRANTS

FINLAND: EASTERN BORDER CHECKPOINTS



Despite the EU's coordinated response and steadfast support for Ukraine, challenges remain as internal divisions surface among member states. Hungary's President Orbán and Slovakia's former Prime Minister Fico are notable examples of figures with pro-Russian leanings. With upcoming national and European Parliamentary elections, Russian disinformation and exploitation of migration issues could potentially bolster anti-Ukraine sentiments within the EU. Amidst these challenges, the EU must bolster its support for Ukraine financially and militarily while ensuring the robust enforcement of sanctions against Russia. Additionally, the EU must enhance resilience against Russian disinformation campaigns, particularly concerning migration, through long-term societal education and awareness programs. In navigating these complexities, Finland stands as a model of resilience. Through a comprehensive whole-of-society approach, Finland has effectively managed and secured the EU's northern border for decades. As Russia's hybrid attacks persist, drawing inspiration from Finland's resilience, the EU can fortify its defenses against Moscow's future provocations.

However, the question remains: how long can Finland practically maintain constant surveillance over the border section, considering some migrants successfully cross on foot? It is worth monitoring the Finnish border situation, as further escalation may necessitate significant EU intervention.

Conclusion

The Finnish-Russian border has long been a focal point of geopolitical tension, influenced by historical events, shifting power dynamics, and contemporary political complexities. From the Finnish War in the early 19th century to the modern challenges of migration crises and hybrid warfare tactics, the border's history reflects a complex interplay of territorial disputes, treaties, and geopolitical realignments.

Over time, Finland's relationship with Russia has evolved, marked by periods of cooperation, conflict, and diplomatic maneuvering. [The establishment of precise boundaries through treaties like the Treaty of Tartu and the Moscow Peace Treaty has shaped bilateral relations and influenced border management strategies.](#)

In the post-Soviet era, Finland's accession to the European Union has further transformed the dynamics of the Finnish-Russian border. Russia's recent actions regarding the Finnish border suggest strategic aims that extend beyond mere territorial disputes. By unilaterally terminating the border agreement with Finland and orchestrating migrant movements towards the border, Russia appears to be pursuing several interconnected objectives.

Firstly, Russia's actions can be interpreted as a demonstration of its willingness to assert control and escalate tensions along its northernmost boundary with the EU and NATO. The termination of the border agreement, albeit largely symbolic due to its suspension following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, serves as a provocative gesture aimed at signaling Russia's assertiveness in its regional power dynamics. By challenging Finland's sovereignty and security, Russia may seek to test the resolve of both Finland and its Western allies.

Secondly, Russia's instrumentalization of migrants as a hybrid warfare tactic serves to exploit internal divisions within the EU regarding migration. By facilitating the movement of asylum seekers towards Finland's border, Russia aims to exacerbate tensions within the EU, weaken cohesion among member states, and undermine support for Ukraine. [This tactic mirrors similar actions taken by Russia's ally Belarus in 2021, highlighting a coordinated effort to exploit migration issues for strategic gains.](#)

Furthermore, Russia's actions may also be motivated by a desire to exert influence and pressure on Finland, particularly in the context of Finland's NATO accession and the broader geopolitical dynamics in Northern Europe. [The accession of Finland to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in 2023](#) has increased cross-border tension with Russia significantly, which views NATO's expanding influence in the region as a threat to its security interests. Overall, Russia's aims on the Finnish border appear to be multifaceted, encompassing geopolitical signaling, the exploitation of migration issues for strategic gain. Thus these actions now poses new challenges and opportunities for both countries and underscore the complex, evolving nature of Russia's strategic objectives in the region and the challenges they pose for Finland, the EU, and NATO.

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