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Illusions of Friendship? The Soviet Union and Russia in the Finnish Press

Kurzfassung: Das Bild von der Sowjetunion und von Russland hat sich nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg in der finnischen Presse dramatisch verändert. Der vorliegende Text basiert auf einer Frequenzanalyse, in der das Vorkommen verschiedener Länder, Staatengruppen und internationaler Organisationen kodiert wurde (z. B. Sowjetunion/Russland, Vereinigte Staaten, NATO, UNO etc.). Um diese Analyse aussagekräftiger und interessanter zu machen, wurde eine Unterscheidung gemacht, ob die Bezugnahme erfolgte im Kontext von (1) Bündnis, Freundschaft und Kooperation, oder (2) Distanz, Restriktion und Feindbild, oder (3) sowohl in einem positiven als auch in einem negativen Kontext. Der Zeitrahmen wurde von 1945 bis zum Ende des Jahrhunderts gesetzt. Untersucht wurde die Berichterstattung an den Feiertagen von nationaler Bedeutung. Die ausgewählten Zeitungen repräsentieren das gesamte Spektrum der finnischen Medien.

Die Studie zeigt deutlich auf, was Hauptgegenstand der finnischen Außenpolitik nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg war: In dem gesamten kodierten Zeitungsmaterial wurde die Sowjetunion/Russland 222 Mal erwähnt, was 37.5% aller Erwähnungen ausmacht. Andere wichtige Staaten oder Staatengruppen waren die Vereinigten Staaten (5.3%), EC/EU/WEU/Westeuropa (12.6%), die Vereinten Nationen (9.0%) und die Nordischen Staaten (11.2%). Mit sehr wenigen Ausnahmen sind alle Bezugnahmen auf die UNO und die nordischen Staaten positiv. Auch die Sowjetunion wird ziemlich positiv beschrieben. Der Anteil der negativen Erwähnungen liegt bei 8.1%, und der der sowohl positiven als auch negativen Erwähnungen bei 14.4%. Die Vorstellungen von den Vereinigten Staaten und von den Europäischen Verbündeten sind die gegensätzlichsten. 54.8% der die USA betreffenden Erwähnungen sind positiv, während 45.2% negativ sind. Was die EC/EU etc. betrifft, so gibt es 54.1% positive Bezugnahmen, 28.4% negative, und 17.6% sind sowohl positiv als auch negativ.

Bemerkenswert sind die Einstellungsänderungen gegenüber der Sowjetunion. Der Anteil negativer Erwähnungen der Sowjetunion war durchgehend sehr gering. Einzige Ausnahme bildet das Jahr 1995 (30%), als Finnland bereits Mitglied der EU war. Jedoch war die Anzahl der Fälle, in denen auf die Sowjetunion sowohl positiv als auch negativ Bezug genommen wurde, zwischen 1945 und 1948 ziemlich hoch (27% und 22%). Die Bezugnahmen auf die Sowjetunion /Russland waren 1945, 1948 und 1989 am häufigsten. Die Abnahme der Erwähnungen zwischen 1989 (als die Sowjetunion am Rande des Zusammenbruchs stand) und 1993 ist sehr deutlich. Interessant ist, dass das Ausmaß der Berichterstattung über die Sowjetunion 1968 (Einmarsch in die Tschechoslowakei) auf einem sehr niedrigen Niveau angesiedelt war; man könnte vermuten, dass es nichts Positives zu sagen gab, dass aber auch niemand den Mut hatte, etwas Negatives zu schreiben. So lange die Sowjetunion existierte und Finnland in ihrem Schatten leben musste, tat die Presse nichts, um das Boot ins Wanken zu bringen. Im heutigen Mediendiskurs kann das schlimme Erbe des Kalten Krieges in seiner zynischen Haltungen gegenüber einer Rhetorik der Freundschaft und der Zusammenarbeit gesehen werden.

Abstract: The image of the Soviet Union and Russia has changed dramatically in the press in Finland after the World War II. This article is based on a frequency analysis in which mentions of certain countries, groups of states and international organizations were coded (like the Soviet Union/Russia, United States, NATO, UN etc.). To make the analysis more revealing and interesting, a distinction was made whether the mention was made in the context of (1) alliance, friendship and cooperation, or in the context of (2) distance, restriction and enemy image, or (3) both in a positive and in a negative context. The time frame was from 1945 till the end of the century, and the newspapers chosen for the study represented the whole political spectrum of the Finnish media. The selection criteria of the material emphasized national celebration days.

The study proves clearly what has been the main object of Finnish foreign policy after the WW II: in all coded press material, the Soviet Union/Russia was mentioned 222 times which makes 37.5% of all mentions. Other important states or groups have been the United States (5.3 %), EC/EU/WEU/West-Europe (12.6 %), United Nations (9.0 %) and Nordic council/Nordic co-operation (11.2 %). With very few exceptions, all mentions concerning the UN and Nordic co-operation are positive. The Soviet Union has also been described rather positively (77.5 %). The share of negative mentions is 8.1% and mixture of negative and positive mentions 14.4%. Images of the United States and the European alliances are most contradictory. In the case of USA, 54.8 % of the mentions are positive and 45.2% negative. Concerning EC/EU etc. 54.1 % of mentions are positive, 28.4 % negative and 17.6 % mixtures of positive and negative references.

Changes in attitudes towards the Soviet Union in different time spots are remarkable. The share of negative mentions of the Soviet Union was very low, except in 1995 (30 %) when Finland already was a member of the EU. However, the number of cases in which the Soviet Union was referred to both in a positive and in a negative way, was rather high in 1945 and 1948 (27 % and 22 %). The visibility of the Soviet Union/Russia was on its highest level in 1945, in 1948 and in 1989. Decrease on mentions from 1989 (when the Soviet Union was near the brink) to 1993 is very clear. It is interesting that the prominence of the Soviet Union was on a very low level in 1968 (occupation of Czechoslovakia); one could guess that there was nothing positive to say but no courage to write negatively either. As long as the Soviet Union existed and Finland had to live in its shadow, the press did not rock the boat. In the contemporary press discourse the grim heritage of the Cold War can be seen in cynical attitude towards rhetoric of friendship and cooperation.

The image of the Soviet Union and Russia has changed dramatically in the press in Finland after World War II. In a study about the role of the media in the transformation process of collective identities¹, 1213 press articles were analysed mainly by using quantitative methods, but also by using the qualitative approach. The time frame was from 1945 till the end of the century, and the newspapers chosen for the study represented the whole political spectrum of the Finnish media. The selection criteria of the material emphasized national celebration days, such as the New Year's Day, May 1st, Midsummer, and Independence Day etc. Because of this, a kind of celebration discourse is in the focus of the analysis.² This article is based on a sub-study of the bigger project called "National relations". It was a rather simple frequency analysis in which mentions of certain countries, groups of states and international organizations were coded (like the Soviet Union/Russia, United States, NATO, UN etc.). To make the analysis more revealing and interesting, a distinction was made whether the mention was made in the context of (1) alliance, friendship and cooperation, or in the context of (2) distance, restriction and enemy image, or (3) both in a positive and in a negative context. Before presenting the figures, it is important to clarify the position of Finland in Post-War Europe.

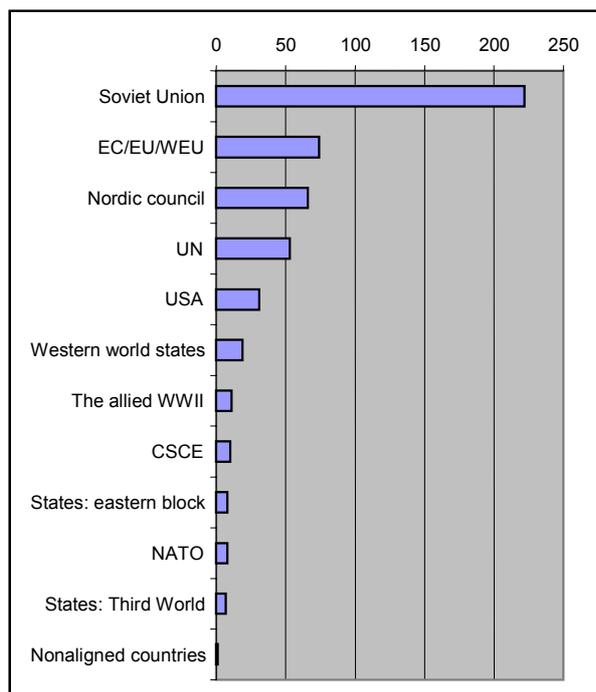


Diagram 1: Mentions of international actors

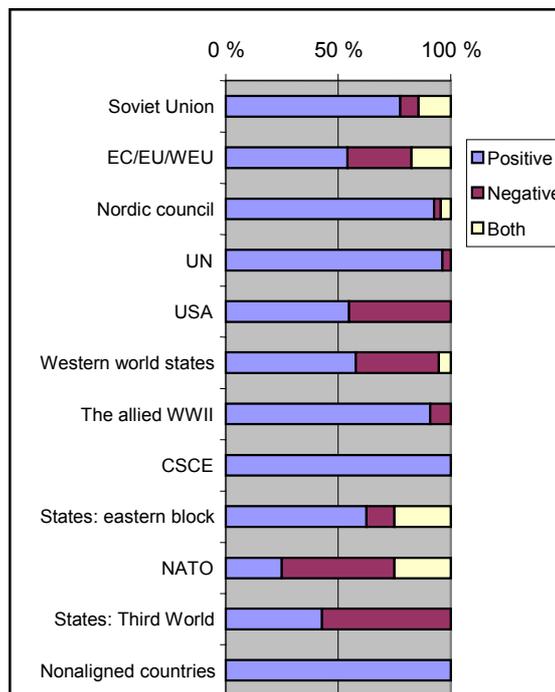


Diagram 2: Positive and negative mentions of international actors

The front line of the Cold War did not follow the Eastern border of Finland and neither did it follow the Western border. The front was inside the Finnish way of thinking. There was a continuous struggle between the Finns and the Soviets about the influence of the Soviet Union in all levels of the Finnish society – the economy, domestic politics, foreign policy, content of textbooks, press discourse etc. But this was also the case within the Finnish society; the Finns argued strongly about "anti-Sovietism" or "pro-Sovietism". The so-called "Finlandization" – political and cultural adaptation to the will of the Soviet

1. Heikki Luostarinen & Risto Suikkanen: A Quiet Bystander. In Epp Lauk, Marju Lauristin & Heikki Luostarinen (eds.) Media and Transformation of Identities, Hampton Press, forthcoming.

2. The time spots of the study, nine together, were chosen according to the principles of the international study which our analysis is a part of: major changes in the international system and in the Finnish cultural, economic and societal life were the most important criteria for including the years 1945, 1948, 1956, 1968, 1975, 1982, 1989, 1993 and 1995. Each year, press material on 8 celebration days or important events were analysed: (1) New Year's Day, (2) May 1st, (3) Midsummer, (4) Memorial day of the beginning of the Winter War (30 November), (5) Independence Day (6 December), (6-7) two relevant internal and/or international events and (8) one prominent celebration/memorial event of the national culture or heritage. All stories fulfilling these criteria were read. The most prominent editorial or commentary (prominent in the sense of editorial emphasis: length, placing, lay-out and journalistic profoundness) and the most prominent other story (according to the same criteria) were selected for the quantitative analysis. Other relevant articles (if they could be found), plus all political cartoons on the issue were copied for the additional qualitative analysis. 1213 stories altogether were included in the quantitative analysis. Additionally 1560 articles, plus political cartoons were collected for the qualitative analysis. The number of coded variables was 3624.

Union – can also be described as psychologically motivated acceptance of unchangeable facts: If the Finns were unable to change their geopolitical position, they were able to change their way of thinking and to see whether the position had anything positive to offer. In popular discourse, but not necessarily in public discourse, the relationship with the Soviet Union developed from negative feelings of inferiority and fear of the 1940s–1960s, via more positive and self-confident opinions in the 1970s–80s, towards feelings of superiority of 1990s.

The position of Finland between the East and the West was re-interpreted in the 1960s from a forced necessity to a chance benefit from both directions. To live “in-between” (or “in the grey zone”) was not regarded solely as a problem but also as a positive chance. In the official liturgy of the Finnish foreign policy, this attitude was called Finland’s role as a bridge builder between the East and the West. If you cannot be in one or the other end of the bridge, you can at least collect bridge toll. Finland, for instance, tried – and in some extent succeeded – to gain advantages in its trade from both the East and the West, especially from the East. As one of the few “friendly-minded” capitalist partners of the Soviet Union, Finland had the function as a display window for the Soviets. The Finns made use of their special status, and even started to be proud of their international position.¹

As long as the Soviet Union existed, the construction of Finland as an international actor happened in the real life and it was metaphorically connected to its location between the Soviet block and Western democracies. This situation as such did not form any basis for the collective identity (to being neither here, nor there) before “the bridge” was discovered. After that to be “in-between” got a positive interpretation, the “grey zone” changed into the zone of cooperation. This attitude was naturally not shared by all Finns, but at least a few generations internalized the idea to a large extent.

However, Finland started to integrate to the West as soon as it was politically possible. “The bridge” did not vanish completely, because this metaphor was to some extent still used in the 1990s, but the other end of the bridge was moved to the Eastern border of Finland: Finland was part of the West, still an economic gateway to Russia and still offering special know-how about Russia, but definitely a part of the West. Almost all political content of the bridge metaphor was abandoned; it was a purely pragmatic construction and mainly concerned trade.

At the beginning of the Cold War period, the identity suggestion given by the press was the role of a sympathetic bystander, a reserved and understanding person who would never interfere with other peoples’ business. It was not the role of Finland or the Finns to give advice to other countries or to say how things should be done. It was more valuable to conciliate and to try to find compromises to contradictory interests. However, when the international position of Finland stabilized, the bridge building idea materialized in a much more active foreign policy in which Finland tried to seize a prominent role in the East-West dialogue. This role was necessarily not very credible in the eyes of the international community – Finland was too close to the Soviet Union – but at least it gave to the citizens of the country the feeling that Finland was actively solving major problems of the time.

In the public discourse of the media, negative criticism towards the Soviet Union and towards the official Finnish foreign policy was not totally absent, but rare. Changes in the politics of the Soviet Union, especially during the Gorbatshev era starting from 1985, naturally had their impact on the Finnish media discourse. It seems probable (according to previous Finnish studies about the so-called self-censorship, see e.g. Salminen 1999), that the Finnish media were most pro-Soviet in the 1970s when the international influence of the Soviet Union was on its highest level.

Diagram 1 describes mentions of certain nations, groups of states, alliances and groups of peoples. Diagram 2 shows the distribution of positive and negative mentions. It proves clearly what has been the main object of Finnish foreign policy after the WW II: in all coded press material, the Soviet Union was mentioned 222 times which makes 37.5% of all mentions.²

Other important states or groups have been the United States (5.3 %), EC/EU/WEU/West-Europe (12.6 %), United Nations (9.0 %) and Nordic council/Nordic co-operation (11.2 %). With very few exceptions, all mentions concerning the UN and Nordic co-operation are positive (variable 1: mention of alliance, friendship, co-operation). The Soviet Union has also been described rather positively (77.5 %). The share of negative mentions (variable 2: distance, restriction, enemy image) is 8.1% and mixture of negative and positive mentions (variable 3: both) 14.4%. Images of the United States and the European alliances are most contradictory. In the case of USA, 54.8 % of the mentions are positive and 45.2% negative. Concerning EC/EU etc. 54.1 % of mentions are positive, 28.4 % negative and 17.6 % mixtures of positive and negative references. Individual states of the Western block and the Eastern block are evaluated in an even-handed way: most men-

1. The most peculiar phenomenon in the Finnish special status was the so-called “vodka tourism” – masses of Finns travelled to Soviet cities in order to have cheap alcohol. This carnival was difficult to understand for (other) Westerners. For the Finns, cheap vodka was one of the blessings of the Cold War.
2. Mentions of both the Soviet Union and Russia were coded. The reader has to be reminded that there are big differences in basic frequencies in this study. Low numbers of basic frequency can lead to big changes in shares if there is only one more positive/negative article in the sample. Results which are based on low frequencies must be interpreted carefully.

tions are positive with a few exceptions. In the foreign political map of the Finnish press, also the CSCE conference and the Allied powers of the World War II get some positive attention, but these mentions are closely connected to certain historical periods (the CSCE top summit in Helsinki in 1975 and the end of war).

From the military alliances of the Cold War, the Warsaw pact alliance is totally absent in the media discourse. NATO gets some attention but mostly negative or contradictory in terms of attitude. According to the statistics, Third World countries are a black spot on the map of Finnish journalism. Here, once again, we have to remember that celebration days are special events also in journalism and moments of national self-reflection; the content of everyday news flow might be in some extent different (Kivikuru & Pietiläinen 1998). It seems, however, that the Third World has not been regarded important enough to be included in considerations about Finland's place and role in the world.

These results give reason to assume that there has been consensus on certain issues in the Finnish foreign politics which has not changed during the time frame of the study: the neighbouring Nordic countries, the neutral and non-aligned countries and the UN have been evaluated positively by all wings of the political spectrum and during the whole period of 50 years. Only very few negative mentions could be found in the whole study. However, there might have been changes in reasons to emphasize these relations – for instance orientation towards the Nordic countries was immediately after the war a way to emphasize that Finland belongs to the West and later on a more neutral way to express traditional connections with Nordic countries. It also seems that Finland has had varying reasons to emphasize the role of the UN; multilateral international co-operation has been seen important as a counter-force for super power domination, as well as Finland's visibility in the struggle for its neutral and sovereign status.

There are differences of certain importance between various newspapers: communist papers are naturally most critical towards the United States and most positive towards the Soviet Union. More interesting are differences within centrist, liberal and right-wing papers, although rough quantitative analysis does not unveil all nuances which often are written "in between the lines" and can only be seen by means of a detailed textual and contextual analysis. For instance, the absence of certain official formulations praising "the good and confidential relations" with the Soviet Union was an indirect way used by the bourgeois press to express its oppositional attitude, although the Soviet Union or the Finnish foreign policy were not openly criticised.

If we look at changes in attitudes towards the Soviet Union in different time spots (diagram 3), a few observations can be made. The share of negative mentions of the Soviet Union was very low, except in 1995 (30 %) when Finland already was a member of the EU. However, the number of cases in which the Soviet Union was referred to both in a positive and in a negative way, was rather high in 1945 and 1948 (27 % and 22 %). The visibility of the Soviet Union/Russia was on its highest level in 1945 (44 mentions), in 1948 (36) and in 1989 (35). Decrease on mentions from 1989 (when the Soviet Union was near the brink) to 1993 (6) is clear. It is interesting that the prominence of the Soviet Union was on a very low level in 1968 (10 mentions, occupation of Czechoslovakia); one could guess that there was nothing positive to say but no courage to write negatively either.¹

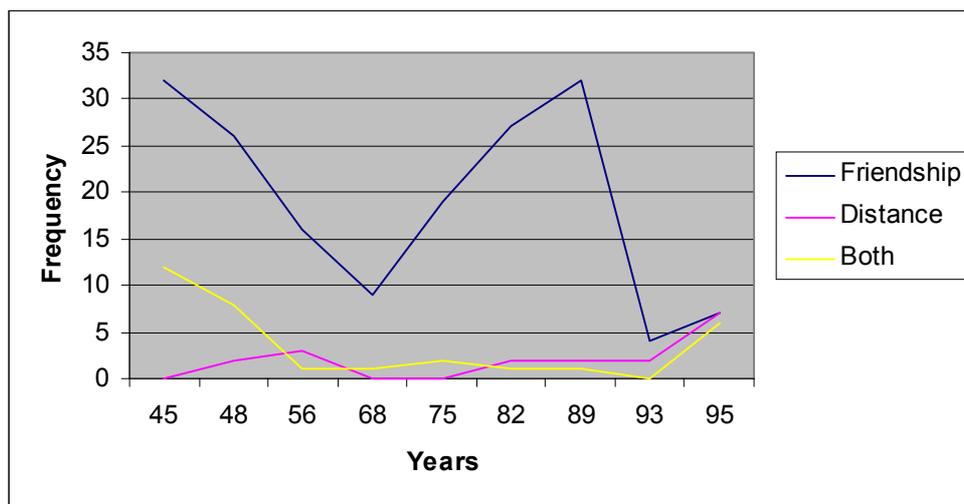


Diagram 3: The amount of positive, negative and mixed statements about the Soviet Union / Russia

1. The reader must keep in mind that also here the basic frequencies are relatively low.

Other ways of analysis in the main study (see footnotes 1 and 2) give the same result: as long as the Soviet Union still existed and Finland had to live in its shadow, the press did not rock the boat. In spite of all political disagreements and various degrees of criticism towards the Soviet Union, the press was mainly loyal to the state and protected its efforts to maintain good relations with the Soviet Union and at the same time get credibility to the Finnish neutrality. In the main study, several approaches were used to analyse the consequences of the big change in Finland's foreign political position in 1989–1995 (foreign policy orientation of the press, reporting on military issues, image of the national history etc.). All results can be summed up by saying that the change was almost as dramatic as in the former Soviet Block socialist countries. Starting from 1989, the image of the Soviet Union/Russia decreased rapidly in the public media discourse, and in the same time patriotic feelings got much more space and many prominent figures of the national history – previously forgotten for foreign political reasons – were rehabilitated.

The qualitative analysis, however, unveils certain differences in the way different newspapers express their support for the official foreign policy in different times. In the case of left-wing newspapers, especially the communist ones, three different attitudes can be observed: Right after the end of war, the Soviet Union was described as the "land of hope", a target of *utopian* projection for better future for the whole humankind. After the disclosures about the Stalin regime, when the grim reality of Soviet life became visible even to the most enthusiastic communists, a more *pragmatic* approach got a dominant position: the Soviet Union was not so much an utopian dream but an economic and political superpower which offered material gains in terms of trade, stability and peace in international relations and support for anti-colonial movements in the Third World. When the Soviet Union gradually started to lose its super power position, the left-wing discourse got a more *defensive* tone: in spite of its problems, the Soviet Union and Russia offer huge chances for the Finnish industry, and stability in mutual relations should in all circumstances be a crucial cornerstone of the Finnish foreign policy.

In the bourgeois press, several different attitudes and approaches can be found, although not as clearly replacing each other in chronological order as in the left-wing press. The discourse of *necessity* was dominant after the end of war, but it has continued its life until these days. Finland's geo-political position, it has been said, the common border of over 1,000 kilometers and location near one of the main cities of the Soviet Union/Russia, Leningrad/St. Petersburg is a fact of life which cannot be changed. The big neighbor has always had and will have certain security interests concerning Finland which can be fulfilled in the best way by co-operation and confidential relations. The idea of *tactical freedom* emphasized that the better Finland's relations are to the Soviet Union, the freer Finland was to collaborate with the West and to independently take care of its inner affairs. In an atmosphere of distrust, the Soviet Union would try to control Finland by using more repressive methods. The emphasis on *stability* used some similar arguments as the pragmatic approach of the left-wing press: Finland had bad experiences of short-sighted politics towards Russia and the Soviet Union, and it should arrange the mutual relations of the states on a firm basis with longstanding goals of continuity and stability. The benefits for trade were also often mentioned.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the discourse of necessity was reformulated into historical interpretation and explanation in most parts of the press: During the Cold War Era, Finland, it was said, had to accept for instance the treaty of friendship and cooperation in order to avoid worse alternatives, but it was always a pure tactical choice forced by the Soviet dictatorship without much real positive content. In this post-Soviet discourse those Finnish politicians and parties who went beyond the absolute necessity in their co-operation with the Soviets are criticized.

We now come back to the question of Finland's role as a bridge builder and as a neutral country. In the new Post-Cold War circumstances a part of the Finnish media started to ridicule both attributes as a pure illusion of the Cold War: In fact, Finland had been closely linked to the Soviet Union, and its neutrality was not really accepted by either the Soviets or by the Americans or by the international community in general. It was just a trick for a better image, a fake. Now Finland had to forget neutrality (or non-alignment) and to join its natural reference groups in the West. The problem – from the point of view of this argumentation – has been in the slowness of change in people's collective identity. Because the idea of neutrality in foreign policy was so intensively drummed by the whole publicity in the country for over 50 years, it started to be one of the cornerstones of the social identity of people, in fact a part of their personality and ideals of social behaviour. Consequently, criticism towards NATO membership has been harsh until these days, and the Finnish public opinion is one of the most critical in Europe towards the United States and the Bush administration. In the most recent opinion poll, 55 % of the Finns were against NATO membership, and only 20 % were for alliance. Almost 50 % would not give their vote for NATO even in a situation in which the highest leadership of the state would promote alliance. Most important reasons for Finland's continuing position as a non-aligned country were distrust towards the United States (which was considered as the real leader of NATO), belief in good results of non-aligned policy in the past and a fear of increasing military spending and possible obligation to send Finnish troops abroad. (Torvi 2004)

However, public opinion is slowly changing - attitudes against NATO have been even more critical than they are now. It is important to notice that criticality towards Western military alliance does not include any pro-Russian attitudes or unrealistic conceptions about the instability and military strength of Russia. The main idea is that Finland has to stand on its own feet

and to consider extremely carefully any collective processes in the field of foreign and security policy and military issues. It has to avoid any interference to conflicting international affairs. Finland does not want to be a neutral bridge builder, just neutral.

On the level of collective identity, Finland has no international mission any more. A long collective process – with the help of the media – has been demanded to change the popularity of the bridge building ideal. Like many efforts of the Cold War Era to create connections over ideological and political differences, it looks now somewhat shameful. It has a taste of KGB and Soviet manipulation. In fact, Soviet manipulation is a part of the story but just one part. Misled or not, people had true belief in conciliation and negotiation as the correct way of solving disagreements in international life and in the possibilities of a small country to take a prominent and positive role in the world. The grim heritage of the Cold War seems to be cynicism: friendship and cooperation are always an illusion and hypothetical fraud, and confrontation and suspicion always the right attitude.

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