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FINNISH RESPONSE TO NATO – VIEWS FROM THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH AND CHRISTIANS IN FINNISH POLITICS

By Miro Leporanta

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Russia's brutal attack against Ukraine has been going on for a year. In February of 2022, the whole international community was shaken to its core. Finland, sharing a 1,343.6-kilometer border with Russia, faced its biggest foreign policy crisis in years. Then something happened: public opinion changed almost overnight in favor of joining the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO.¹ No prominent force in Finnish politics had driven this kind of fast accession to NATO, even though the Center-Right National Coalition Party (*kokoomus*, kok.) and the liberal Swedish Peoples Party (*Suomen ruotsalainen kansanpuolue*, RKP) had expressed interest in joining the alliance. Finland placed an application for NATO in May of 2022, together with Sweden, with whom Finland's foreign policy goals had been aligned for years.²

Finnish Christianity and Finnish Churches have offered a variety of responses to the end of Finland's non-military alignment. Of historical institutions in Finland, the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church (hereafter FELC) has a prominent social influence and is regarded as an institution that represents that country's values. This applies to Finnish defense policy as well. The church is a prominent player in the Finnish army and conscript service. On the FELC website, the Church states that: "The Church supports those who serve in the defense forces both mentally and spiritually. The Church sees that the defense forces have a vital role in securing the peace and

¹ <https://yle.fi/a/3-12436782>, accessed Jan. 25, 2023.

² This article is meant as a kind of companion to Erik Sindevall's article, see: *Sindevall, Erik: NATO and Swedish Churches: Dealing with Defense Policy in the Midst of a European Crisis. Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe (September 2022) XLII, 7.*

independence of Finland.”³At the opposite side of the organizational spectrum, the free-aligned and revivalist religious movements have very different kinds of views. This is especially the case within charismatic, pietistic movements and their variations.

Let’s start with a short overview of how the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church, and some notable politicians and parties who have had Christian influence, responded to the shift in Finnish defense politics and the NATO application, based on author’s observation of these still very recent events.

Response of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church to NATO

Before there was any real talk of NATO-accession, pre-February 2022, Finnish churches were ambivalent about NATO, just like in the neighboring Sweden.⁴ The Protestant dogma of separated ecclesial and state issues is well-received in Finland. If the FELC releases statements about national or/and international political issues, they usually have something to do with human rights, of which the FELC is an outspoken supporter.

Regarding the issues of war and defense, the FELC has longed for peace and has been careful not to make direct statements. One could argue that this has something to do with the history of the FELC in situations of conflict and war. In the context of the Finnish Civil War, the Church was for a long time seen as an actor on the national (white) side against the socialists (reds). The Civil War broke out in 1918, but it was only in the 1990’s that the Church started to re-bury and bless socialists who had died in the war. In some parts and societies within the country the Church is still seen as a bourgeoisie institution.⁵ During the Second World War, the FELC had a strong presence in the Finnish military forces as the upholder of faith and morals. After the world wars, the Church has maintained a strong anti-violence and anti-war stance.

Following in these footsteps, the FELC has taken an ambivalent stance on the issue of NATO, releasing no formal positive or negative statements. On the May 17, 2022, the Bishop of Kuopio, Jari Jolkkonen released a statement that said:

The Finnish parliament has voted 188-8 to support Finland's membership in the defense alliance NATO. The church has not taken a position on membership, nor does it need to. However, I think it is appropriate to give credit to the state leadership for the procedures

³ <https://evl.fi/tietoa-kirkosta/kirkko-ja-yhteiskunta/kirkko-ja-puolustusvoimat>, accessed Jan. 30, 2023.

⁴ Sindevall, *NATO and Swedish Churches*:

⁵ For more, see Ilkka Huhta, *Sisällisota 1918 ja Kirkko* (– Suomen kirkkohistoriallisen seuran toimituksia 212, 2009).

regarding the application process... The state administration has managed to go through the application process in a way that strengthens democracy. The President of the Republic, the Prime Minister and the country's government have given space for an open discussion... In Parliament, the government and opposition parties have worked together across party lines... Citizens have been told in advance about the possible means of influence by foreign powers... Despite its small size, Finland is a major peacekeeping power. Before the outbreak of the Winter War, J. K. Paasikivi (Finnish president at the time) led Finland's peace negotiations. Paasikivi tried to ward off Soviet pressure by telling Stalin that Finland is a peace-loving country and wants to stay away from the power struggles between the great powers... According to Mannerheim's memoirs, Stalin replied to Paasikivi: "I understand. But Finland is not allowed to do that." In such a tragic world of power abuse, Finland has the right to take care of its defense... Finland has been a peaceful country and it should remain so. Finland must continue to promote peace and justice... In doing so, we fulfill the Apostle Paul's instruction: "If possible and if it depends on you, live in peace with everyone."⁶

This statement reflects the stance of FELC. Firstly, there is mutual understanding between the Church and State, even though the opinions are kept separate. This is shown by the bishop thanking the appropriate members of Finnish leadership. Secondly, there is the non-partisan approach which reflects the Church's wish to stay neutral. Thirdly, the stance leans heavily on Finland's history as a neutral country, subject to aggression from foreign attackers (the Soviet Union). This kind of discourse has been used by politicians and the media in Finland and in Ukraine: both have been attacked by their far-bigger neighbors but managed to hold off the attack with relative success despite their inferior military strength.

The Bishop of Mikkeli, Seppo Häkkinen, was asked to deliver an expert statement to the Future Committee of the Finnish parliament about NATO. In the statement "*Perspectives on the report on the change in security environment*," Häkkinen goes through how the war in Ukraine and Finland's application to NATO have affected Finland from the point of view of FELC:

The 2020's could be called the era of accumulating crises or the era of "triple crisis." Climate change, the corona pandemic and the war in Ukraine test everyone... People's concern and fear in the changed security situation can be seen in the parishes... The topic is very prominent in every person we encounter.⁷

Häkkinen reflects the sense of hardship that many share about the situation of the world in the last few years, due to devastating events: the coronavirus pandemic and then the war.

⁶ <https://www.piispajarijolkkonen.fi/kirjoitukset/valtionjohdon-menettelytavat-naton-hakuprosessissa-esimerkillisia-vahvistavat-demokratiaa/>, accessed Jan. 30, 2023.

⁷ <https://www.epressi.com/media/userfiles/132964/1652251326/piispa-hakkisen-asiantuntijalausunto-tulevaisuusvaliokunnalle-ajankohtaisessalonteko-turvallisuusympariston-muutoksesta-3.5.2022.pdf>, accessed Jan. 30, 2023.

Another factor is the status of the Russian minority in Finland. Russians living in Finland make up about 1.5% of the population.⁸ Russian is spoken primarily in south-eastern Finland, where Finland borders Russia, and in the Helsinki region.⁹ Russians in Finland have themselves been targeted by racist assaults.¹⁰ Häkkinen states that the FELC is especially worried about the growing threat of domestic confrontation in Finland, saying:

The suffering of the Ukrainians has awakened a strong desire to help them, which is positive. The war has also given rise to hatred towards Russia's actions. Some have channeled their hatred towards the Russians living in Finland. The church has been working against hate speech that has grown in society. The church has its own important role as well as an advocate of truth and truthfulness and as a peace builder.¹¹

Häkkinen also repeats the FELC's position on NATO:

The Church will not express opinion on should Finland join NATO or not. That decision belongs to the state-leadership. The possible membership of NATO is not the end, but a new beginning of our foreign- and security politics. The important thing for the Church is that it can build peace, trust and mutual understanding also in the new situation. The Church's mission to support people will remain in any circumstances.¹²

The Church remains intentionally vague in its position, but it is clear that it has prepared itself for this new security situation.

Christianity and NATO in the Finnish Parliament

Few notions from the Finnish Parliament regarding the NATO process and influence of Christianity in politics will be considered, taking a look into four parties in the parliament that have some kind of (big or small) Christian influences. Those are: 1) Christian Democrats (*kristillisdemokraatit*, KD), a center-right party, akin to the Christian Democratic parties of Central Europe, but with less influence (in the parliamentary election of 2019, KD received 3.9% of the votes); 2) The Finns party (*perussuomalaiset*, PS), a populist, right-wing group with notable people from the Pentecostal movement, the second-largest party in the parliament (in the 2019 elections

⁸ https://www.stat.fi/tup/julkaisut/tiedostot/julkaisuluettelo/yyti_fif_202000_2020_23214_net.pdf, accessed Jan. 30, 2023.

⁹ https://www.stat.fi/tup/maahanmuutto/maahanmuuttajat-vaestossa/vieraskieliset_en.html, accessed 30.01.2023.

¹⁰ <https://yle.fi/a/3-12332169>, accessed Jan. 26, 2023.

¹¹ <https://www.epressi.com/media/userfiles/132964/1652251326/piispa-hakkisen-asiantuntijalausunto-tulevaisuusvaliokunnalle-ajankohtaisessalonteko-turvallisuusympariston-muutoksesta-3.5.2022.pdf>, accessed Jan. 30, 2023.

¹² <https://www.epressi.com/media/userfiles/132964/1652251326/piispa-hakkisen-asiantuntijalausunto-tulevaisuusvaliokunnalle-ajankohtaisessalonteko-turvallisuusympariston-muutoksesta-3.5.2022.pdf>, accessed Jan. 30, 2023.

they received 17.5% of the votes); 3) the Center Party (*Keskusta*, kesk.), an agrarian-centrist party, with notable historical (also current fraction) of people from the Finnish “Bible-Belt,” notably Laestadians (in the 2019 elections they received 13.8% of the votes); and 4) Power Belongs to the People (*valta kuuluu kansalle*, VKK), a party with only one MP, Ano Turtianen, a new-age charismatic Christian, who was kicked out of PS after writing racist tweets.¹³ If we want to assess what the role of Christianity in its non-institutional form is in these political parties and their response to NATO, it must be noted that there is no sufficient research done in Finland to draw any direct connections between Christianity and NATO attitude. However, the observations that are presented here give us valuable insight on the subject. Also, it must be said that most of the resistance to the Finnish application for NATO comes from the political left, especially from the Left Alliance.¹⁴

KD has had a semi-positive attitude towards NATO-membership. In a political program written in 2016, the party writes that “the partnership for peace between Finland and NATO must be strengthened... a public referendum about joining NATO must be organized, if necessary.”¹⁵ In May 2022, the calls for public referendum were dropped, and the KD’s parliamentary group supported the Finnish membership of NATO.¹⁶ KD’s line on NATO follows the mainly positive attitude the Christian Democratic parties in Europe have had for supranational structures, such as the European Union. They have, however, been more modest with their approach to NATO than their fellow companion in the Finnish parliament from the same European Party, *Kokoomus* (European People’s Party, EPP). PS has for a long time against joining NATO. In their election program from 2003, the party states that “The Finns party does not want Finland to become a member of NATO.”¹⁷ This kind of disdain for supranational structures has deep roots in the agrarian-populism from which PS was born. They have opposed Finnish membership in the EU, and still hold the Finnish exit from the European Union as their long-time foreign policy goal. However, the attitude towards NATO changed completely in the spring of 2022. In August of the same year, PS released their updated *Foreign and Security Political Program*, and in the front

¹³ <https://yle.fi/a/3-11813107>, accessed Jan. 30, 2023.

¹⁴ <https://www.is.fi/politiikka/art-2000008823715.html>, accessed Jan. 30, 2023.

¹⁵ <https://www.kd.fi/tutustu/ohjelmat/kd-asta-ohon/>, accessed Jan. 30, 2023.

¹⁶ <https://www.kd.fi/2022/05/12/kristillisdemokraattinen-eduskuntaryhma-kannattaa-suomen-nato-jasenyytta-yksimielisesti/>, accessed Jan. 27, 2023.

¹⁷ <https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/perussuomalaisten-eduskuntavaaliohjelma-2003/>, accessed Jan. 30, 2023.

cover it states that “our strong national security will be strengthened by NATO.”¹⁸ However, unlike some of their sister parties in Europe (like the *Swedish Democrats* and the Italian *La Lega*) PS has never considered Russia as a partner in international politics. This probably made the switch to the pro-NATO stance easier. The leadership and most of the members of PS have also aligned themselves in the pro-NATO and anti-Russia camp (most notably the previous Chair, Jussi Halla-aho, now head of the committee of Foreign Affairs as well as a scholar of Church Slavic and a fluent speaker of both Ukrainian and Russian).

PS calls themselves a “patriotic and Christian-social party.”¹⁹ PS also has some MPs who belong to the revival branch of Christianity. Mika Niikko, who was the head of Foreign Affairs committee before Halla-Aho, was forced to step down after his tweet (posted on Feb. 8, 2022, before the war) about Ukraine, stating that “Macron or some other European leader should come forward and state that to Russia that Ukraine will not be joining NATO.”²⁰ Niikko is a member of charismatic Pentecostalism, and a prominent player in the movement in his hometown of Vantaa. The Center party has a long and complicated relationship with NATO. During the term of the longest-serving Finnish president, Urho Kekkonen (kesk., then the *agrarian league*) maintaining a good neighboring relationship with Russia was the most important foreign policy matter. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, The Center party’s relationship to Russia has been mixed, especially among the members of the party who lived during the time of the Soviet Union. Still, at the end of 2021, prominent politicians in the Center Party disagreed with the suggestion that Finland should apply to NATO.²¹ Applying to NATO membership was not the easiest decision for Center party, as they were also a part of the Leftist government who finally filed the application. However, not a single member of the party voted against the proposition.²²

The Center party includes prominent politicians with Christian backgrounds in high offices. The notable fraction of these is Laestadians, who come from the Finnish “Bible belt” in Northern Ostrobothnia, where the role of revivalist movements is strong. An example is Markus Lohi, the head of the Parliamentary committee for Social Affairs. His Christian background does

¹⁸ <https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/UITurPoWeb.pdf>, accessed Jan. 30, 2023.

¹⁹ <https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/arvomaailmamme/>, accessed Jan. 30, 2023.

²⁰ <https://yle.fi/a/3-12306993>, accessed Jan. 16, 2023.

²¹ <https://www.is.fi/politiikka/art-2000008510928.html>, accessed Jan 30, 2023.

²² <https://www.is.fi/politiikka/art-2000008510928.html>, accessed Jan. 30, 2023.

not appear to affect his NATO decision. The Center party also holds the post of the minister of defense, one of the key ministries regarding the NATO accession.

The newest party in the Finnish parliament is Ano Turtiainen's VKK. Turtiainen has become famous for his Christian-inspired eschatological speeches and his provocative Tweets. NATO, coronavirus, vaccines, the World Economic Forum, end times, and the coming kingdom of God are themes that Turtiainen has repeated in his speeches over and over. Turtiainen is a fine example of a more radical version of the new Christian right, a global phenomenon that combines charismatic Christianity with conspiracy theories. This is most notable in the political scene of post-Trump USA (2016 onward) but has arisen in Europe as well in the last few years. Ano Turtiainen has been greatly opposed to NATO from the beginning. Some of his speeches could be called *Russophile*. In his speech for the Finnish parliament (May 17, 2022) he stated,

Dear Speaker! As I brought up in my speech yesterday, Finland has not considered the overall picture of the world politics in any way. The Foreign Affairs Committee's report continues to miss the point, being already out of date at the time of its creation. Parliament is unfortunately in full psychosis, and I claim that many of my colleagues will vote for NATO today, for the fear of not being accepted as candidate in the next elections.²³

Turtiainen is vocal about "God's plans" in Finnish politics. On April 10, 2022, he tweeted, referencing to the Finnish talks about NATO and Finnish response to Russian aggression:

Unfortunately, Finland and the Finns, who have abandoned their God, are now drifting into the hardest place in their history, accompanied by the follies of their current state leadership. Lord have mercy on us from the worst; just a little beating, that we need, would be enough.²⁴

Final Remarks

There is a wide range of opinions on the Finnish application to NATO. At the time of writing this article (January of 2023) Finland and Sweden have still not been accepted. Two countries are blocking the accession, Hungary and Turkey. Hungary has stated that it will ratify the accession in February of 2023, but Turkey has been far more unwilling.²⁵ There have been extensive trilateral talks between Finland, Sweden, and Turkey about the ratification process.

²³ https://www.eduskunta.fi/FI/vaski/Puheenvuoro/2022/Sivut/PUH_58+2022+2+11+11.aspx, accessed Jan. 30, 2023.

²⁴ <https://twitter.com/turtiainenano/status/1513067958972690433?lang=fi>, accessed Jan. 23, 2023.

²⁵ <https://yle.fi/a/74-20006583>, accessed Jan. 30, 2023.

Things escalated in January of 2023, when a right-wing politician, Rasmus Paludan, publicly burned a Qur'an in Sweden.²⁶ Turkey's president Erdogan has stated outright that it would be very difficult for Turkey to ratify Sweden's application, and since Sweden and Finland have decided to go through the application process together, this makes Finland's accession harder. There will be more events regarding the NATO accession that the churches will need to comment on in the future.

²⁶ <https://www.hs.fi/ulkomaat/art-2000009353859.html> , accessed Jan. 30, 2023.