

## Finns Less Apprehensive about Relations with Russia

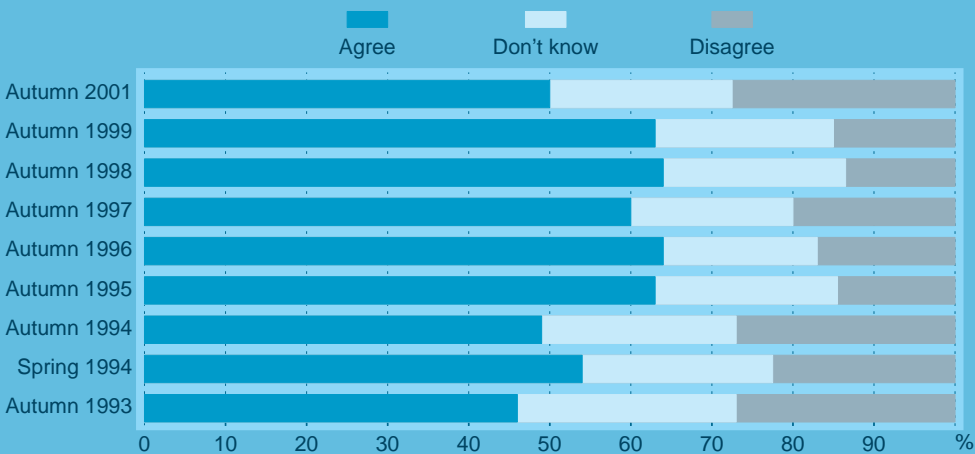
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It's hard to find borders in Europe that haven't, at some point, been torn by tension. The EU's mission is to overcome such traumas: no more war among member states. The Finnish-Russian border, which spans a total of 1,200 kilometers, is very long by European standards. It also has a long history.

In their history lessons, children learn to recite the dates of peace treaties and to diligently track border changes in their school maps. They learn that Finland was under Russian rule for less than a hundred years (1809-1917), and that, of all the countries fighting in WWII, Fin-

land was the only one that wasn't occupied by foreign troops. Yet history is not – even though the history books may indicate otherwise – only about warfare, but also about cross-border trade and cultural exchange. Finland has at times been very dependent on trade with Russia (and the Soviet Union), and the Finnish language contains many loan words originating from Russian. One of the main roads in central Helsinki, Unioninkatu, is a direct reference to the union with Russia, not the European union. Another central road, Aleksanterinkatu, is named after Alexander, the Russian Emperor.

### "As a Neighbour of an Unstable Russia, Finland is Better Off and More Secure as a Member of the EU Than Outside the Union"



Source: EVA/Yhdyskuntatutkimus Oy, 2001-2002.

ETLA S02.1/f49

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We form our opinions by digesting what history has taught us and what we learned in school and from our parents, and also by following the news and other media information. As public opinion is increasingly a force to be reckoned with in Europe, there is good reason to look also into what the Finnish public thinks about our relations with Russia. These relations can be studied from the perspective of Finland or from the wider perspective of developments in Europe.

In the past two years, there has been a marked decrease in the share of people who are of the opinion that, next to an unstable Russia, it is better to be an EU member than not. Correspondingly, there has been an increase in the share of people who think the opposite (figure on the previous page). This is a significant change if one considers that, in the EU membership vote of 1994, it was the question of security that led many “undecided” voters to finally swing in favor of EU membership. However, one should keep in mind that half of the respondents remain “apprehensive”.

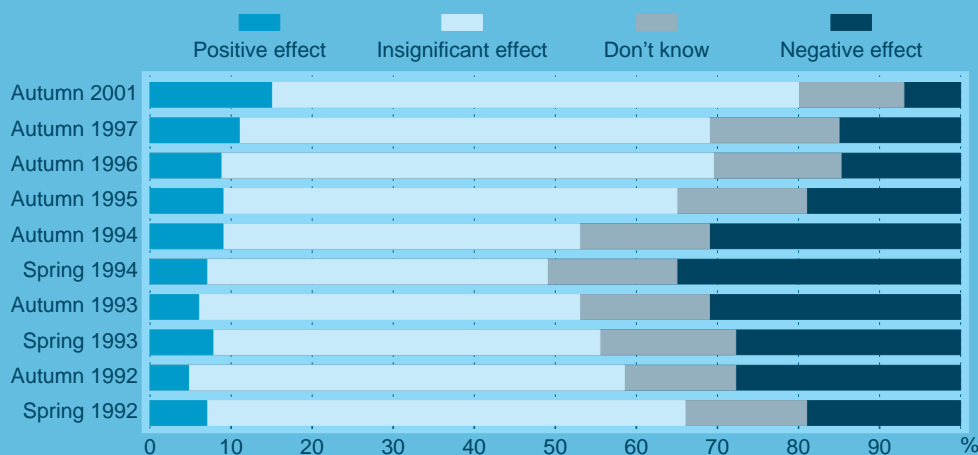
The same trend is evident in polls about the effects of EU membership (figure below). Before the EU membership vote, 35 percent of re-

spondents were of the opinion EU membership would have a negative impact on relations with Russia, while 42 percent were of the opinion that the impact would be negligible. By fall 2001, however, only 7 percent had observed a negative impact, while 65 percent hadn’t discerned a noticeable change.

The trend is also reflected in the opinions Finns have of NATO (figure on the following page). Very few pine for NATO membership. Conversely, an overwhelming majority (61 percent) are of the opinion that Finland must be prepared to defend itself in all circumstances, there will be no help coming from others. This is consistent with Finland’s official foreign policy, which is based on neutrality and an independent, credible national defense. Many factors are at work behind this view: Finns still remember the lessons of history (Finland was left on its own in WWII), Russia is now much more stable, and the European union already provides a sense of security. Still, the support for NATO membership is surprisingly low even in the scenario that Sweden and the Baltic countries decide to join – only 30 percent.

Finns also harbor a less gloomy picture of the effects of European developments on relations

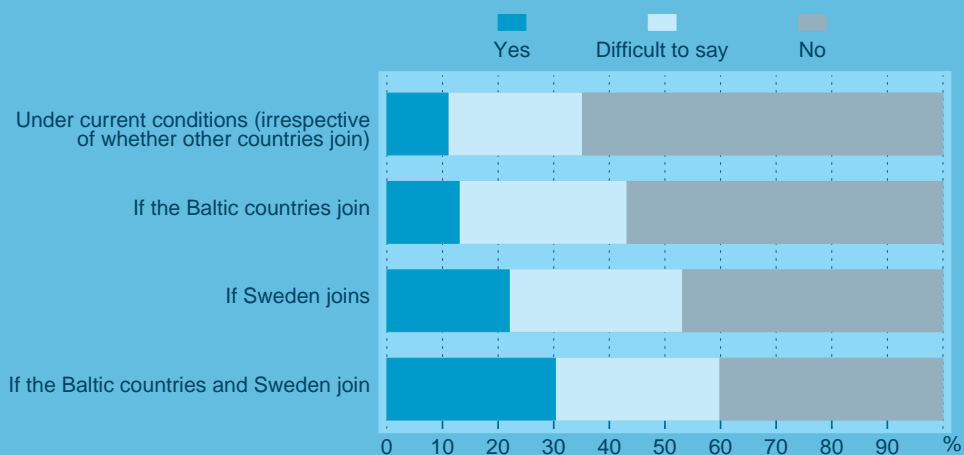
### ”Assessments of the Effect of EU Membership on Finland’s Relations with Russia”



Source: EVA/Yhdyskuntatutkimus Oy, 2001-2002.

ETLA S02.1/150

## ”Attitudes Regarding Finland’s Membership in NATO under the Following Situations/Conditions”



Source: EVA/Yhdyskuntatutkimus Oy, 2001-2002.

ETLA S02.1/f51

with Russia. The share of respondents who believe that EU expansion to the east will isolate Russia has clearly declined during Vladimir Putin’s presidency. In fall 1997, 31 percent predicted isolation. In fall 2001, only 19 percent. A corresponding change has taken place with respect to those who think isolation unlikely.

Concerning the direction EU development, a clear majority (68 percent) is of the opinion that the EU must improve its relations with Russia. This figure has remained more or less unchanged throughout Finland’s EU membership. Yet there are many goals that are thought more important. The top slot (once again) goes to combating international crime – practically everyone (97 percent) think it of primary importance (most of the international crime visible in Finland is in the hands of Russian criminal organizations).

The tragedy of September 11 is also manifest in opinions of Finnish-Russian relations. Of the respondents, 69 percent are of the opinion that relations between the western countries and Russia have decisively improved in the wake of the terrorist attacks. This trend has also received wide coverage in domestic and international news.

### *The study*

The study is based on the answers of 1,371 people, submitted in written form, between 1 November - 19 December, 2001. The material is a representative and correct sample, and no weights were assigned in the analysis. The study was conducted in conjunction with the research series “What Finns think about the EU”, initiated by EVA in spring 1992, and the research report “Finland, the EU and the World” is the twelfth in the series.