

AT NATO'S DOOR

Russia's invasion of Ukraine shifted the opinion of a majority of Finns in favour of NATO membership

The Finns' opinion of Finland becoming a NATO member has shifted from reserved to clearly in favour. The exceptionally rapid, large and broad-based change in attitude is based on the understanding that a fundamental change has taken place in the Finnish military security environment and that the threat posed by Russia has increased. A clear majority of Finns think that Finland should make a decision on NATO membership by the end of this year at the latest.

EVA has carried out a broad study of Finns' views on NATO membership as part of its Values and Attitudes Survey conducted in spring 2022. The results will be published in several parts during March–April 2022, and this will be the first part. EVA has been surveying Finnish opinions on NATO membership annually since 1998. It is the longest-running regular monitoring of opinions on NATO membership in Finland.

- ◆ 60 per cent of Finns support Finland's NATO membership and 19 per cent oppose it. The proportion of those in favour of membership has increased by 34 percentage points from last autumn.
- ◆ 60 per cent think that the decision about NATO membership should be taken this year, with 41 per cent in favour of taking it already in the next few months and 19 per cent in favour of taking it before the end of 2022.
- ◆ 48 per cent would support Finland's NATO membership even if the Finnish state leadership did not.
- ◆ The data for the survey was gathered during the second and third weeks of the war in Ukraine, between 4 and 15 March 2022.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shifted the opinion of a majority of Finns in favour of Finland's membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation NATO. In EVA's Values and Attitudes Survey, a clear majority of Finns (60 per cent) is in favour of Finland joining NATO. 19 per cent are against membership and 21 per cent did not express a preference (Figure 1).

There has been a massive change in the Finns' attitude towards NATO membership since last autumn, when 26 percent of Finns were in favour of and 40 per cent against membership.¹ The proportion of those in favour of membership has increased by 34 percentage points and the proportion of those against has halved.

The change is beyond comparison, both in terms of size and speed, in EVA's Values and Attitudes Survey, which has been conducted for a longer period than any other regular survey in Finland on support for NATO membership.² It has a standardised query context and its data is gathered over a longer period than in many other surveys, which increases the reliability and comparability of the data in comparison to opinion surveys conducted on one day. The extensive data collected

from more than 2,000 respondents also provides valuable information on how the views are distributed demographically.

The change in attitudes observed in the survey is a result of the Finns' reaction to the change in their security environment, which seems to have left the old security policy philosophy, which had dominated in Finland for many years, without a foundation. Only 11 per cent of the respondents felt that Finland is not subject to any real military threats, but as much as 74 per cent now feel that there are military threats (Figure 2). The perception of Finland's military security threats has changed dramatically from the early years of the 21st century. Still in 2007, one in two (49%) respondents considered any military threat to Finland largely hypothetical.

The Finns have now seen the truth. Russia has shown that it does not respect its neighbours' sovereignty. The war in Ukraine has also made real the terrible nature of a defensive war fought on a country's own territory and made it clear that countries belonging to NATO cannot bring their

Perception of threat has changed dramatically.

FIGURE 1. "Finland should join NATO" (%)

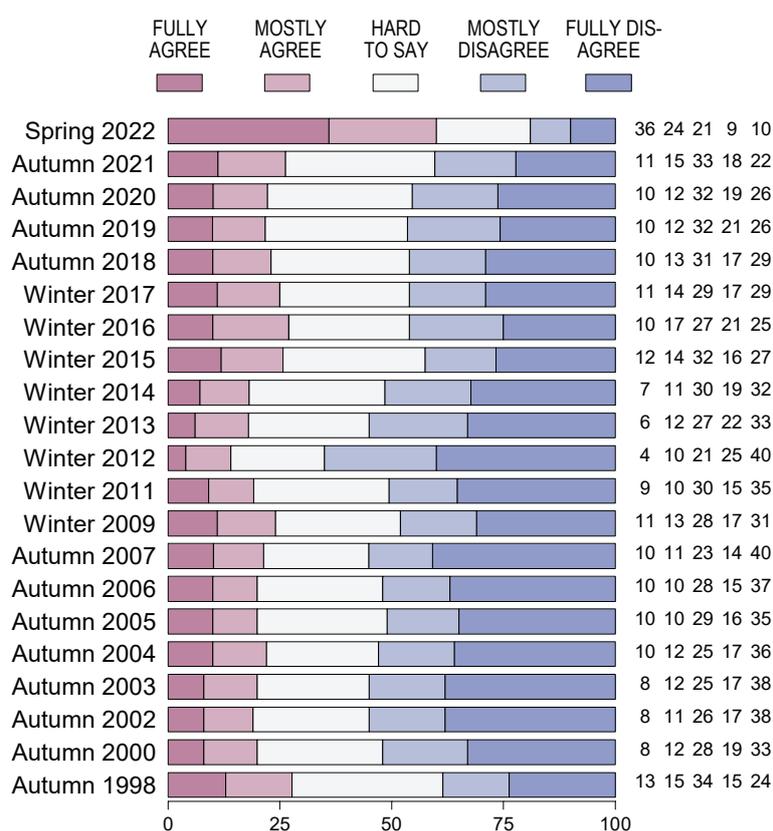


FIGURE 2. “Finland is not subject to any real military threats” (%)

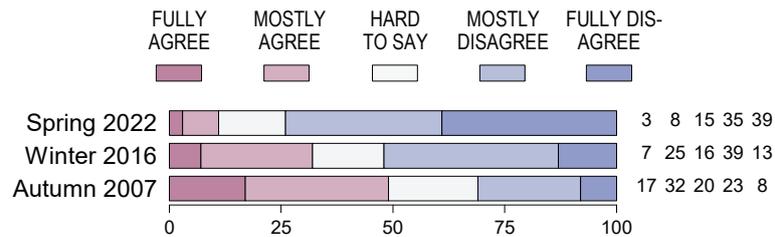
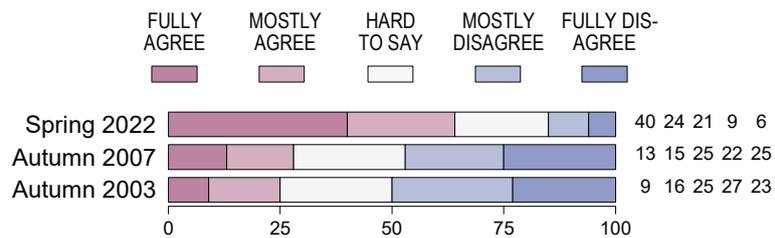


FIGURE 3. “Because Finland is situated next to an unstable Russia, it would be safer for Finland to be a member of NATO than non-aligned” (%)



forces to help the defence of a country that is not part of the alliance.

The Finns’ opinion of this is that because Finland is situated next to an unstable Russia, it would be safer for Finland to be a member of NATO than non-aligned. This is the opinion of 64 per cent of the respondents and only 15 per cent disagree

(Figure 3). Practically all (96%) of those who were in favour of joining NATO associate the need for security with Russia’s instability. (See the separate appendix with figures, which also contains a demographic breakdown of all other results presented in this publication).³

THIS IS EVA’S SURVEY OF VALUES AND ATTITUDES

EVA’s Survey of Values and Attitudes, conducted twice each year, is Finland’s leading regular and broad opinion survey on social issues. EVA has conducted its surveys since 1984 and their topics cover the key themes in politics, economics, foreign relations, the environment and well-being.

The aim has been to keep the question context and method of conducting the Surveys of Values and Attitudes as uniform as possible from year to year in order to ensure comparable results and to monitor changes in attitude that take place over time. Each survey contains a number of questions on each theme. The format of the recurring questions has been kept as uniform as possible from year to year. For many topics, trends in

the Finns’ attitudes and values can be systematically monitored over decades.

In 2012, EVA began collecting data using an internet panel instead of carrying out the survey by mail. During the transition to the panel system, data was collected using both methods to verify the comparability of results.

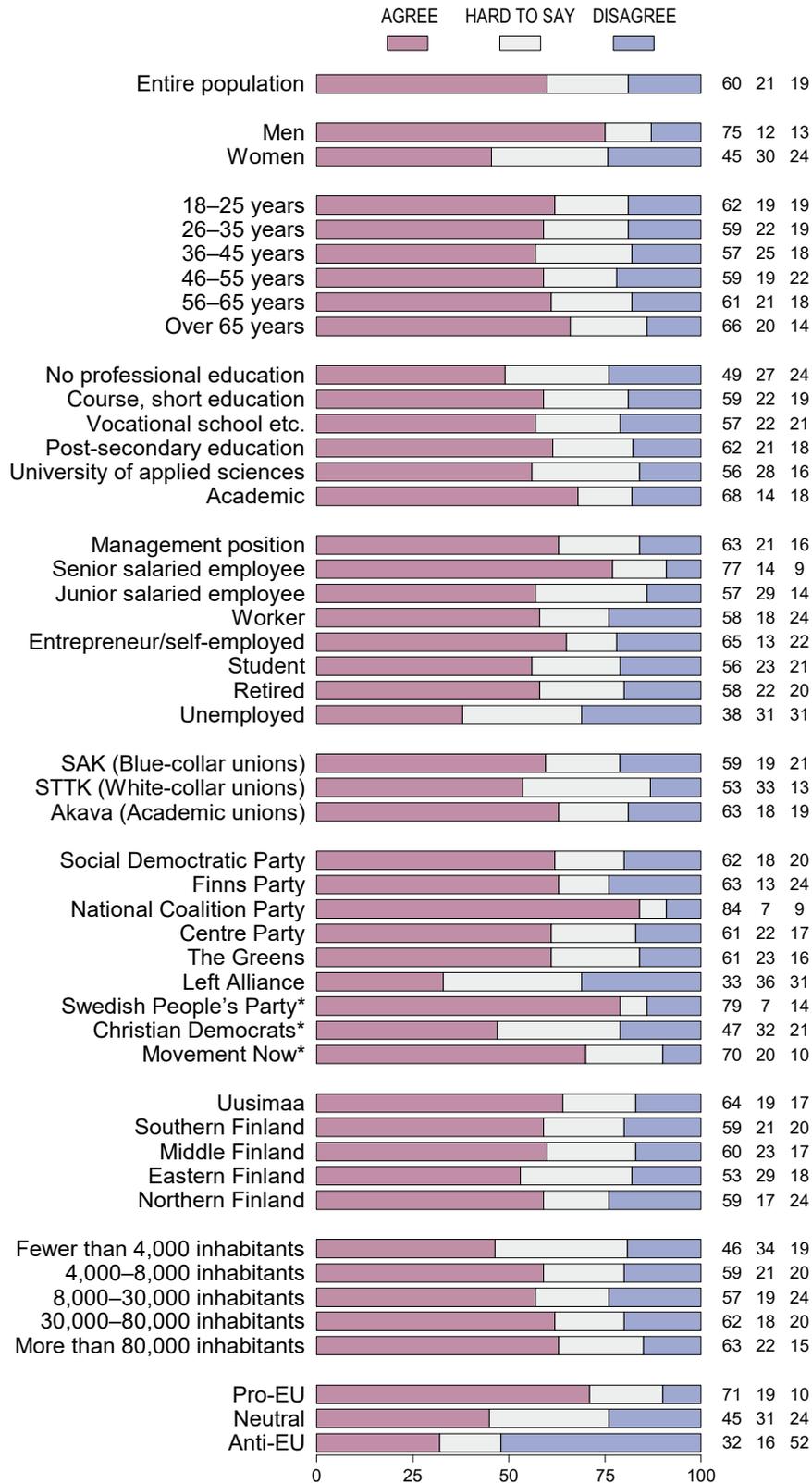
The data of EVA’s Survey of Values and Attitudes are stored in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (FSD, University of Tampere), which can release the data for scientific research and teaching purposes. EVA’s materials have long been included among the most requested at the FSD. They have been and are currently being used in numerous academic research projects at different universities in Finland and abroad.

The change in attitude is broad-based

The change in the Finns' attitude to NATO is not only extensive and rapid, it is also very broad-based. Only half a year earlier almost all popula-

tion groups had reservations about NATO membership, but now the majority is in favour of it in most groups and no groups are clearly anti-NATO (Figure 4). Men are clearly in favour of NATO membership. The oldest and youngest respon-

FIGURE 4. "Finland should join NATO" (%)



dents support NATO membership slightly more than respondents in other age groups. Support for membership increases with socioeconomic status.

The greatest variations in opinion are between members of the various political parties. They are made up of three groups, the first of which includes voters from the National Coalition Party (84%) and the Swedish People’s Party (79%) who are strong supporters of NATO membership. Another group includes the voters of Movement Now⁴ (70%), the Finns Party (63%), the Social Democrats (62%), the Centre Party (61%) and the Greens (61%). The third category includes the more NATO-sceptical supporters of the Christian Democrats (47%), and the Left Alliance (33%), of whom almost as many (31%) would reject NATO membership.

Negative attitudes towards NATO are not particular to any specific population groups, as nearly all population groups have more than a little of those opposed to NATO membership. A factor that identifies those most opposed to NATO membership is that they also oppose Finland’s membership of the EU: the majority (52%) of those against EU membership are also against membership of NATO.

People are in a rush to join NATO

The citizens’ change in attitudes regarding NATO membership did not taken place in a political vacuum, as at the time the questionnaire was conducted, the Finnish Parliament was engaged in a debate on Finnish security policy in a changed security environment.

The Finnish Government is preparing an overview report to the Parliament on the change in the foreign and security policy environment and its implications for Finland.⁵ According to the Finnish President, security policies will be reviewed

“not procrastinating but carefully” and after the report, it will be “time to draw conclusions” on security policy.⁶

The Finnish people agree that there is no room for delay. Of the survey’s respondents, 41 per cent believe that a decision on whether to apply for NATO membership or not should be made in the coming months, before the summer. Just under a fifth (19%) could wait until the end of this year (Figure 5). The proportion of those who wish for a decision by the end of this year (60%) corresponds with those who are in favour of NATO membership (see Figure 1 above).

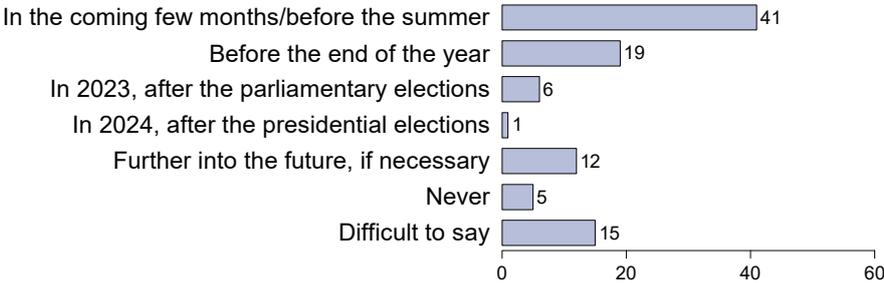
It is clear that the Finns do not want to turn the issue of NATO membership into a mundane political dispute. Very few (6%) would leave the matter to the period after the 2023 Parliamentary elections, and only one percent would wait a few years until after the presidential elections in 2024.

Only 12 per cent do not want to reach a solution to the matter in the next few years, instead they would postpone the consideration of the issue to the future while maintaining the so-called NATO option or the option of joining NATO some time in the future. This group of “NATO option keepers” form the majority of those opposed to NATO membership. Five percent of Finns are categorically against NATO, choosing the option “Never”. This group can be regarded as the most hard-core in their opposition to NATO membership, but it is difficult to find a common denominator for them (see appendix).

NATO option triggered

At the moment, only one in eight Finns believe in holding on to the NATO option. This reflects very well the change that the Finnish security policy is currently in. From the mid-1990s until today, Fin-

FIGURE 5. When the decision to join or not join NATO should be made (%)



land's official position on NATO membership was founded on the NATO option.⁷

In the latest Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy, the option is formulated as follows: "Maintaining a national room to manoeuvre and freedom of choice are also integral parts of Finland's foreign, security and defence policy. This retains the option of joining a military alliance and applying for NATO membership. The decisions are always considered in real time, taking account of the changes in the international security environment."⁸ Such a change in the security environment has now been announced by the Finnish leadership.

The message underlying the NATO option has now become controversial. A good third (35%) believe that Finland's policy of stability, which includes staying outside NATO and exercising the NATO option if necessary, is wise because it is cautious, but equally many (36%) disagree (Figure 6). The thesis is most appealing to Left Alliance voters (51%), but the supporters of the Centre Party (46%) and the Social Democrats (40%) are also more favourable of it than the average. The only ones who dissociate themselves completely from the message are the supporters of the National Coalition Party, with one-fifth (20%) agreeing with it and the majority (62%) rejecting it (see appendix).

On the other hand, the conflicting and mild reaction may also indicate that, on the one hand, the Finns feel that the policy of stability has worked but that the time of using the option has arrived, and also that the language of foreign policy is often difficult to understand.

The time to use the NATO option is at hand, and the Finns feel it is an urgent matter probably because they also feel that waiting until there is a threat of an attack is not realistic. 71 per cent consider it unrealistic to think that Finland could join a military alliance when an actual threat has presented itself. Just a little more than over a tenth (11%) of Finns estimated that joining a military alliance would even be possible when under a threat (Figure 7).

Another uncertainty regarding the use of the NATO option is whether it is realistic to believe that the NATO door will always remain open for Finland. This also concerns the Finns. Of the respondents, 47 per cent feel that Finland should apply for NATO membership quickly because the alliance may close the door to Finland in the future. Of the respondents, 28 per cent would not rush, either because they are confident that NATO's doors will remain open – or because they hope that Finland will not even apply for membership (Figure 8).

When the threat of an attack is there, it will be too late.

FIGURE 6. "Finland's stability policy, which includes staying outside NATO and exercising the NATO option if necessary, is wise cautiousness" (%)

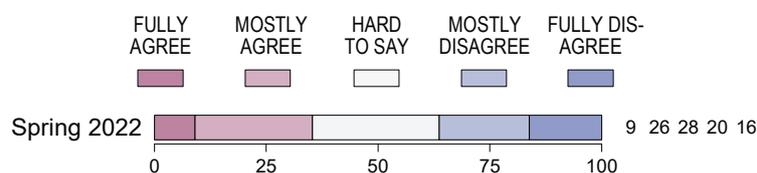


FIGURE 7. "It is unrealistic to think that Finland could join a military alliance when a real threat is already present" (%)

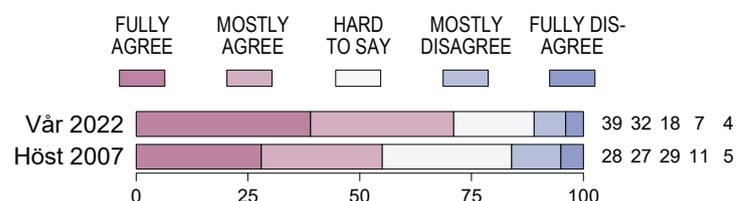
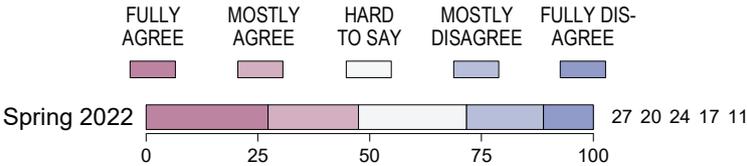


FIGURE 8. “Finland should apply for NATO membership quickly, because it may not be possible later” (%)



The opinion of the Finnish state leadership has limited influence

The fact that the Finnish state leadership’s opinion of Finland’s NATO membership does not have a decisive influence on the Finns’ opinions shows how determined the Finns are about membership. It also shows that the citizens’ opinions are not just a reaction to the current situation and that a more permanent change of attitude may be taking place.

Two thirds of the respondents (67%) say that they would support Finland’s membership of NATO if the Finnish state leadership supported it. Just under a fifth (16%) would not agree with the state leadership’s favourable position on NATO. (Figure 9).

In other words, the favourable position of the Finnish state leadership towards NATO would increase the support for membership by seven percentage points compared to a situation where

the leadership’s position is unknown (see Figure 1 above).

If the leadership were to take a negative view of NATO membership, there would be less popular support for it, too, as expected, but not by a massive margin. Just under half (48%) would still be in favour of Finland’s membership of NATO, and just under a third (31%) would agree with the state leadership’s negative position on NATO. (Figure 10). Support for membership would in this case be 12 percentage points smaller than overall support for NATO membership.

The overall picture does not change significantly when the effect of the state leadership’s views is asked from those who oppose NATO membership. Of the respondents, 16 per cent would not support Finland’s membership of NATO even if the Finnish state leadership supported it. However, a more steeply worded question would slightly increase support for NATO membership so that seven out

FIGURE 9. “I would support Finland’s NATO membership if the Finnish state leadership supported it” (%)

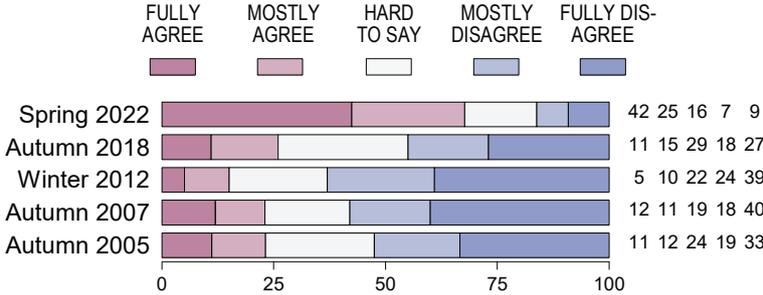
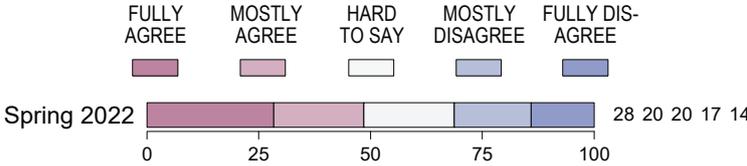


FIGURE 10. “I would support Finland’s NATO membership even if the Finnish state leadership did not support it” (%)



of ten (71%) would answer the question with “no” (Figure 11).

Finland is not pursuing its security policy alone, and is seeking close cooperation with its ally and neighbour Sweden. In view of this, it is not surprising that Sweden’s decision will also have an effect on the Finns’ opinions. Only a 11 per cent are of the opinion that Finland should not join NATO even if Sweden decided to join. 69 per cent think that Finland, too, must become a NATO member if Sweden joins. (Figure 12).

The impact of Sweden’s hypothetical membership application on the Finns’ NATO positions is equivalent to the effect of the Finnish state leadership’s position, although with the difference that

the proportion of those opposing NATO membership would shrink to roughly 10 per cent. It seems that Finns’ consider the idea of Finland being the only Nordic country outside of NATO rather bleak.

In the light of the survey’s results, the effect of the state leadership on the Finns’ opinions can, in the present situation, be estimated at about 10 percentage points. It is substantial, but nevertheless limited. Most importantly, it is much smaller than the spontaneous change in opinion brought about among Finns by the change in the security environment. The citizens are at NATO’s door, awaiting the opinion of the state leadership at the discretion of which Finland’s NATO membership ultimately depends on.

FIGURE 11. “I would not support Finland’s membership of NATO even if the Finnish state leadership supported it” (%)

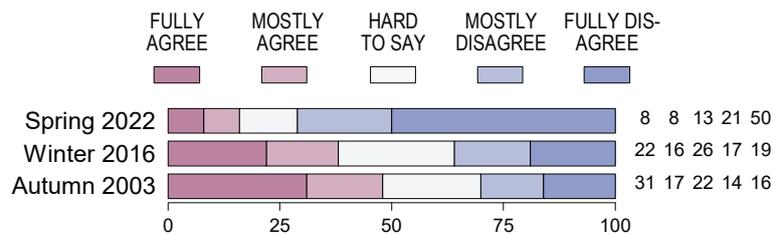
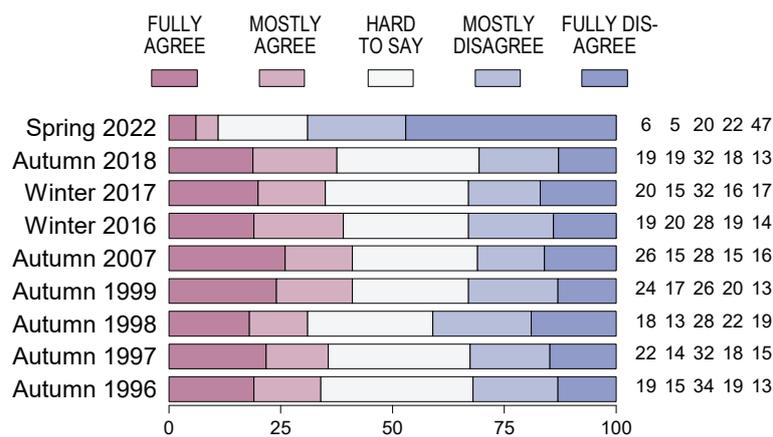


FIGURE 12. “Finland should not join NATO even if Sweden decided to join” (%)



ENDNOTES

- 1 Metelinen (2021).
- 2 Another survey that measures the long-term development of the Finns' attitudes to NATO is the survey conducted by the Advisory Board for Defence Information, ABDI, (Maanpuolustustiedotuksen suunnittelukunta, MTS) under the Ministry of Defence. It has surveyed attitudes towards NATO membership regularly since 2005, see Maanpuolustuksen suunnittelukunta (2021).
- 3 Finns' perception of Russia as a military threat was already stronger in EVA's Survey of Values and Attitudes in spring 2021, see Haavisto (2021).
- 4 Due to the small number of respondents, the results for the supporters of Movement Now, the Swedish People's Party and the Christian Democrats are only indicative.
- 5 Finnish Government (2022).
- 6 President of Finland (2022).
- 7 Helsingin Sanomat (2022).
- 8 Finnish Government (2020).

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How the survey was conducted

The results are based on the responses of 2,074 people. The error margin of the results is 2–3 percentage points in each direction on the level of the entire population. The data were collected from 4 March to 15 March 2022. The respondents represent the population aged 18–79 across all of Finland (excl. Åland). The material was collected in a Taloustutkimus Oy internet panel, from which the survey sample was formed through stratified random sampling. The material has been weighted so as to represent the population according to age, gender, place of residence, education, profession or position, sector and party affiliation. The statistical analysis of the material was carried out and the graphics of the results created by Pentti Kiljunen at Yhdyskuntatutkimus Oy. The results and their more detailed itemisations by population group are available on EVA's website. EVA has conducted the Values and Attitudes Survey since 1984.

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