

# LOSS OF TRUST

Finns hold Russians in high regard but perceive Russia as a military threat

In the minds of the Finns, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has made Russia an untrustworthy neighbour. Their attitude towards their Russian neighbour is now very negative and they regard Russia as an unequivocally threatening and unpredictable dictatorship.

The view that Russia is a major military threat to Europe is a key explanation to why Finns are now looking towards NATO for protection. Ordinary Russians are not accused of the grim developments, however, and Finns still hold them in high regard.

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 is the third part.

- ◆ Practically all Finns (95%) perceive Russia as a threat to Europe's security and 84 per cent consider it a significant military threat.
- ◆ Three out of four (74%) consider Russia to be an unreliable contractual counterpart. The perception of Russia's unreliability has risen by 34 percentage points in a year.
- ◆ Just over one in ten (12%) Finns have a favourable attitude towards Russia, while 76 per cent have a negative opinion. However, the majority (58%) feel that Russians are likeable people.
- ◆ The data for the survey was gathered during the second and third weeks of the war in Ukraine, from 4 to 15 March 2022.

The attack on Ukraine has changed the Finns' perception of Russia to very negative. Only 12 per cent feel that there is at present no reason for Finns to have a negative attitude towards their large neighbour despite Russia's own problems. Three quarters (76%) have a negative view of Russia (Figure 1).

The increase in the negative attitude towards Russia has been exceptionally quick, extensive, steep and broad-based. The proportion of those with a positive attitude towards Russia has plunged from the previous year's figure, and the share of Finns with a negative attitude has grown by 31 percentage points. The proportion of those who took a very negative stand ("completely disagree") nearly tripled from the previous year.<sup>1</sup> In all population groups, a clear majority has a negative view of Russia, and there are very few who have a more understanding view (see Figure Appendix).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine marks an end point for Finns' trust in Russia. For many years, opinions about Russia were cautiously hopeful. In the first years of this millennium, a clear majority of Finns thought that Finns have no reason whatsoever to have a negative opinion about Russia.

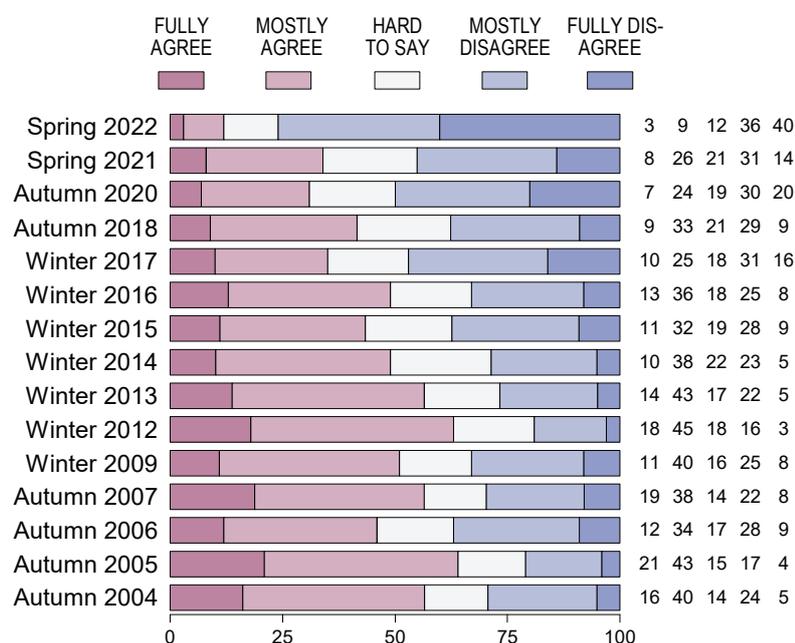
Finns have not been naive about Russia, however. EVA's Values and Attitudes Survey has regularly indicated a dip in the positive regard for Russia at times when events in Russia or Russia's actions around the world have appeared negative.<sup>2</sup>

The turning point in attitudes dates back to 2012, when the Finns were more positive about Russia than ever before or after. Later in the same year, Russia's President Vladimir Putin began his third term as president and the Russian government started to take stronger action against civil society and movements calling for democracy. Protests calling for free elections were suppressed,<sup>3</sup> and Russia enacted a law restricting the activities of non-governmental organisations (NGOs),<sup>4</sup> and in the following year, it enacted another law that restricted the rights of sexual minorities.<sup>5</sup> The harsh policies of the beginning of Putin's third term also affected Finns' attitudes, increasing their reservations towards Russia year by year.

Other important events that have reinforced the negative attitude since 2012 include the military action initiated by Russia in Ukraine in 2014 and Syria in 2016 and the attempted assassination of opposition politician Aleksei Navalnyi in 2020.<sup>6</sup> The accumulation of other negatively perceived action taken by Russia<sup>7</sup> and the continual erosion of Russia's own democratic and human rights progress are also likely to have contributed to the decline of positive attitudes and the increase of negative ones with regard to Russia.

**Reservations have increased year after year.**

**FIGURE 1. "Even though Russia has its own problems, Finns have no reason to take a negative attitude to this big neighbour" (%)**



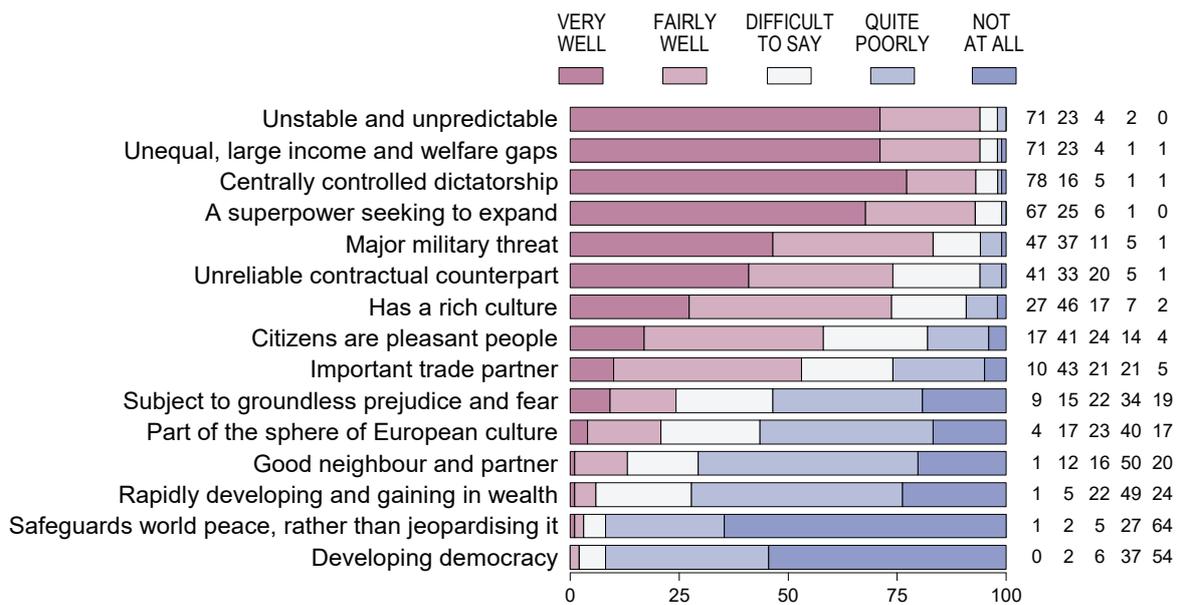
## Russia is perceived as a threat

This massive shift in attitudes is the result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has made Russia a real threat in Finnish minds. A sense of perceived threat from Russia is evident in the series of questions in which Finns are asked to evaluate fifteen characterisations according to how well they cor-

respond to their own opinions about Russia (Figure 2).

The views on Russia are mainly very grim. Over 90 per cent of Finns consider Russia an unpredictable dictatorship whose desire to expand threatens world peace. Very few people recognise a good neighbour in Russia anymore. Instead, the overwhelming majority feels it is a significant mil-

FIGURE 2. How well following statements and descriptions reflect one's perception of Russia today (%)



## THIS IS EVA'S VALUES AND ATTITUDES SURVEY

EVA's Values and Attitudes Survey, 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 Values and Attitudes Surveys 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.

itary threat. Only six per cent believe that Russia is a developing and increasingly affluent country.

Despite the threat posed by Russia, it is easy to see that Russians and their culture are held in high regard. A clear majority of Finns consider Russians to be likeable, and the majority have high regard for Russian culture. These views reflect the sympathy felt by Finns for the Russian civil society. Finns believe that the Russia's problem is not its people, but its leaders.

**There is high regard for Russian people.**

A corresponding series of questions was also presented in the EVA Values and Attitudes Survey in 2005, 2015 and 2021, which enabled a more detailed assessment of the attitudes towards Russians over both the short and a longer term.

Almost all Finns (94%) consider Russia to be unstable and unpredictable. (Figure 3). Although the majority of Finns have considered the Eastern neighbour to be unstable previously, this feeling has very dramatically grown stronger and become more contrasted since Russia invaded Ukraine.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, it has become clear to Finns that Russia is truly prepared to engage in a war of aggression to expand its sphere of power. Of the respondents, 92 per cent consider Russia to be an expansive superpower and in practice, nobody disagrees. In the past, the perception of Russia as an expansive country was not considered to be very credible. In 2005, only a third (34%) considered

Russia to be an expansive superpower and nearly as many disagreed.

Finland became independent from Russia 105 years ago and twice repelled the Soviet Union's attempts to invade it in the Second World War. In addition to Belarus, which is considered to be Russia's satellite state, and Ukraine, which is currently under Russian attack, Finland is now Russia's only militarily non-aligned western neighbour.

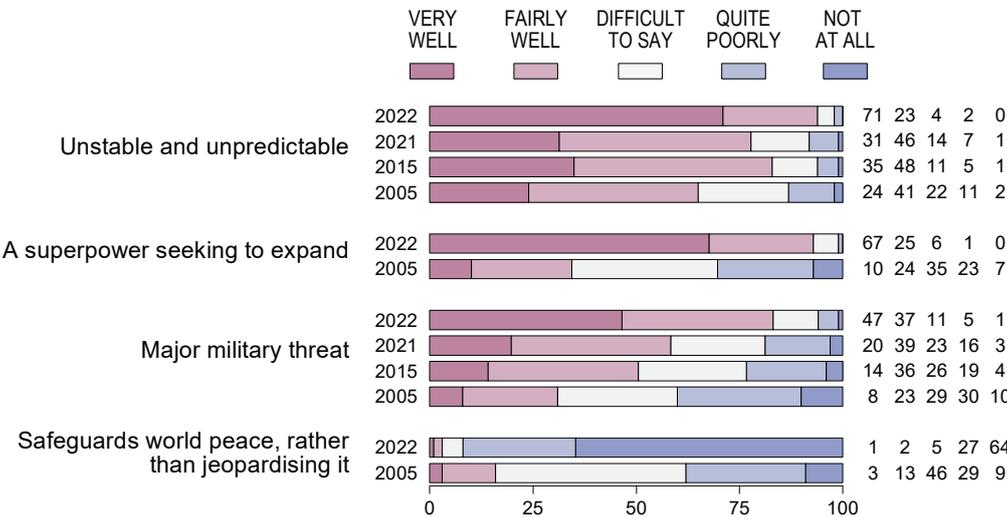
**Russia's aggression could also extend to Finland.**

Perhaps this is why Finns believe that Russia's aggression could also extend to Finland. The vast majority (84%) of Finns regards Russia as a major military threat and only six percent disagree. The proportion of those who perceive Russia as a significant military threat has increased substantially in only a year (25 pp.).

For Finns, the alarm bells already started to ring when Russia occupied Crimea in 2014 and launched the war in Eastern Ukraine. EVA's 2015 Survey of Values and Attitudes indicated a significant increase in the proportion of those who consider Russia to be a major military threat, and another substantial increase was indicated by the survey in spring 2021.

Finns' perception of Russia's current role in global politics is entirely negative. Only three percent of Finns agree with the characterisation that Russia "safeguards world peace, rather than jeopardising it" and 91 percent of Finns reject it. The

**FIGURE 3. How well following statements and descriptions reflect one's perception of Russia today: Assessments in 2005, 2015, 2021 and 2022 (common areas of assessment, %)**



figures have undergone a huge change since 2005. In 2005, 16 per cent of the respondents considered Russia a safeguard and a much smaller proportion (38%) considered it a threat to world peace.

The Values and Attitudes Survey also collected information on Russia’s perceived threat with a seven-part series of questions, in which Finns were asked directly how threatening they currently perceive the actions of Vladimir Putin’s Russia. (Figure 4).

The results were largely consistent with characterisations regarding Russia. Finns believe that the actions of Putin’s Russia are unequivocally threatening. In practice, everyone sees them as a threat to world peace (96%) and European security (95%).

However, Russia is also considered a more direct threat. More than nine out of ten (92%) Finns believe Russia is a threat to the security of the Baltic Sea region. Almost as many (85%) believe that Russia’s actions pose a threat to Finland’s national security, and the majority (55%) believe that Russian actions under Putin pose a direct threat to their own security and that of their family and friends.

These figures explain why the clear majority of Finns (60%) are now in favour of Finland’s membership in NATO.<sup>9</sup> According to the results of EVA’s Survey of Values and Attitudes conducted in spring 2022, a large majority of people in Finland believe that NATO membership would increase Finland’s military security and ability to counter the threat of Russia’s aggression. In the majority’s opinion, the alliance would also increase the Finns’ collective and personal sense of security.<sup>10</sup>

### Finns hold Russians in high regard

However, Finns’ strong perception that the actions of the Russian government are threatening does mean that they do not find anything good in Russia.

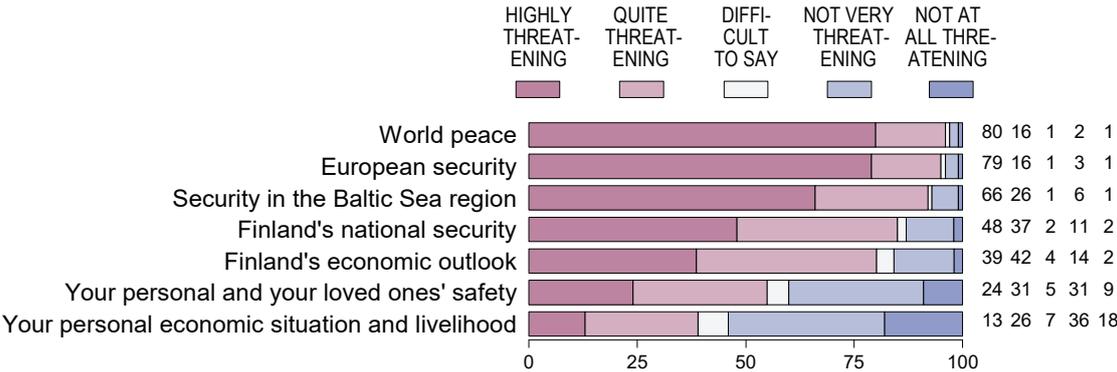
Finns hold their neighbour’s culture and its people in very high regard. Nearly three out of four (73%) consider Russia to have a rich culture and just one in ten (9%) disagree. (Figure 5). These figures have remained unchanged since 2005. Although perceptions of Russia’s actions and the direction its society is developing have become very pessimistic, this has in practice had no effect whatsoever on how Finns perceive Russia as a country of culture.

Despite the grim situation – or as a result of it – the Finns demonstrate sympathy towards ordinary Russians. A clear majority (58%) feel that Russian citizens are pleasant people, and less than one fifth (18%) disagree. The attack on Ukraine has not affected this. In fact, the proportion of those who hold Russians in high regard has increased somewhat from last year and is 10 percentage points higher than in 2005.

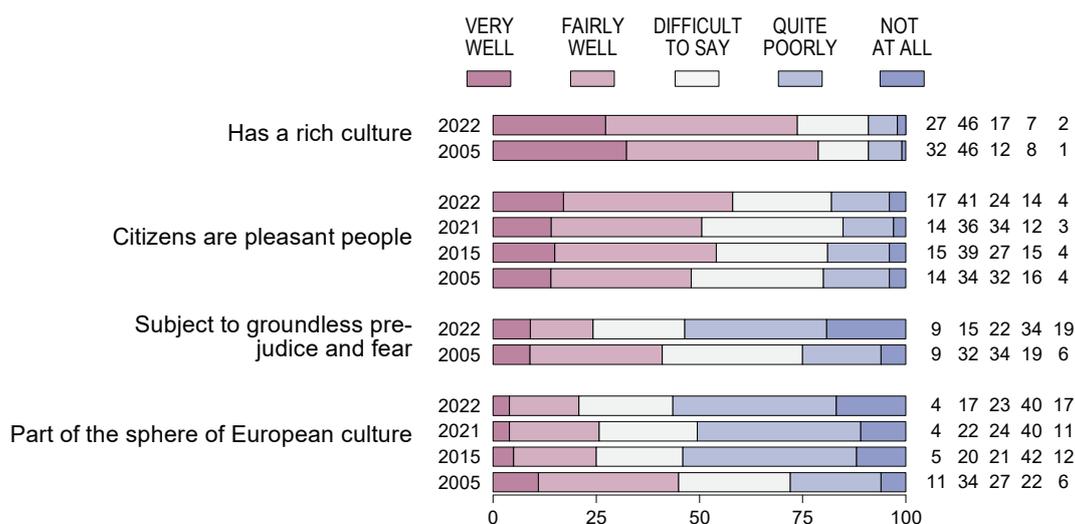
These views are indicative of the very positive general attitude Finns have towards Russians. They suggest that despite the emotional turmoil caused by the war in Ukraine, the Finns are not very enthusiastic about stigmatising, let alone blaming, ordinary Russians for the actions taken by the Russian leadership and armed forces, which they consider absolutely reprehensible.<sup>11</sup>

**Finns do not want to blame ordinary Russians.**

**FIGURE 4. How threatening one finds the activities of Russia under President Vladimir Putin (%)**



**FIGURE 5. How well following statements and descriptions reflect one's perception of Russia today: Assessments in 2005, 2015, 2021 and 2022 (common areas of assessment, %)**



However, the sympathy for Russians does not extend to the Russian state. Just under a quarter (24%) think Russia has been misunderstood and is subject to groundless prejudice and fear, but the majority (53%) reject this claim. The change in attitudes that has taken place since 2005 indicates that Finns have become much less sympathetic and accepting regarding Russia.

In terms of values and culture, Russia is also considered to have become more distant. Around one fifth (21%) feel that Russia is part of the European cultural sphere, but the majority (57%) feel that it represents different ideas and beliefs. For Europeans, the key values of democracy, freedom and equality have not taken root in Russia. The results of the Values and Attitudes Survey show that still in 2005, a large number of Finns (45%) saw Russia as a part of the greater European family. However, since then, the nascent hopes of a more European Russia have disappeared.

### The suppressing effect of authoritarianism

Russia has made it clear that it is not interested in European integration. Instead, it is currently trying to integrate Ukraine, which is seeking to join the European Union, into its sphere of influence, where the rules of the game are different. Finns feel that Russia is now increasingly becoming a very unequal and authoritarian society.

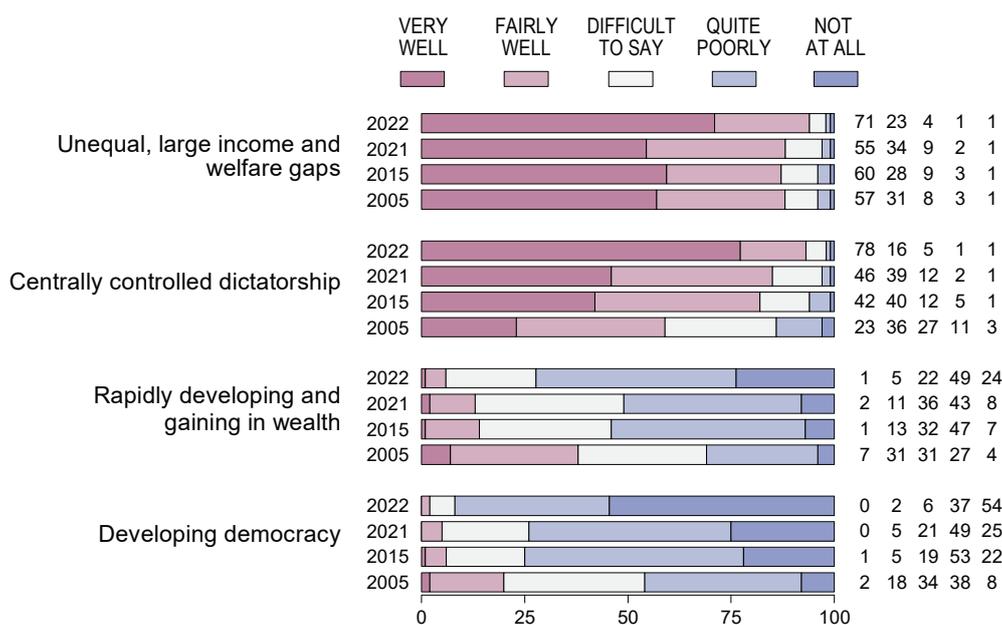
Nearly all respondents (94%) saw Russia as an unequal society with large income and welfare gaps (Figure 6). The contrast between different views has also become deeper: more respondents (71%) than before agree that Russia is economically very unequal. In other respects, the attitudes have not changed much. They were already almost at the extreme, and there have been no signs of Russian society becoming more equal.

The broad-based promotion of citizens' wellbeing has never even been its objective. The primary objective of contemporary Russian economic policy has been to protect the state and those in power.<sup>12</sup> The Russian economy relies on energy and natural resources, and economic self-sufficiency is a priority for Russia that is more important than the modernisation and reform of its economy.<sup>13</sup>

Even Finns no longer believe Russia will develop and move forward. Only six per cent predict that Russia is rapidly developing and gaining in wealth, but nearly three out of four (73%) disagree and think Russia is rather a regressive economy. Still at the beginning of the 2000s, quite a few Finns (38%) felt that Russia was going in a good direction, but as in the case of many other matters, Finns' opinions of the performance of the Russian economy had become pessimistic already by the time of the 2015 Values and Attitudes Survey.

In addition to the economy, the outlook for democracy in Russia is also considered to be quite

**FIGURE 6. How well following statements and descriptions reflect one's perception of Russia today: Assessments in 2005, 2015, 2021 and 2022 (common areas of assessment, %)**



gloomy. Only two per cent of Finns believe Russia is a developing democracy, and nine out of ten (91%) reject this view. In practice, Finns' no longer feel there is hope for improvement compared with the early 2000s, although even then only one in five believed in greater democracy for Russia.

Instead of a democracy, as much as 94 per cent of Finns consider Russia to be a centrally controlled dictatorship, and in practice no one (2%) questions that characterisation. More people consider Russia a deeply authoritarian state than in spring 2021 and the contrast between views has also become clearer. Finns are aware that the Russian opposition has been suppressed, dissidents and protesters against the war are being silenced, the internet is censored, the media is controlled by the Kremlin, and the state media is distributing disinformation about the war in Ukraine.

### No trust left

For a long time, Finns have invested in maintaining good relations with Russia. Finland's aim has been to safeguard its own interests and, at the same time, maintain stability by causing as little trouble as possible to Russia as its neighbour. Finns have also expected Russia to return the favour by also being a 'good neighbour', which in practice has meant that Russia should refrain from inter-

vening in Finnish affairs and stick to what it has agreed with Finland.

However, Finns believe that this recipe for relations with Russia no longer works because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

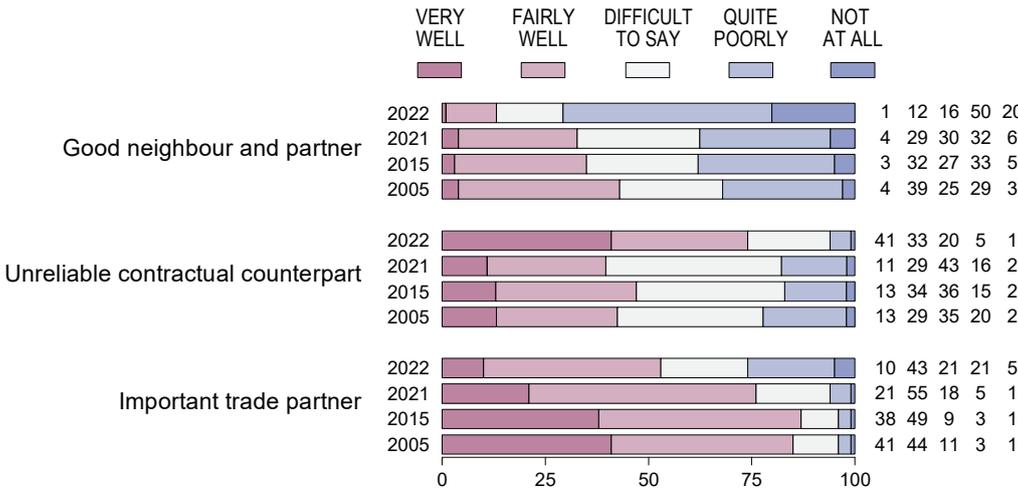
The present conditions do not, in the opinion of Finns, offer a path to good relations. In fact, three out of four (74%) Finns consider Russia to be an unreliable contractual counterpart and only six per cent believe that Russia can be trusted to honour its word (Figure 7).

The perception of Russia's unreliability has risen drastically in a year, by 34 percentage points. The result is in line with the results of the EVA's Values and Attitudes Survey of this spring that have been published earlier: Finns feel that the special relationship based on trust between Finland and Russia is a thing of the past<sup>14</sup> and that Finland should now reposition itself by applying for membership in NATO.<sup>15</sup>

The majority did not consider Russia as a good neighbour even before, and now even fewer people believe so. Just over one in ten (13%) feel that Russia is a good neighbour and partner for Finland, and 70 per cent feel that Russia is a bad neighbour.

In fact, good neighbourly relations between Finland and Russia have always been a relative concept. Max Jakobson, a former long-standing diplomat and EVA's former Managing Director, has said

**FIGURE 7. How well following statements and descriptions reflect one's perception of Russia today: Assessments in 2005, 2015, 2021 and 2022 (common areas of assessment, %)**



**Russia has gone too far.**

that when Finland's leaders say its relations with its eastern neighbour are good, they mean that they are as good as Finland can make them under the prevailing circumstances.<sup>16</sup>

Although Finns' attitudes to the changing relations with Russia are now defined by a deep concern for Finland's security and Russia's path, the attitudes as a whole reflect a firmness and even a sense of becoming free. By attacking Ukraine, Russia has gone too far and Finns are no longer willing to maintain good relations at all costs.

Just over one in ten (13%) believe that Finland should not take a stand on international issues that would jeopardise our good relations with Russia and a clear majority of 69 per cent rejects this theory (Figure 8).

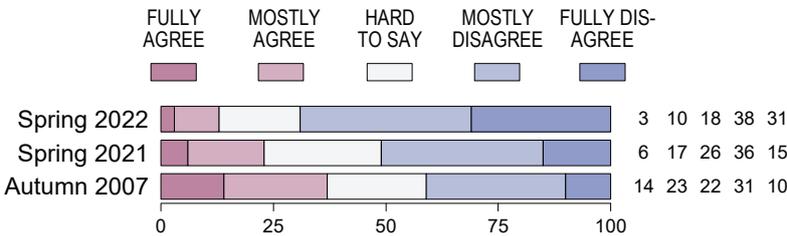
The comparison data behind the attitude graph indicates that a significant change has taken place. Still in 2007, Finns had fairly strongly reservations about Finland taking a stand on issues concerning

foreign relations that Russia could perceive as sensitive. Such state self-censorship was usual of Finland especially during the Cold War, when German politicians came up with the term Finlandisation, which was considered offensive in Finland.<sup>17</sup>

After Russia's attack on Ukraine, practically no one has defended Russia's actions. Finland condemned Russia's invasion in clear terms and has supported the sanctions imposed by the EU and the West. Finland did have initial doubts about providing military assistance to Ukraine and rail connections to and from Russia were allowed to continue for a long time after the war started. For the time being, Finland's leadership has steered clear of expressing its opinion on Finland's potential membership of Nato, which a clear majority of Finns support.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps this is why some Finns see new signs of Finlandisation. One third (32%) believe that the increased threat posed by Russia has led to an increase in Finlandisation, but on the other

**FIGURE 8. "Finland should not take a stand on international issues that would jeopardise its good relations with Russia" (%)**



hand, just as many (33%) have seen no signs of it. (Figure 9).

A third of the respondents (36%) are undecided. The results are contradictory and the fact that they are the same as in 2015 suggests that it is a false alarm. Clearly, consideration of and preparing for whatever reaction Russia may have if Finland applies for membership in NATO should not be labelled as Finlandisation.<sup>19</sup>

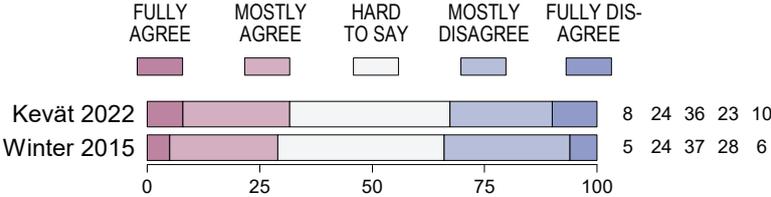
Finnish businesses are also quickly adapting to the changed security environment. On a very broad front, they have announced that they have ceased or will cease their operations in Russia, which would in any case have happened because of the sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia. It is in

fact slightly surprising that more than half (53%) of Finns feel that Russia remains an important trading partner for Finland (see Figure 7 above).

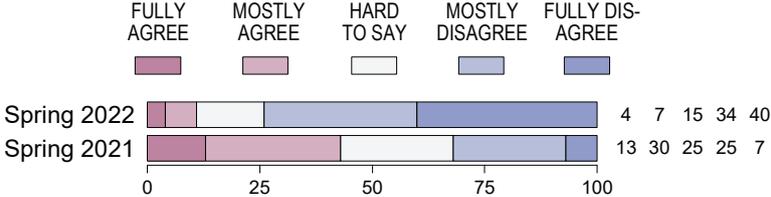
This is, however, more a statement of the circumstances that we are in than about being in favour of continuing close economic relations. In 2021, Russia was still ranked fifth in exports from and second in imports to Finland.<sup>20</sup>

Finns stand firmly behind putting trade with Russia on hold. Only 11 per cent feel that as a trade partner Russia is so important for Finland that our trade relations should not be weakened because of non-economic problems (Figure 10). Three quarters (74%) think trade must be put on hold because there is a war.

**FIGURE 9. "Russia poses a growing threat, which has led to increasing Finlandisation in our country" (%)**



**FIGURE 10. "Russia is an important trade partner for Finland, and our trade relations should not be weakened because of non-economic problems" (%)**



## ENDNOTES

- 1 See Haavisto (2021).
- 2 For example, in 2004 attitudes may have become more negative because of the chaotic end of the Beslan school hostage crisis and the new evidence of brutality in the second Chechen war, and in 2006, because of the murder of the journalist Anna Politkovskaya who had reported on the brutalities, and the export duties on timber imposed by Russia. The 2009 results reflect the reaction to the war in Georgia in 2008.
- 3 The New York Times (2013).
- 4 BBC (2012).
- 5 The Guardian (2013).
- 6 The war in Ukraine is reflected in the survey conducted in the winter of 2015 and events in Syria (especially the destruction of Aleppo) in the survey from the winter of 2017. Navalnyi was poisoned just before the period when the data for the autumn 2020 survey was collected.
- 7 The poisonings (Skripal case in 2018), attempts to influence elections in different countries (US presidential election in 2016 and French presidential election in 2017) and hybrid operations, for example. The hybrid operations include sending asylum seekers to the borders of Finland and Norway in the winter of 2015 and 2016.
- 8 The increasing contrast in attitudes is evident in proportion of respondents who believe this characterisation describes Russia “very accurately”, which has grown by as much as 40 percentage points since spring 2021.
- 9 See Haavisto (2022a).
- 10 See Haavisto (2022b).
- 11 The data from EVA's Values and Attitudes Survey conducted in spring 2022 were collected during the second and third weeks of the war in Ukraine and before the turn of March and April 2022, when media reports about the war crimes committed by Russia in Kiev's suburb of Bucha began to appear.
- 12 See Solanko (2020).
- 13 See Raik (2021), p. 71.
- 14 See Haavisto (2022b), pp. 6–7.
- 15 See Haavisto (2022a), see also Haavisto (2022b), pp. 5–6.
- 16 See Jakobson (2003), p. 355.
- 17 Der Spiegel (1970).
- 18 See Haavisto (2022a).
- 19 See Pesu (2017).
- 20 Statistics Finland (2022). [https://www.stat.fi/tup/suoluk/suoluk\\_yritykset\\_en.html#Tuonti,%20vient%20ja%20kauppatase](https://www.stat.fi/tup/suoluk/suoluk_yritykset_en.html#Tuonti,%20vient%20ja%20kauppatase)

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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 of by population group are available on EVA's website. EVA has conducted the Survey on Values and Attitudes since 1984.

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