

Hostile Influencing and Finland's Vulnerabilities

Description

In 2024, Finland experienced a sharp [increase](#) in GPS disturbances. Affected flights forced airports to switch to other navigation systems, preventing some flights from landing. Over 2,800 incidents reportedly affected flights that year compared to just 200 the year prior. The sudden increase raised suspicions of deliberate interference by Russia.

These disruptions are not occurring in a vacuum. Finland's unique geography and shifting geopolitics makes it a particularly vulnerable and strategically significant target for hybrid operations. Unlike its Nordic-Baltic neighbors, Finland's 5.6 million citizens share a land border of more than 800 miles with Russia. Though Finland was able to maintain a strong defense capability and carefully managed relations with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine changed Finland's national security context radically. Recognizing that standing alone wasn't a viable option, Finland went from a long-standing policy of neutrality to joining [NATO](#) in 2023. This decision built on an earlier pivot toward deeper integration with the West, marked first by Finland's [accession to the European Union](#) in 1995.

While creating considerable challenges for defense policy, Finland's geopolitical reality also places it in a unique position within NATO. One of Finland's challenges is countering hostile malign influence, which exploits freedom of expression to undermine democratic institutions and processes. Finland's response to these hybrid threats to democratic freedoms raises fundamental questions about the balance between national security and the preservation of democratic values. As Finland faces increasing pressures from external actors, the country's ability to safeguard the rule of law and its democratic institutions is being tested in new and complex ways.

Hybrid challenges

Hybrid threats have been [a longstanding national concern](#) in Finland, and these concerns have escalated since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. The related concepts of [hybrid threats](#) and [hybrid warfare](#), often used interchangeably, encompass a wide spectrum of activities, from influence campaigns, economic pressure and covert political maneuvering, to sabotage, cyberattacks and instrumentalization of migrant flows. [Instrumentalized migration](#) refers to a country directing large

flows of migrants to the border of another country with the aim of creating pressure on the receiving country, a practice that has gained increased attention since 2021, when Belarus began [orchestrating](#) migrant flows to its border with Poland to place pressure on Warsaw and NATO. Among these tactics, influence activities are particularly insidious. They often involve spreading false and misleading information to destabilize states — whether by deepening societal tensions or influencing political processes in favor of a particular party.

Though hybrid activities are far from being a [new phenomenon](#), they have emerged as an [increasing concern](#) in recent years, with [NATO](#) pointing to the speed, scale, and intensity of hybrid activities as a new feature. In response, the leaders of the Nordic and Baltic countries have [tasked](#) former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg with preparing recommendations for Nordic-Baltic security and defense cooperation in advance of the June 2025 NATO summit. One of these [priorities](#) is — countering hybrid activities and operations, including threats in the cyber domain and to critical underwater infrastructure. — This reflects a growing recognition that hybrid threats — particularly those targeting cyber systems and critical infrastructure — require a coordinated, forward-looking regional strategy.

In the period between Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion in 2022, Russia appears to have stepped up its hybrid activities with the [goal of undermining support](#) for NATO, the EU, and Ukraine’s defense. As a consequence, responding to hybrid activities, which have the potential to develop rapidly in new directions, needs to remain a high priority for Finland. The country [hosts](#) the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, which shares best practices, provides recommendations, tests new counter-hybrid warfare approaches, and builds collective operational capacities. The center [notes](#) that hybrid activities can take advantage of political rights in democratic societies. Methods that exploit and twist fundamental political and civil liberties pose a challenge for democracies, including the wider democratic transatlantic alliance, as countermeasures can unintentionally infringe upon rights and liberties, such as the right to freedom of expression.

The Right to Freedom of Expression

The right to freedom of expression, or “free speech,” is a central issue in countering hostile influencing activities. A constitutionally-protected right in Finland, it is also protected by the [European Convention on Human Rights](#), a treaty with binding decisions overseen by the European Court of Human Rights. The convention permits restrictions of free expression in the interest of national security, but only when strict criteria are fulfilled, according to [Article 10](#).

Adversaries exploit this right to freedom of expression, which can create challenges for the development of countermeasures, especially since freedom of expression is fundamental to healthy democracy and must be protected. Restrictions on freedom of expression can also have impacts that are difficult to predict, which creates additional challenges. For example, there is a risk of playing into the hands of destabilizing forces, because measures that involve some degree of censorship can cause strong counter reactions amongst democratic populations. For example, the EU's 2022 decision to prohibit Russian media outlets *Russia Today (RT)* and *Sputnik* raised concerns about state censorship of media, causing intense [debates](#) and drawing [criticism](#).

One alternative approach governments can take is to institute policies that encourage [media literacy](#) and the population's resilience to false and misleading information. While this is a better approach than measures that restrict freedom of expression, it does not by itself solve the problem of vulnerability to hostile influencing campaigns. An effective strategy requires a mix of mutually supportive approaches across different sectors. As an example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [recognizes](#) the importance of building societal resilience through digital and civic literacy, but also emphasizes the importance of promoting a diverse and independent media sector. A range of different [approaches](#) are needed, such as fact-checking, counter messaging strategies and regulating online communications.

Finland's Comprehensive Security Approach and Perceived Resilience to False and Misleading Information

Finland's [comprehensive approach to security](#) emphasizes preparedness based on the [collaboration of authorities, business, civil society organizations and all citizens](#), an approach that has been [praised](#) by international media. This strategy is based on a national assessment and includes plans to counter threats such as influencing activities, political, financial and military pressure, instrumentalized migration, terrorism, and disruption of food or energy supplies. Households are expected to have stockpiles that can sustain residents for [72 hours](#) in case of major disruptions to critical supplies and [civil defense shelters](#) across the country can house around 4.8 million people.

Despite these strong resistance preparations and associated attitudes amongst the population, [Mediapooli](#), the body that coordinates media sector preparedness, recently published a [report](#) which found that certain narratives (particularly ones that resonate with anti-establishment sentiments) appear to be having an impact. This is despite Finland having a historically strong resilience to Russian propaganda. The report warned that a subtle spread of anti-defense or anti-NATO rhetoric could slowly begin to impact public sentiment.

Despite Finland's strong track record in [high levels of media literacy](#) and resilience to disinformation, recent reflections suggest the population may not be as immune as once believed. In May 2024, journalist Johanna Vehkoo, an expert on disinformation, [argued](#) that Finland might not manage as well as expected when facing a major foreign state-led disinformation campaign. [Vehkoo](#) pointed to events in 2015-2016, when Finns were confronted with a large-scale, homegrown disinformation effort. During that time, as significant numbers of asylum seekers arrived in the country, [websites masquerading as news media](#) began circulating false stories and racist narratives. Many Finns unwittingly amplified these messages on social media. While one could speculate about the role of domestic bad actors or so-called ["useful idiots"](#), Vehkoo's warning raises an important and timely concern.

Deep Divisions and Rule of Law Under Pressure

Deep divisions in Finnish society offer opportunities for hostile influence aimed at driving conflict and undermining democracy. The aggressive tone of public debates, including harassment of journalists, researchers and others who take up controversial topics such as immigration, has been a growing [national concern](#) for several years. In 2020 then-President Sauli Niinistö [warned](#) that "A culture of hate will not carry us far".

This growing culture of hate appears to mirror and reinforce the political polarization increasingly evident in Finnish society. Suspects in many [hate speech-related](#) crimes have had connections to political parties and [research](#) has found increased polarization in politics. The current right-wing government was formed after [elections](#) in 2023, when the anti-immigrant Finns Party won 20.1 percent of the vote. The party has remained in government despite repeated [controversies](#) involving racism and comments about Nazis.

For several years, leading judges and experts have [warned](#) that the independence of the courts needs safeguards. They argue that the current system could allow a future government with a strong parliamentary majority to take control of the courts. In response, the government established a [working group](#) to develop constitutional guarantees for an independent judiciary. Issues with serious implications for the rule of law and Finland's democratic institutions and processes have arisen in the context of legislative changes related to border security. These changes have been in response to possible attempts by Russia to direct large flows of migrants to Finland's border.

Following earlier [criticized](#) legislative changes, in 2024 parliament adopted the [Act on Temporary Measures to Combat Instrumentalized Migration](#) (known as the "pushback law"). The law makes it possible to turn people back at the border without assessing their asylum applications. This is an

extraordinary development for a country that has repeatedly stated its commitment to a rules-based international system, the rule of law, and human rights. During the legislative process, Finland's parliament's Constitutional Law Committee chose to ignore the [lack of support](#) for the proposed law from the external legal experts it consulted. This reinforced calls for urgent reform of the system of constitutional review. Little is known publicly about the level of assessed threat surrounding the new law and [border closures](#).

It is legitimate to raise questions about the chain of events, the factors at play, and their consequences. One view is that Finland has successfully responded to a hybrid threat from Russia through legislative changes and by closing its borders. Another perspective is that the rule of law and democratic institutions and processes in Finland have suffered significant damage. Critics would add that the unprecedented level of disagreement about the legality of the border security law and border closures has been a bonus for bad actors aiming to cause division. The unanswered question remains: what really happened and what are the potential implications for other NATO countries?

Joy Hyvärinen specializes in freedom of expression, in particular issues related to national security. She is board chair of Finnish PEN. The views in this article are her own.

The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

Image Description: In the morning, the Finnish and NATO flags were hoisted in front of the main building of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Merikasarmi. 4 April 2023, 08:46:24 ([FinnishGovernment](#))

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