

Russia's embedded influence in Finland

A framework for understanding the
broader logic of Russian subversion

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Summary

This paper makes three contributions to the contemporary debate on Russian hybrid operations and subversion in Europe. First, it conceptualises embedded influence as the gradual, long-term shaping of another state's strategic environment through political, economic and societal relationships in which dependencies are created and opportunities for influence emerge. Much of this interaction is legitimate, but Russia embeds manipulative and deceptive elements within these relationships to shape perceptions, incentives and decision-making in the target state. Second, it explains how embedded influence interacts with shorter-term coercive hybrid operations. Third,

the publication illustrates the mechanisms linking these two levels of Russian influence through concrete examples observed in Finland.

The paper argues that Russia's influence in Finland was often most effective when exercised through embedded influence rather than coercive hybrid operations. Drawing on more than two decades of evidence – including interviews with key participants in policy processes – it analyses how embedded influence and hybrid operations interacted, why some forms of Russian influence succeeded while others failed, and what lessons the Finnish case offers for strengthening European resilience against Russian influence.

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Contents

Introduction	4
1. From active measures to embedded influence: An analytical framework	5
2. Russia's influence in the Finnish context	7
3. Limits of Russian influence and sources of Finnish resilience	10
Conclusions: Lessons for European resilience	12
Bibliography	14

Introduction

Since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, hybrid influencing has evolved from a relatively specialised concept within military studies into a central element in wider security and policy debates. Russia's seizure of Crimea by unmarked special forces, accompanied by a sophisticated disinformation campaign and the rapid organisation of an internationally unrecognised referendum, demonstrated how military and non-military instruments could be coordinated to achieve strategic objectives while deftly obscuring responsibility and intent. The operation exposed significant shortcomings in Western threat perceptions. Neither policymakers nor many observers fully recognised the nature of the operation as it unfolded, prompting a fundamental reassessment of Russian methods across policy, intelligence, military, and academic communities.¹ Since then, the European Union and NATO have incorporated hybrid terminology into their strategic frameworks, adopting new policies, institutions, and mechanisms to improve preparedness for and response to unconventional, subversive methods of influence used by hostile actors.²

Both academic research and policy responses have largely concentrated on hostile, coercive manifestations of hybrid activity. Considerably less attention has been devoted to the gradual political, economic, and societal processes through which Russia has shaped the strategic environment over

many years by embedding manipulative influence within legitimate forms of cooperation.

This Research Paper argues that analysing these longer-term forms of embedded influence is essential both to understanding the broader hybrid landscape and to explaining how hostile states such as Russia achieve durable strategic effects in open and democratic societies. Furthermore, this approach better reflects Russia's own thinking and policymaking. For Russia, shorter-term coercive hybrid operations such as sabotage campaigns or the instrumentalisation of migration are part of a much wider, long-term influence strategy.

To capture this broader dimension of influence, this paper uses the term embedded influence as its primary analytical concept. The term is substantively close to the broad Russian understanding of subversive activity (*podryvnaya deyatel'nost*), as well as to conceptualisations of Russian subversion that refer directly to Russian thinking, such as recent work by Danylyuk and Watling.³ In the Russian context, the concept of subversion also emphasises the long-term cultivation of influence and favourable political conditions.

In contrast, in much of the English-language policy discourse and security literature, the term subversion is commonly understood as referring primarily to activities intended to manipulate, undermine or weaken a target state more directly.⁴ This emphasis on hostile activities and their intended

1 Pynnöniemi and Rácz 2016; Lange-Ionatamishvili 2015.

2 Key EU policy frameworks on hybrid threats: Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (2022); EU Hybrid Toolbox and Coordinated Response Framework (2022); ProtectEU Internal Security Strategy (2025); Key NATO policy frameworks on hybrid threats: Strategy on NATO's Role in Countering Hybrid Warfare (since 2015); NATO Strategic Concept (2022).

3 Danylyuk and Watling 2026.

4 See, for instance, the definition of subversion in the Cambridge Dictionary: "the act of trying to destroy or damage an established system or government"; and the considerably broader NATO definition: "Action or a coordinated set of actions of any nature intended to weaken the military, economic or political strength of an established authority by undermining the morale, loyalty or reliability of its members." Allied Joint Publication (AJP)-3.27.

effects risks obscuring the long-term political, economic and societal relationships through which influence is cultivated and strategic opportunities emerge. Hence, this paper adopts the term embedded influence to shift the analytical focus from hostile subversive activities to the gradual development of these relationships and the strategic environment they create. In doing so, it complements rather than replaces the concept of subversion.

The Research Paper is based on a broader research project funded by the Prime Minister's Office of Finland and its final report, published in Finnish in January 2026.⁵ While the empirical cases draw on that research, this paper develops the conceptual framework and analytical argument beyond the more empirically focused final report.

One of the key conclusions of this Research Paper is that there is a pressing need for more systematic research into European countries' historical interactions with Russia. Without a nuanced understanding of the cognitive and socialised frames shaped by these interactions, we cannot fully comprehend our present-day vulnerabilities to Russian influence. Russian embedded influence and hybrid activities take advantage of the target state's political culture and the historical legacies of the bilateral relationship. While their specific forms and combinations vary from country to country, the underlying mechanisms and methods are consistent enough to permit comparative analysis. Such research would provide valuable insights into Europe's vulnerabilities and sources of resilience, thereby strengthening its capacity to identify, prevent and counter Russian influence operations in the future.

1. From active measures to embedded influence: An analytical framework

It is important to bear in mind that the debate on hybrid influence is primarily a Western one and responds to the Western need to conceptualise unconventional policies that cut across policy domains.

Activities that in the West would be labelled as hybrid influencing are typically what Russians call active measures or subversion abroad.⁶

This Russian terminology has its roots in the Soviet past. Soviet intelligence agencies relied on the concept of active measures, a term that referred to a range of political manipulation methods, including the dissemination of disinformation, demonstrations organised by front organisations, and even assassinations. Soviet intelligence culture emphasised the offensive character (*nastupatel'nost*) of such activities. According to a KGB manual, these offensive active measures were "proactive and full of initiative", and they were intended to confer a strategic advantage over the adversary, who would thereby be forced into a reactive posture.⁷ According to the same manual, these measures were intended "to influence the political life of the target country, its foreign policy, and the resolution of international issues; to mislead the adversary; to destabilise and weaken its positions; to disrupt hostile plans; and to achieve other objectives".⁸

In the 1990s, manipulation methods were mobilised within the Russian administration primarily for internal power struggles and for efforts to influence developments in states that had gained independence from the former Soviet Union. The range of methods was already extensive during that decade: Western-style political "spin" was combined with Soviet traditions in ways that were often both brutal and inventive. The tools employed included paid sham parties and proxy politicians, the pre-scripted orchestration of election outcomes, extreme smear campaigns against opponents, blackmail, and various acts of violence, including poisonings and assassinations. In the Russian context, such practices were referred to as "political technologies" (*politicheskie tekhnologii*).⁹ Many specialists behind these operations, "political technologists", had backgrounds in the intelligence services, but within the new societal order they often worked under the title of consultant or analyst. Private and state

⁵ Saari (ed.) 2026.

⁶ See Gioe et al. 2020; Danylyuk and Watling 2026. However, in Russian military theory, these measures are often linked to strategic deterrence and "new generation of warfare" debates. See e.g. Bruusgaard 2016.

⁷ Mitrokhin (ed.) 2001, 261.

⁸ Mitrokhin (ed.) 2001, 13.

⁹ Wilson 2024, 38–56.

interests frequently became intertwined. According to Ukrainian political scientist Volodymyr Polokhalo, political technologists were not motivated solely by financial gain; they also operated as Russian “agents of influence” and as representatives of Russia’s national interests in the former Soviet republics.¹⁰

Since the early 2000s in particular – marked by Vladimir Putin’s rise to the presidency and Russia’s rapid economic growth – active measures have gained prominence in Russian foreign policy, initially in the post-Soviet states and later also in the West.¹¹ Russian subversion and active measures have evolved in response to changing conditions, extending far beyond the traditional domain of intelligence agencies. In the digital age, these activities have broadened in both scope and repertoire, relying on diverse channels to shape the perceptions and behaviour of politicians, officials, journalists, social media influencers, academics, business executives, activists, religious leaders and other actors and groups. The objective is to influence the institutions and public discourse through which political decisions and societal attitudes are formed.¹²

It is important to recognise that not all active measures are inherently coercive or illegal. Danylyuk and Watling argue that active measures can include ‘special positive influence’ that consists of influencing the target state’s decision-shaping and decision-making in ways that advance Russia’s interests while generally remaining within the legal framework of the target state. Such methods rely less on coercion than on manipulation and covert persuasion embedded in the bilateral relationship and its dynamics and legacies.

This paper conceptualises this broader, long-term phenomenon as embedded influence. Embedded influence refers to the long-term shaping of the strategic environment through political, economic, and societal interaction. Much of this interaction is legitimate and open and appears benign. However, Russia embeds manipulative and subversive elements within these relationships, gradually

shaping perceptions, incentives, institutions, and patterns of decision-making in the target state in ways that advance its strategic objectives. Hence, embedded influence seeks to shape and direct the way in which national interests are understood in the target state.

Contemporary Russian embedded influence builds on the Soviet tradition of active measures but extends beyond it. Whereas Soviet active measures primarily referred to covert influence operations conducted by intelligence services, embedded influence encompasses the broader process through which political, economic, and societal relationships are cultivated and strategically shaped over time by a variety of Russia-connected actors.¹³ Alongside intelligence operations, embedded influence is advanced, for instance, through diplomacy, business partnerships, strategic investments, elite networks, as well as cultural and religious engagement by various actors.¹⁴

Embedded influence shapes the strategic environment within which shorter-term hybrid operations take place. Coercive hybrid operations are shorter-term efforts to exploit or reinforce this long-term influence – or to compensate for its absence. While embedded influence gradually creates favourable political and institutional conditions, hybrid operations seek either to capitalise on these accumulated vulnerabilities or, when embedded influence proves insufficient, to impose immediate political costs through hybrid coercion.

Figure 1 shows how Russia’s influence in a target state – in this case Finland – is structured and embedded in the bilateral relationship. It also demonstrates how both the target state and the influencing state shape the constantly evolving relationship. Each of these elements and the interaction between them should be carefully studied in order to fully understand how Russia builds its long-term influence strategy and how European states can counter Russian efforts more effectively.

10 Wilson 2005, 58.

11 Galeotti 2019.

12 Danylyuk and Watling 2026.

13 See discussion in Wilson 2005; Danylyuk and Watling 2026.

14 Baumann and Pynnöniemi 2025.

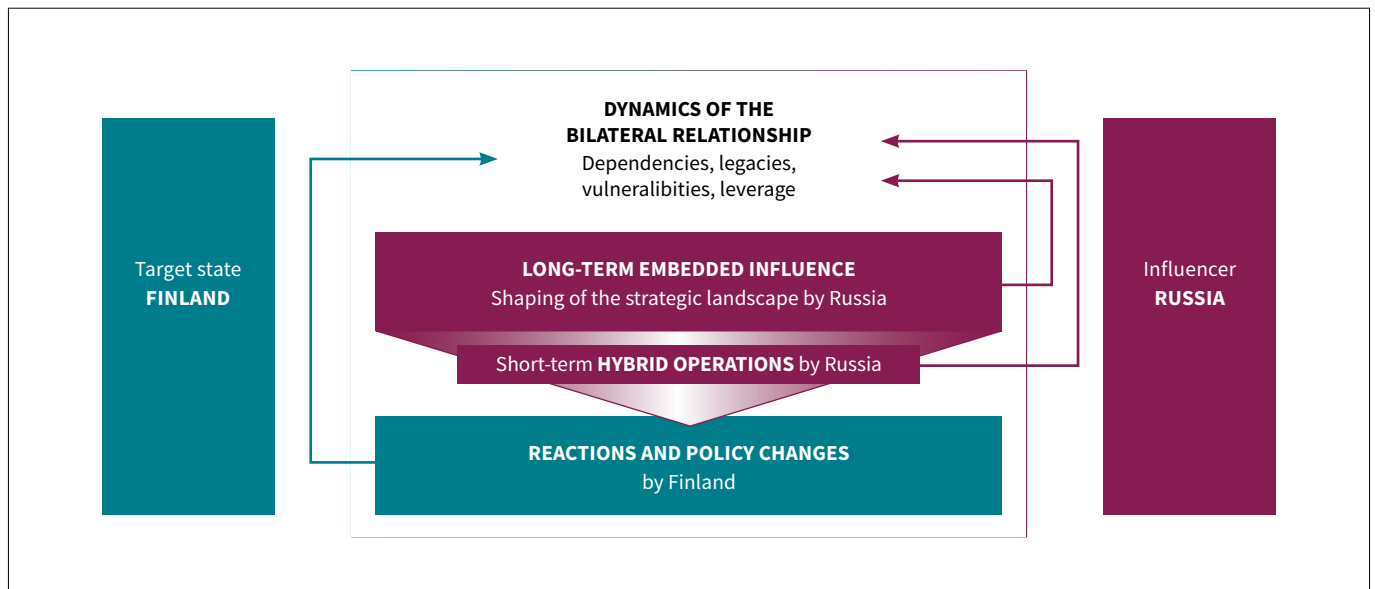


Figure 1. Russia's long-term embedded influence and hybrid operations in the context of Russian–Finnish relations.

2. Russia's influence in the Finnish context

Since gaining independence, Finland's relationship with Russia has been characterised by a pronounced asymmetry of power and by Finland's enduring objective of safeguarding its sovereignty and security vis-à-vis its much larger neighbour. From the Cold War until 2022, Finnish foreign policy sought to reconcile three partly competing objectives: maintaining a pragmatic, cooperative and economically beneficial relationship with the Soviet Union and later Russia, supporting Finland's integration with Western political and economic structures, and preserving credible national defence and preparedness against potential Russian aggression.¹⁵ These geopolitical realities fostered a political culture in which Russia-related security concerns were widely recognised among the political elite but often left publicly unstated. At the same time, Finland developed and maintained a robust defence capability and a comprehensive approach to societal security that reflected a persistent awareness of security risks relating to Russia.

The central dilemma of Finnish foreign policy after Finland joined the EU in 1995 was therefore how to strengthen deterrence, support common European policies, and maintain constructive bilateral relations with Russia without unnecessarily

provoking tensions or compromising broader national interests. Finnish leaders traditionally sought to manage this dilemma through confidential high-level dialogue with Russian counterparts, careful anticipation of Russian reactions to foreign and security policy decisions and limited accommodation of Russian interests to avoid confrontation. Managing relations with the Russian leadership consequently became one of the defining responsibilities of successive Finnish presidents, regardless of their political orientation.¹⁶

Russia embedded its influence strategy within these political realities and historical legacies. Its key objective was to keep Finland out of NATO while deepening the country's economic, political and societal ties with and dependencies on Russia.¹⁷ More broadly, Russia sought to maintain Finland as a predictable neighbour whose room for manoeuvre would remain constrained by anticipation of Russian reactions.

Russia pursued these objectives primarily through embedded influence: long-term efforts, including deceptive practices, to shape Finland's strategic environment and influence its decision-making. Shorter-term coercive hybrid operations constituted a complementary rather than an alternative instrument, reinforcing embedded influence through selective signalling and coercive

¹⁵ Saari 2026; Sinkkonen and Pesu 2025.

¹⁶ Pesu and Saari 2026.

¹⁷ See e.g. Hautala 2024, 38.

pressure when deemed necessary. Even after 2014, when Russia did employ more coercive hybrid measures against Finland, these measures were generally intended to influence Finland's political decision-making and broader strategic environment rather than to create an immediate crisis or disrupt critical societal functions.

A central feature of this strategy was the promotion of the idea that Finland and Russia enjoyed a unique, mutually beneficial relationship based on trust and good-neighbourly cooperation.¹⁸ Russian officials consistently argued that Finland's security was best served outside NATO and portrayed Finnish membership as an unnecessarily hostile act that would inevitably provoke Russian countermeasures. More broadly, Russian actors encouraged the perception that Finland's prosperity and security depended on maintaining pragmatic bilateral relations and pursuing "responsible" policies that took Russian interests into account.

Goeconomic engagement formed an important part of Russia's embedded influence strategy. Unlike coercion and direct pressure – which would likely have been interpreted in Finland as national security concerns – economic cooperation framed as mutually beneficial commercial activity aligned well with Finnish political culture and was therefore considerably more effective from the Russian point of view.

For Russia, Finland's energy sector was of particular interest because long-term infrastructure investments created durable economic interdependencies that could be translated into political leverage. Significant energy cooperation had already started during the Cold War, and Russia was generally considered to be a reliable energy partner in Finland. As elsewhere in Europe, Russian oligarchs with close ties to the Russian political leadership and security services cultivated extensive networks through business partnerships, strategic investments, joint ventures, and close relationships with political and economic elites.¹⁹

Fennovoima's Hanhikivi nuclear power plant project illustrates how this goeconomic influence operated in practice. In December 2014, less than a

year after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, the Finnish Parliament approved the construction of a Russian-built nuclear power plant. Although the German energy company E.ON had originally been a major shareholder and partner in the project, a series of developments – along with Russian actors' skilful capitalisation on emerging opportunities – ultimately led to Rosatom being selected to build the plant. The decision is particularly striking given that nuclear energy projects have long been recognised as instruments through which Russia seeks to establish long-term political and economic leverage abroad.²⁰

Finnish decision-makers believed that they could manage the security risks by requiring Finnish or other EU/EEA investors to own at least 60% of the project. Migrit, a very small ostensibly Croatian solar-power company, promised to invest €158 million in the project. However, it was soon discovered that its owners were Russian-born Croatian citizens and that its founders and associates had links to Russia. After the arrangement was exposed and the offer rejected by the Finnish authorities, the majority state-owned energy company Fortum helped save the project by stepping in as an investor. The project was ultimately cancelled only after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.²¹

Alongside these embedded forms of influence, Russia periodically employed carefully calibrated hybrid threat activities intended to reinforce the broader political message that stable bilateral relations depended upon Finland's "responsible behaviour". Rather than constituting sustained campaigns of intimidation, these actions served as reminders that Russia retained the ability to generate political costs if Finland crossed perceived red lines. Such activities included airspace violations, the instrumentalisation of migration at the Finnish-Russian border and private warnings to key decision-makers. In one notable albeit unattributed incident, a cardboard box containing a teapot and letters addressed to both the Commander of the Finnish Defence Forces Timo Kivinen and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley was placed outside Kivinen's residence on the day of their scheduled meeting.²²

18 Saari and Lavikainen 2022.

19 Tynkkynen et al. 2026, 116–121.

20 Danylyuk and Watling 2026, 36–37.

21 Tynkkynen et al. 2026, 116–121.

22 Pesu and Saari 2026, 97.

Importantly, these coercive signals were frequently accompanied by diplomatic initiatives designed to reframe Russian pressure as technical misunderstandings requiring bilateral management. Following Russian airspace violations, instrumentalised migration at the border,²³ or information operations targeting Russian speakers in Finland, Russian officials commonly proposed new bilateral mechanisms to address the resulting “problems”. These included calls for bilateral commissions on child welfare issues and bilateral negotiations on border management. Such proposals sought to portray deliberately engineered pressure as shared bilateral challenges best managed through direct Finnish–Russian cooperation rather than through existing national or European frameworks, while diluting Russia’s own responsibility for the incidents.

Russia also sought to weaken Finland’s identification with broader European institutions by encouraging scepticism towards other EU and NATO member states. Baltic countries, in particular, were frequently portrayed as irrationally hostile towards Russia and discriminatory against Russian-speaking minorities, while Finland was depicted as a pragmatic and responsible neighbour. An illustrative example occurred in February 2021 when EU High Representative Josep Borrell was publicly humiliated during a press conference with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow. Just over a week later, Lavrov received Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto in St Petersburg with notable diplomatic courtesy. Such contrasting treatment sought simultaneously to undermine the EU’s authority as a collective actor and encourage member states to privilege bilateral engagement with Russia over common European approaches.²⁴

Russia’s influence strategy also benefited from a structural asymmetry in how the two countries pursued economic engagement. Russian commercial activity abroad was centrally coordinated and aligned with broader geopolitical objectives irrespective of whether individual actors formally represented the state or the private sector. Finnish investment decisions, by contrast, were largely

driven by commercial logic without an overarching strategic framework. Many Finnish decision-makers feared that rejecting Russian investment opportunities on security grounds would simply allow competitors elsewhere in Europe to reap the associated economic benefits.²⁵ This asymmetry was not always fully recognised within either the Finnish business community or official policy analysis.²⁶

Beyond elite influence, Russia also attempted to stoke social divisions within Finland, although this proved more difficult in a relatively homogeneous and consensus-oriented society. Russia’s instrumentalised migration operations in 2015 and again in 2023 sought simultaneously to generate public anxiety over migration and polarise debate over asylum policy.²⁷ Other efforts included influence operations targeting Russian-speaking diaspora organisations and attempts to shape activities within Orthodox religious communities in Finland.²⁸

Taken together, Russia’s influence strategy was well adapted to Finnish political culture. Finland’s strong commitment to national independence, broad societal support for territorial defence, and historical sensitivity to external coercion meant that overt pressure would likely have proved counterproductive. Instead, Russia relied primarily on embedded influence through diplomacy, business, energy, political networks, and selective hybrid signalling in ways that gradually shaped the strategic environment within which Finnish decision-makers operated. Rather than compelling Finland to act against its will, Moscow sought to make policies aligned with Russian interests appear pragmatic, mutually beneficial, and ultimately self-evident.

This approach remained largely intact until late 2021, when Russia’s demands for an end to NATO’s open-door policy, coupled with its looming aggression against Ukraine, changed perceptions of Russia among Finland’s political leadership and the public alike. Although Russia’s goals for a renewed security order in Europe that would recognise its “legitimate” interests in its neighbourhood had been voiced many times since Putin’s speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, it was only at this point that the

23 Eggen and Lavikainen 2025.

24 Henley 2021.

25 Tynkkynen et al. 2026, 134.

26 See e.g. Nyberg 2019, 111.

27 Eggen and Lavikainen 2025.

28 Lassila et al. 2026, 186–192.

Finnish public at large came to understand the implications not only for Ukraine but also, by extension, for all of Russia's smaller neighbours.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, interstate cooperation ended abruptly, depriving Russia of its principal levers of influence within Finnish society. Russia subsequently shifted from benign-looking embedded forms of influence to more clearly coercive hybrid operations.

These have included increased malicious cyber activity²⁹ – such as cyber attacks against Parliament and government services – interference with satellite navigation and disinformation campaigns on historical events and Finland's current policies and posture. The most obvious example was the instrumentalisation of migration at Finland's eastern border in 2023, when Russian authorities facilitated the arrival of third-country nationals in an apparent attempt to put pressure on the Finnish government and strain domestic institutions. Although damage to undersea cables in the Baltic Sea has raised further concerns about Russian sabotage, Russia's responsibility for the incidents has not been established.³⁰

3. Limits of Russian influence and sources of Finnish resilience

Finland's strong culture of preparedness and its comprehensive security model are effective in responding to disruptions to normal conditions and thus to short-term coercive hybrid operations. For instance, Russian cyber operations, instrumentalised migration operations at the border, or disinformation campaigns were typically managed rapidly through well-established procedures and close cooperation between public authorities, private companies and other relevant actors.

At the same time, the same model was considerably less effective in recognising the gradual accumulation of structural vulnerabilities created through Russia's embedded influence. Finnish preparedness traditionally focused on responding

to disruptions rather than identifying structural vulnerabilities embedded in the normal state of affairs. Russia's geoeconomic influence was rarely recognised, and the authorities were slow to respond to the risks associated with Russian investments in strategic assets, such as shipyards, and the acquisition of strategically located properties near critical infrastructure and military installations by private and state-linked Russian actors. However, once these issues gained public attention and political momentum, the Finnish authorities responded swiftly by introducing legislative reforms that are unique in international terms.³¹

Certain features of Finnish political culture served to strengthen Russia's embedded influence in the country. Russia systematically supported and reinforced a policy frame that emphasised good-neighbourly relations and the benefits Finland was perceived to gain from its close and confidential relationship with Russia. A strong tendency not to "rock the boat" – that is, to avoid criticising the prevailing foreign and security policy line – made it more difficult to detect Russia's more subtle efforts at manipulation. Differences in situational awareness across policy sectors and levels of government further complicated efforts to assess the cumulative strategic implications of Russia's economic statecraft, its nurturing of networks of influence, and other forms of embedded influence.

Although it was not always welcomed by the authorities, public scrutiny often helped to expose these institutional blind spots. Investigative journalism, academic research, and civic activism periodically challenged prevailing assumptions, brought previously unspoken concerns into public debate, and encouraged more comprehensive assessments of Russia-related risks.³² The debate surrounding Russian real estate acquisitions illustrates this dynamic. Only after sustained investigative reporting and public discussion did assessments begin to converge across government agencies and wider society, ultimately leading to a more coherent understanding of the strategic implications of these acquisitions.

29 Yle News 2026a; Yle News 2026b.

30 Kaleta 2026; Blackburn 2026.

31 Pesu and Saari 2026, 108–109.

32 The changing balance between 'need to know' and 'need to share' in the context of hybrid threats has been recognised more widely in intelligence studies. See e.g. Nilsson et al. 2026, 119; Ivan et al. 2021, 505.

Russian goals	Russian messages	Methods (potential; not all attributed to Russia)
Keep Finland out of NATO	- There is no threat to Finland – unless it seeks NATO membership. Finland would be less secure as a NATO member. - Finland benefits from its good-neighbourly relations with Russia but should not take them for granted. - Russia can play dirty if it so chooses.	- Signalling discontent through cyberattacks, airspace violations, etc. during joint NATO training or a high-level visit. - More coercive hybrid threat activity such as instrumentalised migration. - High-level dialogue and occasional private reminders to individual decision-makers. - Messaging through normal diplomatic channels.
Weaken EU unity	- Other EU states are advancing relations with Russia, while Finland is hesitant/too critical/too slow. - The Baltic states and Ukraine are Russophobic and their analysis of the Russian threat is unreliable. - Contrasting Finland's constructive, pragmatic approach with that of selected EU states portrayed as emotional and unreliable.	- High-level dialogue and normal diplomatic channels; positive references to the “pragmatic Finnish approach” bilaterally and internationally. - Public displays of a wedge strategy; treating EU states differently and sowing discord.
Nurture a culture of accommodation	- Finland benefits from its good-neighbourly relations with Russia but should not take them for granted. - Good relations with Russia give Finland international standing beyond its size; Finland would not have any significant agency internationally without them.	- The Russian leadership could offer better deals to Finland than to its competitors. - Hybrid threat reminders that Russia can be less friendly and that Finland will be in trouble.
Strengthen bilateral arrangements	The Russian state is not aware of what is happening / the situation is unintentional and accidental, but it can surely be resolved by creating bilateral ad hoc arrangements.	Suggestions to resolve self-created challenges by setting up ad hoc arrangements or launching a negotiation process overriding existing arrangements and legal measures.
Create long-term dependencies	Russia is a reliable energy partner, and Russian actors operate solely according to business logic in their commercial interactions abroad.	Nurturing influential networks, including by hiring former politicians as consultants to Russian companies and inviting them to join the boards of strategically important Russian companies.
Build subversive capacity for the future	There is no intelligence service/state connection; the actors in question are acting purely on the basis of private interests.	Testing Finnish reactions and preparedness through hybrid operations.

Table 1. Russian foreign policy goals, messages and methods of embedded influence and hybrid operations in Finland.
This summary is based on the findings of Saari (ed.) 2026.

Despite these limitations, Finland also possessed important sources of resilience that constrained Russia's ability to convert embedded influence into durable political outcomes. Perhaps the most important was the country's high level of political cohesion on security-related issues. Broad cross-party consensus on foreign and security policy, combined with comparatively high levels of

institutional trust, limited opportunities for Russia to exploit domestic political divisions.

Unlike in several other European countries, Russian information operations have, at least so far, gained only limited political traction in Finland. For example, the Finnish-language edition of the Russian state-run media outlet Sputnik ceased operations as early as 2016, most likely because it failed

to attract an audience. Similarly, the Finns Party, despite its right-wing populist orientation, has consistently supported EU sanctions against Russia and military and financial assistance to Ukraine. Finland has also been insulated by the heterogeneous nature of its Russian-speaking population, limiting opportunities for Moscow to employ compatriot policy in the ways observed elsewhere.³³ Much of Russia's strategic communication concerning Finland appears to be directed primarily at a domestic audience in Russia. While these narratives have contributed to increasingly negative perceptions of Finland among Russian audiences,³⁴ they have so far failed to drive wedges between groups in Finland.

Interestingly, coercive hybrid operations and political pressure directed against Finland frequently produced effects opposite to those intended by Russia. Rather than undermining public confidence or weakening political cohesion, Russian pressure generally reinforced domestic unity and heightened public awareness of the security threat posed by Russia. Once Russian influence was broadly securitised in Finnish public debate, much of the leverage that had depended upon normalised political and economic relations rapidly disappeared.

The Finnish case therefore illustrates both the strengths and the limitations of Russian embedded influence. On the one hand, Russia failed to achieve its principal country-specific objective of preventing Finnish NATO membership when Finland joined the Alliance in April 2023. On the other hand, this outcome did not primarily reflect shortcomings in Russia's embedded influence in Finland. Rather, it resulted from Russia's own decision to wage full-scale war against Ukraine and fundamentally challenge the existing European security order. Indeed, the fact that many Finnish decision-makers appeared surprised by Russia's objectives and readiness to wage a full-scale war in Europe may itself be interpreted as evidence that embedded influence had, to some extent, succeeded in shaping Finnish assumptions about Russian intentions before 2022.

In summary, Finland's experience demonstrates that resilience against foreign influence extends beyond the capacity to prevent and withstand kinetic and hybrid attacks. It is also important to recognise one's own vulnerabilities and understand how they may be exploited through embedded influence.

Conclusions: Lessons for European resilience

Finland's relationship with Russia before 2022 should not be understood as exceptional. Rather, it reflected broader European assumptions that prevailed throughout much of the post-Cold War period. Like many Western governments, Finnish policymakers continued to frame the bilateral relationship with Russia as pragmatic and characterised by beneficial and manageable interdependence, despite Russia's increasing aggression and policy ambitions in Europe. The slow and gradual recognition of the strategic implications of Russia's goals and behaviour presents an analytical puzzle. Russian revisionism in Europe challenged the sovereignty and security of small states – including Finland itself – yet these developments were only slowly integrated into assessments of the bilateral relationship with Russia. Between 2014 and 2022, there was an uneasy tension between political prudence and caution towards any significant revision of policies towards Russia, on the one hand, and the primacy of security considerations on the other.

However, more critical voices also existed in Europe. For instance, policymakers and analysts in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania consistently argued that many Western governments underestimated the strategic implications of Russia's increasingly authoritarian and revisionist trajectory.³⁵ According to these perspectives, the West tended to interpret problems related to Russia as technical or managerial challenges, when in fact they reflected strategic objectives fundamentally at odds with the normative foundations of the European order. Despite the

³³ Lassila et al. 2026.

³⁴ While Russian attitudes towards Finland became clearly more negative after 2022, they appear to have stabilised. In 2025, 38% held a positive view of Finland, and 25% a negative one. In 2019, the corresponding percentages were 71% (positive) and 5% (negative). Prime Minister's Office 2025.

³⁵ See e.g. Landsbergis 2008; Laar 2007.

Baltic states' greater strategic awareness, they also remained vulnerable to Russia's embedded and hybrid influence, reflecting their own structural vulnerabilities and national characteristics. It is important to note that no country in Europe is immune to Russia's influence operations; however, the pathways through which that influence is exercised are consistently tailored to each country's unique strategic context.

This paper suggests that assessments of Russian influence should move beyond a narrow focus on specific means, operations and incidents towards a more holistic understanding of the wider hybrid threat landscape that includes both long-term Russian embedded influence and shorter-term hybrid operations in the target state.

Embedded influence and coercive hybrid operations should be understood as complementary rather than competing instruments of state influence. Embedded influence creates structural vulnerabilities by fostering dependencies and networks of influence and shaping expectations and political frames. These vulnerabilities can subsequently be exploited through coercive hybrid operations when Moscow seeks to increase political pressure or impose immediate costs.

Interestingly, however, the Finnish case demonstrates that coercive hybrid operations may also undermine embedded influence. Pressure at the borders, cyber operations, airspace violations, GPS interference, and Russia's ultimatums concerning NATO membership policies gradually altered Finnish threat perceptions. Rather than reinforcing earlier influence efforts, these coercive measures eventually eroded the assumptions that had sustained Russia's embedded influence. In this sense, Russia's own escalation transformed what had been

a relatively effective long-term strategy into one that rapidly generated political unity, strengthened societal resilience and accelerated Finland's NATO membership process.

The relationship between embedded influence and coercive hybrid operations is therefore a dynamic one. In the Finnish political environment – shaped by historical legacies, political culture and bilateral dynamics – Russia's embedded influence has traditionally been more effective than its coercive hybrid operations. The Finnish case has demonstrated that hybrid coercion carries significant strategic risks because it exposes hostile intent and may rapidly erode years of accumulated influence.

Analysing the broader political context and the full spectrum of Russia's embedded influence and hybrid operations is fundamentally important for all European countries. If European states only react to hybrid coercion after the fact, Russia will retain the first-mover advantage and continue to shape the strategic environment in its favour. Developing more proactive preparedness strategies therefore requires an understanding of the dynamic interplay between short-term coercive hybrid operations and the long-term shaping of the strategic relationship through embedded influence. Critically examining the bilateral relationship and its underlying dynamics enables states to identify both their vulnerabilities and their sources of resilience. Such self-reflection would also help to uncover institutional blind spots, reassess long-standing assumptions, and strengthen strategic awareness. In turn, this would provide a stronger foundation for developing more comprehensive resilience against Russian influence and reducing opportunities for Russia to exploit European vulnerabilities. ■

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