

No carelessness in Finland under President Niinistö

Every January 1 at noon, with their ears glued to the radio during the war and then their eyes glued to the television screen throughout the Cold War years, Finns have maintained a tradition of listening attentively to the [annual New Year's address by the President of the Republic](#), who is responsible for the foreign policy of a country that shares 1,200 kilometres of borders with Russia.

The beginning of 2022 was no exception, quite the contrary. The tense situation on Ukraine's borders leaves no room for complacency in this country of 5.5 million inhabitants next to its powerful neighbour. Despite more than 25 years of membership in the European Union, the Finns are concerned about Russian demands against NATO enlargement.

The President, Sauli Niinistö, has been careful to repeat that the request to join NATO, if the Finns so decide, is still an option for the country and is part of NATO's Open Doors policy. This has been publicly confirmed many times to Finland, the President reassured.

Sauli Niinistö is - and has been for a long time - the strongest advocate of the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy and is certainly very frustrated that this is progressing so painfully despite persistent proposals from French President Emmanuel Macron.

He did not fail to express his frustration with a quip: *"Europe cannot be content with the role of a mere sanctions coordinator."*

To underline the seriousness of the current situation, Sauli Niinistö admits that he has been thinking a lot lately about the conclusion of Henry Kissinger, former US foreign minister and one of the most brilliant geopolitical thinkers ever. *"According to Mr Kissinger's cynical statement,"* the President continued, *"when the main goal of a group of countries has been to avoid war, the international system has been at the mercy of its most ruthless member."* And in his speech Sauli Niinistö warns: *"This principle could be put to the test in the dialogue that is due to start in the second week of January"*.

The quote is from Kissinger's book *"A World Restored"* in which he refers to the European situation in the 1930s and more precisely to the year 1938 when Neville Chamberlain, the British Foreign Secretary, made concessions to avoid war - which resulted in an even worse war. Apparently, this is precisely what Sauli Niinistö wants to avoid by thinking of the Geneva meeting where two leaders, Russian and American, will negotiate over the heads of the Europeans.

One can interpret the Finnish President's message that democracies must be ready to use force against Russia if necessary. Those who know Finland's history know that, against all odds, the country did not hesitate to stand up to its powerful neighbour in 1939 and did not allow itself to be invaded by the Soviet Union. This lends weight to Sauli Niinistö's words and his country's determination to maintain a credible defence - tangible proof of which is the Finnish Army's recent order for 64 F-35A fighter aircraft worth €8.4 billion.

Finland applies the old Roman principle to the letter: *"If you want peace, you must be prepared for war"*. The danger of further concessions in Geneva seems to haunt Sauli Niinistö. Already, he does

not like the idea that the "polite host" of the meeting, as he calls Europe in his speech, has no other role than to listen.

"Russian demands are in contradiction with the European security order. Reserved areas of influence are not relevant in the 2020s," he said.

As for the Finns, the President's New Year's address predictably sparked a heated discussion about possible NATO membership and the President's change of heart. Two days later, Sauli Niinistö found it useful to repeat a passage from his speech on his blog: *"Finland's chosen line for its foreign and security policy is stable. It is designed to withstand difficult times. In a fast-paced world, it is valuable to know when to move at full speed, when to wait."*

So he made it clear that if his personal position on NATO ever changed, he would say so at once. This would certainly have a great impact on public opinion, as the President enjoys enormous popularity. He has been in power since 2012 and 90% of the population rate him highly for his actions.

The Finnish Constitution, renewed in 2000, gives the President of the Republic leadership in foreign policy in cooperation with the government. In contrast, the four original constitutional laws dating from 1919 had the particularity of giving all powers to the President of the Republic, a compromise between the Royalists and the Republicans. It is interesting to note that, according to Maurice Duverger, the Finnish Constitution of 1919 was one of the sources of inspiration for General de Gaulle and the presidential regime of the Constitution of the Fifth Republic. From this tradition, the Finns give importance to the President and willingly listen to him.

As for Finland's possible membership of NATO, in the absence of recent polls, one can nevertheless estimate that favourable opinion has increased following the latest events and even since the presidential address in the New Year. Last year, only 26% of Finns wanted the country to join NATO.

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