



## Finland Votes for President Advocating Stronger Foreign and Security Policy

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The presidential elections in Finland, with the first round on 28 January and the second on 11 February, were held amidst a change in the Finnish security perspective as a result of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. After two terms in office, President Sauli Niinistö, the undisputed leader of the National Coalition Party who led the country to NATO, is leaving office. His successor will be Alexander Stubb, who defeated Pekka Haavisto. Stubb's victory means even stronger opposition to Russia. At the same time, the consistency in Poland's and Finland's threat assessments makes them increasingly important security partners.

### What was the context of the elections?

The second round of elections to succeed Niinistö, who served as president for 12 years, was a contest between Stubb of the National Coalition Party (NCP) and Pekka Haavisto, an independent supported by the Green League. The higher sense of a security threat among Finns stemming from Russia and the war in Ukraine strongly determined their decisions at the ballot box, giving the advantage to the charismatic leader of the NCP.

Since the outgoing president enjoys very high public support and the constitution obliges the head of state to co-create foreign and security policy with the government, his successor faces the challenge of exerting similar influence as he has in the international arena. The war in Ukraine is also one of the reasons why Stubb, who previously served as prime minister, among other roles, returned to politics. The migration crisis at the Finnish border, challenges in energy policy, and activities within NATO were also important factors.

### Why did Finns elect Stubb?

Stubb's victory with about 52% of votes in the second round came from nuanced differences with his opponent rather than by diametric opposition. In the election debate, Stubb

opposed, among other things, the conscription of women into the army, while Haavisto supported it. Stubb meanwhile had a positive view of the dislocation and transport of nuclear weapons in Finland as part of nuclear sharing cooperation with the U.S., which was opposed by his rival.

The Green League backed, centre-left candidate's defeat confirmed growing polarisation among Finnish voters, while Stubb in the second round seems to have received the votes of supporters of right-wing parties. This is backed by the gradual increase in support for the Finns Party, which has nationalist origins and has been gaining in polls (now up to 18% of Finns).

### What impact might the election result have on Finland's foreign and security policy?

Although the two candidates' positions on foreign policy issues did not differ significantly, Stubb is perceived by the public as a "hawk", distinguished by a more critical and decisive approach to Russia. He announced that he would not resume any political relations with Vladimir Putin until Russian troops withdraw from Ukraine. He also assured that he would continue to provide the attacked country with strong, multi-dimensional support, from arming the Ukrainian army, through humanitarian aid, to keeping Ukraine high on the list of EU and international policy priorities.

## PISM SPOTLIGHT

Stubb also declared Finland's involvement within NATO and actions to strengthen the Eastern Flank of the Alliance, and he supports the presence of U.S. troops on the country's territory. He sees Finland's involvement in the EU as strengthening its active eastern and migration policy and serving to protect the EU's external borders. This stance is related to Russian hybrid actions, including it instigating a migration crisis on the border.

### **What does Stubb's win mean for Poland?**

His victory most likely implies a continuation of the pro-European and NATO-focused direction in Finland's foreign policy. The Finnish position will be stricter than during the presidency of the outgoing President Niinistö, who maintained good relations with Putin before 2022. This slight

change is conducive to tighter Finnish-Polish cooperation, especially when it comes to EU policy towards Russia, migration policy, and developing a common response to threats such as those in cyberspace, as well as strengthening NATO's Eastern Flank, where cooperation between frontline countries is and will be essential. Poland also has an important partner in Finland in supporting Ukraine. The perspective of increasing energy security will also be important, especially in the Baltic Sea region, particularly in the development of electricity networks, ensuring their stability, as well as in increasing production capacity, which will be achieved by expanding wind farms or investing in nuclear projects. Beyond that, protecting critical infrastructure and countering Russian hybrid activities is increasingly important.