Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Union Affairs
Ireland, Finland, and wider Euro-Atlantic Security
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Cathaoirleach, Leas-Chathaoirleach, Deputies and Senators, it is a great honour for me and my family here in Ireland to be speaking at the Oireachtas Committee on European Union (EU) Affairs today. My name is Eoin Micheál McNamara. I am a research fellow at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) in Helsinki. FIIA is an academically independent and non-partisan research institute supported by the Parliament of Finland (*Eduskunta*) to inform decision-making in Finland, in the EU, and globally. As an internationally focused researcher from Ireland, I was honoured to have my work on security policy recognised when I was awarded a visiting research fellowship at FIIA in 2021-22. I returned to FIIA thereafter as a research fellow working on the Horizon Europe Reignite Multilateralism via Technology (REMIT) project in March 2023.[1] My previous professional experience came in neighbouring Estonia through my soon forthcoming PhD research on the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan at the University of Tartu, where I also concurrently taught and published on a range of security policy issues between 2013 and 2020.

While I only started working in Helsinki in late 2021, I have greatly benefitted from many fruitful collaborations with security researchers in Finland since 2013. I have published analysis and contributed to commentary on Nordic-Baltic security over the course of my early career. I have occasionally attempted to highlight the strategic trajectories of these neighbouring European states here in Ireland. In 2017, I made a presentation at the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) followed by the publication of my article "Between Trump's America and Putin's Russia: Nordic-Baltic Security Relations Amid Transatlantic Drift" in the Academy's peer-reviewed journal, *Irish Studies in International Affairs*. I am glad to say that much of the "transatlantic drift" that I discussed in that article has since eased under US President Joe Biden. Russia's escalated aggression in Ukraine since February 2022 has rendered a stronger transatlantic link vital for security in Europe as most Western states now adapt their strategic outlooks. Finland – the country where I live and work – has been a prominent example of this adaptation, switching from a non-aligned posture to become a NATO member in April 2023.

I have been requested to give some comparative and contrasting insights on Finland's security policy development and how this might inform Ireland's current security debate. Briefly sharing some of my experiences as an Irish citizen and as a security researcher working in Northern Europe might help to start this discussion. I graduated from University College Dublin (UCD) in 2009, just as the Irish banking crisis began to bite and when many Irish graduates were emigrating. Events of this time have left some lasting influences on me. Perhaps the most important lesson I learned from this period in Ireland was that academic expertise when effectively communicated can be crucial to inform and advise prudent public policy decisions and to provide warning about impending policy mistakes. I am sure that Committee members remember the few academic economists that tried to publicly sound an early warning

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before 2008 as Ireland's property bubble cascaded out of control. Direct policy input from academic economists was later important in Ireland's economic recovery. When Ireland recently faced the global Covid-19 pandemic, academic epidemiologists were vital to help the wider population to understand the health risks at stake and to assist the government's policy response. The Covid crisis faded, only to give way to a major security crisis in Europe ignited by further Russian aggression. I thus hope that evidence-based and informed perspectives on the future of Irish security policy from the academic community will now be encouraged and embraced by the Irish political system and civil service. In my view, both have sometimes been unnecessarily tentative to engage in the past, especially when compared to policy systems in other EU countries.

Wars usually have many far-reaching tentacles and the war for Ukraine combining with a wider deterioration in the global security environment has brought Ireland's security policy into focus like few other times in its independent history. Disputes over Northern Ireland aside, Ireland has been fortunate to have a democratic neighbour, the United Kingdom, that does not resort to threats of serious military or economic coercion when trying to settle political problems. Several EU member states are not as fortunate. Finland shares a 1,340km border with Russia, a neighbour that it has endured troubled relations with since it declared its independence in 1917. Finland experienced a civil war in 1918 when Red Finland supported by the Bolsheviks attempted to subvert the new state. World War II essentially imposed three painful wars on Finland. After 1945, Finnish leaders found a path to maintain independence, but at the price of a neutrality known colloquially as "Finlandisation" until the end of the Cold War. Finland could develop as a liberal democracy and a market economy, but it was forced to steer clear of Western institutions like the EEC and NATO, while political, societal and media self-censorship was endured to stave off aggression from its superpower neighbour, the Soviet Union.

Contrasting with Irish experience, Finnish neutrality was an imposed necessity that obstructed its engagement with the democratic Western world. This neutrality was perceived to include political and economic as well as military components. Thus, when Finland joined the EU in 1995, it changed its strategic outlook from neutral to militarily non-aligned and politically aligned with the EU. This is another curious contrast with Ireland, which joined the EU in 1973 but still uses the term "neutral" to guide foreign policy discourse. I have always been impressed by how deeply Finnish decision-makers understand the wider European and transatlantic strategic balance. Most prominently explained by the current President of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, Finland retained military non-alignment between 1995 and its application for NATO membership in 2022 through its "own will". This was based on the belief that Finnish non-alignment could assist to stabilise the security situation in Northern Europe.

Choosing not to join NATO immediately after the Cold War, Finland never left itself naïvely exposed. Conscription was retained and most Finns enthusiastically undertake their national service. This means that for a small nation of 5.5 million people, Finland can rapidly mobilise 280,000 personnel to defend its territory should a crisis develop. Its military strength when its reserve is fully mobilised stands to be approximately 900,000 personnel. This system supports one of the strongest artillery defences in Europe. Finland has a formidable air force and a navy effective to patrol and defend the southern Baltic. It is a world leader in cyber defence policy. However, at a regional level, despite this extensive independent defence

posture, and while remaining outside NATO until recently, Finnish leaders still saw post-Cold War defence cooperation with various actors including with NATO; within the EU; through Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO); bilaterally with Sweden and the US; and through the UK-led multinational Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) as vital to advantage its armed forces. Despite not joining NATO until 2023, few Finnish policymakers saw NATO's wider role as "bad" or "dangerous", most recognised NATO's importance for security in Europe. NATO enlargements in the neighbouring Baltic and Central and Eastern European regions after 1999 were perceived from Helsinki as further securing democratic stability. These NATO enlargements finally freed many smaller European states from long periods of imperial or authoritarian strife imposed by stronger powers. Globally, Finland has a similar tradition in contributing positively to UN peacekeeping, peace-mediation and international development as Ireland, and, in my opinion, it out-performs Ireland in many aspects related to these areas.

Finland's social wellbeing and economic prosperity rest on a "comprehensive security" concept emphasising the importance of combined civilian and military components. Together with national defence, this concept emphasises strong social solidarity, cyber security and repulsion of propaganda interference. I often read some Irish politicians and activists criticising those in Ireland and in Europe that wish to see wider development of similar concepts to better protect our collective social values and our economic prosperity as somehow encouraging a regressive "militarism". I think Finland's experience strongly underlines that these arguments are well wide of the mark. Finland takes its security seriously while also being one of the most stable, most peaceful, most free, most equal and most prosperous nations on earth – its comprehensive security system provides an important basis for these to flourish. This Finnish example should be pertinently remembered as we now try to strengthen our own national security in Ireland.

It still must be importantly clarified that Finland faces a different geopolitical threat-environment to Ireland. Ireland does not need conscription or the same land force as Finland, but Ireland's Permanent Defence Forces (PDF) and Reserve Defence Forces (RDF) have been run down badly over recent decades. Ireland has been geopolitically sheltered for much of its independent history. As a society, Irish society is not used to realising and countering security threats related to great power competition in the same way that Finnish society is. However, Ireland's economic transformation has increased its prominence on the global geopolitical pecking order. Ireland is now a central part of the Western political and economic system and thus an attractive target for states seeking to disrupt and challenge Western power and democratic order through "hybrid" means, be it through cyber-attacks, economic blackmail, clandestine espionage subversion or military brinkmanship in airspace or maritime zones.

Ireland must strengthen its national security across both civilian and military areas to effectively counter hybrid threats. Reform of the Defence Forces (DF) is an indispensable pillar in this process. Irish governments and wider society must better recognise the immense value that DF brings and invest. Even though the challenges in defence reform facing Ireland are stark, there is little alternative but to see DF as ever more vital to protect Ireland's hard-won sovereignty, social progress and economic prosperity when the global security situation fragments into more intense great power competition and conflict.