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Putin: Moscow would shift troops if Finland joined NATO

7/3/2016



Moscow would reposition its troops if Finland were to join NATO, Russian President Vladimir Putin said Friday.

Putin made the comment at a news conference after meeting with Finnish President Sauli Niinisto at the latter's summer residence in the town of Naantali. It was Putin's first trip to a European Union country since the British vote to leave the bloc.

Interest in the prospect of joining NATO has been rising in both Finland and neighboring Sweden in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea and its backing for separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine.

The Finnish and Swedish foreign ministers in May attended a meeting of their NATO counterparts, an indication of pursuing stronger ties.

Putin said that "if Finland enters NATO, that means that Finnish soldiers would have stopped being independent, stopped being sovereign in the full sense of this word, they become part of the military infrastructure of NATO, which will in an instant find itself on the borders of Russia." He noted that most Russian troops are well away from the countries' border now but asked, in the event of NATO accession, "Do you think we'd still act that way?"

Putin's visit came as the EU extended sanctions against Russia until February. The sanctions and Russia's retaliatory ban on food imports from the EU have been a blow to the Finnish economy.

He suggested that there are ways around the problem for Finland, saying "Turn to London, they will show you," a clear reference to the recent referendum supporting Britain leaving the EU.

Niinisto in turn said Russia could get the sanctions removed by implementing terms of the Minsk agreement aimed at ending the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Niinisto also said that in their meeting he proposed that all warplanes flying in the Baltic region keep their transponders turned on as a confidence-building measure and Putin said he agreed with the idea. The proposal reflects increased concern after several incidents in the spring when Russian planes flew close to U.S. naval vessels in the Baltic.