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Ireland Is Playing into the Kremlin's Hands With Its Pretense of Neutrality

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Irish Naval Service drills. **Irish Defence Forces**

As an island and the European base for the vast majority of the Tech Titans, Ireland is extremely vulnerable to Russian sabotage. Just look at the underwater cables in the Baltic Sea that are currently suspected of having been cut by China last week. Moscow would be much more reluctant to sabotage Google, Microsoft, PayPal, Apple and eBay and create chaos on a grand scale if they were operating out of a NATO member state and not based on a small neutral island, wide open at the edge of the North Atlantic.

It is no secret that Ireland's military is in poor shape. The Irish Naval Services suffers from depleted resources with a meagre eight ships in total. Meanwhile, the Irish Air Corps "has no defence capability of any significance", according to a report in 2020. Even more worryingly, Dublin relies on the RAF's Typhoon jets to intercept threats in Irish airspace, which makes a mockery of the country's neutrality.

The Russian navy can – and does – brazenly enter the Irish exclusive economic zone. Could it have been a dummy run when one of their spy ships was escorted out of the Irish Sea on Nov. 15? According to a report in the Guardian, "its presence has raised fresh concerns about the security of the interconnector cables that run between Ireland and the UK carrying global internet traffic from huge datacentres operated by tech companies including Google and Microsoft, which have their EU headquarters sited in Ireland."

There is a general election underway in Ireland at the moment. To outsiders, it must beggar belief that joining NATO is not even a topic on the political radar during these perilously dangerous times. The main political parties are afraid to broach the subject because there is strangely no appetite for it, with 61% of voters wanting to remain neutral, according to an Irish Times poll in 2023. The Irish, it seems, naively prefer to continue with their dangerous ostrich mentality, with only 20-something per cent in favour of NATO membership.

Ireland prides itself on being a supposedly neutral country because they believe it brings soft power. During the thorny 2001 Treaty of Nice negotiations, the EU was cajoled into officially recognising Ireland as a country with a "traditional policy of military neutrality."

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It begs the question: how does this chime with the fact that since the Gulf War in 1990, U.S. military planes have been permitted to fly in and out of Shannon Airport, effectively using it as one of their main European hubs?

Successive Irish governments laughably claimed they only allowed the U.S. military to refuel there on the condition that their planes carry no prisoners and cannot be armed with ammunition or explosives. But it is naive to believe the U.S. military obeys these rules because there has been no monitoring at the airport. It has even been proven that so-called "rendition flights" have flown into Shannon Airport.

So, how can a country claim to be neutral when (in the eyes of Moscow) it offers assistance to the U.S. military and turns a blind eye to covet operations?

No matter how you spin it, Ireland does have "blood on its hands", as claimed by a former Irish MEP in 2020, by allowing warplanes in and out of its airspace.

During the European elections in the summer, the candidate Peter Casey, a successful businessman and TV star who came second in the last presidential election in Ireland, raised concerns that Shannon Airport could be a legitimate target if a wider war broke out with Russia. This – coupled with the Irish state's alarming inability to guard its air and sea territories – should surely be good enough reasons to follow in Sweden and Finland's footsteps and join NATO.

Mr Casey's comment should have dominated the headlines, but barely registered in the media. Again, this highlights their determination to remain with their heads buried in the sand while the hourglass ticks down to a harsher new reality.

Ireland has always had an unusual relationship with its professed neutrality. If I asked you to

guess the nation where higher-education students – including one of its future PM – celebrated VE Day by burning British and American flags, you would be unlikely to guess that the culprit was the Republic of Ireland (then called the Irish Free State).

As an Irish person, you can only be deeply ashamed of those past actions. But it all needs to be viewed in its historical context. Irish wounds were still raw from the oppressive and bloody occupation it suffered under the British regime until it gained independence in 1922. Besides, the Irish public did not know what was going on because the government refused to acknowledge there was a World War, officially calling it "The Emergency." The Irish media was even censored from fully reporting on WWII.

Ireland has supposedly been neutral in international relations since the 1930s. But that didn't prevent the then-Irish Taoiseach Éamon de Valera from making an official visit to the German ambassador to "express his condolences" on the death of Adolf Hitler, which was correctly described at the time by one irate American letter writer as showing "allegiance to a devil". It was also shameful how, according to Reuters, "the Éireann Minister in Lisbon today hoisted the German swastika at half mast over the legation as a sign of mourning for Hitler."

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It is now time to drop the charade of this neutrality and for Ireland to join NATO because. The country will not be able to hide behind that excuse if the entire European Union – God forbid – was ever dragged into an international conflict.

One NATO source told me, "Ireland would be good for NATO, especially relating to naval assets." Ireland may be a small country with a small army, but it can still make a valuable contribution. The Irish army has a strong reputation for its role as a peacemaker in the UN. Despite this, the Irish Army Rangers Wing – as a legacy of their hardcore training during the Troubles in Northern Ireland – are among the best sharpshooters in the world and can boast of being the only non-Americans to ever win the U.S. Army International Sniper Competition in 2018.

Even though the Republic has not been in any combative conflict since its civil war of 1922-23, Irish soldiers did fight and die in WWII – despite the threat of being ostracized back home for fighting with the British army.

Sadly, VE Day comes and goes for the most part in Dublin without any substantive celebration, which ignores all those who sacrificed their lives. I am not suggesting that we Irish all start wearing the Poppy every November, but those Irish soldiers should be honoured on every VE Day anniversary in May. It was a very touching scene when a handful of an estimated 130,000 – who went to join foreign armies – were honoured a few years ago with a special tribute by Europe to mark VE Day's seventy-fifth anniversary.

The British author L.P. Hartley once mused in his novel The Go-Between, "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." His statement certainly rings true for Ireland during WWII and I would hate to see history repeat itself. Ireland should never again be found sitting on the fence.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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