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## **The Finnish Parliamentary Elections from a European Perspective**

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Value conservative opposition parties of the provinces made progress at the cost of the previous conservative-social democratic government in the Finnish parliamentary elections of 19 April 2015. As the left received less than 24 per cent of the votes, negotiations on the governmental programme are expected to lead to the formation of a centre-right government led by Juha Sipilä (Centre, 49 seats, won 14) and joined by Alexander Stubb (National Coalition, 37 seats, lost 7) and Timo Soini (Finns – also known as ‘True Finns’). Soini’s ‘right-left’ populist party reinforced its status as one of the four large parties (38 seats, lost 1) and will probably be included in the new government, which may have implications for Finnish stands within the European Union. Mr Soini ran a conspicuously moderate campaign avoiding anti-immigration stands and focus on Greece, seeing this as a unique chance to enter government. Mr Soini has increased his credibility as the Chairman of the Committee of Foreign Affairs and, as a verbal genius, succeeded in TV debates. In case the negotiations lead to the containment of the populists, Soini’s mixed party may lead the financial or the foreign ministry but consequently runs the risk of internal divisions.

At the same time, the Greens also gained 15 seats, winning 5, and Finland received two first MPs with an immigrant background. 70 per cent of the electorate voted in the elections in which 117 men and 83 women were elected.

### **An ally of Germany in the Eurozone**

Extended financial support to Greece was generally excluded by the party leaders but the depth of the domestic economic crisis, the failure of the government to agree on a healthcare reform and disagreements on how much public spending should be cut overshadowed Greece in discussions. The Leftist Alliance (12 seats, lost 2) was the only party to speak for increased public spending, while the election posters of the National Coalition contrasted ‘the Greek way’ with the future of Finland.

The National Coalition managed to get Chancellor Angela Merkel and the Social Democrats Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier to Helsinki to support their campaigns, but the visits were rather interpreted as reflections of excellent relations between Germany and Finland. Cultural proximity to Germany is a century-old phenomenon but the Euro and Ukrainian Crises have made Finnish governments increasingly supportive of German leadership in Europe. Joint interests have brought Finland closer to countries such as Sweden and The Netherlands as well.

### **Common security and defence policies**

Security and defence issues were brought to the agenda by Russian policies. The parliamentary parties recognise President Sauli Niinistö (National Coalition) as a foreign policy leader, are concerned of developments in Russia, support EU sanctions (the Leftist Alliance and the True Finns with reservations), try to retain a working everyday relationship with Russia, are ready to increase

defence spending, wish to deepen defence cooperation with Sweden, welcome an estimate on the consequences of a NATO membership, and refrain from a membership application in current circumstances. The National Coalition and the Swedish People's Party (9 seats) wish to develop defence cooperation with Sweden, the other Nordic countries and the EU and would welcome NATO membership, while the Greens, the Christian Democrats (5 seats, lost 1) and the True Finns are more cautious about NATO. The Centre, the Social Democrats (34 seats, lost 8; the worst result in their history) and the Leftist Alliance are unwilling to call Russia a 'threat' or 'challenge' and doubt the positive effects of a NATO membership on the Finnish eastern border.

### **A eurocrat lost to a rally-English speaker**

Integration has made the Finnish prime minister the undisputed leader of both domestic and connected European policies. Required qualifications have become impossible to meet even by Dr Stubb – an integration scholar educated in the US, Sorbonne, Brugge and LSE, fluent in five languages, former advisor of the European Commission and MEP as well as a triathlete making effective use of social media. As Mr Sipilä refrained from participating in a panel on European integration and sent Olli Rehn, former Commissioner responsible for economic and monetary affairs, as his replacement, the future prime minister was accused of evading answers to challenging questions on European policies and of trying to conceal his 'rally-English'. In a country where English is spoken as a foreign language best after Denmark, The Netherlands and Sweden, capability to participate in transnational European political debates is seen as prerequisite for a political leader by many – though not by the majority of the voters.