

Euroscepticism vs. Political Pragmatism: The Finns Party tones down its criticism of the EU

Tuomas Iso-Markku

As expected, Eurosceptic forces of different political shades were among the major winners of the 2014 European Parliament elections. Eurosceptic parties grew compared to the 2009 EP elections in several member states, including the EU's founding members France, Germany and Italy and non-eurozone countries the United Kingdom, Denmark and Sweden. In Finland, the populist and Eurosceptic Finns Party, formerly known as True Finns, was also able to improve on its 2009 result. The party emerged as Finland's third-biggest party, gaining 12.9% of the vote in the 2014 EP elections. This represents an increase of 3.1 percentage points in comparison to 2009 and entitles the party to two seats in the 8th European Parliament, as opposed to the one seat it held in the 7th EP.¹

Despite the gains, the Finns Party's leader Timo Soini was unable to hide his disappointment when the preliminary results of the Finnish EP elections came through: the party had expected, and the polls had forecast, more. After the Finnish presidential elections in January 2012 and the municipal elections in October 2012, this was the third time in a row that the Finns Party had been unable to live up to its own heightened expectations, finishing third with almost seven percentage points behind the second-placed Centre Party and far below the 19.05% mark it reached in the Finnish parliamentary election in 2011. Party leader Soini bemoaned the low turnout in Finland, indicating that many of the Finns Party's supporters had simply stayed at home.² Although the low turnout might indeed be part of the explanation, the interesting question is why the Finns Party was not able to mobilise all of its (potential) voters at a time when Eurosceptic and EU-critical parties elsewhere in Europe were celebrating major victories. The answer probably lies both in the changing political environment as well as developments within the party itself since its unprecedented electoral triumph in 2011.

¹ Altogether, Finland holds 13 seats in the European Parliament.

² Samuli Leivonniemi, "Vaalitulos: Kokoomus suurin, vasemmistolle kirivoitto ja Sdp:lle rökäletappio",

² Samuli Leivonniemi, "Vaalitulos: Kokoomus suurin, vasemmistolle kirivoitto ja Sdp:lle rökäletappio", *Helsingin Sanomat*, 25 May 2014 (<http://www.hs.fi/politiikka/a1400989959123>).

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Euroscepticism in a changing political climate

The Finns Party's rapid rise began in the late 2000s. Finland's three biggest political parties were all, to varying degrees, involved in a scandal regarding undisclosed campaign funding during the 2007 parliamentary elections. This provided favourable conditions for an anti-establishment party like the Finns Party, which was originally built on the ruins of the populist Finnish Rural Party and has always seen itself as a representative of ordinary people; mixing left-leaning social and economic policies with nationalism and conservative values. Chairman Soini himself was the Finns Party's top candidate in the 2009 EP elections, emphasising that his party represented a true alternative to the mainstream parties and their consensus-oriented EU policies.³ In the end, the Finns Party gained 9.8% of the votes and Soini received more votes than any other Finnish EP candidate.

It was the unfolding of the eurozone crisis that allowed the Finns Party to establish itself as one of Finland's four big parties, however. Encouraged by Finland's excellent credit rating and relatively low level of public debt, many Finnish voters have been very critical of the notion that Finland should assume financial responsibility for the problems of other eurozone members. From the very beginning of the crisis, the Finns Party has been eager to fan the flames of discontent, presenting itself as an adamant opponent of the bailout loans and an uncompromising defender of Finland's national interest. Prior to the 2011 elections, the party also both spurred and capitalised on the heated immigration debate in Finland.⁴

Much has changed since the early days of the eurozone crisis, however. To begin with, the crisis has entered a less acute phase. This allows the architects and proponents of the EU's crisis policies in Brussels and Helsinki to proclaim that the measures adopted, including the much-contested rescue loans, are bearing fruit, even if the recovery remains fragile. Meanwhile, Finland's own economic outlook has worsened dramatically and the country's public debt is soon set to exceed the 60% of the GDP limit laid down in the Stability and Growth Pact. The downturn has eroded some of the self-confidence that bolstered the Finns at the beginning of the crisis.⁵ Moreover, the economic slump has served to gradually shift the focus of Finnish politics from European affairs back to domestic issues, as the biggest threats facing the Finnish economy are no longer seen to emanate from the crisis-ridden eurozone countries. As a result, the Finns Party has had fewer possibilities to use the eurozone crisis as an electoral trump card.

At the same time, the recent events in Ukraine have reminded many euro-weary Finns of why Finland joined the EU in the first place; security having been one of the principal motives for Finnish EU membership. For the Finns Party, formulating a clear position on the Ukraine crisis has proven challenging. Party leader Soini, who also acts as chair of the Finnish Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, has argued that Finland needs to speak with one voice on foreign and security policy matters, insisting that the Finns Party supports the president and the government in the conduct of Finnish foreign policy.⁶ Accordingly, the party condemned the Crimean independence referendum and approves of the EU sanctions targeting individual Russian and Ukrainian officials.⁷ On the other hand,

³ See Tapio Raunio, "The European Parliament election in Finland", European Parliament Election Briefing No. 26, European Parties Elections and Referendums Network, 7 June 2009 (<https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=epern-no-26-finland-2009.pdf&site=266>).

⁴ See Juha Jokela and Kaisa Korhonen, "A Eurosceptic big bang – Finland's EU policy in hindsight from the 2011 elections", FIIA Briefing Paper No. 106, 23 May 2012 (http://www.fiaa.fi/fi/publication/264/a_eurosceptic_big_bang/).

⁵ Kristi Raik, "Finland turns humble as its economic outlook worsens", Euro Crisis in the Press Blog, London School of Economics and Political Science, 19 August 2013 (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/eurocrisispress/2013/08/19/finland-turns-humble-as-its-economic-outlook-worsens/>).

⁶ Piia Elonen, "Timo Soini nosti puoluettaan sote-pöytiin ja hallitukseen", *Helsingin Sanomat*, 3 May 2014 (<http://www.hs.fi/politiikka/a1399082572407>).

⁷ Marko Junkkari, "Perussuomalaiset: Venäjän talouspakotteita tulisi välttää", *Helsingin Sanomat*, 18 March 2014 (<http://www.hs.fi/talous/a1395111523285>).

Soini has described the Ukraine crisis as an example of how Finland as an EU member can get drawn into international conflicts, regardless of its own intentions. The Finns Party has also been critical of possible economic sanctions against Russia, arguing that they would be more harmful for Finland than for most other EU member states and emphasising the importance of maintaining good bilateral relations with Russia.⁸

Last but not least, the Finns Party is to some extent a victim of its own success. After the party's unprecedented electoral triumph in 2011, almost all Finnish parties have adopted more critical views on specific aspects of the European integration process, adapting their rhetoric accordingly.⁹ Consequently, the Finns Party's recent attempts to depict other parties, particularly the Centre Party and the National Coalition Party as federalists, sounded rather hollow. At the same time, surveys suggest that Finnish voter support for Finland's membership of the EU and the euro has remained somewhat stable throughout the crisis.¹⁰ This has given the mainstream parties – all of which remain principally pro-European – more confidence to challenge the Finns Party and to demand concrete alternatives to the policies it opposes. As a result, the Finns Party is, in contrast to the period right before and shortly after the 2011 Finnish parliamentary election, no longer able to solely dominate and steer the EU debate in Finland.

From Eurosceptics to EU critics?

As the political environment has changed, significant developments have taken place within the Finns Party itself as well. At last year's party conference, Chairman Soini declared that his main goal was to lead the party into the next Finnish government. To underline his determination, Soini announced that he would not run in this year's EP elections, concentrating on domestic politics instead.¹¹ On the one hand, the desire to assume a seat at the government table reflects the growing ambitions within the Finns Party and its leadership. On the other hand, it is arguably also a reaction to the party's declining ability to influence Finnish EU policy from the ranks of the opposition and by shaping public opinion.

In order to gear up for government duties, the Finns Party has recently moderated its views on and above all its rhetoric towards the EU, as participation in any Finnish government would require the party to move closer to the mainstream parties' EU policies. Tellingly, at the very same party conference where Soini announced his intention to take the party into the government, the Finns Party also discussed its position towards Finland's membership in the eurozone. In the end, no clear position was defined, with the party's sole MEP Sampo Terho simply stating that the Finns Party is not committed to the euro, but would not actively support a Finnish eurozone exit either.¹²

The Finns Party's election manifesto for this year's EP elections continued in a similar vein, attempting to shed the protest party image and instead portraying the party as an EU-critical reform party.¹³ The manifesto applauded David Cameron's proposal for a thorough reform of the EU as well as the Dutch government's idea to roll back the EU's powers in certain policy areas. It also criticised the rescue packages and all related policy measures, such as the European Stability Mechanism, the two-pack and the six-pack. The manifesto did not, however, demand that Finland leave the EU or the eurozone, culminating in the statement that there should be "less, but better EU". In the same way, the Finns Party has tried to temper its members' comments on migration and asylum policy. However, it

⁸ Timo Soini's statement in the Finnish Parliament on 12 March 2014 (<http://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/news/perussuomalaiset-suomi-tukee-ukrainassa-neuvotteluratkaisua/>).

⁹ See Jokela and Korhonen, op. cit.

¹⁰ Ilkka Haavisto, *Neljäs Suomi – EVAn Arvo- ja asennetutkimus 2014*, Taloustieto Oy, 24 March 2014 (<http://www.eva.fi/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Neljas-Suomi.pdf>).

¹¹ Olli Pohjanpalo, "Soini tähtää pääministeriksi 2015", *Helsingin Sanomat*, 30 June 2013.

¹² Miska Rantanen, "Eurovaalikeskustelusta puuttui roihu", *Helsingin Sanomat*, 1 July 2013.

¹³ *Perussuomalaisten EU-vaaliohjelma* (<http://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/EU-vaaliohjelma.pdf>).

has to be noted that the most popular candidate of the party by far in the EP elections was MP Jussi Halla-aho, who has made a name for himself as one of the Finns Party's primary immigration critics.

The gradual move of the Finns Party towards the more moderate EU-critic camp was sealed after the EP elections, as the party decided to leave the Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD) group headed by the UK Independence Party, instead joining the British Tories in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group. Membership in the bigger and significantly more cohesive ECR group will certainly open up a new channel of influence for the Finns Party; something that could benefit the party on the domestic stage as well. That being said, the backlash the move has provoked in the European press¹⁴ has most likely come as a surprise to the party.

Conclusion

While many Eurosceptic parties in Europe achieved historical successes in this year's EP elections, the Finns Party has had to face difficult questions and choices for a while now. In the long term, the crucial question is how the developments currently taking place within the party will affect its role within the Finnish, and European, political landscape. Will the more moderate incarnation of the Finns Party fare as well with protest voters and Eurosceptic hardliners as the Finns Party's previous embodiment as an anti-establishment protest party did? Is the party able to attract new support?

It already seems clear that the competition for potential Finns Party voters will become stiffer. In the EP elections, the Centre Party successfully challenged the Finns Party by running both EU insider Olli Rehn and well-known Eurosceptic Paavo Väyrynen as candidates at the same time. The Social Democratic Party, for its part, recently elected the plain-speaking trade unionist Antti Rinne as its new chairman. The choice suggests that the party is seriously trying to lure back some of the blue-collar voters it lost to the Finns Party. Meanwhile, the Finns Party itself is still very reliant on Chairman Soini, with no credible successor or challenger in sight.

The next Finnish parliamentary elections, scheduled to take place in April 2015, will be a litmus test for the Finns Party, showing whether the strategic adjustments the party has made start to pay off. So far, polls suggest that the Finns Party would retain its place among Finland's biggest parties.¹⁵ However, the polls did overestimate the party's support prior to the EP elections. In the end, much will also depend on what happens in Europe and the wider world in the months before the elections. A renewed worsening of the eurozone crisis – perhaps even just a concrete proposal for a further rescue package for Greece – could see the Finns Party's popularity soar once again. However, if the party really wants to pursue the moderate course it has now embarked upon, it will have to word its messages more carefully – not an easy task for a party with such a strong protest tradition.

¹⁴ Alex Barker, "MEPs with criminal records join Tories' Eurosceptic group", *Financial Times*, 4 June 2014.

¹⁵ In the latest poll of the Finnish public broadcasting company YLE the Finns Party ranks third with 18.9% of the vote.

About EPIN

EPIN is a network of European think tanks and policy institutes with members in almost every member state and candidate country of the European Union. It was established in 2002 during the constitutional Convention on the Future of Europe. Then, its principal role was to follow the works of the Convention. More than 30 conferences in member states and candidate countries were organised in the following year.

With the conclusion of the Convention, CEPS and other participating institutes decided to keep the network in operation. EPIN has continued to follow the constitutional process in all its phases: (1) the intergovernmental conference of 2003-2004; (2) the ratification process of the Constitutional Treaty; (3) the period of reflection; and (4) the intergovernmental conference of 2007. Currently, EPIN follows (5) the ratification process of the Lisbon Treaty and – should the treaty enter into force – (6) the implementation of the Treaty.

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