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'Finnish politics has experienced an enormous shift to the right'

Kristina Birke Daniels on Sanna Marin's electoral loss and the difficulty of forming a government in Finland

On Sunday, Finland's youngest-ever Prime Minister, Sanna Marin, and her Social Democrats lost the election. Although the party made gains, it ended up only in third place. As a consequence, Marin has even stepped down as lead of her party. Was it perhaps also because of her?

In Finland, the prime minister's party has managed to increase its share of the vote on only two previous occasions. Generally, incumbents have always lost the elections. For a while, it seemed that Sanna Marin might break that rule, as she was the most popular prime minister in 30 years and by far the most popular of the three candidates. But the Social Democrats' gain in support and their resulting three new seats in parliament were not enough to make them the largest party.

There's no denying that, as a person, the 'Finnish rock star prime minister' is polarising. Everything that progressives and left-wingers love about the Social Democrat, conservatives hate. She is a young, left-wing woman who repeatedly breaks with traditional role models in politics. That made her a good projection surface for accusations of everything – from lack of seriousness to drug use. It bordered on slander when old allegations were dredged up again, despite the clearing up of supposed scandals during the election campaign. However, Finland elects parties and not the prime minister, so the question is why the other parties did better.

Why was it not enough for the Social Democrats?

Although Finland was already among the most conservative of the five Nordic countries, with this election, Finnish politics has experienced an enormous shift to the right. The right-wing populist, nationalist 'Finns Party' was already part of a government in 2015. However, the fact that with 20.1 per cent, they narrowly missed first place by just

0.7 per cent is worrying. Especially because the party first radicalised and then split while it was in government, and it is now its more radical part that is experiencing an upswing.

What were the issues that enabled the National Coalition Party (NCP) to win the election?

Surprisingly, with supposedly tired old recipes: the National Coalition Party wants to reduce the national debt by € six bn in eight years and this austerity program is to be accompanied by tax cuts. The issue of national debt is a traditional topic of Finnish elections – conservatives, economists and journalists keep pushing it. In reality, at 70.8 per cent, the debt is below the EU average and only slightly above that of Germany (67 per cent). However, the Eurobarometer shows that the Finnish population greatly fears an economic decline. For many, the economic downturn and inflation in the worst energy crisis since the 1970s, as well as the uncertainties about how the many crises will play out, raise the question as to whether and how the Finnish welfare model will remain sustainable.

How did the right-wing forces manage to gain so much support?

Riikka Purra, the leader of the Finns Party, was the biggest electoral magnet. She even received the most votes in the election, ahead of Sanna Marin. She is quiet, reserved and intellectual and in recent years has repositioned her party in economic terms and made it more conservative. For example, for the past two years, she has been working towards a rapprochement with the conservatives, for which they rewarded her during the election campaign by offering her a coalition. While her party was formerly quite strong in rural Finland, it is now aiming towards the centre of society. Moreover, one of its former leaders is a trained expert on Ukraine who succeeded in reversing his radical image thanks to media attention to his expertise.

Through the targeted use of social media, especially TikTok, the Finns Party managed to convince many first-time voters. The fact that they didn't even have a party platform didn't seem to matter to 20 per cent of the population. Overall, the Finns Party provides supposedly simple answers to the complex political challenges of our time and promises the welfare state for everyone born in Finland. At the same time, the Finns Party offers up the discourse that 'we don't want to live with criminal gangs and overburdened public services like our neighbouring country Sweden', and stirs up fears of a supposed 'population exchange', the fighting words of the New Right. They were successful in this, although the proportion of Finns with a migrant background is very low and there is an urgent need for skilled

workers.

How did joining NATO shortly before the election affect the result?

Elections are won with promises for the future and the will to shape things. Although security was among the top 10 priorities of the population, Sanna Marin's achievement in this matter was already a *fait accompli*.

The previous government alliance consisted of five parties. Finding a majority will also be difficult this time: especially since the Finns Party has gained strength. What alliances are likely now?

According to the analysis of one observer, NCP leader Petteri Orpo's options dwindle the closer you look at them – and most of them are bad for him anyway. He will probably first consider a conservative majority before negotiating with the Social Democrats. That means he will start by getting the Finns Party on board – even if there are substantive differences between the two on labour migration and their views on climate protection. On both of these issues, the Finns Party has an obstructionist attitude. In order for this coalition to have a majority, however, it would still have to win over the black sheep of the previous government, the agrarian-liberal Centre Party. In that case they would have a comfortable majority of 117 seats. The Centre Party did not fit politically into the last coalition and, thus, for the second time in a row, they experienced a devastating election result. Their party leader has announced that she is joining the opposition. Of course, this may be an attempt to drive up its price as a coalition partner.

Although the Conservatives have other ideologically allied, smaller conservative and liberal parties to choose from, they are vehemently opposed to a coalition with the Finns Party. Their list of demands is probably too long for the right wing to accept.

If it is not possible to form a government with the Finns Party, the other major option is to involve social democracy. Then it will be more difficult in economic policy but easier on many other issues. This could bring Finland forward in urban development, for example. However, for this to happen, the Centre Party would have to be back on board.

There are a few more options, but relations within the new governing coalition are likely to remain 'complicated' for the next several months. We will know what to expect from Petteri Orpo as the new head of government only once he has managed to form a majority.

This interview was conducted by Lisa Felgendreff.



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