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‘We must adapt to a new reality without abandoning what makes us Social Democrats’

Miia Järvi reflects on the success of Finland’s Social Democratic Party and the lessons it holds for others across Europe

In European social democracy, there is a perceived trade-off between security and defence on the one hand and social policy and the welfare state on the other. Yet Finnish Social Democrats (SDP) have supported NATO membership, stronger defence capabilities and a more security-focused Europe since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Has Finland recognised something that other Social Democrats have been reluctant to accept – that security is also a core social democratic issue?

> Finland is in a unique position geographically. We share a 1 300-kilometre border with Russia, and Finns place a very high value on security. In recent years, it has become impossible for anyone, including Social Democrats, to ignore that reality. For us, the challenge has been to find the right balance. Security is essential, but so are the issues that have traditionally defined social democracy: education, healthcare, social protection and equal opportunities. Unlike conservatives, we do not see these priorities as competing with each other.
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> The changing security environment has required us to rethink some long-held assumptions. NATO is a good example. We had to reassess positions that had existed for decades. That was not easy, but it was necessary. At the same time, we wanted to remain true to our core values. The task has been to adapt to a new reality without abandoning what makes us Social Democrats.

Let us turn to migration and the welfare state. The SDP programme argues that Finland needs labour migration because of demographic decline. At the same time, migration must be managed and integration must work. How do you strike the balance between openness and

control?

It is important to understand the Finnish context. For the past three years, Finland has been governed by a coalition of conservatives and the Finns Party. Immigration has been one of the central issues in political debate, and the government has pursued a more restrictive approach. These discussions have forced all parties to think carefully about where the balance should lie.

What many people in Finland now agree on is that successful integration requires clear expectations. If someone wants to make Finland their permanent home, learning Finnish or Swedish – our national languages – is essential. Language is the key to participating fully in society, finding employment and becoming part of the community. Of course, there are different situations. Someone who comes to Finland for a few years to work in a technology company faces different circumstances. But for those who want to settle permanently, language matters.

We also look closely at experiences in neighbouring countries, particularly Sweden. There are developments there that we want to learn from and, in some cases, avoid repeating. That has influenced the debate in Finland. At the same time, we remain convinced that Finland needs immigration. Demographic trends are clear. The challenge is not choosing between migration and control. It is ensuring that migration is managed in a way that supports both economic needs and social cohesion. At the same time, we must prevent labour-related exploitation and to ensure that collective agreements are complied.

For many years, the Finns Party was one of Europe's most successful right-wing populist parties. Yet its support has recently declined. Why?

I think the main reason is that the party has now spent three years in government, and people have seen the results. The government has implemented a strongly conservative agenda. It has introduced labour-market reforms, reduced social security, pursued tax policies that primarily benefit higher-income groups and adopted measures that have had negative consequences for many women.

As a result, many voters have concluded that these policies do not serve ordinary working people. That is particularly significant because the Finns Party was successful in attracting support from workers. Many of those voters believed the party represented their interests. Today, more people are questioning that assumption. They see that the party is not particularly interested in labour rights or in protecting workers. I believe that is the main reason for its declining support.

From a German perspective, there is an ongoing debate about whether right-wing populist parties become 'normalised' once they enter government. Has that happened in Finland?

In some respects, yes. The Finns Party has participated in government before, so this is not entirely new. But Social Democrats have been very clear that we will not govern with them. At the same time, governing changes parties. The current government has implemented many policies that conservatives have wanted for a long time. Even Prime Minister Petteri Orpo said recently they had done the most conservative politics. That experience has revealed much more clearly what the Finns Party stands for in practice. However, I would not say that the party has fundamentally changed its views. The hard-line positions on immigration remain. The more radical elements are still there. What has changed is that voters can now judge the party by its record in government rather than by its promises in opposition.

Many European Social Democrats are asking themselves how to win back voters who have drifted towards right-wing populist parties. What does the Finnish experience suggest?

One lesson is that these voters are not motivated by only one issue. As I said, the Finns Party had gained votes among workers. Many of those voters believed the party would defend their interests. After three years in government, however, labour-market reforms and cuts to social security have led many to question that belief. The lesson for Social Democrats is not that we should imitate right-wing populists. It is that we must offer credible answers to people's everyday concerns – jobs, wages, security and public services. When politics becomes concrete, voters also become more interested in what parties actually do, not just what they say.

Across Europe, Social Democrats are grappling with insecurity, migration, ageing societies and the rise of populism. Looking at Finland's experience over the past decade, what lessons might German Social Democrats draw from it?

Social Democratic parties must constantly ask themselves how society is changing, what challenges lie ahead and what kind of future they want to build. We need a clear vision, whether we are in government or opposition. But we also need practical answers to the problems people face today – rising prices, economic uncertainty or concerns about jobs and public services. Politics cannot be purely reactive. Parties need both immediate responses and a longer-term vision.

At the same time, recent years have shown that Social Democrats must be willing to revise their positions when circumstances change

dramatically. Finland's NATO debate is a good example. For decades, our position was different. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we spent a year discussing whether Finland should join the alliance. We organised discussions across the country, held party events and gave members the opportunity to debate the issue thoroughly.

Ultimately, we concluded that the security environment had changed so fundamentally that Finland also had to change its position. That experience illustrates an important principle. Social Democrats need a balance between long-term ideals and political reality. We must have values, ideas and a vision for the future. But we must also be prepared to adapt when the world changes around us.

This interview was conducted by Philipp Kauppert.



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