

# Denmark and Finland: (not always) a success for the far-right

Nina Liljeqvist and Kristian Voss

30 May 2014

## Finland

Populist and European Union (EU)–critical Finns Party (PS) was expected to pose a serious challenge to the established parties in the Finnish election to the European Parliament last Sunday. Having achieved tremendous success in the national elections in 2011 and continuing to ride high on the Euro-sceptic sentiments this spring, the PS aimed to increase their number of seats in the European Parliament from one to three, with polls having predicted that the party would receive as much as 21% of the votes. However, the Euro-sceptic sensation never happened in Finland. This may be partly explained by the fact that the party did not have a prominent top candidate, or rather, by the fact that this top candidate was not charismatic party leader Timo Soini, who has decided to focus on domestic politics instead. PS did increase their support compared with the 2009 election, scoring 12.9% and consequently gaining one seat, but this result is obviously far from what they were hoping for. Instead, the Finnish electorate favoured established parties in this year's European election. The liberal conservative National Coalition Party (KOK), which is the party of current prime minister Jyrki Katainen, kept its grip on the electorate with 22.6% of the votes, thereby securing the three seats it currently has in the parliament. One explanation for this success is the vote magnet Alexander Stubb, current minister for European affairs and foreign trade, who single-handedly got the party 8.6% of the vote share. Although Finnish elections to the European Parliament do tend to become candidate centred due to the use of open party lists, Stubb's achievement is nonetheless remarkable. As a former Member of the European Parliament (MEP) with a PhD in international politics and a previous career as an EU civil servant, KOK top candidate Stubb has added expertise and know-how to the campaign without making the party overly pro-European. Vis-à-vis European equivalents on

the centre-right, the KOK is rather less pro-Europe, including preferring a freer internal market from bureaucratic red tape and opposing debt sharing and the transformation of the EU into a military alliance.

The four coalition partners of KOK had less of a successful election. The biggest disappointment might be the Social Democrats (SDP), having failed terribly at mobilising its voters, despite taking a pragmatic position insisting on improvements to the EU, including the continuation of free and fair trade and opposing joint liability of cross-country debts, in addition to typical social democratic positions. Expecting to increase its share of votes thanks to a revamped party leadership, the SDP instead lost over 5 percentage points to garner only 12.3%, a disappointing result for a party that averaged 20% of the votes in the 1990s. Despite this, the party managed to secure two seats in parliament. The other coalition party that self-reportedly sits on the centre of the political spectrum, the Green League, also lost several percentage points since 2009, and now enjoys only 9% of the vote share, thereby losing one of its two seats. The situation looks better for the liberal-centrist coalition partner, the Swedish People's Party, which is intensely pro-Europe. Despite low polls this spring, the party managed to hold on to their one seat in the Parliament by securing just under 7% of the votes. The other coalition partner on the right, the Christian Democrats, suffered a bittersweet election as it lost its one seat in the parliament despite increasing its vote share by one percentage point to 5.2%.

The situation is not bleak for all parties of the political centre. Opposition party the Centre (KESK) had an impressive election as it received 19.7% of the votes, thereby easily surpassing both the PS and the SDP. Suffering from internal divisions on the issues of European integration, the party offers voters a homespun mix of pro- and anti-Europe policies. On the one hand, it favours a more practical and pragmatic cooperation with subsidiarity as an important principle, especially for the issue of agriculture. On the other hand, KESK advocates returning the EU to more of its supposed original role as promoting free trade and peace, which is also the rhetoric of many parties expressing elements of Euroscepticism. With this combination of messages, KESK managed to keep up the positive wave the party has been riding lately, as it came fourth in the 2011 general election, third in the recent local election, and now emerges as the second largest Finnish party represented in the European Parliament. In addition, the Left Alliance (V), which left the 'six-pack' cabinet in March, had a remarkable election as it won back votes lost in the 2009 election. With an increase by 3 percentage points, the party now enjoys over 9% of the vote share and one seat in the parliament. Although V leader Merja Kyllönen regrets that the success of the left has happened at the expense of the SDP, as was indeed the case in large parts of Europe, she is satisfied about the party's comeback in the political arena in Finland, as in Europe at large.

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Table 1. Results of the 2014 European Parliament elections – FINLAND

Party	EP Group	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (change from 2009)	Seats (change from 2009 post-Lisbon)	Röster 2009	Platser
National Coalition Party (KOK)	EPP	22.6	3	-0.6	+0	23.2	3
Centre Party (KESK)	ALDE	19.7	3	+0.7	+0	19	3
Finns Party (PS)	EFD	12.9	2	+3.1	+1	9.8	1
Social Democratic Party (SDP)	S&P	12.3	2	-5.2	+0	17.5	2
Green League (VIHR)	G-EFA	9.3	1	-3.1	-1	12.4	2
Left Alliance (V)	GUE-N-GL	9.3	1	+3.4	+1	5.9	0
Swedish People's Party (SFP)	ALDE	6.7	1	+0.6	+0	6.1	1
Christian Democrats (KD)	EPP	5.2	0	+1.0	-1	4.2	1
Others	n/a	2	0	+0.1	+0	1.9	0
<b>Total</b>		<b>98.0</b>	<b>13</b>		<b>-</b>	<b>100</b>	
Turnout (%)		40.9		+0.6			
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)		none					

Note: The 13 seats are distributed in proportional elections, using the open list d'Hondt method, where voters vote for an individual, but the individual's vote is counted primarily for the party and secondarily for the candidate. The entire country is a single electoral constituency without legal threshold.

EP group abbreviations: EPP, European People's Party; S&D, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; ALDE, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; G-EFA, The Greens-European Free Alliance; ECR, European Conservatives and Reformists; GUE-NGL, European United Left-Nordic Green Left; EFD, Europe of Freedom and Democracy; NI, Non-Inscrits.

Cannibalism on the left flank aside, it may be said that the Finnish election contains few political sensations. Despite an absolute loss of votes, the five-party cabinet is performing surprisingly well in a context where the political elite has received a severe bashing from the public. In neighbouring EU member states Sweden and Denmark, government parties performed much worse, and while the left camp in Finland did not do as well as its Swedish colleagues, the real underperformer was the nationalist PS. It is underperforming as three major tendencies in Finnish politics theoretically should have

worked in its favour. First of all, there is a strong Eurosceptic trend in Europe, as indeed in Finland. With six extraparliamentary parties fighting for seats in the European Parliament on the basis of EU critiques, several flavours of Euroscepticism were on the menu. Second, compared with PS's previous election results in the national election in 2011 in which the party experienced a significant success, many expected the PS to maintain this momentum. With national elections usually focused on national issues and not the EU, it did not appear far-fetched to expect the PS to improve in this arena. In addition, the PS campaign has been absent of any overt blunders. Third, the presence of the euro(crisis) should play in their hands. One might therefore think that it would be in Finland that the far-right will advance and not in the Nordic neighbours in the west. Instead, Finnish voters defied this trend and rewarded parties on the centre-right and far-left.

## Denmark

This stands in particular stark contrast to the election results in Denmark, where the far-right Danish People's Party (DF) undoubtedly secured an overwhelming victory to almost double its vote share. With 26.6% of the votes and four of Denmark's 13 seats, DF emerges as the largest Danish party in the European Parliament. Morten Messerschmidt, DF's top candidate and the Danish politician to receive the most personal votes in history, interpreted the victory as follows: 'I see it as a clear indication that the Danes want the EU back on track . . . Around Europe we are some democratic, civilised but EU critical parties . . . who now try to steer back the EU to what it is all about.' For the DF, as for the Swedish Sweden Democrats, the EU is all about the inner market, which they both favour and wish to have full access to. However, the European project becomes uncomfortable when it starts regulating issues that they see as national. Hence, the anti-immigration and pro-law and order DF laments the decline of Danish sovereignty, or the increase in the power of the EU regarding foreign policy, social welfare, or immigration, and particularly views open borders as having led to a significant increase in crime committed by EU citizens from Central and Eastern Europe.

The second largest party is the Social Democrats, party of Prime Minister Helle Thorning Schmidt, and comparably received 19.1% of the votes and three seats, which is a decrease by 2%. This is a disappointing result, but not as disappointing as that of the Liberals, the party of government from 2001 to 2011 that suffered a relatively humiliating decline to 16.7% of the votes and two seats, prompting a lot of soul searching. The Conservative People's Party and Socialist People's Party both presumably lost votes to the DF, respectively

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Table 2. Results of the 2014 European Parliament elections – Denmark

Party	EP Group	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (change from 2009)	Seats (change from 2009)
Danish People's Party (DF)	EFD	26.6	4	+11.3	+2
Social Democrats (S)	S&D	19.1	3	-2.4	-1
Liberals (V)	ALDE	16.7	2	-3.5	-1
Socialist People's Party (SF)	G-EFA	11	1	-4.9	-1
Conservative People's Party (K)	EPP	9.1	1	-3.6	+0
People's Movement against the EU (N)	GUE-N-GL	8.1	1	+0.9	+0
Radical Liberals (RV)	ALDE	6.5	1	+2.2	+1
Liberal Alliance (LA)	NI	2.9	0	+2.3	+0
Total		100	13		-
Turnout (%)		56.4		-1.3	
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)		none			

Note: The d'Hondt method of proportional representation is used. The country is one single constituency.

EP group abbreviations: EPP, European People's Party; S&D, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; ALDE, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; G-EFA, The Greens-European Free Alliance; ECR, European Conservatives and Reformists; GUE-NGL, European United Left-Nordic Green Left; EFD, Europe of Freedom and Democracy; NI, Non-Inscrits.

declining in support to 11% and 9.1% of the votes and one seat each. The only other successful parties included the left-of-centre and government party the Social Liberals and right-of-centre Liberal Alliance, as both increased their vote shares by over 2%. Yet this was only enough for the former to reenter the European Parliament for the first time since the 2004 election. Finally, cross-political People's Movement against the EU managed to maintain its support of over 8% and one seat, although this result pales in comparison with the great successes achieved in elections in the 1980s, as the far-right has taken control of Euroscepticism.

In other words, while established parties are overrun by the far-right in relatively well-off Denmark, we see a different picture in euro crisis-stricken Finland. With a closer look at these cases, however, it is not very surprising. In Denmark, as in probably most European countries, the socioeconomic left-right dimension is increasingly overshadowed by a different dimension, namely, that of the international versus the national. Either you consider Eu-

rope as a possibility or you consider it as a threat. Danish People's Party masters the art of capitalising on this development, whereas traditional parties do not. To this, there is a related evolution regarding how parties cater to voters' Eurosceptic sentiments. There is considerable movement across the left-right spectrum here. In the 1970s, 80s and even 90s, it was the left, or centre-left, in Denmark that provided voters with an EU critical alternative to the pro-European centre and centre-right. The first MEP of the Progress Party, which the Danish People's Party split from in 1995, was Mogens Camre, who was an Member of Parliament (MP) for the Social democrats in the early 1970s and voted against European Community (EC) membership along with several other social democrats. As the European project shifted, however, bringing about change that appealed to the left camp, the opposition against the EU shifted. And voters, and indeed partisans as Camre, followed it over there. With the decline of cross-party People's Movement against the EU, which cooperates with any party on the left-right apart from the far-right, the DF is consequently the most easily perceived alternative for Eurosceptics. But (and that is a big but) here, Euroscepticism is nested in a far-right ideology.

## Conclusion

The comparison of the Danish and Finnish cases tells us that the success of the far-right may be explained by economic factors, noneconomic Euroscepticism, how well the far-right party campaigns, as well as the response of other parties to their presence. Essentially, how mainstream parties answer to the challenge of the far-right plays an important role. In Denmark, other parties have not effectively replied sufficiently to the Eurosceptic views of voters, neither by offering policy options nor by addressing the debate, so the DF remains as either the more genuine or the more distinct regarding Euroscepticism. In Finland, a quite different development has taken place over the last few years. Cognisant of the appeal of the PS and Euroscepticism, the Finnish government has hardened their stance on EU negotiations, such as demanding unanimity for decision making of the European Stability Mechanism and blocking the entry of Rumania and Bulgaria into the Schengen area. That is, as voters' Euroscepticism became clear for anyone to see due to the success of the PS in 2011 national election, the government parties have shifted their stance in national EU policies. It is too early to say if this marks the beginning of a fundamental change in Finnish integration policy, but at least it seems as if this shift towards the EU has absorbed some of the Eurosceptic sentiments, which only three years ago seemed so profuse. Again, this goes to show that the success of Euroscepticism and far-right parties is partially explained by

the nature and degree to which the established parties on the centre-left and centre-right respond. Traditionally thought of as a very homogenous group of countries, this story also indicates how different the political landscapes in the Nordic corner(s) of Europe actually are.

## References

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