European Elections monitor

from Corinne Deloy
Translated by Helen Levy

General Elections in Finland
17th April 2011

Just over 4 million Finns are being called to vote on 17th April next to renew the 200 members of the Eduskunta/Riksdag, the only Chamber in Parliament. 2,200 people are standing in the election. In all 38 outgoing MPs +11 in comparison with the general election on 18th March 2007 + chose not to stand again.

The economy and immigration are due to be the main themes in the upcoming electoral campaign. But undeniably the question at the heart of the election focuses on the result achieved by the “True Finns”.

After Hungary and the Netherlands will Finland be the next country to see a populist party make an electoral breakthrough and even – in the wake of Austria and Slovakia - enter government?

Should we be afraid of the “True Finns”

1. A breakthrough expected

At present the populist party “True Finns” is credited by the latest polls with around 15% of the vote and is due to make an electoral breakthrough on 17th April. Their leader Timo Soini maintains that he can win 15 seats in Parliament ie +10 at present. This result (constantly rising since the start of 2010) should enable his party to take part in negotiations to form the next government.

Timo Soini said he was interested in the Economy, Employment, Interior and Defence portfolios. “The meaning and aim of a political party is to enter government to exercise power. This is also our goal,” he declared.

Apart from the Greens, Timo Soini said he was ready to cooperate with all political parties. “The Social Democrats, the Conservative Assembly and the Centre Party are possible government partners, I have no preference,” he said. However he has set one condition for any participation by his government: the scrapping of a clause in the Constitution that stipulates that Finland is a member of the European Union (the text has just been approved by the Parliament 144 votes in favour, 26 against but which still has to be approved by a 2/3 majority in the next Parliament if it is to be finally adopted). “Belonging to the EU must not be protected by the Constitution,” repeats Timo Soini. This condition may prove to be a serious obstacle: constitutional reform is the focus of a consensus amongst the Finnish political parties.

The idea of a cordon sanitaire (an alliance of government parties that aim to prevent an extremist party entering office) does not exist in Finland. “The True Finns may take part in the next government like the Social Democratic Party and the Centre Party,” declared Jyrki Katainen, leader of the Conservative Assembly and present Finance Minister. Prime Minister Mari Kiviniemi also said on 3rd March last that she was “ready to cooperate in government with any political party with whom she might find an agreement on a government programme,” and that “she did not exclude cooperation with the “True Finns”.

The Rural Party (SMP) which gave rise to the “True Finns” also participated in the Finnish governments from 1983 to 1990.

People who vote for “True Finns” are divided over which party they would prefer to see in government: 48% approve of an alliance with the Centre Party and 49% with the Social Democratic party depending on the poll.

Another sign of acknowledgement which the party enjoys is that on 31st March Timo Soini will appear in a pre-electoral TV debate that had been reserved until now for the “3 major parties” organised by the national channel Yle.
2. Who are the “True Finns” in fact?
The party is undeniably populist in nature: it criticises the elites believed to be incompetent, corrupt and deaf to the problems of the people; it challenges the established order and exalts the people; it promotes everything national and is hostile with regard to the EU and globalisation; it is determined to restrict or stop immigration from poor countries and rejects multi-ethnic society denounced as the cause of social dysfunction.
The “True Finns” have thrived on the political parties’ financial scandals, the denunciation of the government’s European policy (notably with regard to the aid granted to Greece and Ireland) and on the question of immigration. They voted against Helsinki’s funding of aid plans to Greece, with which the Social Democratic Party also agreed –traditionally an extremely pro-European party. Timo Soini’s party is asking Helsinki to reduce its contribution to the Union, to place its veto on any increase in the present total of the European Financial Stabilisation Fund and it wants to create a euro area “reserved” for the Member States with an AAA credit rating (for example Finland and Germany). Timo Soini wants to exclude the countries from the southern part of the European Union from the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU).
“Cooperation, yes, but the creation of a Federal State or the United States of Europe, never. I will never vote in support of saving a State,“ he declared.
The “True Finns” are a “workers’ party without the socialism” mixing a leftwing economic programme with a far right social policy. In the Eduskunta/Riksdag they sit in the centre placed between the Greens and the Centre Party. Although across Europe, the populist parties have understood the need to maintain a discourse which is both social and protectionist and to set themselves as defenders of a strong Welfare State, this position is new to the “True Finns” who, like the Rural Party of Veikko Vennamo (aka the Forgotten Party) which they took over from, have always defended the weak, the unemployed, the workers, the excluded, single mothers and small entrepreneurs. They campaign for a strong Welfare State – the only one which is able in its opinion to guarantee the economic security of the weakest citizens. At the beginning of the 2000’s the True Finns were already accusing the left of having abandoned the weakest citizens and campaigned for a hefty reduction in income tax on the lowest wages believing that an increase in purchasing power of the poorest would make it possible to reduce applications for social aid mid-term. Their predecessor the Rural Party was already qualified as “non-socialist leftwing party”. Denouncing immigration as a threat that weighs both on the host country’s identity and on its prosperity, the “True Finns” suggest that social protection should only be offered to nationals and are asking for a reduction in social aid granted to foreigners. “A foreigner with a residence permit is not comparable to a Finn,” declared Timo Soini.
Against marriage between people of the same sex or adoption by homosexual couples, the populist party defends the traditional family that is close to that of the Christian Democratic Party with whom it made an alliance in the most recent European elections on 7th June 2009. The “True Finns” challenged the “Greens” with regard to the issue of homosexual rights which was the focus of public debate in autumn 2010.
The “True Finns” electoral programme that was written by a group of 14 people chaired by Vesa-Matti Saarikkala advocates the defence of an “homogeneous, Finnish culture. “The True Finns have been the best in transforming the public’s scepticism with regard to the issue of immigration into popular support but they are not the only ones to have held a discourse that challenges the reception of populations that come from abroad,” declares political analyst Jussi Foerbom. The party has made the presence of some 10,000 Somali refugees is the focus of political debate. It refuses however to be qualified as racist whilst it recalls that immigrants must respect the laws of the country where they live. “I feel extremely offended when my party and myself are qualified as racist. It is an unfair opinion which goes against what I believe in,” says Timo Soini. Finland was homogeneous for a long time welcoming people from neighbouring countries (Sweden, Estonia). The country now hosts 155,000 people who were born abroad ie 3% of its total population, the lowest proportion in the entire EU.
“The vote in support of the True Finns is a protest vote. The government parties seem disconnected from reality. People want someone to listen to them and take them seriously,” indicates the sociology professor Risto Heiskala. The “True Finns” are not part of the far right tradition as represented by the Austrian Liberal Party (FPÖ) or the French National Front (FN). Although the personality of
Timo Soini is a key element of his party’s success (few of its executives are known to the public), he is not a leader comparable to Jörg Haider, Jean-Marie Le Pen or Geert Wilders (Freedom Party, PVV) in the Netherlands. The “True Finns” do not share the rejection of Islam with the latter either. "Compared to the European far right, the party’s rhetoric is much more conciliatory," says Mikka Pyykkonon, professor at the University of Jyväskyläe.

The “True Finns” attract voters from all of the other political parties. According to Jari Pajunen, Research Director at the Taloustutkimus Institute, out of 100 “True Finn” voters 50 have already voted for this party, 10 were former Centre Party voters, 10 former Social Democrat proponents, 8 from the conservative assembly, 5 from the Left Alliance and 17 had not voted until now. 2/3 of its electorate are poorly qualified men, victims of factory closures and people who have lost their job in the wake of the economic crisis.

3. An irresistible rise?
The breakthrough of the “True Finns” comprised the event in the most recent local elections on 26th October 2008. The populist party won 5.4% of the vote (442 local councillors) but 10% of the vote (+9 in comparison with the previous election) in Vantaa, a suburb of Helsinki and six seats. They also won four council seats in Helsinki. “The nightmare has arrived here,” analysed political expert Tuomo Martikainen at the time who added “people are dissatisfied and deplore the fact that some serious problems are not being settled.” “Xenophobia is now organised affair in Finland” says Pasi Saukkonen, a researcher at the Foundation for Cultural Policy adding that for a long time Finland had been an anomaly in Europe because of the weakness of its far right.

The populist party confirmed its European Election result of 7th June 2009 in which it won 9.8% of the vote thereby becoming Finland’s fourth most important party. As in the local elections, Timo Soini was the candidate to have won the greatest number of votes in that election.

The Affair of Political Party Funding and the Fall of Matti Vanhanen

The affair of political party funding ended in the resignation of the Prime Minister (2003-2010) Matti Vanhanen (KESK) in June 2010. It started in April 2008 when the media revealed that businessmen (builders of shopping centres or industrial estates) had financed at least 53 political leaders mainly from the Centre Party and the Conservative Assembly; nearly all of them were elected and 7 became ministers. On 27th January 2007 ie two months before the general elections the press revealed that the head of government Matti Vanhanen had organised a meeting on electoral funding in which the secretary of the Centre Party, Jarmo Korhonen and leaders of the company Nova Group took part. The newspapers revealed that Arto Merisalo (Nova Group), the leader of the group of businessmen was in contact with Matti Vanhanen as the government was being put together and in which he managed to secure posts for his favourites. The Prime Minister who said he did not know these businessmen found himself at the heart of the scandal. He was accused by the opposition of having benefitted from illegal funding for his general election campaign on 17th March 2007; the State TV channel Yle accused him of having received aid in kind for himself. Several members of his party were also involved in the scandal and accused of having received money from the Nova Group. In August the press made further revelations whereby the Conservative Assembly was said to have received 75,000 € (as well as a second payment of 50,000€) from Björn Walhroos, General Director and Administrator of the Insurance Group Sampo – which is 14% owned by the Finnish State. Other companies partly owned by the State then said they had made donations to several political parties. Already under fire Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen was accused of having infringed the law by taking part in the decision to grant subsidies of around one million € to the association Raha-automaattiyhdistys (Ray) between 2006 and 2009. This organisation holds a monopoly over the casinos and one-armed bandits in Finland and devotes some of its profits to social organisations including the Centre Party’s foundation Nuorisöäätiö, which funded Matti Vanhanen’s campaign in the presidential election to a total of 23,000€ on 15th and 29th January 2006. The head of government defended himself saying he had committed no crime and said he refused “to take the blame for practices that had been in use for years.” Antti Kaikkonen, chair of the Nuorisöäätiö Foundation
and MP for the Centre Party resigned from his post, with Jukka Vihriälä, chair of the Ray Association and MP for the same party followed suit in September 2009. Matti Vanhanen finally resigned as chair of the Centre Party (12th June 2010) then from his post as Prime Minister (22nd June) officially because he was about to undergo an operation on his leg. He was replaced in this two posts by Mari Kiviniemi. The latter was elected as head of the Centre Party in the second round of voting with 56% of the votes ahead of Trade and Industry Minister, Mauri Pekkarinen (44% of the vote). The Constitutional Affairs Committee, responsible for looking into the cogency of the accusation against Matti Vanhanen, (which could lead to the launch of a preliminary inquiry by the Chancellor and the Prime Minister’s appearance before the High Court of Justice) recently rejected this question believing that even if the former Prime minister is at the heart of a conflict of interest conditions are not met to take him to the High Court. The financial scandals revealed by the media deeply shocked the Finnish. “People are saying that voting serves no purpose and that money can decide everything. We are the least corrupt country in the world, we are proud of this and yet we still have a great amount of work to do,” analyses Timo Soikkanen, professor of political science at the University of Turku. According to a poll 44% of the Finns believe that Matti Vanhanen has committed some shameful acts and 43% believe he should be brought before the High Court of Justice.

The Start of the Electoral Campaign

Prime Minister Mari Kiviniemi has started work to win back the centrist electorate and notably the rural voters a significant share of whom joined the “True Finns” in the last elections. She is using the results of the work undertaken by her government as a base. Finland entered recession in the second quarter of 2008, in February 2009 Matti Vanhanen’s government launched a recovery plan focused on infrastructures and the support of research and development programmes. After an 8.1% contraction in its GDP in 2009 the country recorded growth of 3.1% in 2010 and is counting on 2.9% this year. Growth is derived from exports that increased by 5.7% in 2010 (with a planned rise of 6.9% in 2011), from domestic consumption (+2.8% in 2010), investments (+3.1% last year and +6% planned in 2011) but also the because of the rise in industrial production. The State deficit decreased by 10 billion € in 2010 and is due to decrease by a further 8 billion € this year. Two points overshadow these results however: the unemployment rate (11.8% in January) is still high and the inflation rate (3% in January 2011) which is due to rise to 2.4% this year. The tax system is one of the vital issues of the pre-electoral debate. The Centre Party and the Conservative Assembly support a rise in VAT (except on food and medicines) and a reduction in business tax, two measures which the Social Democratic Party and more widely the parties on the left are against. Moreover the conservatives want to reduce income tax contrary to the centrists. The issue of the obligatory teaching of Swedish, an official language in the country’s schools since 1919 just like Finnish has now entered the debate. Finland is home to 275,000 Swedish speakers ie 5.5% of the population who mainly live on the country’s south and west coasts. They are the descendants of Swedish settlers who colonised the provinces of Uusimaa, Turunmaa and Ostrobothnia from the 12th century on. This minority has its own education system (ranging from nursery school to university) and media. Moreover programmes in Swedish represent a tenth of airtime on two State TV channels (Yle). Most Swedish speakers traditionally vote for the Swedish People’s Party. Prime Minister Mari Kiviniemi has suggested the replacement of Swedish with Russian lessons in the schools in the East of Finland. Nils Torvalds, the Deputy Chair of the Swedish People’s Party suggested that the obligatory teaching of Swedish be abandoned in schools. The “True Finns” are the only ones to ask for the total abolition of the obligatory lessons in Swedish and the reduction in programmes in Swedish on State television. Finland is also home to 8,000 Sami 1,000 of whom live in the Helsinki area (they also represent half of the inhabitants of the communities of Inari, Utsjoki and Sodankylä). This minority enjoys cultural and linguistic autonomy and has elected a parliament of 21 members (with a four year mandate) since 1996. The Sami feel that they are not acknowledged by the Finnish government as they are by the Norwegian and Swedish authorities, countries in which their population is far greater than in Finland (80,000 and 20,000 respectively).
Finally the Aland Islands, an archipelago that lies between Finland and Sweden is home to a population of 25,000 Swedish speakers who have enjoyed a specific administrative status of Free Associated State since 12th October 1951. The islands’ institutions legislate in education, healthcare, security, culture etc. In 1995 the EU granted the demilitarised area of Aland a dispensation to remain out of the EU customs union. Since 1922 they have had their own government and parliament (Alands lagting or Lagtinget) which comprises 30 MPs. The Aland Islands constituency has just one seat in the Eduskunta/Riksdag.

The Finnish Political System

The Eduskunta/Riksdag, (the Finnish and Danish names for the Parliament) comprises 200 MPs elected every four years by proportional voting according to the Hondt method. Finland is divided into 15 constituencies. The number of MPs elected depends on the number of inhabitants in each of the latter (except in the Aland Islands which elect just one representative); at each election the number of citizens in each constituency is divided by the country’s total population and the result obtained is then multiplied by 199 to achieve the number of MPs elected per constituency. In 2007 this number varied between 6 (North Karelia and South Savonia, both lying to the east of the country) to 34 (Uusimaa). Finnish voters choose both a party and a candidate. A specific feature of this country is that there is no electoral threshold to be able to enter Parliament. This might have complicated the Swedish minority’s representation and even deprive the Swedish People’s Party of electing any MP at all.

Candidates are appointed by the political parties or by electoral associations. To take part in the general elections a party has to collate a minimum of 5,000 citizens’ signatures in order to be registered by the Interior Ministry. Voters associations who want to stand have to have at least 100 members. If the number of candidates appointed by local branches of a political party rises above the number of candidates it is allowed to put forward, the electoral law obliges it to organise primary elections. Finally the Eduskunta/Riksdag includes 80 women ie 40% of the total number of MPs. With regard to the number of women in parliament Finland lies 3rd in the European ranking (and 7th on a world scale) behind Sweden, 45%, and the Netherlands 40.7%. It is the leading country of the 27 EU Member States with regard to women’s inclusion in government.

Moreover Finland is specific in that it is governed by two women at present. The President of the Republican Tarja Halonen (Social Democratic Party, SDP) was re-elected in 2006 (date of the 100th anniversary of voting rights and eligibility for Finnish women, the first to have won these rights in Europe) and Prime Minister Mari Kiviniemi (KESK), in office since 22nd June 2010. Her government brings together the Centre Party, the Conservative Assembly, the Greens and Swedish People’s Party. The government comprises 13 ministries and a maximum of 18. The MPs appointed to the ministries retain their seat in Parliament and thereby have two mandates.

8 political parties are represented at present in the Eduskunta/Riksdag:
- the Centre Party (KESK), of Prime Minister Mari Kiviniemi, successor to the Agrarian Party founded in 1906; it lies to the right of the political scale. The KESK has taken part in nearly half of the governments (34 out of 68) and has 51 seats;
- the Conservative Assembly (KOK), is a party that was founded in 1918. It has been led since June 2004 by the present Finance minister Jyrki Katainen, who has often been compared to the present Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt (Moderate Assembly Party, M). The KOK has 50 MPs;
- the Social Democrat Party (SPD), created in 1899 under the name of the Workers’ Party of Finland has been led since June 2005 by Jutta Urpilainen has 45 MPs.
- the Left Alliance (VAS), a party lying on the far left of the political scale was founded in 1990 and was the successor to the Democratic League of the Finnish People (SKDL) and the Communist Party (SKP), it is led by Paavo Arhinmäki and has 17 seats;
- the Greens (VIHR), led by present Labour Minister Anni Sinnemäki; it has 15 seats;
- the Swedish People’s Party (SFP), represents the interests of the Swedish minority and is led by Stefan Wallin with 9 seats;
- the Christian Democrat Party (SKL), founded in 1958 and led by Päivi Räsänen. It has 7 seats;
- the True Finns (PS) arose from the Rural Party (SMP)
in 1995; the latter was created by Veikko Vennamo in 1959. Led by Timo Soini it won five seats in the general elections on 17th March 2008 but now has six since it was joined mid-term by Centre Party MP Markku Uusipaavalniemi.

For nearly 30 years three parties almost equal in size have shared 2/3 of the votes in the national Finnish elections in a balanced manner.

According to the latest poll by the institute Taloustutkimus and published by the TV channel Yle, the Conservative Assembly is due to win the election on 17th April with 20.9% of the vote ahead of the Centre Party which has suffered because of the funding scandal (several of its members have been charged in this affair), and which is due to win 18.9% of the vote and the Social Democratic Party 17.5%. These three parties are however under threat from the “True Finns” credited with 16.9% of the vote (the party won 5% of the voting intentions in the summer of 2008 and 10% in May 2010). There are still a great number of undecided voters however and there will therefore be decisive in terms of the election result. Around 65% of Finns say they will turn out to vote.

More than a quarter of Finns (28%) want to see the leader of the Conservative Assembly Jyrki Katainen appointed as Prime Minister, 22% want the present head of government Mari Kiviniemi to stay in office, 14% approve of Timo Soini and finally 8% would like Social Democrat Jutta Urpilainen to be appointed to this post.
Reminder of the Election Results on 18th March 2007 in Finland

Turnout: 67.90%

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<th>Political Parties</th>
<th>No of votes won</th>
<th>% of votes won</th>
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