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## FINLAND'S NEW PRESIDENT

**AFTER 56 YEARS, A CONSERVATIVE  
IS ONCE AGAIN HEADING THE REPUBLIC**

*Andreas M. Klein*

Finland has a new President. Sauli Niinistö, the candidate of the national-conservative Coalition Party (Kansallinen Kokoomus), who went into the second round as the favourite, triumphed over Pekka Haavisto from the Green League (Vihreä liito) with a clear margin of 62.4 compared to 37.4 per cent of the votes. The competition for the highest office of the Republic of Finland was observed with great interest by the rest of Europe, seeing that the country had recently made headlines mainly on account of the relatively good results of the Eurosceptic True Finns (Perussuomalaiset) at the parliamentary elections last year. The fact that two staunch pro-EU proponents, Niinistö and Haavisto, made it into the final round can certainly be viewed as an indication of the Finns' loyalty to Europe. Timo Soini, Chairman of the True Finns, was eliminated in the first round, having placed fourth with 9.4 per cent behind Niinistö, Haavisto and the Centre Party candidate Paavo Väyrynen. Back in the parliamentary elections in April 2011 he had led his national-populist protest movement to third place with 19 per cent of the votes.

It was a disappointing election result for the Social Democrats (Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue, SDP), who had sent a doyen of Finnish social democracy into the race in the person of Paavo Lipponen, Finland's Prime Minister for many years (1995-2003). With just 6.7 per cent and a sobering fifth place, Lipponen was eliminated in the very first round. After two terms in office, the Social Democrat incumbent Tarja Halonen was not eligible to run again, and she handed over the reins of office to her successor on 1 March.

What initially reads like ordinary daily news about an impending change in personnel at the highest office of a European country merits closer scrutiny when one considers the change in political colour at the Presidentinlinna, the President's official residence. During the first round of the presidential election, on 22 January, the public TV broadcaster YLE reported the following on a Twitter post: During a car journey with her parents, a young girl had asked the question: "Are men also allowed to run for President of Finland?" Certainly a justified objection from a youngster considering the 12 years Tarja Halonen held the office. In view of three decades of Social Democrat heads of state in Finland, one might also ask: "Is it possible for the President to be something other than a Social Democrat?"

**During a car journey with her parents, a young girl had asked the question: "Is a man actually allowed to be President of Finland?"**

With Sauli Niinistö, it is not only a male politician, but also a conservative, who is moving into the Presidential Palace. For the first time since Juho Kusti Paasikivi (1946-1956) and for the third time ever in the history of the independent Finnish State since 1917, the head of state emerges from the ranks of the conservative Kokoomus party. There was one intervening period of 26 years with legendary President Urho Kekkonen from the Centre Party in office (1956-1982) and a 30-year social democratic period with office holders Mauno Koivisto (1982-1994), Martti Ahtisaari (1994-2000) and Tarja Halonen (2000-2012). This means that with Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen and President Sauli Niinistö there are two conservative party representatives at the head of independent Finland for the first time in the republic's history.

## **WEAKNESS OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY**

Even though the dominance of the Social Democratic Party in Finland has never been comparable to the social democratic movements in the neighbouring Nordic countries of Sweden and Denmark, five Social Democrat Prime Ministers and close to 40 years' participation in government since the end of the war indicate a high level of effective political influence during the past six decades. Signs of the SDP's progressive loss of power were already emerging during the parliamentary elections in 2007, when the party achieved its worst result in 45 years with 21.4 per cent. And things

deteriorated even further during the elections last April with 19.2 per cent. It was only the weakness of the other two major parties Kokoomus and Keskusta (Centre Party), which were not able to form a coalition government, and

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the upsurge of the True Finns, who did not want to form a government with anybody, which allowed the SDP to take a seat at the cabinet table of Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen at all. Ever since, the SDP, and most notably their chairperson Finance Minister Jutta Urpilainen, have sought to hone their social democratic profile in the six-party coalition nicknamed "Six-Pack".

To face a conservative opponent who has not questioned the achievements of the Finnish welfare state for a long time and three direct competitors – the Left Alliance, the True Finns and, with some reservations, the Green League – all vying for the traditionally social democratic blue-collar vote, is no easy task. The decades-long tradition of grand coalitions with sometimes four or more parties has resulted in a broad consensus in central policy areas. In no other country in the world is there less corruption and such a relatively high standard of living, and in no other country have equal opportunities been implemented across social strata and genders as effectively as in Finland – acclaimed the "best country in the world" in 2010 by the U.S. magazine *Newsweek*.<sup>1</sup> Today, none of the leading parties question the Finnish social and welfare model with free access to schooling and university education, free healthcare and a close-knit social network for the weakest members of society. And the demographic challenges facing the Social Democratic Party, whose members are on average just over 60 years old, has recently been illustrated conspicuously by Lipponen running for office at the age of 69. While the rejuvenation of the party leadership has been kick-started with the election of then 33-year-old Jutta Urpilainen as chairperson of the Social Democrats in 2008, the opening of the party and purposeful efforts to appeal to younger members are still outstanding. During the presidential election, the fact that the Green League candidate, Pekka Haavisto,

1 | Cf. Adam Clarkson et al., "Interactive Infographic of the World's Best Countries", *Newsweek/The Daily Beast*, <http://thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/08/15/interactive-infographic-of-the-worlds-best-countries> (accessed 21 Mar 2012).

was ahead among young and first-time voters was due in no small measure to vigorous and modern online electioneering.

Haavisto's successful advance to the second round is an indication of the great social changes that have taken place in Finland in recent years. Although the Green League, which was founded in 1987 and achieved around 7.5 per cent of votes in the last parliamentary elections, has since become part of the political establishment, there had previously been no sign of any support with respect to presidential aspirations. Furthermore, the openly gay Pekka Haavisto, who has been living for years in a legally recognised civil partnership with his Latin American partner, was regarded a total outsider, in spite of all the liberal attitudes professed by the Finns. His advancement to the second round therefore came as a surprise.

Only 12 years ago, when then Minister for Foreign Affairs Halonen ran for President for the first time, her relationship with her partner Pentti Arajärvi, with whom she had been living for 15 years, had been subject of public discussions, as was her involvement in the organisation SETA – LGBT Rights in Finland, which she headed when she was a young Member of Parliament. The first period with a woman as head of state has seen a change in the acceptance of equal partnerships. Equal partnerships have been recognised under the law since 2002; same-sex partners have had the right to adopt each other's biological children since 2009. Neither Pekka Haavisto's sexual orientation nor the 29-year age difference between Sauli Niinistö and his second wife played a role in the campaign. Instead, it appeared as if Finnish voters wanted to put the parliamentary elections of April 2011, when Europe was looking apprehensively at the rise of the Eurosceptic True Finns, behind them. As the President's brief now mainly comprises representative tasks subsequent to the constitutional changes implemented in 2000 and the only areas left in which to exert some influence are foreign policy and defence, it seems no coincidence that it came down to the two pro-EU candidates, Haavisto and Niinistö.

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## ROLE OF PRESIDENT

Over the last twenty years, Finland's political system has been changed from a semi-presidential to a "three-quarters parliamentary"<sup>2</sup> form of government, where the President is restricted to only a few executive tasks, such as acting as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. The new definition of the presidential powers was influenced on the one hand by various challenges in the area of foreign policy after the breakup of the Soviet Union and Finland's entry into the European Union, and on the other hand by greater stability in domestic politics through the parties' increasing willingness and capability to form coalitions. This meant that there was not the same need for intervention by the President as there had been in preceding decades.<sup>3</sup>

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The idea of the President as a strong executive force originated in the bloody civil war between "Whites" (bourgeois) and "Reds" (socialists) after Finland gained its independence from the Russian Empire in 1917. The elevated position of the President in the 1919 constitution was a response to the fear of political radicalisation on the part of the bourgeois camp, which had been victorious in the civil war. The President was to oversee the democratically elected parliament and thus preserve political order. The office was invested with extensive powers, including even the right to dissolve the Finnish Parliament, the Eduskunta, at any time disregarding the opinion of the governing factions.

Although some attempts were made back in the 1930s to curtail the President's position, the war undermined all advances in that direction. The decisive role played by Presidents Risto Ryti (1940-1944) and Carl Gustaf Mannerheim (1944-1946) with their calls for national unity and their defence of the integrity of Finnish borders during the costly Winter War and subsequent hostilities enhanced the image of the head of state as the nation's leader. The transformed

2 | Antero Jyränki, "Finland: Foreign Affairs as the Last Stronghold of the Presidency", *EuConst* 3, 2007, 285-306, 285.

3 | Cf. Heikki Paloheimo, "The Rising Power of the Prime Minister in Finland", *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2003, 219-243.

world order after 1945 strengthened the position of the Finnish head of state as the shaper of the country's foreign policy.

A discussion on the dominant position of the head of state started back in the 26-year term of President Urho Kekkonen, and led to corrections being made to the Finnish constitution, such as the direct election of the President by the people and the limitation to a maximum of two consecutive six-year terms of office. Finally, Finland's entry into the European Union in 1995 demanded a totally different arrangement for dividing the decision-making powers relating to foreign affairs between the government and the President. A commission was thus set up to draft proposals for a major constitutional reform, which ultimately resulted in the adoption of a new constitution (*perustuslaki*) in 2000. This removed most of the presidential powers dating from the 1919 constitution. Since that time, the President has no longer had any means of exerting direct influence on the formation of the cabinet or on the enactment of legislation put forward by the government. Although the President can still refuse to put his signature to a law, this will now only cause a delay, as the final decision concerning the proposed legislation falls to Parliament – even in the absence of the President's signature. Furthermore, the President is no longer entitled to exercise a veto over the state budget.

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Although most of the rights relating to domestic matters have been taken away from the head of state, the new constitution still envisages the President acting as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces and being actively involved in shaping foreign policy in collaboration with the government. It is indeed the government's task to prepare decisions taken at a European level in consultation with Parliament. But it is still the President's decision whether to take part in EU summit meetings of heads of state and heads of government.<sup>4</sup>

4 | Besides Finland, only France sends both the President and the Prime Minister to EU summit meetings of the heads of state and heads of government, although the Finnish system is only comparable to the presidential system of France to a very limited extent.

## FINLAND'S NONALIGNMENT POLICY

Finland's entry into the European Union in 1995 represented a significant departure from the previous strict policy of neutrality, which originated in the geo-strategic position of

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the country owing to its 1,270 km border with Russia (formerly the Soviet Union). Although Finland succeeded in preventing the country from being occupied by the Red Army in the aftermath of 1945, the presence of the Iron Curtain running directly along the eastern Finnish border required the Finnish government to act with great sensitivity. The personal relationships between Finnish Presidents and their Soviet counterparts therefore played a central role in Finnish foreign affairs during the decades of the Cold War.

The foundations of Finnish foreign policy, which would persist until the historic turning point in 1990/1991, were established under President Kusti Paasikivi (1946-1956). Paasikivi, a staunch anti-communist and former Prime Minister from the national-conservative Finnish Party (Suomalainen Puolue, subsequently Kokoomus), knew from preceding war experiences that Finland's security and the integrity of its borders could only be guaranteed in the long term by reaching an understanding with the Soviet Union, which protected the security interests of both countries. Influenced by the communist party coup in the Czech Republic in February 1948 and the communists permanent takeover in Prague, as well as by rumours – that were never actually confirmed – about an impending coup by communists in Helsinki, President Paasikivi advanced efforts to come to an arrangement with those in power in Moscow. In April 1948, Finland and the Soviet Union concluded an Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, intended to support the security interests of both parties. While the Soviet Union sought to preclude attack from the West via Finnish territory, the leadership in Helsinki hoped to maintain Finland's independence and nonalignment.

Paasikivi assumed that the Moscow leadership would only accept an independent Finland if it appeared of peripheral significance for Soviet interests in Central and Eastern

Europe. The agreement, a combination of a neutrality guarantee and a commitment to good-neighbourly relations with the Soviet Union, had a stabilising effect and, under the title of the Paasikivi Doctrine (subsequently Paasikivi-Kekkonen Line), formed the basis of Finnish foreign policy until the breakup of the Soviet Union. This political balancing act between the two antagonistic blocks, subsequently referred to as "Finlandisation", culminated in the hosting of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in Helsinki from 1972 to 1975.

It was not until the breakup of the Warsaw Pact that Finnish foreign policy underwent a fundamental reorientation, which entailed negotiations to join the European Union from 1991 and ongoing discussions about giving up neutrality in conjunction with entry into NATO, which are still continuing today. Former President Tarja Halonen was one prominent figure consistently opposed to Finland joining the transatlantic defence alliance. She also had reservations about the Baltic States joining NATO.<sup>5</sup> Halonen continued the tradition of maintaining good-neighbourly relations with Russia. She is said to have had a good understanding with both President Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Besides intensive political consultations, the mutual trust between the two countries is also demonstrated by economic ties: Russia is the third largest export market for Finnish goods; measured by total sales figures, Russia is actually Finland's largest trading partner with 14 per cent. Representing roughly a third of the around 170,000 foreigners registered in Finland, Russian immigrants now make up the largest group.

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### HALONEN'S LEGACY

In view of the manageable proportion of migrants in the population as a whole, it seemed strange that the departing head of state Tarja Halonen warned against increasing intolerance and xenophobia. Despite this, particularly the growing popularity of the True Finns during the last local and parliamentary elections seems to provide evidence that

5 | Cf. Interview with Tarja Halonen, *Der Spiegel*, 15/2001, 168-171.



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the population is becoming increasingly fearful of foreign influences, especially since the party had attacked the government's policy on immigration and Europe during its campaign. Thus it has been human rights policies in particular that remained a common theme through both Halonen's terms in office. During her last New Year's Speech she again highlighted concepts such as equality and solidarity as being the cornerstones of Finnish society. In spite of all the achievements of the Nordic welfare model, she warned against society drifting apart and advocated internal cohesion expressed in mutual solidarity. She stressed once more that to her this solidarity was not just a crucial concern in her own country, but that Finland also needed to play a pioneering role in the fight against poverty and inequality worldwide. Achieving the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 must therefore remain on the country's foreign policy agenda.

For Halonen, the United Nations (UN) Assemblies, which she initially attended as Minister for Foreign Affairs from 1995 to 2000 and subsequently as President, represent the central forum for conflict resolution and solutions to global challenges. For Finland to be admitted to the UN Security Council as a rotating member for 2013 and 2014, which Finland applied for alongside Australia and Luxembourg within the WEO Group (group of Western European and other states), would be the crowning glory of her diplomatic efforts of the past 15 years and would be considered the legacy of her 12 years as President. For Finland, a positive decision in the 67<sup>th</sup> UN Assembly in October 2012 would mean the third inner circle membership of the UN after 1969/1970 and 1990/1991. To many Finns it would represent an acknowledgement of their unwavering loyalty to the UN in terms of financial contributions and personnel over the last few decades.

There have been persistent rumours that Tarja Halonen, born in 1943, has ambitions to take up an international role following the end of her term of office. In 2006, she was briefly considered a possible successor to UN General Secretary Kofi Annan. Lastly, she co-chaired the High-level UN Panel on Global Sustainability with South Africa's President Jacob Zuma; the panel presented its final report *Resilient*

*People, Resilient Planet: A Future Worth Choosing* in Addis Ababa on 30 January 2012. Besides engaging human rights issues, she is likely to continue making contributions to the current discussions on climate change. Contrary to the strategy of the Finnish government, she spoke out decidedly against the expansion of nuclear energy capacities during her terms in office. The country's fifth nuclear reactor is currently being built in Eurajoki in southwest Finland. The Olkiluoto 3 reactor, commissioned by Finnish energy company Teollisuuden Voima, is to be connected to the grid at the beginning of 2013. Disregarding the Europe-wide discussions following the nuclear disaster in Fukushima in Japan, the Finnish Parliament has not reversed its decision of 1 July 2010 to build two further nuclear reactors.

### **A CONSERVATIVE IN THE PRESIDENTINLINNA**

The 63-year-old Sauli Niinistö is moving into the Presidential Palace as the twelfth President of the Republic of Finland, a politician with expertise in financial policy matters in addition to extensive experience in foreign affairs – particularly regarding Europe. While serving as Finance Minister under the Social Democrat Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen, he was instrumental in the introduction of the euro to Finland. In this role and as Vice-President of the Luxembourg-based European Investment Bank and lastly as Speaker of the Finnish Parliament he has earned a reputation as a “man of action” and as a solid finance expert, who does not shy away from putting his own party, the national-conservative Kokoomus that he led as Chairman from 1994 to 2001, in its place. His zest for action and his work ethic were moulded into the slogan “The President is at work” (*Presidentti on työssä*) during the election campaign.

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A lawyer by profession, Niinistö learnt the political craft when he was elected to the city council of his home city of Salo in southwest Finland for the first time in 1977. He was still a member of that council when he was finally elected to the Eduskunta in 1987 on his third attempt. While he quickly rose there to the position of Chairman of the Constitutional Committee, he was further elected Chairman of the Kokoomus Party, which was struggling to

raise its profile at the time. He became a parliamentarian respected beyond his own party, but his private life took a tragic turn. His wife Marja-Leena, to whom he had been married for 21 years, died in January 1995 in a car accident on the way back from a party meeting.

He progressed in his political career when Kokoomus joined the rainbow coalition in 1995 under the Social Democrat Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen in spite of faring badly in the elections with just 17.9 per cent of the votes. Niinistö initially took on the office of Minister of Justice before being appointed to the Ministry of Finance one year later. In his role as Finance Minister, he succeeded in turning the Finnish household deficit into a surplus in the period from 1996 to 2003 by following a strict course of consolidation. Finland introduced the euro in 2002 as planned once the Maastricht criteria had been clearly fulfilled.

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As far back as the presidential election in 2000, his party had asked him to run against the Social Democrat Halonen because of his high standing. To the regret of many, he did not go along with this request, instead announcing his partial withdrawal from politics. He resigned as party chairman in 2001 and did not run at the parliamentary elections in 2003. Instead, he joined the European Investment Bank as Vice President.

Niinistö celebrated his political comeback in Finland in 2006, when Kokoomus once again offered him the presidential candidacy, this time successfully. Niinistö managed to win many additional votes, with the result that he was defeated by a very narrow margin; his party had achieved the second best result in its history. This brought about a renaissance of the national-conservative Kokoomus. During the next few years, Niinistö used his position as newly elected Speaker of the Parliament to criticise the poor administration of Parliament and to denounce its lack of efficiency. He did not spare his own party in doing so, or the government, which has been led by his party chairman Jyrki Katainen since the summer of 2011. His election to head of state is the pinnacle of a political career that has

not been free from personal blows<sup>6</sup>, but has demonstrated a high level of independence and consistency.

## CONCLUSION

Although Tarja Halonen only achieved slim majorities when defeating her competitors Esko Aho and Sauli Niinistö in the elections for head of state in 2000 and 2006, she enjoyed great popularity during her two terms of office. She could count on support from the great majority of the population. During the 2012 presidential election, Sauli Niinistö lived up to expectations as favourite from the start. At 62.4 per cent, he achieved the best result of any candidate since direct election of the President was introduced in 1994. Turnout in the second round, however, was at an all-time low for presidential elections at 68.9 per cent. In view of falling turnout in the local and parliamentary elections as well, Niinistö's new role will involve the task of bringing people together again and of strengthening their faith in democratic institutions and processes. One of the important objectives will be to revive faith in Europe amongst many of his compatriots who are critical of the efforts to save the euro. Due to his background in finance and European policy matters, he is well-placed to become more active in providing impulses in this area than his predecessor. The President's scope of action on the domestic front is limited, but as a figure of moral authority he will also be able to initiate discussions on topics of domestic policy.

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In the arena of foreign affairs, a conservative President could further help to progress matters where Finland's rapprochement with NATO is concerned. The Social Democrat Halonen had excluded the possibility of her country joining NATO to the last. The discussion about the negative consequences of a possible joining is rooted deeply in Finnish history and identity. For large swathes of the population this topic is linked to the fear of jeopardising acquired skills in how to survive in close proximity to a

6 | In December 2004 Niinistö only just escaped the deadly tsunami in the Thai resort of Khao Lak, where he was spending a winter holiday with his 2 sons. The family managed to evade the rushing waters by climbing a telegraph pole.

large and unpredictable neighbour. Nonalignment and the avoidance of confrontation have proven positive for the country in the past. In spite of all the defensive reflexes against a formalised entry into NATO, Finnish soldiers are already taking part in NATO or EU-led peace-keeping operations in Afghanistan, the Balkans and the Horn of Africa. President Niinistö has not yet made his position clear in this regard. But a possible reorientation of the Swedish neighbour in relation to this issue might also provide an impulse to revive the Finnish NATO discussion.