

Politics from a Global Perspective: Finnish Greens in Power

Article by Alviina Alametsä

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Are storm clouds gathering over Greens in government? In June 2021, Finland held municipal elections, in which the governing parties - among them the Green League -experienced a significant decline in both their vote share and council seats. At the same time, the far-right populist Finns Party saw a major increase in vote share and council seats. Green MEP Alviina Alametsä explains what this means for Finnish politics.

***Green European Journal:* What are the main issues driving politics today in Finland?**

Alviina Alametsä: I would highlight two issues: the economy and the climate - which are to some extent intertwined. The economy and the EU is a critical issue now in Finnish discussions, especially due to the “Green Deal” and the Covid-19 recovery package. These issues created lots of tension, especially between the Greens and the Finns Party [formerly known as the True Finns].

This racist, nationalist party is the opposite of the Greens on issues ranging from climate change through Covid-19 to refugees. Unfortunately, this party has been gaining ground in recent years. In the current debate, while the Greens are the leading proponents of European solidarity, the Finns Party claim that the recovery package will strip Finland of its remaining independence. [In May, the party’s members deliberately slowed down parliamentary proceedings prior to the vote on the recovery package by, among other things, reading poetry and reciting passages from Little Red Riding Hood.]

While the climate issue became more prominent over the years, Greens entry into the governing coalition has not been as successful as we would have hoped. The Greens have not yet achieved their goals for climate neutrality or set out an actual roadmap for Finland to achieve them. This has caused a lot of frustration. The Greens are in a coalition with the Centre Party which is strongly opposed to agricultural policy reform. While the Greens call for an ecological transition - and would make protecting livelihoods in the countryside the core of agricultural policy - many of our coalition partners want to stick to the status quo [the coalition government is made up of five parties: the Social Democrats, the Centre Party, the Green League, the Left Alliance, and the Swedish People’s Party that represents Finland’s Swedish-speaking community].

Would you say the Greens’ core voters have been frustrated by what they see as a lack of progress?

Definitely. It is a major issue. There is also frustration inside the Green party, and even

some in government are unhappy with the situation. But we are stuck. Both Prime Minister Sanna Marin and the Social Democrats, who are leading the government, are very popular. If the Greens were to leave the government, the coalition would fall apart and there is a strong chance that the next government would include the Finns Party.

How do you evaluate the results of the July local election?

The results were bad for the Greens. We lost a significant number of seats. But we should not forget that our previous local election results, four years ago, were amazingly high. So that is the baseline. Nonetheless, the change is alarming and something we definitely have to think about.

The Finns Party did not win as many votes as people perhaps thought they would in the local elections. But this does not necessarily mean that they are weaker than expected. It might be because it is generally difficult to get people to the polls in local elections. At least not to the extent as you would see in presidential or parliamentary elections. They also put the EU and the recovery package at the centre of their campaign, even though that issue is not decided at the local level. With immigration slowing because of the pandemic, their main campaign point suffered a blow so they had to change tack.

What role do you see ecology and the green agenda playing in the whole setup of Finnish politics?

It is an important topic, and there is a growing consensus around it. Most of the Finnish population – and especially the younger generations – accepts the fact that climate change is happening and that it has catastrophic consequences. Nevertheless, there is a lot of disinformation regarding this issue, and it affects our climate policies.

Finland is one of the countries with the most ambitious climate agenda but there has not been enough governmental action to meet those goals. The politicisation of environmental agenda divisions within parties is a contributing factor to this inaction. For example, when the EU forest strategy was widely discussed in Finland, some parties argued that Finland should benefit economically from our forests while the others called for protecting the forests as much as possible.

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How much does European politics influence public policy in Finland?

It is quite important although not necessarily in the way the EU would like it to be. When some idea or proposal comes from Europe, the populists and especially the Finns Party, will spin it or fight it. That was the case with the reform of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy: the Finnish government policy was to promote some ambitious ideas, but then individual politicians pushed the policy in the other direction. Although we still have wide support for

EU membership, extensive disinformation about climate change and EU funding have been accelerating the growth of the Finns Party, which have consistently positioned themselves against the EU.

15 or 20 years ago, many Greens in the Nordic countries were not particularly pro-European. Today, however, the Finnish Greens seem to be very committed to the EU. How would you describe the party's stance on the European issue?

In Finland, our priorities are very similar to those of other Green parties. Our main priorities include the environment and climate change, animal rights, the education system, work and quality of life – the kind of green economic thinking common across Europe – enhancing wellbeing and preventing poverty. We also put an emphasis on questions of feminism, democracy, and human rights. The last core priority that we Greens have defined in our programme is solidarity through the European Union.

We are very committed to the EU. I would even say that we are among the most ambitious parties – I would even call ourselves federalists – when it comes to the EU. The issue that the Greens have is that the EU is sometimes unable to make good enough decisions on climate change and some other key issues. While the European Parliament had some ambitious proposals, there is quite a lot of distrust in the Commission, because they tend to water things down, especially in climate policy.

Is the success of the Finns Party a reaction against Finland becoming closer to the rest of Europe, a Europe that the Greens are closely associated with?

It is difficult to answer. Even researchers have a hard time understanding the dynamics between the EU, the Finns Party, and the Greens. Greater EU integration has definitely fuelled the popularity of the Finns Party. For example, they used the financial crisis to claim that the Finnish people are paying for Greek debts.

Of course, financial realities are forgotten when solidarity is debated. Sure, Finland will give a small share of its wealth to pay for the European recovery package. But the common market and financial system of the EU is part of Finland's economic success. It is worth three or even five times what we actually pay. But the Finns Party and their supporters do not want to understand this.

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The Greens were never as Eurosceptic as the Left and always ultimately believed in the EU. This commitment is probably down to a global perspective: we know that it is hard for Finland to solve the refugee crisis, climate crisis, or the Covid-19 pandemic on its own.

Many people who are active in the Greens also have international experience; they have enjoyed open borders and studied abroad. At the same time, many people in the Finnish

population from different social and economic backgrounds might not have felt the benefits of cosmopolitanism in the same way, and might be more receptive to negative commentary about the EU. We have to eradicate inequality and give everyone the possibility to enjoy the EU.

Finland is often associated with the frugal states that try to block more European integration, particularly on fiscal matters. What role would the Finnish Greens like Finland to play in Europe?

It is true that Finland has often been thrown together with these frugal countries in Europe, most recently in the context of the recovery package. At the same time, on other issues, Finland is on the progressive side. It is a driving force on climate policy and has been pushing for some of the more ambitious goals, like reaching climate neutrality by 2035. Finland also hopes to be at the forefront of the green and digital transition. Overall, I think that Finland is quite influential, but we should not forget that it is still a small country; it is not a key player like France or Germany.

How do elections in other countries affect the Finnish political scene? Has Finland felt the effect of a “green wave”?

We follow closely what happens with Greens in other countries and our communications and election strategies were influenced by experiences from Austria and Germany. It is one reason why we were successful in the 2017 municipal election. Our campaign was more modern than other parties and it stood out.

We also follow our Nordic neighbours very closely. They influence our security, financial policy, and climate policies. But elections in neighbouring countries do not have a great impact. Russia is the exception, of course. The political developments in Russia are crucial and very notably affect our security policies.

On a global scale we see growing tensions between the US and China; there have been issues on Europe’s eastern border with Russia. Faced with this changing global picture, how do the Finnish Greens see Europe’s place in the world?

The global values that I mentioned earlier are really important to us, and we want to push them through the EU. The EU’s influence in the world would be enhanced by a strong and mutual foreign policy and the ability to speak with one voice. This issue, as well as the economic and security cooperation and the benefits it brings, are important for the Greens. The EU should be more active in using its influence, for example, through trade agreements to promote the rule of law, human rights, and other values. Europe has to be more ambitious than it is now on trade issues; the Finnish Greens and the Greens in the European Parliament are definitely opposed to business cooperation with no strings attached, especially when it comes to countries with a bad human rights record. We want the EU to be stronger, more cooperative, and federalist. It should speak with one voice on foreign policy.

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What are the obstacles to the federalisation of foreign policy?

There is a lot of false information on the EU. Some people think that deepening cooperation will take their independence away. This is also the case in Finland. The question of giving some of our power away, even for a greater cause, is of course difficult, but it does not take away sovereignty and independence. Deepening political cooperation through the EU is not a priority for most parties and countries. The number of mutual projects and cooperation initiatives has grown, but since most of the countries are NATO countries they do not want to build an alternative or complementary European system.

In this sense, the Covid-19 pandemic might turn into a major threat. People will easily forget the benefits of the EU because the borders are closed, and the EU has not handled the crisis as well as it should have. The Greens would like to see more health cooperation, even if many countries consider health to be a national competence. If we Greens could decide, we would build a welfare state across the whole of Europe – and this would also include actions related to mental health and as well as measures to tackle the current pandemic. Unfortunately, that is not the reality right now.

Finland has a Green Foreign Minister, Pekka Haavisto. Did he bring a distinctive Green approach to the position?

I worked as the right hand of Pekka Haavisto six years ago. Already then, he was very progressive on peace issues. He opened a crisis management and peacebuilding centre in Finland a few months ago. This is a very important step and would not necessarily have been done by others.


Greens work towards solving conflicts and preventing people from becoming refugees. Strangely, the Finns Party is talking about the same, but with a different emphasis: they claim, if we help those countries locally, we will not have to take people in anymore. But for them this is just rhetoric – they are not up for it when it comes to financing such development programs abroad, and massively cut funding while in government. The Greens with the Foreign Minister have taken a more preventive approach in their foreign policy and have embraced wider thinking about human security and environmental security.

These issues can also be seen on the Finnish and Green lines on EU foreign policy. The question of refugees has become crucial; and this nearly cost the Foreign Minister his seat, due to a major scandal about the al-Hol Camp evacuation. The Finns Party claimed that the foreign minister overstepped his authority when he ordered his staff to evacuate children from the camp. There was even a police investigation. Here the Greens were much more progressive than the other parties would have been. So our thinking has definitely shaped our foreign policy.

From your point of view, which level of politics will be most important for the Greens in the next few years? Is it national government, cooperation on the European level, is it rebuilding some strength on the local level?

Government policies at the national level will be key. In the European Parliament, the Greens are already well covered with three seats. The loss at the local elections has been a huge topic for us, but it is more an outcome of national politics. And the candidates who campaigned on local themes, such as mental health which I've pushed for, were quite successful at times.

Currently, the Greens are focused on advancing climate targets. The possibility of leaving the government has already been raised but it is risky. Strategically, it is very important that we think about the core voter population and why we lost them in the local elections. We should, for example, try to address young people and workers in the cultural industries who lost out due to Covid-19 measures. Their opposition to the government's lockdown policies might be a reason why they did not turn out at the locals. To promote Green values of well-being of people and nature, we need to listen to the people, especially the youth, and win elections. Our voters deserve to have their voice heard.

 Alviina Alametsä is a Finnish politician of the Greens/EFA group at the European Parliament. In the Parliament she is a Member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Member and Group Coordinator in the Committee on Security and Defence, and substitute Member in Committees on Development, and Transport and Tourism. At the age of 29, she is the youngest serving Finnish MEP.

Alviina Alametsä has been a member of Helsinki city council since 2017. Before becoming a member of the European Parliament she also chaired its equality committee and was part of the board of Helsinki Regional Transport Authority. Alviina also has a background in peace work, working for the Finnish peace negotiating NGO Crisis Management Initiative, and she has been a strong advocate of mental health services in Finland.

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