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The Profiteers of Fear?

Right-wing Populism and the COVID-19 Crisis
in Europe
Finland

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About this publication

This paper analyses, how the Finnish far right has reacted to the government's handling of COVID-19 and the economic consequences of the virus during its first wave. It explains, how the populist radical right Finns Party has remained reasonably reserved in its criticism, and how the party has attempted to avoid affiliation with the Finnish online far right. Instead of uniting Finnish far right actors, COVID-19 has reinvigorated coalition building potential especially between the centre right and the populist radical right.

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The Profiteers of Fear?

Right-wing Populism and the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe Finland

When the Finnish government decided to halt incoming international travel in the early spring of 2020, the ministers laughed. Just under a year ago, the Social Democrats (Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue) had won over the Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset) with a margin of one parliamentary seat to form a centre-left coalition government with the Green League (Vihreä liitto), Left Alliance (Vasemmistoliitto), Centre Party (Suomen Keskusta), and the Swedish People's party (Ruotsalainen kansanpuolue). The irony of the decision to limit international mobility to an unprecedented degree was not lost on the governmental parties' leaders: while the country's primary anti-immigration party sat firmly in the opposition, it was a left-wing-led government that would actually close the borders.

The Finnish government's efforts to curb the first wave of COVID-19 have been viewed a success as the Finnish numbers of infections and deaths have remained comparably low. In March, the government declared a state of emergency and instated strict restrictions that included, for example, stopping most international travel, closing schools, banning meetings of more than 10 people, preventing non-essential travel in and out of the Uusimaa region surrounding the Finnish capital, and recommending remote working.

After the state of emergency was lifted in May, the responsibility over public response to potentially re-emerging local epidemics was transferred to regional health officials. They have continued implementing a strategy based on widespread testing, tracking, and containing of infections. However, as the epidemic started to show signs of re-escalating into a second wave in autumn, entry restrictions were reintroduced by the government.

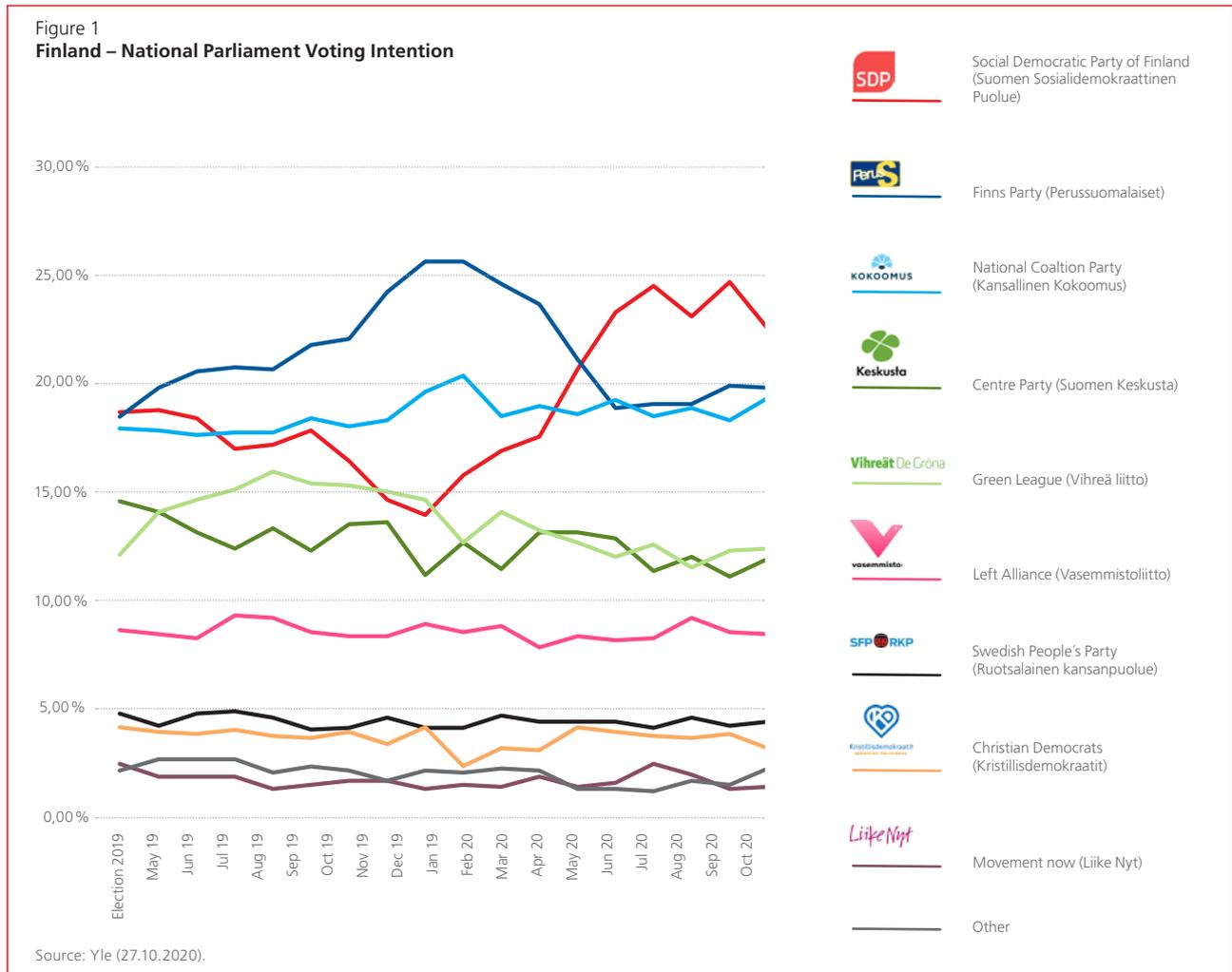
How has the only Finnish right-wing populist parliamentary party reacted to the public health crisis and the government's actions during the first wave of the virus outbreak? What do the Finns Party's communications tell us about the role of COVID-19 in advocating for populist radical right demands? And how have the party's efforts to remain moderate during the crisis been affected by far right online communications beyond the control of the Finns Party's organisation?

THE FINNS PARTY'S CALM RESPONSES TO RESTRICTIONS

The Finns Party is the only populist radical right party in the Finnish parliament. Since 2011, the party has been among the three largest parliamentary parties and currently has 39 members of parliament (MPs) in the 200-seat Eduskunta. After a successful renewal of the party leadership in 2017 followed by vast programmatic work, the party became ideologically more akin to European populist radical right parties yet managed to retain its support in the 2019 parliamentary elections. The current government led by progressive left-wing environmentalists has provided the Finns Party the perfect target for launching rhetorical attacks from the opposition. Consequently, before the pandemic, the Finns Party was enjoying its highest support to date, reaching over 24 per cent in the polls. However, during the first months of the pandemic, the party lost nearly six percentage points in polled support as voters seemed to rally around the leadership of Prime Minister Sanna Marin. By the autumn of 2020, the party's support has stabilised around 19 per cent, roughly corresponding to the party's current parliamentary representation. Thus, the public health crisis has not turned out to be a crippling crisis for the Finns Party's support.

The central party organisation's reactions to the handling of the health crisis have remained relatively calm and moderate. On its official platforms, the party's core institutional leaders have not widely attacked the government's strategies to curb the infection rate and have even regarded most of the government's restrictions as vital. The party has also refrained from framing compliance with health officials' recommendations as a matter of ideology, as such a pursuit would appear utterly irresponsible in the Finnish context. In fact, the party has widely endorsed, for example, a comprehensive mask recommendation (Perussuomalainen 2020a). Compared to many other countries where masks have become political signifiers and wearing or refusing one can be regarded a political act, the public health crisis did not become as polarised in Finland during the first wave.

As the Finnish government exerted rather authoritarian measures within the limits of the Emergency Powers Act and the constitution, the Finns Party has had little room to demand stricter restrictions to citizens' freedoms in order to protect the Finnish population. However, in the spring, the leader of the party's parliamentary group entertained the



idea of implementing wider business closures to »suffocate the epidemic« in order to allow a swifter reopening of the economy instead of lifting more lenient restrictions gradually (Perussuomalainen 2020b). Also, the party’s politicians wished to extend the duration of the Uusimaa lockdown and even hinted at hopes of the president taking over operational leadership of the government (Suomen Uutiset 2020a; Suomen Uutiset 2020b), despite the fact that both measures would have been not only authoritarian but also unconstitutional. Regardless, most of the party’s criticisms of the measures to curb the infection rate have not challenged the government’s strategy head-on, but relied on, for example, pointing out flaws and inconsistencies in the government’s communications and lambasting the state’s failed attempts to procure adequate-quality protective equipment (Perussuomalainen 2020c).

DECENTRALISED ONLINE COMMUNICATIONS AND AMBIGUITY OF PARTY STANCES

One of the explanations for why the Finns Party has exhibited restraint in criticising the government’s handling of the epidemic is the party’s ongoing pursuit to regain legitimacy as a reliable governmental partner, which it lost following the

2017 leadership change. In the initial stage of the pandemic, party leader Jussi Halla-aho even urged party members and activists to ease up on unnecessarily chastising the government and to stick to »factual politics« (Halla-aho 2020). However, as the party’s online presence relies heavily on de-centralised online communications that allow the party to adopt ambivalent stances especially on controversial issues, the party’s individual politicians and activists have been significantly more confrontational in challenging the government’s actions. Still, the party has avoided widespread journalistic and civic scrutiny targeting individual Finns Party politicians’ participation in, for example, the dissemination of COVID-19-related online disinformation.

The coronavirus has not significantly mobilised the Finnish extra-parliamentary far right, which consists of several small radical-right and extreme-right organisations and loose movements plagued by infighting, organisational disarray, and ideological incoherence. Unlike in Germany, in Finland there have not been notable demonstrations against the government’s or health officials’ issuing of restrictions and recommendations. Thus, the far-right’s chances of appropriating already mobilised and popularised symbols and platforms for contentious action have been marginal. Despite clear-cut conspiracy theories on COVID-19 circulating in certain Finnish far-right online publics, the Finns Party’s engage-

ment and perceived affiliation with such disinformation has remained thin.

However, the party's central organisation has not been able to contain all online communications that could be viewed as at least unscientific. For example, one of the party's MPs founded a Facebook page for disseminating information on the virus, but the community quickly became riddled with false information, including the infamously widespread conspiracy theory regarding 5G towers. Another organisational linkage to conspiratorial online content has been the party paper's insinuation that the government's strategy to flatten the curve can be interpreted as a means to intentionally hold on to a necessary number of new infections to sanction the continuing of the centre-left government's emergency powers (Perussuomalainen 2020d).

PARTY IDEOLOGY REWIRED THROUGH CRITICISM OF PUBLIC SPENDING

In the acute phase of the crisis, the Finns Party's go-to topics of discussion – immigration and the integrity of national and cultural sovereignty – were in danger of appearing as irrelevant. This required the party to realign its communications, and since April, the party has been admirably consistent in appropriating the crisis to advocate for the party's core political demands. The party has achieved this by focusing not on the political decisions pertaining to the handling of the epidemic but on its economic aftermath. More specifically, the party has adopted economically right-wing rhetoric regarding fiscal responsibility and dangers of debt to champion all but exclusively for welfare chauvinist, economically nativist, eurosceptic, and populist ideas. For example, according to MP Lulu Ranne, »the government uses the crisis as Trojan horse filled with ideological ventures that will finally annihilate our economy« (Suomen Uutiset 2020c). The high costs and long-lasting economic consequences of the public health crisis have thus been appropriated to argue for budget cuts to immigration and development aid, to create a sense of urgency regarding Finland's fiscal and political sovereignty, and to foster an understanding of left-wing political elites as unworthy of wielding power.

The Finns Party's increasing reliance on chastising overspending is the result of the party's ongoing realignment towards the economic right combined with nativism having become a primary feature in the party's ideology. Because of the party's economically centre-left background and the historically valued role of the welfare state in Finnish politics, the party has adopted the incongruous position of praising the welfare state while demanding severe reduction of the public sector. Ensuring the viability of the party's shift towards the economic right has required the mobilisation of welfare chauvinist arguments that suggest that having a functional welfare state requires stopping harmful immigration. As an example, when the government decided to add 75 euros to monthly basic social assistance due to the corona crisis, the Finns Party's MPs criticised the decision by arguing that the increase would benefit immigrants disproportionately (Suomen Uutiset, 2020d). Demanding to reserve welfare services for the

Finnish people facilitates the party's rhetorical shift towards supporting austerity and a smaller state, which in turn enables the party to rub shoulders with the Finnish centre-right, especially with the National Coalition Party (Kansallinen Kokoomus). This has helped the Finns party to sustain both nativist and generally right-wing social policy positions during the corona crisis without necessarily alienating the party's socio-economically left-wing voters, who still contribute to a significant amount of the party's support.

POPULIST NARRATIVE ENABLED BY CRISIS

Unlike in some other countries, the crisis has not increased openly racist or xenophobic positions on the level of Finnish parliamentary parties. However, a few of the Finns Party's demands regarding, for example, the stopping of individual flights with high-numbers of non-native travellers and prioritising Finnish workers due to the coronavirus have contained strong elements of ethnic nativism, especially when presented on online platforms. In general, the high salience of the economic relief efforts and the government's reliance on debt has enabled the party to enact its populist narrative of a polarised Finnish society under attack from the so-called Green Left. The party has consistently highlighted particularly left-wing or »woke« relief actions as unnecessary to portray the government as morally corrupt and its goals as incompatible with the ones of silent majority. The party has also engaged in attacking the mainstream media for being biased in its coverage of the crisis. For example, the leader of the party's parliamentary group has criticised the media for creating a »personality cult« around the leadership of Sanna Marin »to hide the dangerous green-leftist ideology that pushes ordinary working people to the brink« (Perussuomalainen 2020e).

Therefore, additionally to allowing the party to argue for the necessity of austerity and economic nativism in the near future, the coronavirus has provided the Finns Party discursive contexts and platforms to perform the ideational contents of populism. In other words, COVID-19 as an extremely high-profile hybrid media event has allowed the Finns party – an established parliamentary power with a developed party organisation – to continually attribute the elites as unworthy of the people's trust, to express closeness to the people, and to demand the restoring of the people's sovereignty. Like the party secretary Simo Grönroos summarises it: "The governmental parties push detrimental immigration, excessively strict climate policies, anti-industry green taxation, and EU-packages that redirect the Finnish people's billions of euros to support other countries. Therefore it is not believable, that these same parties would (...) strive for policies that support the Finnish people's wellbeing." (Suomen Uutiset 2020e)

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC SUPPORT MEASURES AS THE DOOM OF FINNISH SOVEREIGNTY

The European economic relief measures have proven to be a boon for the Finns Party. As the sole eurosceptic party in

Finland, the party has revelled in utterly deploring Finland's participation in the EU's collective recovery package that encapsulates a renewed colossal demand for even further European solidarity. Whereas the party might have held back in criticising political decisions regarding the handling of the epidemic, the party's politicians have not at all hesitated lambasting the package as the loss of Finnish sovereignty to hidden federalist agendas. In doing so, the party's politicians have rediscovered much of the classic eurosceptic rhetoric used by the party during the early years of the Eurozone crisis, which originally boosted the party to institutionalise a permanent position in the Finnish party system. This has for example, reinvigorated the party's defense of the Finnish hard-working taxpayer against having to bear the burden of the irresponsibility, disorganisation, and laziness of Southern European countries.

Despite the Finns Party having officially presented only soft eurosceptic policies, it prevalently uses hard eurosceptic rhetoric especially online and when addressing its own ranks. The party's effort to utilise a varying combination of hard and soft euroscepticism on different forums of discussion has been evident during the corona crisis. This equivocality also is where the discursive paths of the Finns Party and the Finnish extra-parliamentary far-right converge in the context of COVID-19. The only significant demonstration relating to the coronavirus was for organised in early September against the European relief package and in favour of Finland's leaving of the European Union. One of the speakers at the demonstration was a (currently expelled) Finns Party MP and several other of the party's MPs appeared to show their solidarity with at least some element of the protest on social media. The demonstration drew in activists from several extra-parliamentary populist radical right and extreme right groups as well as alternative online media.

Three weeks after the protest, the Finns Party's youth organisation launched a citizens' initiative for a referendum to be organised on Finland's participation in the relief package. The initiative, endorsed by several high-profile Finns Party politicians, got off the ground very quickly. In just in four days after its launch, the initiative gained the needed 50,000 signatures to be eligible for parliamentary consideration. Despite the fact that the protests and the citizens' initiative are most unlikely to achieve their demands, they illustrate that COVID-19's economic aftermath has created demand and platforms for harder euroscepticism that the Finns Party is more than tempted to engage in.

TOWARDS COMMON GROUND WITH THE CENTRE RIGHT

A significant share of the journalistic and scholarly attention regarding the relationship of COVID-19 and the far right has focused on online conspiracy theories and so called »fake news« as contributing factors to the institutionalisation of radical right demands (e.g., Ketchell 2020). However, the Finns Party's reactions to the virus illustrate that populist radical right policy positions can be effectively consolidated without relying on easily contested disinformation and sub-

versive political styles. In fact, in the case of COVID-19, the Finns Party's core organisation has actively shied away from seeking synergy between its message and the one of the online far right. Instead, the party has focused on utilising its established parliamentary position, party media, social media presence, and access to national mainstream media to highlight the government's overspending in order to argue for budget-discipline, nativism, and national sovereignty. Thus, in the context of the economic aftermath of the virus, the rhetoric and platforms used by the Finns Party to articulate its core agenda are not prominently those of the far right but those of the centre right.

Overt affiliation with extremist and reprehensible actions – such as deliberate dissemination of disinformation regarding a deadly virus – tends to prove detrimental for political parties' chances of realising their goals, especially in multi-party systems. Although the contemporary media system aids in the sedimentation of radical right ideas into parliamentary institutions, those institutions are still responsible for deciding to what extent especially authoritarian and nativist demands can affect legislation. Thus, the institutionalisation of populist radical right political demands does not hinge so much on digital media boosting their salience and societal availability, but on the willingness of especially the centre right to legitimise and to govern with the populist radical right.

The Finns Party's current chances for government in 2023 depend largely on the Finnish centre-right parties. The current government's public spending has met nearly matching levels of vitriol in the Coalition Party, so the Finns Party is not alone in its calls for austerity. The party's ongoing shift from the centre left to the economic right has made it easier for the Finns Party to find common ground with the centre right. However, the party's authoritarian views on immigrant rights, unofficially communicated ethnic nativism, and increasingly hard eurosceptic rhetoric will make the governmental negotiations difficult, even if the Finns Party was to win by a landslide. Regardless, as long as the Finns Party can tone down its ethnic nativism and abstain from officially communicating blatantly anti-EU views, the Finnish centre right and the populist radical right are likely to find themselves forming a front against a distended public sector and the left. If such an alliance were to form, it would undoubtedly result in the institutionalisation of a number of populist radical right demands.

The left should not be too concerned of a far right that is stylistically and ideologically too counterhegemonic to obtain power. Instead, the left should be wary of a far right that is increasingly difficult to discern from the centre right. That kind of a far right wears the colours of the hegemony, enabling its aspirations to become reality.

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In many countries the COVID-19 crisis had initially led to increased trust in government. The restrictions to personal freedoms, curfews, restrictions on social contacts, the closure of large segments of the economy as well as the widening of executive powers in many countries was largely accepted and supported by the public. However, frustration and distrust of government have been increasing the longer the restrictions have been in place. Some countries, such as Germany, witnessed large demonstrations against the counter measures. Moreover, the wide dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories are influencing the public debate on how to handle the pandemic.

Reports from Sweden, Finland, Italy, France, Spain, and Germany – all countries with large or growing right-wing populist movements and parties explore the question, if right-wing populism in Europe has been able to benefit from the Corona-crisis. A synopsis interprets and classifies the developments in the individual countries in a comparative perspective.

Further information on the project can be found here:
fes.de/c19rex