

The Rise of Right-wing Populism in Finland: The True Finns

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Right-wing populist anti-immigration parties, such as the National Front in France, the Freedom Party of Austria, the Progress Party in Norway and the Danish People's Party have done well in many European countries over the last couple of decades. So far Finland has been seen as an exception in Europe: the country has lacked an extreme right, or the usually successful "ideal-type" of the populist right defined by Herbert Kitschelt and Anthony McGann (1997, 19), which combines right-wing market ideology, political authoritarianism and anti-foreigner attitudes (Pekonen 1999, 11). Only now, in the parliamentary elections of 2011, is there the general prediction that the True Finns, characterised by their stance on immigration, will gain unprecedented success.

My article examines the relation of the True Finns to other European right-wing populist parties and the reasons behind the success of this brand of populism.

The True Finns as a radical right-wing populist party

David Arter (2010) sees the True Finns as representing radical right-wing populism, since studies show that the party line has grown tougher on immigration questions, and the immigration question in particular is a central definer of European right-wing populism. Arter defines the True Finns also as a populist and welfare chauvinist party². The voter profile of the party closely resembles the archetypal voter of the radical right, defined, according to Arter, by low party commitment, lower than average trust in politicians, proletarianism, being male and relatively young (Arter 2010, 501). On the other hand, Arter points out that the True Finns' voters perceive themselves to be the most leftist of the voters of right-wing parties. The True Finns have never flirted with neoliberalism (Arter 2010, 499), while the ideal-type of the populist right defined as successful by Herbert Kitschelt & Anthony McGann (1997, 42) combines, in particular, market ideology with political authoritarianism and anti-foreigner attitudes. Moreover, the background of the True Finns is not that of the far right, unlike that of the Sweden Democrats or France's Front National. The rhetoric and leadership of the True Finns are also

more moderate than, say, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands or the FPÖ in Austria. However, Arter classifies the True Finns in the Western European tradition of right-wing populism instead of centre-populism, as it is particularly the ethno-nationalistic view of Finnishness that defines all of the True Finns' politics (Arter 2010, 502).

In 2005 Elina Kestilä suggested that the mood and outlook of Finnish voters is as favourable to a radical right-wing party as in those European countries where the radical right has had success. Finns, actually, fear the effects of immigration on the economy and culture more than average Europeans. The Finns' attitudes toward immigrants are particularly tough compared to other Nordic countries. Kestilä also noticed that voter turnout had decreased, dissatisfaction toward political institutions had grown and xenophobia and criticism of the EU had increased (Kestilä 2005, 369). She did not, however, see that the radical right had a place among the Finnish parties but saw its future mobilisation as possible. Allowing radical right activities in the beginning of the 1990s removed the most important obstacle for the movements (Kestilä 2005, 371), and according to Villiina Hellsten (2001, 45-46) the entry of the National Coalition Party into the government, after a long pause beginning in 1987, created further possibilities for them.

In the book *The New Radical Right in Finland* (1991) edited by Kyösti Pekonen the question of whether Finland really is an exception in Europe was addressed, since the country seemed to lack the ideal-type of the populist right that was successful elsewhere in Europe and that combines market ideology, authoritarianism and an ethnocentric or even racist attitude (Pekonen 1991, 11; Pekonen, Hynynen, Kalliala 1999, 47). The authors saw some signs of an awakening of the neo-right even in Finland. According to the authors, it was especially the attitudes popular among the populist right, which seemed to meet with a response from the voters, which the political groups or parties that existed then did not know how to take advantage of (Pekonen, Hynynen, Kalliala 1999, 57).

True Finns in Europe

The right-wing populist ideology is built on nativism, welfare chauvinism and populism (Mudde 2010, 3), or on ethno-nationalism, populism and socio-cultural authoritarianism (Arter 2010, 439). At least immigration, security and corruption can be cited as its key issues (Mudde 2010, 7). The populist right was born as a counter-reaction to the post-materialist left born in the 1960s and

1970s, which emphasises the rights of minorities, feminism and environmental values.

David Arter counts the True Finns among the European right-wing populist parties. He does, however, remind us that the party's statements are, at least for now, lacking the typical xenophobic and extreme tone, and Timo Soini has not proposed anything like the Freedom Party of Austria's Jörg Haider³ who suggested that "Sonderlager" should be established for the ill, elderly and criminals (Arter 2010, 485). According to Soini, however, labelling Jörg Haider and other right-wing populists as racists is too simple⁴. Even though he declares himself a non-racist, 12% of respondents to a poll in 2008 see Timo Soini as openly racist and 28% considered him a racist trying to hide his racism (Arter 2010, 498). Soini humorously calls the openly racist members of his party "propeller heads" but in doing so he ignores the problem itself. Soini's criticism seems to be directed only at clumsy communication and appearance skills, not at racism as such.

The True Finns do, however, differ somewhat from their continental role models. For example, voters do not consider the party to be particularly right wing. Scandinavian right-wing populism is, indeed, considered more moderate than in the rest of Europe (Kitschelt & McGann 1997, 121). Scandinavian parties often justify their anti-immigration views with welfare chauvinism instead of racism, their nationalism is milder and connections with extreme groups weaker than with right-wing populists of continental Europe (Kitschelt & McGann 1997, 135). Also EU criticism, for which the True Finns bang the drum, especially defines the Scandinavian neo-right (Granfelt 2010, 15).

On the whole, right-wing populist parties come from very different ideological backgrounds. For example Hungary's Jobbik party and the British BNP originate from (1) a neo-fascist and racist background. The True Finns, Dansk Folkeparti and Norway's Fremskrittspartiet have been successful based on (2) a populist protest. The Swiss People's Party is rooted (3) in the countryside, and before Haider the Austrian Freedom Party concentrated on (4) environmental questions. In addition, (5) ethnic-regional parties include at least the Belgian Vlaams Belang and the Italian Lega Nord (Lodenius & Wingborg 2010, 19.)

Behind some parties, there is a single-issue movement: The Dansk Folkeparti began from a tax rebellion (Betz 1994, 5)⁵, Italy's Lega Nord from regional patriotism in Northern Italy (Betz 1994, 9),

Austria's FPÖ's roots are liberalist (Betz 1994, 12), France's FN is neo-fascist (Betz 1994, 13), and Switzerland's Autopartei, for its part, was established as the party of car-driving consumers to oppose the green left's aspirations to hinder motoring and shopping. The background of the True Finns is in the populist small farmers' Finnish Rural Party (SMP). However, in recent years there has been a loud "immigration-critical" wing in the party, which comes from the extreme right.

Who are the True Finns?

Are the True Finns, then, "the most left of the right-wing parties", a continuation of the SMP's traditions or a radical, or about to radicalise, right-wing party that arose from Europe-wide Islamophobia? At least the party's voters resemble the typical voters of the radical right (Arter 2010, 501). The supporters of the True Finns are, according to a survey done in 2008-2009, on average well off, middle-aged male wage-earners. Half of its supporters, a larger share than any other party has, are workers. The proportion of specialists and managerial employees who vote for it, on the other hand, is smaller than that of any other party; however, the supporters of the party are doing well financially. Only the National Coalition Party and Swedish People's Party had more supporters in the highest income bracket, those earning over 50,000 Euros per year; and as far as the lowest income bracket is concerned, those earning less than 20,000 Euros per year, only the National Coalition Party and the Swedish People's Party had less of these people among its voters.

The level of education of the supporters of the True Finns is relatively low. 53% have completed vocational school or college-level education, and 27% have completed only comprehensive, middle or primary school. Only 5% have a university education. By comparison, of the supporters of the Greens 33% have university education, 26% have vocational education and only 7% have not gone beyond comprehensive school. The supporter base of the party is the most masculine, 67%, of all parties. A glance at those in positions of responsibility in the party also reveals that in terms of gender the party leadership is masculine. The True Finns get more votes in sparsely populated areas than in towns. In this sense the party's supporter base resembles that of the voters of the Centre Party, though for the Centre Party the difference is greater (Rahkonen 2010, 511). According to Paavo Niskanen (2008, 142-144) the True

Finns promote the causes of farmers and – apart from officials – the middle-class unorganised workers. In statements issued by the True Finns, the most central class virtue seems to be entrepreneurship, according to Niskanen. The True Finns position themselves more as advocates of middle-class virtues than does the bourgeoisie. However, the class orientation of the True Finns is stronger than in many other parties, as it does not stress a common cross-class interest as strongly as the others do.

As the most central objectives of the True Finns, David Arter (2010, 494) cites the aspiration to integrate minorities, in other words defending the majority against minorities' demands for equality that have gone too far, and defending basic security and progressive taxation and lowering the taxes of low-paid workers. In relation to the question of basic security, Arter refers to the 2003 manifesto⁷ of the True Finns, in which the traditional left was seen as having abandoned the tradition of tailor Halme and farmer Koskela and having hopped onto the wagon of the cold and strange socialist EU elite. The True Finns are, indeed, often presented as a centre party with a left emphasis, and people do not want to consider it a European right-wing populist party in the name of its SMP roots. Immigration themes were not addressed in the SMP's party programmes⁸ (Pekonen 1999, 36; Kestilä 2005, 367).

Leftist utterances by right-wing populist parties regarding the state's role in the economy are, however, not exceptional by any means (Mudde 1997, 130). For example, Jörg Haider defined the FPÖ's economic and social policy as "social, not socialist" (Arter 2010, 495). Like Haider, Timo Soini defines the True Finns as a workers' party without socialism. Instead of "socialism" what they propose, of course, is a "sociality" based on Christian values (Mudde 1997, 130). The True Finns, too, lean on Christian values to some extent, and Timo Soini emphasises his Catholicism.

True fear

In Finland, the growth of the income gap since the mid-1990s has been faster than in any other OECD country⁹. Since the end of the 1980s, economic growth has not increased the wellbeing experienced by people (Hänninen & Palola 2010, 8). In particular, property income has grown in comparison with earned income, as property income has been taxed relatively and earned income

progressively. Also, a new class of the working poor has emerged in Finland¹⁰.

In a situation in which there seems to be no alternatives, people have been mobilised by fear. The fear of immigrants, criminals, and licentiousness, a public sector that is becoming a burden or an ecological catastrophe makes politics meaningful again (Iiłek 2010). In the atmosphere of the war against terror, the world is now divided into friends and foes. Through fear “we” are made into a homogeneous group and attitudes toward “them” are magnified. The strong moral pressure connected to this division makes compromise virtually impossible. The morally righteous “we” cannot be contaminated even with the smallest number of “them” (Mudde 2007, 89).

Right-wing populists – though they take advantage of anti-foreigner views – try to avoid direct racism and anti-Semitism. Still, their ideology contains elements typical of the radical right, such as the idea of “a nation” (Jokisalo 2009, 130). Indeed, the True Finns’ election programme (2011, 10) proposes various ways to preserve “the national cultural heritage”, such as focusing government grants on cultural projects and activities that “strengthen Finnish identity”.

The electoral programme also has echoes of the “ethno-pluralistic” theory of the neo-right, in which the race-based thinking that is seen as old-fashioned is replaced by a notion of a national culture. Instead of racial hierarchies, immigration is opposed by calling for the preservation of “the diversity of cultures”. In ethno-pluralism, national cultures are thought to have evolved through a social-Darwinian battle for existence, and they are considered homogeneous and unchanged. Ethno-pluralism sees culture as a natural, homogeneous and unchanged “national” culture (Jokisalo 2010b, 96-97). According to the True Finns, “an independent and prosperous Finland is, even on a global level, one of the most miraculous achievements on Earth” (parliamentary election programme 2011, 9). So the national culture must be cherished or it will be destroyed. Islam is seen as the biggest threat to it. The blog of a Helsinki City Council member, the second most well-known True Finn Jussi Halla-aho ‘Kirjoituksia uppoavasta lännestä’ (Writings from the Sinking West) beats the drum for the conspiracy theory promoted by the neo-right elsewhere in Europe, according to which Islam is waging war of invasion in Europe.

Jussi Halla-aho directly equates human worth with success and the achievement principle¹¹. Timo Soini, on the other hand, tries to distance himself somewhat from the number two of the party: their

rhetoric refers to different directions. The True Finns' parliamentary election programme in 2007, for example, declares that the disabled are as worthy as all other people, and thus they must be guaranteed equal opportunities. The True Finns are also against the proposal to remove disability from society by means of various prenatal screenings. However, these propositions that the True Finns oppose come from the European neo-right and right-wing populists (see e.g. Jokisalo 1995, 119). The policy line in the programme is probably an echo of the party's internal definition of policy.

Right-wing radicalism clearly tries to appeal to both those displaced by society and the winners of the neoliberal development. Thus, on the True Finns' lists, there are both successful hard line supporters and regular people who are worried about their future.

Why right-wing but not left-wing populism?

For populism "the people" and "the elite" are opposite poles, and for this reason it does not want to relate to either the political left or right. According to Ernesto Laclau, populism condenses obscure discontent, the experience of any injustice. Populism is more like a political emphasis that strives to appeal to "the people" and defend it against this "elite" (Laclau 2005, 4). Left populism concentrates on socio-economic questions; right-wing populism, on the other hand, focuses on ethnic and cultural questions (Arter 2010, 492).

In left debate, two arguments often emerge about the rise of right-wing populism, which seem almost contradictory, at least on the surface level. According to one argument, anti-immigrant right-wing populism has had success because the left, mainly the social democrats, has abandoned the working class and accepted the neoliberal consensus that favours the rich. According to the other argument, the right-wing attitudes and hard values of winners have really gained strength in society.

In his book *Frp-koden* Magnus Marsdal describes the success story of the Norwegian Fremskrittspartiet. The left, led by the social democrats, has been involved in increasing the income gap and dissolving the welfare state. According to Marsdal, instead of workers the left represents the winners of the education revolution of the 1960s, the current cultural elite. At best, even if it wants to identify with the working class, the left-wing elite in reality, and perhaps unintentionally, despises the working-class way of life, its flavour and

family values. For a working-class person, on the other hand, it is difficult to understand, for example, the consumption criticism waged by the left (Marsdal 2007, 249). According to Marsdal (2007, 183), when the Norwegian left-wing intellectual turns his nose up at Norwegian menus and redneck discos in Torrevieja, not understanding that not all people have the capacity to speak foreign languages, travel independently and eat in a sophisticated way, his attitude is not really much better than working class homophobia or xenophobia:

When we laugh at menus in Norwegian in Torrevieja are we not laughing at people whose command of the English language is not as good as ours? [...] Do I have the right to laugh at their way of vacationing if it happens to take place in Gran Canaria or Costa Blanca? What ever happened to the benevolent, open and a little self-critical attitude, with which I have learned to consider immigrants – shouldn't I deal with people from other social classes with the same respect, too?

Right-wing populism is, according to Marsdal (2007, 197), an ugly counterpart created for itself by the leftist cultural elite. Unlike in the early days of the labour movement, when the working class led its movement itself, nowadays politicians, both left and right, are born directly into the elite. Thus the working class can choose between the leftist cultural elite or the right-wing business elite in elections. Workers shun the cultural elite even more than the business elite. A common man can, at least in theory, imagine becoming a millionaire but not a professor (Marsdal 2007, 197, 251). Marsdal believes that a large part of the supporters of right-wing populists would vote for the left if the latter would offer an alternative to the neoliberal and elitist politics (Marsdal 2007, 344).

Especially leftist, socially oriented humanists tend to see racism as a problem of excluded young men. A stereotypical image of a European with radical right views is an unemployed, uneducated wretch living in a miserable suburb. However, studies show that economic distress does not expose one to right-wing radicalism. Rather the far right seems to consist of the winners of western modernisation, who hate the poor and foreigners (Jokisalo 1995, 116-120). According to Jokisalo (1995, 109), the thesis about the rebellion of the victims of modernisation turns violence directed at the weaker into resistance against social injustice. Cas Mudde (2007, 205) does not accept the thesis of the supporters of the radical right as the losers of "the modernisation process" either. According to

Mudde, only a small proportion of the real losers of structural change vote for right-wing populists.

Thus according to another view, right-wing populism is more about the western middle class in a good position and the well-off part of the working class trying to maintain their privileged position under the pressure of globalisation. The insecurity generated by globalisation and the structural change of capitalism sparks right-wing populism – but it stirs it up among those who are relatively well off. Specifically, studies have shown that precarious employment and poor economic conditions seem to vitiate the support for right-wing populists, while a better life situation seems to open up people to voting for right-wing populists (Mudde 2007, 223). This can be called, for example, bitterness generated by success. The white man has begun the battle for the privileges of the rich global north.

Notes

1) A pseudonym.

2) Right-wing populists appeal to regular, average people, to a true Finn, and highlight their intellectual and moral superiority compared to officials, politicians or other educated elites (see Lodenius & Wingborg 2010, 16). In welfare chauvinistic thinking, the aim is to limit social-security and services “to the country’s own citizens” (Lodenius & Wingborg 2010, 13), (Arter 2010, 499).

3) Jörg Haider who, for example calls the Nazi death camps “punishment camps” and admires the “gentle employment policy” of Hitler’s Third Reich. One of Haider’s last acts was the establishment of what he called a Sonderlager – a special camp for old, sick, and criminal asylum seekers, set on an isolated, 1,200-metre-high alpine pasture. He told his voters he planned to “concentrate” Chechens there, enabling the “final goal” of their extradition to be carried out more smoothly. www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/oct/18/haider-austria-fascism-far-right.

4) www.mtv3.fi/uutiset/arkisto.shtml/arkistot/kotimaa/2000/12/3915

5) In 1971 Mogens Glistrup, a millionaire and tax lawyer, encouraged the Danes not to pay their taxes. Glistrup compared tax evaders to heroes who resisted the German occupation during the Second World War. The next year Glistrup founded the Progress Party of Denmark. (Betz 1994, 6.)

6) yle.fi/uutiset/talous_ja_politiikka/2009/02/perussuomalaiset_nake_rtavat_keskustan_kannatusta_555161.html. & yle.fi/tvuutiset/uutiset/upics/.../Perussuomalaisten_kannattajaprofiili.ppt.

7) www.perussuomalaiset.fi/ohjelmat/eduskuntavaaliohjelma2003/

8) The SMP's former chairman Pekka Vennamo has contested that the True Finns could become SMP's successor, as the True Finns "foster xenophobic and anti-immigration attitudes" (<http://www.uusisuomi.fi/kotimaa/62560-vennamon-poika-perussuomalaisista-veikko-pyorisi-haudassaan>). Timo Soini also acknowledges the difference of outlook on immigration between the True Finns and SMP (http://atuubi.yle.fi/videot_ja_kuvat/id-10010550).

9) (http://www.stat.fi/til/tjt/2007/tjt_2007_2009-05-20_tie_001_fi.html) During Lipponen's first and second "rainbow government", and some time after them, in 1995-2008, earned income grew by approximately 38% and dividend income by 425% but the level of income redistribution decreased (<http://www.stat.fi/til/tjkt/index.html>). During that period, the real growth of income was 70% in the highest 10% of incomes. For the richest part of the population, the corresponding change in income was just over 120% (http://www.stat.fi/til/tjkt/2008/tjkt_2008_2009-12-22_kat_002_fi.html).

10) For example, in Helsinki, 10% of those receiving income support are working people. At the same time, low-wage industries are reaping massive profits. Even though Kesko's result improved almost 100% in April-June 2010, salary increases have been about 1-2% (Dan Koivulaakso at the Left Alliance's annual spring meeting 2010).

11) www.halla-aho.com/scripta/ihmisarvosta.html.

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