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On the project

Euroscepticism and the European Parliament elections in 2014, the EU's Neighbourhood in light of the Ukraine crisis and power relations in the EU: The EU-28 Watch project is mapping out discourses on these issues in European policies all over Europe. Research institutes from all 28 member states as well as Iceland, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey give overviews on the discourses in their respective countries.

This survey was conducted on the basis of a questionnaire that has been elaborated in March 2014. Most of the 33 reports were delivered in June 2014. This issue and all previous issues are available on the EU-28 Watch website: www.EU-28Watch.org.

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Finland

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1. Euroscepticism and the European Parliament elections*Key topics in the electoral campaign and the role of the EU-wide frontrunners*

Key topics in the electoral campaigns for the 2014 European Parliament elections in Finland were the Euro and its benefits/drawbacks for Finland, and the situation in Ukraine with its implications for EU-Russia relations and for the security of Europe and Finland. The handling of the economic crisis in Europe was expected to emerge as a key topic, but remained more in the background, albeit surfacing occasionally in debates and interviews and in connection with the discussion on the Euro. A lot of attention in the election debates was paid to themes related more to the upcoming Finnish parliamentary elections, such as the discussion on the possibility of NATO membership and changes in the national government due to the resignation of Prime Minister Katainen, and the appointment of the new chair of the Social Democratic Party and hence the Minister of Finance, Antti Rinne. This underlines the partial role that the elections played in the pre-run-up to the national parliamentary elections. The deepening or lessening of the integration of the European Union was also a topic in party campaigns, with moderate eurosceptic themes raised primarily by the populist opposition Finns Party. However, the confrontation between pro- and anti-integration turned out to be mild, with the Finns Party softening their previously sharper criticism.

While the idea of nominating EU-wide frontrunners received considerable attention in the Finnish media – partly because of Finnish European Commissioner Olli Rehn being nominated as one of two frontrunners of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), and amid speculation about the possibility of Finnish Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen being nominated as an European People's Party (EPP) candidate – the EU-wide frontrunners played very little part in the actual campaigning. Out of the frontrunners, in addition to Finland's Rehn, Schulz and Juncker also visited Finland during the campaign, but otherwise the actual EU-wide leading candidates remained largely unknown to the Finnish electorate, receiving only modest media attention.

Links:

- Anne Lauenroth, Sonia Piedrafita, [Between Apathy and Anger: Challenges to the Union from the 2014 Elections to the European Parliament](#), 20 May 2014.

Euroscepticism in the elections

The largest opposition party, the Finns Party, campaigned with a theme opposing the EU's argued development towards a federal state, and has largely maintained a eurosceptic stance. The Finns Party rose to their current political position with a landslide victory in the 2011 parliamentary elections with euroscepticism as one of their key themes, becoming the third largest party in the Finnish parliament. In the light of this, it was expected that euroscepticism would be strongly evident in this year's European Parliamentary elections. However, even though the Finns Party used their campaign to try to frame the elections as a vote either for or against development towards a closer Union, as

opposed to their alternative of a less integrated Union with an emphasis on the independence of member states, it didn't become a central theme in the elections. In addition, this year has seen the Finns Party softening their critical stance towards the EU by, for example, not demanding an exit from the EU or the Eurozone, but rather reforms towards a more independent member states' Union. This is seen as a move to make the party a more likely partner in the government after the next parliamentary elections in Finland. The party currently accepts Finland's membership in the Eurozone as a given, but emphasizes that this can be changed if Finland's interests demand it.

Other major parties which gravitated towards eurosceptic policies in order to please the voters they had lost to the Finns Party after the 2011 parliamentary elections, have mainly reverted to pro-European lines. However, some Centre Party candidates did campaign with a more EU-critical agenda, most notably Paavo Väyrynen, who has been a long-standing critic of the EU and became the second most popular candidate for the Centre Party in the elections, after pro-European Olli Rehn. In addition to the Finns Party, there were also a couple of smaller parties with more aggressive eurosceptic and nationalistic agendas that had candidates running in the European Parliamentary elections, but they remained too small to sway public opinion significantly. In other respects, the Finnish political parties are mainly pro-European.

Links:

- Anne Lauenroth, Sonia Piedrafita, [Between Apathy and Anger: Challenges to the Union from the 2014 Elections to the European Parliament](#), 20 May 2014.

The outcome of the elections

The outcome has been seen by some as a move towards so-called 'second-order elections', where the turnout is relatively low, and voters are more eager to switch from their traditional parties and to vote in protest against government parties. While the government parties, especially the National Coalition, have previously fared well in the European parliamentary elections in Finland, in this election some of the parties in government were clearly punished by voters. However, unlike in the classic 'second-order elections', there was no rise of smaller parties with all the bigger parties losing their support, and the Prime Minister's party, the National Coalition, held onto its position as the largest party with nearly as big a share of the votes as in the last European parliamentary elections. The National Coalition Party consequently managed to retain their three seats, probably thanks to their pro-European supporter base, which is more likely to vote in the European elections and less inclined to use them as a protest arena. Other government parties lost voters as a result of protest voting, however. Despite this, the seat count remained largely the same as during the last period, with the Green League and the Christian Democrats losing one seat apiece, and the Left Alliance and the Finns Party gaining one seat each – the latter being a far more modest gain than expected and a clear dip in their support compared to the outcome of the previous national elections.

The turnout remained at 40.9 percent, which has been typical of previous European Parliamentary elections in Finland. In the media, the main reason suggested for this low number has been voter unfamiliarity with the way in which the European Union and its parliament function. The assumption is that people feel they don't know enough to vote, or don't understand the significance of the European Parliament and its increased powers.

Links:

- Yleisradio, [European Elections 2014 Results](#), 30 May 2014.
- Finnish Government, [Government report on EU policy](#), 26 June 2013

2. The EU's Neighbourhood

Future relations with Russia

The European Union's relations with Russia are, from Finland's point of view, a key external policy issue, and one where Finland has both important interests at stake and a contribution to make. Due to Russia's actions during the crisis in Ukraine, relations are expected to become more challenging for both the EU and Finland. Difficulties and uncertainties are anticipated in economic relations, and there has been some debate about changes to Finland's security environment as a result of the Ukraine crisis, and a possible need to re-evaluate Finland's security policy and even the possibility of re-considering the policy of non-membership of a military alliance (or military non-alignment). One of the key elements in the current political discussions on relations with Russia have been the economic sanctions targeted against Russia, which are seen as problematic for Finland and detrimental to the Finnish economy. The general attitude towards sanctions is rather critical and Finland leans towards negotiation in resolving issues with Russia, even though it is accepted that the EU must respond to actions like those witnessed in Crimea. The economic sanctions are seen as problematic because of the asymmetrical damage they cause to member states, as Finland will suffer considerably more as a result compared to most of the other EU countries.

As a close neighbour of Russia, relations with the country will no doubt continue to be of the utmost importance for Finland. The Finnish government has stressed its commitment to the EU's common Russia policy, but especially in the context of the sanctions issue, concern has been expressed about the difficulties involved in striking a balance between this commitment and safeguarding bilateral relations with Russia. Finland's goal regarding EU-Russia relations has been described by Prime Minister Katainen as "a natural European neighbouring relationship, which benefits Finland, the EU as a whole and Russia" (YLE), and Finland continues to see engaging Russia in cooperation as a primary strategy in influencing this relationship. According to the Grand Committee of the Finnish Parliament, the EU should seek a more equal and flexible approach towards its partners, including Russia, and needs to base its external relations on a realistic analysis of the motives of neighbouring countries, and their understanding and expectations of the EU.

Links:

- Prime Minister's Office, [The Government Report on EU Policy 2013](#), 17 June 2013.
- Parliament of Finland, [The Government's White Paper on EU Policy 2014](#), January 2014.
- YLE, [Premier worried by EU's strained ties with Russia](#), 12 March 2014.

Eastern Partnership and events in Ukraine

The Eastern Partnership has traditionally enjoyed Finland's support. However, in the light of the recent events, the usefulness and the future of the Eastern Partnership have been called into question. From Finland's perspective, the Eastern Partnership summit in November 2013 (where Ukraine announced that it would postpone the association agreement with the EU, foreshadowing the escalation of the crisis in Ukraine) not only illustrated the EU's difficult relationship with Russia, but also with other ex-Soviet states. In the light of the events that ensued – the violence in Kiev, the change of government, the annexation of Crimea by Russia and now the ongoing violence in Eastern Ukraine – the Eastern Partnership is still regarded in Finland as a relevant political framework, especially for building democracy in the partnership countries. However, there needs to be a stronger focus on the individual needs of the partnership countries.

Finland has emphasised that the Eastern Partnership is not a policy leading to membership of the European Union, and, as such, it should be kept separate from enlargement discussions. The conditions for deepening relations with the partnership countries depend on the implementation of the association agreements and on complying with the common values in the partnership countries. From Finland's perspective, the primary goal of the Eastern Partnership remains the reforms in the partnership countries, and the convergence of their legal and economic integration. In the future, the differentiated nature of the advancement of the partnership countries should be taken into consideration more seriously, and more effort should be invested in providing information about the partnership.

Links:

- Prime Minister's Office, [The Government Report on EU Policy 2013](#), 17 June 2013.
- Parliament of Finland, [The Government's White Paper on EU Policy 2014](#), January 2014.

Turkey and its membership perspective

Turkey was officially recognised as a candidate for full membership of the EU during Finland's presidency of the Council of the European Union in 1999, and Finland has duly supported its membership aspirations. This, however, has been something of a safe option for Finland, since Turkey's membership has been seen as a rather remote possibility given the different positions of the EU member states on this question. In other words, officially Finland has supported the enlargement, without having to take a stance on Turkey's actual membership of the Union in the near future, which would probably be a more problematic issue for Finland.

Turkey's membership perspective hasn't been a key subject of political debate in Finland during the past two years, although the question was raised occasionally by the media during the electoral campaigning. The largest opposition party, the Finns, has opposed Turkey's membership and there has been notable opposition to the membership perspective among politicians of the other parties, too. According to a poll commissioned by Finnish TV channel MTV3 in 2013, 68 percent of the Finnish population were against Turkey's membership, even if the country managed to fulfil the membership requirements. Parties (with the exception of the Finns Party) are generally more amenable to the prospect of Turkey's membership in the future, but it is not currently seen as feasible. However, the official Finnish foreign policy supports the continuation of membership negotiations and the EU accession process is seen as a driving force behind the reforms in Turkey. Finland's official line is that, as a member of the EU, Turkey would be able to strengthen the Union as an economic and foreign policy actor. The actual line sees the prospect of membership as a means of advancing reforms in Turkey, with actual membership not on the horizon at present. Regarding the membership criteria, Finland's position is that only European countries that fulfil the applicable criteria in the areas of democracy, human rights, the rule of law and market economy are eligible, and that no compromise can be made with regard to these criteria, and accession should not be expedited for political reasons.

Links:

- Prime Minister's Office, [The Government Report on EU Policy 2013](#), 17 June 2013.
- Parliament of Finland, [The Government's White Paper on EU Policy 2014](#), January 2014.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, [Finland supports continuation of the EU's enlargement](#), 12 October 2011.

3. Power relations in the EU

Germany's role in the EU

The leading role that Germany has assumed – more or less willingly – in the European Union has received little opposition from Finland. Chancellor Angela Merkel's policies have been easy for Finland to support for the most part, often converging with Finnish interests and goals. In particular, Germany's policy regarding Ukraine, which has also taken into account the concerns of countries that would shoulder most of the economic burden of the possible sanctions, has been regarded as bridge-building in Finland. Germany's EU policies have also emphasized the role of small and middle-sized member states, hence being favourable to Finland.

Links:

- Prime Minister's Office, [The Government Report on EU Policy 2013](#), 17 June 2013.
- Parliament of Finland, [The Government's White Paper on EU Policy 2014](#), January 2014.

Austerity vs. growth

There has been considerable political debate in Finland about austerity versus growth as a solution to the European economic crisis, with both strategies gaining support from different political sides. At the outset of the crisis, Finland's position was clearly in favour of the austerity policies, but since the country's own economic troubles have deepened, this line has been questioned, especially on the left side of the political spectrum.

The largest party in parliament, the National Coalition, has supported the current European policy and its austerity measures, while the Social Democrats have taken a growth and state intervention stance in the debate, with recent comments indicating that they are edging closer to the lines of the European Social Democrats. While underlining solidarity in the Finnish economic policy, it should be noted that the Social Democrats have been critical of bail-outs and joint responsibility at the European level. The Left Alliance have expressed their clear support for European-level solidarity and the richer member states' responsibility to support those in trouble, while other parties have either been against joint responsibility or have demanded guarantees and collateral in return for Finnish financial aid. All the parties emphasize that a balance needs to be struck between austerity and growth, and the question is more about how much weight should be given to each.

The Finnish government's position is that failures to comply with commonly agreed rules were brought about by political mistakes, which led to and aggravated the crisis. The reforms in the area of economic policy coordination, as well as those to be carried out in connection with the banking union, will be instrumental in addressing the flaws afflicting the efficient operation of the economic and monetary union. Budgetary balance and the reduction of debt are some of the main objectives of the reforms supported by the government. Within these objectives the most important goals are improving economic policy coordination and the establishment of the banking union. Strengthened economic policy coordination should primarily seek to create added value, streamline the existing procedures and instruments, promote the exchange of best practices, and evaluate the social implications across the board. Solidarity in the form of common Eurobonds or a redemption fund for countries with excessive national debt has been firmly rejected. Key elements in achieving the necessary economic growth are seen to be restoring competitiveness and putting public finances on a sound footing. Member states are required to carry out structural reforms in order to improve the competitiveness of their products and services.

According to a statement made by the Grand Committee of the Finnish Parliament, reviving the European economy calls for greater productivity in the industrial and service sectors. The enhanced competitiveness needs to be based primarily on increased productivity and innovation. The alternative – internal devaluations involving reduced labour costs – is seen as a highly problematic option

because of its negative impact on demand and even on social stability. Thus it is the Grand Committee's line that Finland should use the objective of reviving economic growth as a benchmark in assessing every proposed European policy and legal act. This serves to demonstrate the difference that exists between the government's policy and major opinions in the Parliament.

Links:

- Prime Minister's Office, [The Government Report on EU Policy 2013](#), 17 June 2013.
- Parliament of Finland, [The Government's White Paper on EU Policy 2014](#), January 2014.

UK exit

UK Prime Minister David Cameron's announcement of plans to negotiate a new settlement with the EU and to hold a referendum on the UK's membership of the EU drew a negative response in Finland for the most part. Prime Minister Katainen stated that he would rather use the EU's resources to develop the Union, not to break it, seeing negotiations with the UK as putting a strain on the Union. European Minister Alexander Stubb said that it would be lamentable if the UK left the Union, regarding Cameron's demands as improbable to achieve. However, Timo Soini, the eurosceptic leader of the Finns Party, lent his support to the idea of a referendum on EU membership.

The United Kingdom has been an important partner for Finland, and the UK's viewpoints on economic policies have converged with the National Coalition Party's positions in particular, increasing the importance of the UK as an actor within the EU. The UK's potential exit from the Union is thus not seen as desirable from Finland's point of view, not least because of the damage it would cause to the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

Links:

- Prime Minister's Office, [The Government Report on EU Policy 2013](#), 17 June 2013.
- Parliament of Finland, [The Government's White Paper on EU Policy 2014](#), January 2014.
- Jari Tourunen, [Cameron haluaa uuden EU:n](#), 25 January 2013