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## Finland's turn to the right: the rise of the Finns party

*The article deals with the rise of the Finns Party during the last two decades. Analyzed is the party's activity aimed at getting the support of the Finnish electorate, especially of the working class. Displayed are the party's attitudes toward major issues of Finland's internal and external politics. Special attention is paid to the immigration issue.*

**Key words:** immigration, the Finns Party, the far right, the EU, welfare, multiculturalism.

*У статті розглядається зростання політичної ваги партії «Справжні фіни» протягом останніх двох десятиліть. Проаналізовано діяльність партії, спрямовану на отримання підтримки фінського електорату, особливо робітничого класу. Продемонстровано ставлення партії до головних аспектів фінської внутрішньої та зовнішньої політики. Особлива увага присвячена питанню імміграції.*

**Ключові слова:** імміграція, партія «Справжні фіни», крайньоправі, Європейський Союз, соціальне забезпечення, мультикультуралізм.

*В статье рассматривается рост политического влияния партии «Истинные финны» на протяжении последних двух десятилетий. Проанализирована деятельность партии, направленная на получение поддержки финского электората, особенно рабочего класса. Продемонстрировано отношение партии к главным аспектам финской внутренней и внешней политики. Особенное внимание уделено вопросу иммиграции.*

**Ключевые слова:** иммиграция, партия «Истинные финны», ультраправые, Европейский союз, социальное обеспечение, мультикультурализм.

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The early twentieth century has witnessed the rise of far right all around Europe: the Freedom Party in Austria, the Jobbik in Hungary, the National Front in France, the Golden Dawn in Greece, the Lega Nord in Italy, the Swedish Democrats in Sweden, Vlaams Belang in Belgium, the Swiss People's Party in Switzerland, the Dutch Party for Freedom in the Netherland etc. The growth of all these far right parties was fueled to a large extent by immigration, especially from non-European countries. Finland also has seen the rise of the far right represented first of all by the Finns Party, previously known as the True Finns Party (which can be interpreted as the party of ordinary Finns, to make an appeal to the working class). In 2015 it managed to win the second largest number of seats in the parliament. In political literature there are various opinions concerning the definition of the Finns Party. In European mainstream media it is usually called far right or right-wing populist. There are also other definitions: populist, nationalist, radical-conservative, anti-Muslim, etc. In the Finnish mass media it is often called populist. It is difficult to give a fair assessment to the party's ideology because of the mixture of different ideological principles (from right to left) in the party's program and activity. It seems that it would be appropriate to call the party either far right or right-wing populist since the traits of these ideologies prevail in the party's policy.

The party's rise in popularity has drawn the attention of analysts in Finland and abroad. Mikko Lahtinen, Kyosti Karvonen, Anna Leszkiewicz, Bruno Janti, Jan Sunberg, William Carter, Aleks Teivainen, Oula Silvennoinen, and others have explored various aspects of the party's activity; but since the party has recently entered the government and trying to adjust to the new environment and exert its influence on internal and external policies, the party's program principles and its political activity can be considered a topical subject which requires further investigation.

The purpose of the article is to trace the Finns Party's rise to power, to single out the party's traits which draw support of the Finnish population, to analyze the party's activity and display its attitude toward major issues of Finland's internal and external politics. Special attention in the article is paid to the immigration issue since the far right rather effectively uses it recently in the EU, including Finland, for political manipulations. Investigation of the typical traits of the Finns Party will help better understand general tendencies of the rising far right movement in the European Union and make predictions for the future.

The Finns Party was founded in 1995; its predecessor was the Finnish Rural Party. At the beginning its popularity was very limited with only one MP in parliament. The party's present head, Timo Soini, assumed the position of chairman in 1997. He turned out to be quite fit for the position since he majored in political theory while studying at university and wrote his Master's thesis on populism. He is also considered by many to be a charismatic leader.

Until the world economic crisis of 2008 the party failed to get a significant support during three successive elections. In 2003 the party won three seats in parliament; in 2007 – five. In the 2008 crisis Finland took part in bailing out of the troubled economies of southern European countries. That caused serious dissatisfaction among the working class who had been hit by the crisis as well. The crisis hit particularly badly the old industrial areas and induced the workers to switch their support from the Social Democrats (whom they traditionally backed) to the Finns Party. According to some analysts, that was a kind of protest against the government's policy [1].

In the 2011 parliamentary elections the Finns Party got 39 seats and became the third largest party in the legislature. The results were considered as shocking and revolutionary by the press. The party raised

its popularity from 4.1 percent to 19.1 percent within a four-year period. In the next parliamentary elections of 2015 the party got 17.7 percent of the votes and became the second biggest party in the parliament. After the 2015 elections the Finns Party entered a coalition government; Timo Soini occupied the post of foreign minister. The party was also quite successful in the elections to the European Parliament and got almost 13 percent of the votes in 2014. In the European Parliament it joined the right-wing European Conservatives and Reformists Group.

The Finns Party skillfully exploited the bailing out and immigration issues to garner a considerable support of the electorate. The party stressed that the money paid to bail out the faulting economies of southern Europe could have been spent on welfare to improve the position of the working class Finns. The party's economic policy is turning more and more to the left. The party stresses that welfare should be used exclusively for the benefit of the economically non-affluent Finnish people; even the Finns of Swedish origin must be banned from access to welfare benefits, not to mention the immigrants [2]. This position of the Finns Party secured the support of the working class. Nowadays more blue-collar workers support the Finns Party than the Social Democrats. The working class has become the party's major electorate.

The economic crisis hit the young especially hard. Finland's economy has been in recession for several years and many young people find it more and more difficult to enter the sophisticated market of the country. As a result, the support of the Finns Party which promises to help the young is growing among that segment of the population. It is reflected as well in the growth of the party's Youth Organization which membership rose from 800 in 2011 to 2,200 in 2013.

The immigration issue has turned out to be especially controversial in Finnish society. In fact it has divided the country. The political establishment has traditionally supported immigration. Thus, in September 2015 during the time of the EU refugee crisis the Finnish government said that it was going to double the number of refugees entering the country from 15 thousand to 30 thousand. Most applicants were from Iraq and Somalia. Finnish Prime Minister Juha Sipilä even offered one of his houses to refugees. He said that Finland, a country of 5.5 million people, must set an example to the rest of Europe on immigration and wrote on Twitter that Finland should be developed into a multicultural country. His colleague finance minister Alexander Stubb stated that multiculturalism is an asset [3]. The Finnish Lutheran Church also encouraged its members to take in refugees. That policy, however, caused a downfall in the church membership. "The Church no longer defends Christian values; they support Islam's entry into Finland. Shame on you fools," wrote on a website one of the former members [3].

The position of the Finns Party on immigration was diametrically opposite. In July 2015, Olli Immonen, one of the Party's MPs, called multiculturalism a nightmare and stated: "We will fight until the end for our homeland and one true Finnish nation" [3]. According to a survey conducted in December 2016, eighty percent of Finns believed that social climate in the country was distressing [4]. Oula Silvennoinen, a researcher in Helsinki University, assumes that this split in society was caused by immigration. Many people, especially blue-collar workers are not satisfied with "that someone else is getting the benefits that belong to them," said Silvennoinen [4]. More affluent white-collar members of Finnish society whose jobs are not threatened by immigrants are usually indifferent to the immigration issue or even support the government's refugee policy. "Our society is becoming more and more polarized," stressed Silvennoinen [4].

The Finns Party, similar to other right wing European parties, emphasizes the dangers of immigration. It points out that accepting more refugees leads to the growth of financial burden on society and provokes more crime; immigrants from Muslim countries do not want to learn the Finnish language and accept Finnish values. These concerns are widely shared by many Finns. In February 2015 the Finns Party published a program on immigration policy that stated that immigration and multiculturalism are not necessary or desirable, and that such concepts as "welfare state" and "open borders" are not compatible [5]. The program also warned that immigration will irreversibly change Finland, divide society, create ghetto areas with gangs and high crime rates, "promote religious radicalism and its consequences, and foster ethnic conflicts" [5].

The party proposes not to look to Sweden with its "open door" policy to immigrants, but to follow the example of Denmark where the far right Danish People's Party pressed the government into toughening the immigration policy. The Finnish government should abandon the refugees quota redistribution system and itself take decisions concerning how many refugees and from what countries to accept. The party advises that family reunification procedures should be made more complicated to stop "welfare tourism." The party suggests that only the people who are able to support themselves may have the right to invite other family members to Finland.

Radical or even racial views are quite common among the Finns Party members. Thus one of the high ranking Finns Party's MPs, Jussi Halla-aho, was investigated several times for igniting racial animosity. He is also a member of the nationalist and anti-immigrant Suomen Sisu organization. Another MP, James Hirvisaari had to be expelled from the party for taking pictures of his friend posing in a Nazi salute in the Parliament and then placing them on Facebook and YouTube [1]. Another of the party's MPs, Amon

Rautiainen, called for Muslims to be “boiled alive” [6]. The Finns Party supported the establishment of the Soldiers of Odin, an anti-immigrant organization to patrol streets in Finnish towns [7]. The Soldiers of Odin accuse immigrants, especially Muslims, of increasing crime rates and distribute placards with an inscription “Migrants are not welcome.” The organization’s founder, Mika Ranta, was convicted of assaulting immigrants.

The Finns Party Youth has become an indicator of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments. This young branch of the Finns Party is especially dissatisfied with the EU refugee policy. The Finns Party Youth pays much attention in its program to populism which it considers as “a political philosophy that is for the people, by the people, against interests of the elite, corruption and overt bureaucracy” [13]. The organization also regards the policy of multiculturalism as wrong and “short-sighted.” Nationalism is propagated instead. In February 2015 they even publicly burned the EU flag during a demonstration. In their statement the Finns Party Youth said: “The EU flag does not represent any nation. Our organization works from the premise that, above all else, individual nations’ rights to determine their own affairs should be respected” [14]. The leaders of the Finns Party abstained from this action and even condemned it. “Flag-burning is just not something Finns would do. There is no sense in it,” said the party leader Timo Soini [14]. Another Finns Party MP, Mika Niikko, also expressed his dissatisfaction with the party youth faction for the flag-burning. According to him, such actions “move outside the limits of socially accepted behavior” [14]. These statements of the party leaders lead to thinking that the party does not control its own youth branch or just pretends that it does not control it. The Finns Party Youth, quite expectantly, looks more radical than its patrons. Its leader, Sebastian Tynkkyinen, for example, was convicted of hate speech based on three anti-Islamic Facebook posts in summer 2016 [15].

The establishment’s positive attitude toward the increasing immigration is explained by the continuous decrease of births in Finland. For example, the number of births has declined by eight percent for the last three years [8]. The Finns Party proposed its own solution in the manifesto of 2011: “Young women should be persuaded not to study and instead give birth to Finnish babies who would eventually fill the demand for workers” [9]. As to refugees, the party offers to settle them in adjacent to the conflict zones countries. It believes that refugees first of all are trying to take advantage of Finland’s generous welfare system. The same is said about Roma who are often called “criminals” in the party press. In general, the attitudes of the Finns Party to Roma and to solving the refugee problem look very similar to those of the far right Jobbik party in Hungary [10]. The party’s program for the Finnish Parliament Election of 2015

states that migration results not so from wars as from the “difference in living standards between Europe and their own countries” [5].

The Finns Party is not totally against any immigration. It believes that immigration to Finland from outside the European Union can be allowed only when it is economically advantageous. Immigrants must be totally integrated to Finnish society according to a principle “when in Rome, do as the Romans do” [11]. Thus any financial support for immigrants’ cultures should be abandoned. The party severely criticizes the EU immigration policy of “burden sharing” [11]. Thus, the refugee quotas must be abolished. Immigrants who committed crime must be deported. Petty crime is also to be taken seriously. The party also believes that the “EU cannot, under any circumstances, dictate how much and what kind of immigration a member state will have” [12].

Like all other European far right parties the Finns Party is definitely Eurosceptic. It believes that “the EU will work best as a loose confederation of independent states working for free trade and economic benefits” [12]. Sampo Terho, the chairperson of the Finns Party Parliamentary Group and potential next leader of the Finns Party (the current leader Timo Soini decided to abandon the position in June 2017), went even further and announced in March 2017 a possibility of placing a referendum issue on Finland’s membership in the EU in the party program for the next parliamentary elections [16]. In contrast to other far right parties, the Finns Party expresses its opposition to NATO. Such a position has been applauded by Russia. The Kremlin also praises the party’s stance on the language policy: the Finns Party campaigns to stop teaching Swedish as mandatory language and replace it with Russian in eastern parts of the country [9].

Instead of NATO the party wants the European Union to develop its own defense and security policy. The Finns Party leader, Timo Soini, who currently occupies the position of foreign minister, announced recently his wish to strengthen ties with the United States. It does not fit with the actions of many other European far right parties (France’s National Front, Hungary’s Jobbik, Italy’s Lega Nord, etc.) who usually try to conform to the Kremlin’s instructions.

In May 2015 the Finns Party entered the coalition government noted for its austerity measures. It was probably a mistake since the party’s popularity dropped to 8.8 percent, according to the Yle poll taken in January 2017 [17]. Thus in just two years the party has lost half of its supporters. Other European far right parties are aware of such tendencies and try to avoid entering a coalition government. For instance, the Danish People’s Party in Denmark has been regularly abstaining from becoming a coalition government partner despite its impressively successful electoral results during the last two decades. The decline of the Finns Party’s popularity in early 2017 coincided with

convictions of its several MPs of anti-Muslim online hate speech [18].

On February 20, 2017 the Finnish Parliament despite the severe opposition from the Finns Party adopted a law on same-sex marriage. Like other European far right parties the Finns Party supports the traditional family model and vigorously declares its opposition to abortions, same-sex adoption, IVF for single women or same-sex couples, euthanasia, and consecration of female pastors by the Evangelical Lutheran Church [19]. The party's strict opposition to innovation in moral spheres does not bring it much popularity. The Finns become more and more tolerant and liberal year after year. The issue that brings the party a serious electoral support is immigration.

The revival of nationalism has become a typical trait of all far right parties in the European Union, including Finland. The Finns Party urges teachers in schools to promote patriotism; it arranges various cultural activities (especially related to traditional values) throughout the country with the aim of consolidation of national identity [11].

Recently, thanks to the Finns Party's efforts, the coalition government adopted stricter anti-immigration measures which made it difficult for immigrants and asylum seekers to settle in the country. The measures even urged some immigrants who had stayed in Finland for years, especially Muslims, to leave the country [20].

**Conclusions.** In summing up the material we can come to the conclusion that immigration became a key issue in the rhetoric and policy of the Finns Party. It is not surprising since immigration has become the central issue for all far right parties in the EU. The working class who used to support the social democratic parties is switching their allegiance to the far right all around the EU. Finland is no exception. The working class has become the major electoral basis of the Finns Party. The major fear of the working class is immigration and related to it unemployment, crime, and reduction in welfare benefits. The Finns Party quite skillfully exploits this fear of ordinary Finns and gets their electoral support. Paradoxically, the far right recently even became attractive to the "marginal groups" (homosexuals, feminists, various sub-culture groups etc.), who now see in this political force the only protection from radical Islam. Not long ago these groups were vehemently against the far right and traditionally supported the left. The far right in Finland and other European countries are normally Eurosceptic; they are fueled by immigration and are not interested in a strong European Union. If the left, center, and moderately right parties do not make radical changes in their immigration policies the integrity of the European Union will be put at risk. It will benefit Russia greatly and may put serious obstacles to Ukraine's development as an independent and pro-EU state.

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