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**‘Whenever the EU is involved, you get  
problems’: Explaining the European  
policy of The (True) Finns**

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### **Abstract**

The 2011 parliamentary elections in Finland finally resulted in the breakthrough of a major Eurosceptical party. Analysing the European policy of The Finns, this paper shows how the entry of EU to the domestic political agenda contributed to its electoral success. The anti-EU discourse of the party is largely similar with the policies of other European radical right or populist parties. The Finns view the EU as an elitist club that favours big business and poses a serious threat to democracy, national culture and solidarity. The consensus-based model of Finnish democracy clearly contributed to the rise of the party, with The Finns calling for an end to 'one truth' politics. However, while opposition to integration is clearly a fundamental part of party ideology, the contextual factors have also moderated the argumentation and policies of The Finns.

## **‘Whenever the EU is involved, you get problems’: Explaining the European policy of The (True) Finns**

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The Finnish parliamentary elections of April 2011 were nothing short of extraordinary, producing major changes to the national party system and attracting considerable international media attention (Table 1). The Eurosceptical and populist The Finns<sup>1</sup> won 19.1 % of the votes, a staggering increase of 15 % from the 2007 elections and the largest ever increase in support achieved by a single party in Eduskunta (the unicameral national parliament) elections. All other parties represented in the Eduskunta lost votes. These were also the first Eduskunta elections where European Union (EU) featured prominently in the debates, with the problems facing the eurozone and the role of Finland in the bail-out measures becoming the main topic of the campaign.

The objective of this paper is to analyze and explain the European policy of The Finns. Focusing on The Finns is relevant for three reasons. The case study provides an interesting example of how the EU can impact national party politics. While the success of The Finns is probably explained more by the party finance scandal and general anti-party sentiments among the Finnish electorate than by Euroscepticism, the recent prominence of EU on the domestic political agenda has undoubtedly benefited The Finns. A close examination of party discourse and programmes in turn makes it possible to understand why The Finns are opposed to integration and to compare the European policy of The Finns with the EU discourses of

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<sup>1</sup> The party adopted its current English name, The Finns, in August 2011. Until then the party had been known as the True Finns. According to party leader Timo Soini, who had put forward the motion for adopting the new name, the new simple name is intended to emphasize the fact that the party represents ordinary citizens. Soini also felt that the old name True Finns had an extreme right or nationalistic slant to it. The exact translation of the Finnish name of the party, *Perussuomalaiset*, would be ‘common Finns’ or ‘ordinary Finns’.

other populist and radical right parties. And finally, excluding the article by Arter (2010), which provides an excellent overall analysis of the party ideology, there are no studies in English of The Finns. Given their very recent breakthrough in national politics and the previous lack of electorally successful radical right parties, Finland is normally also left out of comparative publications on populist or radical right parties.

Table 1. Elections to the Finnish parliament, 1945-2011 (%).

Year	VAS									
	<sup>2</sup>	SDP	VIHR <sup>3</sup>	KESK <sup>1</sup>	PS <sup>4</sup>	LIB <sup>5</sup>	KD	SFP	KOK	Others
1945	23.5	25.1	-	21.3	-	5.2	-	7.9	15.0	2.0
1948	20.0	26.3	-	24.2	-	3.9	-	7.7	17.1	0.8
1951	21.6	26.5	-	23.2	-	5.7	-	7.6	14.6	0.8
1954	21.6	26.2	-	24.1	-	7.9	-	7.0	12.8	0.4
1958	23.2	23.2	-	23.1	-	5.9	-	6.8	15.3	2.5
1962	22.0	19.5	-	23.0	2.2	6.3	-	6.4	15.0	5.6
1966	21.1	27.2	-	21.2	1.0	6.5	0.5	6.0	13.8	2.7
1970	16.6	23.4	-	17.1	10.5	6.0	1.1	5.7	18.0	1.6
1972	17.0	25.8	-	16.4	9.2	5.2	2.5	5.4	17.6	0.9
1975	18.9	24.9	-	17.6	3.6	4.3	3.3	4.7	18.4	4.3
1979	17.9	23.9	-	17.3	4.6	3.7	4.8	4.2	21.7	1.9
1983	13.5	26.7	-	17.6	9.7	-	3.0	4.6	22.1	2.8
1987	13.6	24.1	4.0	17.6	6.3	1.0	2.6	5.3	23.1	2.4
1991	10.1	22.1	6.8	24.8	4.8	0.8	3.1	5.5	19.3	2.7
1995	11.2	28.3	6.5	19.8	1.3	0.6	3.0	5.1	17.9	6.3
1999	10.9	22.9	7.3	22.4	1.0	0.2	4.2	5.1	21.0	5.8
2003	9.9	24.5	8.0	24.7	1.6	0.3	5.3	4.6	18.6	3.3
2007	8.8	21.4	8.5	23.1	4.1	0.1	4.9	4.6	22.3	2.4
2011	8.1	19.1	7.3	15.8	19.1	-	4.0	4.3	20.4	2.0

Source: Statistics Finland (years 1948-1975 include also votes in the Åland Islands).

Notes: <sup>1</sup> Until 1965 the Agrarian League, in 1983 including the Liberal Party. <sup>2</sup> Until 1987 the Democratic League of the People of Finland; in 1987 incl. DEVA.

<sup>3</sup> In 1987 not as a party of its own.

<sup>4</sup> In 1962 and 1966 the Small Holders Party and until 1995 the Finnish Rural Party.

<sup>5</sup> Until 1948 the National Progressive Party, until 1966 the Finnish People's Party, until 1999 the Liberal Party.

Parties: KESK - Centre Party, SDP - Social Democratic Party, KOK - National Coalition, VAS - Left Alliance, VIHR - Green League, KD - Christian Democratic Party (until 2001 the Christian League/Union), SFP - Swedish People's Party, PS - The Finns, Communist Party, LIB - Liberal People's Party, Others - other parties.

The reason for labelling The Finns 'populist' is two-fold. First, this is the way the party defines itself. The Finns are the natural successor to the populist Rural Party (SMP), having been established on the ruins of the latter in 1995. Party chair Timo Soini, who has led The

Finns since 1997, was the last party secretary of the SMP, wrote his master's thesis on populism, and has openly acknowledged Veikko Vennamo, the equally charismatic and controversial leader of the SMP, to be his role model in politics (Soini 2008).<sup>2</sup> The programmes of The Finns identify the party as a populist movement, with the 2011 election programme in particular distinguishing the 'populist' version of democracy advocated by the party from the more 'elitist' version of democracy that characterises modern democracies. Secondly, the defence of the common man or 'forgotten people' and attacking the (corrupt) power elite are the cornerstone of the party's ideology (Ruostetsaari 2011). However, while The Finns are on the left-right dimension quite centrist and even centre-left (Jungar and Jupskås 2011; Ruostetsaari 2011), the emphasis put on 'Finnishness' and protecting national culture and solidarity also indicate that The Finns bear many similarities with European radical right or anti-immigration parties (Arter 2010).

The main argument of the paper is that while the anti-EU discourse of The Finns is largely similar with the policies of other European radical right or populist parties, the contextual factors – which clearly contributed to the rise of the party – have so far also moderated the argumentation and policies of The Finns. The next section contains the analytical framework, examining the factors which influence the adoption and use of Euroscepticism by political parties and by populist parties in particular. The third section analyses how European integration, and the way in which EU as an issue had been treated domestically, contributed to the electoral appeal of The Finns. The empirical analysis in the fourth section identifies the main themes of The Finns' anti-EU discourse. The data consists of party programmes and statements adopted between 1995 and 2011. The fifth section explores the difficult question

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<sup>2</sup> As is typical for populist and radical right parties, The Finns is a highly leader-dependent organization. A highly popular party leader, the role of Soini should not be underestimated in the success of The Finns. A charismatic figure known for his witty and insightful comments, Soini was the vote king in both the 2009 European Parliament and the 2011 Eduskunta elections, winning most votes of the individual candidates.

of whether The Finns' EU policy is primarily explained by ideology or strategy. The concluding section discusses the future of Finnish Euroscepticism.

### **EUROSCEPTICISM: IDEOLOGY OR PARTY STRATEGY?**

Political parties can adopt Eurosceptical positions either because of their ideology or as part of their electoral strategy (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008; Leconte 2010: 106-127). Parties that are consistently against the EU probably view that the current form of integration is fundamentally at odds with their core values and objectives. Euroscepticism can also be limited to policy areas or key issues. Parties that are otherwise supportive of EU may be highly critical of the development of integration in certain questions – such as Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) or Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). However, such moderate or selective critique of EU policies should not be classified as Euroscepticism, as essentially all political parties are critical of some aspects of integration. Regarding more strategic Euroscepticism, parties can be Eurosceptical either as a part of their overall strategy of distancing themselves from the mainstream parties or as part of their opposition tactics. Particularly opposition parties may attack the government for failing to defend national interests in Brussels. A good example is recent debates on measures to stabilize euro, with opposition parties throughout the euro area attacking their governments over their handling of the issue.

But regardless of whether party-based Euroscepticism is explained primarily by ideology or strategy, internal unity over Europe is probably an essential precondition for a party to use EU in domestic party contestation. As national parties are mainly based on the traditional social cleavages recognised in political science literature, and as the anti/pro-integration dimension tends to cross-cut these cleavages, parties often experience internal fragmentation on EU

questions. Moreover, European Election Studies (EES) data shows that parties are on average more representative of their voters in traditional left-right matters than in issues related to European integration, with the elite more supportive of integration than the electorate. In fact, this opinion gap has only increased. According to the EES survey carried out in connection with the 2009 EP elections political parties were more supportive of integration than their electorates in all EU member states (Mattila and Raunio 2012). Hence parties have a strategic incentive to downplay European issues and to structure competition along the more familiar and thus safer domestic cleavages, primarily along the left-right dimension (e.g. Hix 1999; Marks and Steenbergen eds. 2002, 2004). Indeed, party leaders seem to be fully aware of the dangers involved in playing the ‘EU card’. The literature indicates that in most member states parties have preferred not to engage in debates over the EU – and where such debates have taken place, this has often benefited smaller and ideologically more radical parties at the expense of mainstream governing parties (Szczerciak and Taggart eds. 2008).

Parties must also calculate the benefits and costs of playing the ‘EU card’ in domestic party politics. Public contestation over EU may increase party support through attracting the voters of other parties or those who abstain from voting to supporting the party. But such public debates may also aggravate relations with competitors. Hence especially office-seeking Eurosceptical parties probably need to moderate their anti-EU discourse if other potential governing parties are supportive of integration (e.g. Batory and Sitter 2003; Sitter 2001, 2003). For example, many green parties have tempered their criticism of EU at least partly in order to increase their chances of joining coalition cabinets.

Populist and radical right parties throughout EU are opposed to European integration – and more broadly to globalization and the internationalization of societies. However, there are

important differences between such parties. While they are essentially all Eurosceptical, some of them focus on resisting further integration while others demand that their member state exits the EU (Liang ed. 2007; Mudde 2007; Zaslove 2008; Vasilopoulou 2011).

Opposition to EU is on the one hand part of the populist parties' strategy of distancing themselves from traditional governing parties, the clear majority of whom support integration (Taggart 1998). Populist parties like to portray the EU as an extension of domestic party politics, where a cartel of European and national elites agree on issues without consulting the citizens. Such argumentation has been particularly pronounced in member states where policy-making is more consensual and based on cooperation between the mainstream parties. Freedom Party in Austria and the Pim Fortuyn List in the Netherlands challenged successfully both the consensus between the governing parties and their supportive attitudes towards integration (Leconte 2010: 117-118). Populist parties and other Eurosceptical forces have also systematically called for the use of referendums to settle important EU decisions such as Treaty amendments.

On the other hand, populist parties are also ideologically opposed to EU as integration and globalization pose a direct threat to both national sovereignty and societal cohesion. The EU is increasingly a political community, challenging national identities and cultures, and the opening of borders facilitates the free movement of people which in turn may contribute to multiculturalism. Not very surprisingly, populist and radical right parties have in general been critical of enlargement and particularly of Turkey's accession to the Union and the strengthening of Islamic culture in Europe. In fact, opposition to immigration and the opening of borders is often the most important dimension of the EU policies of populist radical right

parties. This is understandable when considering the salience of immigration and the defence of national unity for the ideology and development of such parties (e.g. Rydgren 2005, 2007).

### **WHEN THE SLEEPING GIANT WAS AWOKEN**

These findings and arguments have interesting implications for Finland. First, there was until the 2011 elections a broad partisan consensus about Europe, despite the fact that in the membership referendum held in October 1994 only 57 % voted in favour of joining the Union (turnout was 74 %).<sup>3</sup> National integration policy can be characterised as flexible and constructive and has sought to consolidate Finland's position in the inner core of the EU (Raunio and Tiilikainen 2003; Tiilikainen 2006).

The Finnish polity is also in many ways highly consensual. The fragmented party system, with no party winning more than around 25 % of votes in elections (Table 1), facilitates consensual governance and ideological convergence between parties aspiring to enter the cabinet. Governments are typically surplus majority coalitions that bring together parties from the left and right. Government formation has something of an 'anything goes' feel to it (Arter 2009), with the current 'six pack' cabinet formed after the 2011 elections having six parties, leaving thus only two in the opposition. As was the case with the 'rainbow' governments that ruled the country from 1995 to 2003, the 'six pack' includes both the most right-wing (National Coalition) and left-wing (Left Alliance) party in the Eduskunta. Decision-making in foreign and EU policies is particularly characterised by search for broad domestic elite consensus, with the rules of the national EU coordination system – based on building broad domestic consensus, including often between the government and opposition in the Eduskunta – contributing to the depoliticization of European issues (Raunio 2005, 2008).

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<sup>3</sup> Only two minor Eduskunta parties were against membership: the Christian Democrats (then as the Christian League) and SMP. The Left Alliance and the Green League were so divided over the issue that they decided not to adopt positions either for or against membership (Paloheimo 2000; Raunio 1999).

Such consensual features and office-seeking tendencies have in turn facilitated the lack of opinion congruence between parties and their supporters over EU. This opinion gap has been most pronounced in the three ‘core’ parties of recent decades: Centre, National Coalition, and the Social Democrats (Mattila and Raunio 2005, 2012). According to Eurobarometers Finns are more sceptical of integration than the average EU citizens. In addition to generally low levels of public support for integration, the Finnish electorate seems to be particularly concerned about the influence of small member states in EU governance. Hence it is not surprising that overall Finnish parties have kept a fairly low profile in integration matters.<sup>4</sup> Given that most parties are internally divided over EU, it was not surprising that they showed little interest in submitting the Constitutional Treaty or the Lisbon Treaty to a referendum.

There was thus clearly a demand for a party with a more critical view of European integration. But it took until the 2011 Eduskunta elections for the ‘sleeping giant’ to be awoken (van der Eijk and Franklin 2004).<sup>5</sup> The exceptional nature of the elections is largely explained by the developments that had unravelled since the previous Eduskunta elections held four years earlier. Finland had been governed since the 2007 election by a basically centre-right coalition between the Centre Party, the National Coalition, the Green League and the Swedish People’s Party that found itself by mid-term in serious trouble due to party finance scandals. While the government stayed in office, there was nonetheless an awkward sense of sleaze permeating the domestic political landscape. Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen eventually stepped down in the summer of 2010 and was replaced as Centre leader by Mari Kiviniemi whose term in

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<sup>4</sup> It also appears that until the current euro crisis the EU did not become as salient an issue as in the other Nordic countries, leaving thus parties more freedom to execute their preferred strategies. In contrast to the other Nordic countries, there were in Finland fewer issues around which to wage anti-EU campaigns (like the euro in Sweden and Denmark or fisheries policy in Norway).

<sup>5</sup> Based on data from the 1999 EES, van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) showed that the diversity of opinion about EU among the electorate was not reflected at the level of the parties. There was thus, according to those authors, ‘potential for contestation’ in EU matters, with the EU issue being a ‘sleeping giant’ in party competition at the national level.

office did not get an easy start. The decisions to save Greece out of its near-bankruptcy and the related euro stabilization measures had resulted in unexpectedly heated debates in the Eduskunta during the final weeks of Vanhanen's premiership, and the debates continued after the summer break.

As first Ireland, and then Portugal just before the 2011 Eduskunta elections, followed the path of Greece and required bail-out measures, the debate just intensified in the run-up to the elections. It is fair to claim that no other EU matter has produced similar tensions in the Eduskunta after Finland's entry to the Union.<sup>6</sup> While the opposition parties, as well as a notable share of backbench MPs from governing parties, were clearly aggravated by EU's response to the crisis, the debates were also strongly influenced by the upcoming Eduskunta elections. In the debates particularly the more Eurosceptical parties (The Finns, Christian Democrats, Left Alliance) and the main opposition party, Social Democrats, attacked the government. The Social Democrats adopted a highly publicised position against lending money to Greece and demanded that the banks and investors become involved in solving the crisis while the opposition parties in general voted against the aid measures.

The main beneficiary of the party finance scandals and of the euro crisis was undoubtedly The Finns. The party's support had more than doubled in the previous elections to the Eduskunta, from 1.6 % in 2003 to 4.1 % in 2007, and the rise of the party had continued in the 2008 municipal elections in which it captured 5.4 % of the votes. But the real turning point came in the 2009 European Parliament (EP) elections, with The Finns capturing 9.8 % of the votes and their first-ever seat in the Parliament. It is probable that the victory was explained more

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, a rare piece of drama was seen in the debates held on 9 March 2011 on the stabilization of the European economy when PM Kiviniemi accused the opposition of 'regrettable and unpatriotic behaviour'. Kiviniemi and her government also stressed that Finnish positions and bargaining strategies should be discussed behind the closed doors of the EU committee instead of the plenary.

by a combination of Soini's popularity and the electorate voting against the mainstream parties as by Euroscepticism. However, one can also argue that the voters protested against the broad pro-EU consensus of the political elite, and this was indeed one of the main campaign themes of The Finns.

Repeating the setting from the 2009 EP elections, the 2011 Eduskunta election campaign was strongly characterised as a clash between The Finns and the mainstream parties. The governing parties in particular, often backed by the Social Democrats, did their best to discredit Soini and his party, with the consequence that their own policy agendas were often ignored or downplayed. While The Finns had been able to push immigration on to the domestic political agenda, Soini did not want it to become a key issue in the campaign, mainly because many of candidates of The Finns had expressed rather racist views. Instead, Europe, or more precisely the euro stabilization measures and Finland's participation in the bail-outs, became the main theme of the elections. The debates benefited the entire opposition but most of all The Finns who could attack the euro stabilization measures with more credibility than the traditional parties of government.

After all, The Finns are the only party represented in the Eduskunta that has consistently been against the EU – and also the only party which has systematically used the EU as a central part of their electoral campaigns and political discourse. The Finns have attacked forcefully the consensual modes of decision-making and cooperation between mainstream parties that are particularly pronounced in EU and foreign policies (Arter 2010). Coming from outside of that cosy elite consensus, The Finns have demanded public debates about Europe, calling for an end to 'one truth' politics. But as the next two sections illustrate, the contextual factors

operating in the Finnish system have also impacted on the objectives and discourse of The Finns.

## **WHY THE EU IS A PROBLEM FOR THE FINNS?**

The policies and objectives of The Finns have become more nuanced and detailed over time. But while the party programmes were overall very brief until the 2007 Eduskunta elections, there is nonetheless considerable thematic consistency in the programmes adopted since 1995. Examining these programmes, the anti-EU discourse of the party can be divided into three main themes: EU as an elitist bureaucracy, stronger defence of national interests, and integration as a bridge to increased immigration.<sup>7</sup> These themes were arrived at through carefully reading the individual programmes and identifying issues that appear consistently in the texts. As the analysis will show, it is at the same time obvious that there is a certain degree of overlap between the themes, with for example concerns about democracy relevant for all three thematic categories.

### *Elitist bureaucracy*

The thrust of The Finns' anti-EU discourse can be summed by the famous slogan of Soini: 'whenever the EU is involved, you get problems'.<sup>8</sup> The party underlines the 'impossibility' of integration, predicting (or hoping) that it will prove unworkable and thus inevitably

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<sup>7</sup> The analysis is based on the following programmes (none of which are available in English): Oikeutta kansalle, Perussuomalaisen puolueen yleisohjelma, Olen Perussuomalainen, Hyväksytty 1. puoluekokouksessa 26.11.1995, Kokkola; Eurovaalijulistus: Perussuomalainen kriittisenä Euroopassa, Hyväksytty Perussuomalaisten puolueuustossa, Jyväskylä, 16.6.1996; Perussuomalaisten eurovaaliohjelma 1999: Perussuomalainen kriittisenä Euroopassa; Perussuomalaisten lähiajan tavoiteohjelma, Hyväksytty Perussuomalaisten IV puoluekokouksessa Oulussa 17.6.2001; Perussuomalaisten eduskuntavaaliohjelma 2003, Uusi suunta Suomelle – Korjauksia epäkohtiin, Puolueneuvoston kokous, Pori 11.8.2002; Perussuomalaisten lähiajan tavoiteohjelma, Lappeenranta 2003; Perussuomalaisten EU-vaaliohjelma 2004: Perussuomalaiset puolustavat Suomen kansaa; Perussuomalaisten lähiajan tavoiteohjelma, Kokkola 2005; Perussuomalaiset rp. Eduskuntavaaliohjelma 2007, Oikeudenmukaisuuden, hyvinvoinnin ja kansanvallan puolesta!, Puolueneuvosto, Ikaalinen, 13.8.2006; Perussuomalaisten EU-vaaliohjelma 2009; Suomalaiselle sopivin, Perussuomalaiset r.p:n eduskuntavaaliohjelma 2011, 25.2.2011.

<sup>8</sup> In Finnish '*missä EU, siellä ongelma*'. Soini used this expression for the first time in a TV debate during the 2006 presidential election campaign (Soini 2008: 211).

disintegrate. As the opening section of the party's 2009 EP election programme, titled 'As a Finn in Europe – for democracy', states:

'The Finns are an EU-critical party, for we emphasize how unworkable the EU is. On the other hand, The Finns are also against the EU, for we believe that democracy can not work in the context of supranational EU governance. Hence the EU is not even in theory a democratic system and The Finns believe that democracy is the best way to organize societal decision-making.'

The party argues in its 2007 Eduskunta election programme that European integration and globalization favour elites at the expense of democracy, with authority concentrating to a small circle of power elites and big businesses:

'EU's subsidiarity principle and free movement are pure propaganda which aim particularly at getting young people to support the Union. At the same time the EU produces idiotic directives that make the lives of ordinary citizens more difficult and favour the power of big money. The EU is a project of the filthy-rich capitalists, which tries to fill the pockets of major owners of capital with money while creating a valueless Europe where only money matters. Large artificial entities based on materialistic values are according to The Finns doomed to fail.'

Hence the anti-EU discourse bears many similarities with the European policies of left-wing parties, criticizing the market-oriented nature of integration and its negative impact on the Nordic welfare state model (Jungar and Jupskås 2011). For example, in the 2009 EP election

programme the interests of the big businesses and capital were pitted clearly against the interests of ordinary people:

‘Federalization combined with enlargements – for example, to Turkey – represents further consolidation of unregulated capitalism and centralization of capital. A group of economically and culturally very diverse nations is necessarily heterogeneous and can only find agreement on increasing the power of financial markets. This makes it easy for owners of big businesses to have control – power in the EU belongs to the elite, never to the people. The EU is destined to become a fortress for big businesses where they aim – for example, through free movement of workforce – at reducing wages in more affluent member states such as Finland. Inspiration for this development comes from the United States, where many citizens are forced to take two jobs due to low wages.’

For The Finns the EU is the project of ‘politicians that are opposed to nation-states and support elitist democracy which equals bureaucracy’. Hence integration will result in ‘mammothlike bureaucracy and inefficiency’ and already now ‘the EU is an inefficient heaven for bureaucrats’. As The Finns are opposed to the principle of supranational democracy, they are against increased majority voting in and further empowerment of EU institutions. In the name of democracy power must be returned back to member states. The Finns have also consistently demanded subjecting key domestic EU choices, such as Treaty amendments, to referendums.<sup>9</sup> When considering the opinion gap over EU reported above, their arguments in favour of direct democracy seem legitimate. As argued in their 2007 Eduskunta programme:

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<sup>9</sup> In the 2011 Eduskunta election programme this demand was less straightforward. Proposals containing a significant transfer of power to international or supranational organs should be decided according to the normal procedure for constitutional amendment (the proposal has to be approved twice by the Eduskunta, with an election held between the two votes). If this procedure is not followed, then the party demands the use of direct democracy.

‘the gap between the Eduskunta and the citizens over EU is so large that even representative democracy can be seen to function badly in Finland in EU affairs. The EU has a lot of influence. Hence EU matters should be subjected to referendums in Finland.’

*Stronger defence of national interests*

The Finns argue that the domestic elites have failed to defend national interests in Brussels. Quite the contrary, the party sees EU negotiations as a playground for pro-integrationist national elites. Already SMP had attacked the official consensual foreign policy line of the Cold War period, and according to The Finns the same style continues today, with Finnish politicians ‘shining the shoes’ of EU leaders. The party demands a complete U-turn in national EU policy: Finland should change from ‘a model student to a critical partner’, for ‘several member states that have defended national interests more vigorously have also performed better in the negotiations’. For the party, ‘Finland is not for sale’. In its earlier programmes The Finns even argued that ‘Finland should not implement EU decisions that are either too expensive or have negative domestic consequences’.

Two themes stand out in this discourse about national interests: Finland’s position as a net contributor to the EU budget and protecting the livelihood of rural areas. The Finns like to remind the electorate about the net payer aspect, demanding for example in the 2011 election programme that Finland’s payments should be ‘drastically reduced. EU has redistributed money, for example through structural funds, to companies such as Coca-Cola, Ikea and IBM’. CAP, in turn, is clearly detrimental to Finnish rural areas: ‘Finland should not be turned into EU’s bear and wolf reservation’ and agricultural policy should be returned to the competence of the member states. The Finns also highlight the lack of equality between member states. Smaller countries are steamrolled by larger member states, for the latter use

the EU to advance their own objectives. Questioning the logic of the official national integration policy, the party argues that ‘increased use of majority voting in the EU will inevitably result in the empowerment of larger member states’.

### *Integration as a bridge to increased immigration*

The Finns put significantly more emphasis than other parties represented in Eduskunta on distinguishing Finns from others (us versus them). The party is not against a multicultural Europe as such, but the kind of multiculturalism The Finns have in mind is a mosaic of co-existing cohesive national cultures instead of mixing or blending such cultures inside national societies such as Finland. (Pyykkönen 2011) Hence it is logical that tougher line on immigration is one of the main themes of The Finns and that the party sees the EU as a bridge to increased immigration.<sup>10</sup> Emphasizing immigration is thus in line with the overall party ideology: ‘already our name The Finns tells that our politics is based on Finnish history and culture’. ‘The Finns are a nationalistic and EU-critical party’ which argues that Finnishness is a ‘strength’ and a ‘competitive advantage’. The solidarity and cohesion of the Finnish nation are underlined: ‘history classes in schools must highlight the Finnish miracle, how a poor and peripheral country became a globally recognized nation of progress and wealth – even without large natural resources’.

While The Finns highlight national culture and Finnishness, the immigration policy of the party is nonetheless more moderate than that of most European radical right parties. However, it can be argued that the party has hardened its position on immigration in recent years, at least when measured by the amount of space devoted to the issue and the wording of party programmes. As summarized by Arter (2010: 485): The Finns are ‘indeed a populist radical

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<sup>10</sup> However, the party does not want to limit the free movement of people inside the EU, arguing in fact quite strongly in favour of this freedom.

right party ... albeit one (thus far) lacking the xenophobic extremism of the likes of the Austrian Freedom Party or the Danish People's Party.'

Increased immigration threatens national solidarity and culture, and hence the party has repeatedly stressed that immigration matters must remain in the competence of the member states. The Finns argue that 'the basic idea of immigration policy should be "when in Rome, do as the Romans do"'. There is no point in establishing systems like we have now, where immigrants come to Finland to spend time and search for happiness while authorities aim at artificially maintaining their cultures.' Should competence in immigration issues be handed over to the EU, then Finland would probably be forced to accept more immigrants and refugees.

In line with a heading from the 2011 Eduskunta election programme, 'cohesive nation – safe Finland', the party draws a direct line between immigration and societal problems: 'the EU is struggling with mass employment, demographic problems, pollution, and serious criminal, prostitution, and substance abuse problems. We do not need or want them imported here'. Increased immigration poses also a threat to the Nordic welfare state model: 'EU level cooperation in immigration matters aims at undermining the taxation systems of welfare regimes as the readiness of people to pay taxes decreases when they observe problems related to immigration'. The Finns have also been consistently against EU enlargements, but Turkey is the only potential member state whose membership has specifically been rejected.

## **A CORE IDEOLOGICAL VALUE OR PARTY STRATEGY?**

Is the anti-EU discourse of The Finns primarily a case of a sustained, principled objection to European integration or should it be better understood as a product of domestic party competition? A close examination of party programmes and actual choices made by the party in Finnish politics suggest that it is a combination of both.

The moderating elements evident in domestic party politics – the formation of cross-bloc coalition cabinets and the overall rather consensual approach to policy-making – have clearly impacted the discourse of The Finns. With the exception of the 2011 elections, the party has not made any specific EU-related demands or concrete promises. It is noteworthy that The Finns have at no stage demanded that Finland should exit the EU or the eurozone.<sup>11</sup> Talking about the impossibility or undesirability of the EU can thus be understood as a strategic choice, for more radical stances or detailed promises might stand in the way of cooperation with other parties. In fact, as for example their 2009 EP election programme states, The Finns are committed to working in the EU in order to advance their objectives: 'The Finns are in favour of intergovernmental cooperation among independent nation-states. Our strong desire is to return power back from the EU to nation-states. However, this goal is unattainable without participating in EU decision-making.' It was hence quite ironic that an electoral promise about the EU kept The Finns out of the government after the 2011 elections. The Finns had vowed during the campaign not to approve bail-out measures to Portugal or other euro countries, and despite some initial post-election signs of willingness to moderate this stance, Soini and his party respected their election promise.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> A partial exception is the 2007 election programme according to which Finland should leave the EU if further development towards a federal Europe continues. Also the 2011 Eduskunta election programme argues that Finland could survive outside of both the euro area (like Denmark and Sweden) and the EU (like Norway).

<sup>12</sup> In fact, Soini stated after the election that EU as an issue would not be an obstacle to his party joining the cabinet. It is probable that both Soini and the future PM, Jyrki Katainen from the National Coalition, feared the unpredictability of The Finns as it was foreseen that the government would have to deal with subsequent euro

But while the exact wordings or objectives of The Finns may be explained or influenced by such strategic concerns, it is also clear that the ideology of The Finns is fundamentally at odds with European integration. The EU policy of the party has been very stable and consistent, whereas the Euroscepticism displayed by the Christian Democrats, the Left Alliance or even the Centre has been more opportunistic or dependent on government-opposition dynamics (Raunio 2005, 2008). Hence the anti-EU stance of The Finns is definitely a case of ‘a broad, underlying party position’ which goes beyond more conjunctural usage of Europe in domestic party competition (Szczzerbiak and Taggart 2008: 255).

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has shown how the entry of EU to the domestic political agenda contributed to the electoral success of The Finns – and how the depoliticization or consensual approach to Europe by mainstream parties may not work in the long run. However, as Kestilä (2006) has argued, there was clearly also an attitudinal demand among the electorate for such populist or radical right party breakthrough, with the party system lacking parties that would represent those sections of the citizenry with more traditional or socially conservative and nationalistic preferences. While the role of EU in the breakthrough of The Finns should thus not be overestimated, this case study provides an interesting example of how Europe can have a significant impact on national party politics.

The empirical analysis of The Finns’ EU policy in turn has shown that their discourse is overall broadly similar with other European populist or radical right parties. The Finns’

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stabilisation measures. 34 of The Finns’ 39 MPs have no previous parliamentary experience, and the inexperience and ideological diversity in the parliamentary group have already caused headaches for Soini. Particular question-marks hang over a small group of deputies who have expressed quite racist views, also after election to Eduskunta. One of them, Jussi Halla-aho, was elected chair of the Eduskunta’s Administration Committee which is responsible for immigration.

opposition to integration is based on three main themes – EU as an elitist bureaucracy (anti-establishment), defence of national sovereignty, and anti-immigration – that form also the core of the anti-EU discourse of essentially all populist or radical right parties (Liang ed. 2007; Mudde 2007; Zaslove 2008; Vasilopoulou 2011). However, it can also be argued that in comparative terms the European discourse of The Finns is rather moderate, with the party displaying general opposition to further integration instead of making any specific demands or concrete promises about EU.<sup>13</sup> This may have partially changed with the 2011 elections as The Finns stated that they cannot take part in a government that is committed to the eurozone stabilization measures.

But what will be the impact of The Finns on domestic EU discourse and on national integration policy? Considering its centrist position on the left-right dimension, the EU offers The Finns an issue in which to distinguish itself from the other parties (Mattila and Raunio 2005; Paloheimo 2008; Arter 2010). Hence The Finns – as the main opposition party after the 2011 elections – can be expected to push for public EU debates: the party is internally cohesive over integration and its key policies, defending the welfare state and livelihood of countryside and Euroscepticism, will probably continue to appeal to both leftist and right-wing voters. Regarding the left, both the Social Democrats and the Left Alliance performed badly in the 2009 EP elections. Much of the discussion at European level has in recent years focused on the need to make the EU more competitive, and when this discourse is combined with Finnish domestic measures aiming at making the public sector and the national economy in general more cost efficient and competitive, it is understandable that leftist voters may find

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<sup>13</sup> In terms of the three patterns of radical right opposition to integration identified by Vasilopoulou (2011) – rejecting, conditional, compromising – The Finns provide an example of ‘conditional’ Euroscepticism. Other radical right or populist parties displaying conditional opposition to integration are Austrian Freedom Party, the Belgian Flemish Interest, the Italian Northern League, the Danish People’s Party, the Greek Popular Orthodox Rally and the Bulgarian Attack. Like The Finns, these parties recognize the need for (preferably intergovernmental) cooperation between European peoples, but ‘refrain from supporting the current policy and institutional practice as well as the future building of a European polity’. (Vasilopoulou 2011: 238)

it hard to identify themselves with European integration (Raunio 2010). On the right the electorates of both the National Coalition and particularly the Centre are overall less supportive of integration than their parties.

Populist or ideologically more radical parties have in several EU countries influenced the policies of their competitors, not least regarding immigration (Mudde 2007: 277-292). Until the 2011 Eduskunta election The Finns had at best marginal impact on national EU policy, but interestingly both the argumentation of the political parties in the 2011 election campaign and subsequent post-election developments suggest some potential changes to national integration policy. The decisions to participate in the euro area bail-out operations were justified by their positive effects on domestic economy and growth, and in general the defence of national interests was stressed by all parties. Also citizens are according to public opinion surveys particularly worried about whether the EU is dominated by its larger member countries. Overall it appears that such an emphasis on national interests and on the role of smaller member states has become more pronounced in Finland in recent years (Raunio 2011), and the success of The Finns has clearly pushed the other parties in the direction of more cautious EU policies.

It can be expected that in this opinion climate the new government will emphasize more the need to defend national interests in Brussels. Indeed, since entering office in June 2011 the 'six pack' government led by the National Coalition has taken a tougher stance in EU negotiations. The government demanded specific guarantees for its bail-out payments to Greece, rejected majority decision-making in the European Stability Mechanism and blocked, together with the Netherlands, the entry of Bulgaria and Romania into the Schengen area. Whether this signals a more long-term change in national integration policy remains to be

seen, but at least in the short term the Finnish government – and particularly the Social Democrats given their vociferous criticism of the euro area stabilization measures during the election campaign – is under considerable domestic pressure not to make too many concessions in Brussels.

It will be also interesting to see what lessons parties draw from the Eduskunta elections in terms of how EU matters are processed domestically. While most political parties would probably like to see EU issues debated primarily behind the closed doors of Grand Committee [the EU committee] and other Eduskunta committees, The Finns will no doubt initiate plenary debates about integration. In fact, since the euro crisis began in the spring of 2010 the fate of euro, and European integration more broadly speaking, have appeared repeatedly on the plenary agenda, with many of these debates lasting several hours each. These parliamentary debates are arguably the first time when the government has really been forced to justify and defend its EU policies in the public – and when the opposition has attacked the cabinet publicly over the handling of EU matters. Irrespective of whatever one thinks about the policies of The Finns, at least the party has played a major role in forcing immigration and EU to the domestic public agenda. This is certainly a highly positive development when considering that Europe as an issue had remained depoliticized in Finland for such a long time.

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