



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The departure of Sanna Marin - a pragmatic post-NATO vote in Finland



Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin only received a consolation prize for strongly pushing her country towards NATO membership in the parliamentary elections last Sunday.

Marin and her Social Democrats won three more mandates in the parliament, but they will still be in opposition, since the parties of the conservative bloc have the best chance of forming a government.

It seems that the Finns have pragmatically considered that joining NATO was a done deal and that the current prime minister did not need a special award for pushing this issue, which has been supported by the vast majority of the population.

They were right. Finland formally became a member of NATO just two days after the elections. That job was finished, and the outcome of the elections on April 2 was decided over other issues.

In the past year, Finland has been viewed by the world public mainly in the context of its membership of NATO.

Few people were interested in Finland's internal problems and political shifts, but it would turn out that political shifts, and not foreign policy, would be decisive for the outcome of the parliamentary elections.

Historical shift

Along with neighbouring Sweden, Finland has made a historic shift since the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, from a traditionally neutral state to a strong demand to join NATO.

In less than two months from the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the citizens of Finland turned their position on neutrality upside down.

In that short period, support for NATO membership increased from the usual 20% to 30% to close to 70%.

It was a natural reflex to the imminent danger from the east. Prime Minister Sanna Marin and the President of Finland Sauli Niinistö decisively contributed to the new policy.

The procedure was carried out in a flash. In mid-April, Sanna Marin's cabinet submitted a proposal to the parliament for Finland's entry into NATO, and in May it was accepted almost unanimously - 188 in favour to 8 against.

Equally convincing support of 184 votes in the parliament, was expressed a month ago when the final decision and regulations needed to formalise the expected membership in the Alliance had to be adopted.

Past work insufficient for electoral success

Russia's aggression against Ukraine and, as a consequence, the country's membership of NATO, were also big issues in the recent parliamentary elections.

But in Finland, there is almost no difference, as shown by the acclamation votes in the parliament.

Regardless of her energy and youthful charisma, and even her star status in the international political arena, it was clearly not enough for Sanna Marin and her Social

Democrats to appeal to voters on the merits of bringing Finland into NATO.

Even the admirable health and economic response of the government to the Covid-19 pandemic, where Finland was a role model for the rest of Europe, was not enough.

The April 2 elections were not decided by positive post-Covid and post-NATO sentiment. The state of the domestic economy, for which the competitors blamed the ruling Social Democrats was crucial, and that was the path to success.

Public debt – the only weak point

Petteri Orpo, former finance minister and leader of the centre-right National Coalition Party, recognised that the Sanna Marin government's economic policy might be its only weak point, so he focused his campaign on the issues of public debt and opposing rising food and energy prices.

This angle has brought success to the former deputy prime minister (2017-2019) and NCP leader since 2016, an economist who will have difficulty reaching the charisma of his predecessor, but considered a hardworking and responsible public servant, who instils a sense of stability in citizens.

Petteri Orpo's moderate conservatives won the most electoral votes: 20.8%, only slightly more than the ultra-right and eurosceptic Finns Party (20%) and the Social Democrats (19.9%).

Although the difference is small, due to the proportional electoral system, Orpo, as leader of the strongest parliamentary party, will have

the right to try to form a government first.

He gained confidence on demands to curb the growth of the public debt, which, during the Social Democrats' government, increased from 64% to 73% of GDP.

"I want to fix our economy. I want to boost economic growth. (Sanna) Marin is not worried about the economy. She is not worried about debt", said Orpo to AFP the day before the elections.

Welfare cuts

His plan for public finances has been typically conservative. He advocated limiting the state's borrowing and cutting public expenses by around EUR 6.5 billion.

He announced the reduction of social benefits, the termination of unemployment benefits, and other welfare programmes, to which the social democrat Sanna Marin paid great attention, all with the aim of reducing taxes later.

Although it is expected that the first pick of the conservatives and Mr. Orpo for the composition of the government would be the ultra-right Finns Party and their leader Ms. Riikka Purra, those deals could face significant problems.

While the possible future prime minister is a big supporter of economic immigration to Finland ("Finland cannot survive without more labour immigration"), the right-wing members of the Finns Party expressly oppose it.

In this respect, they are no different from other right-wing populists throughout Europe. Their leader demanded that immigrants'

access to social funds be restricted if they earn more than 700 EUR per month.

Negotiations between moderate and far-right parties, which will last for several weeks, will be complicated in relation to the EU as well as environmental policies.

This makes the future government in Helsinki uncertain, which opens up the possibility that the Social Democrats would again be in the government if the negotiations within the conservative bloc fail.

The only thing that is certain is that Finland's attitude towards the newly formalised NATO membership will not change.

This has been the firm position of all major parties and leaders, including the possible prime minister, Mr. Orpo, who mentioned commitment to NATO membership as the first thing in his victory speech after the elections.