

From Federalism to Euroscepticism – the Finnish Debate on Europe

An interview with MEP Tarja Cronberg

How has the public debate on Europe changed in Finland during the last years?

The public debate on Europe in Finland has generally shifted from being strongly pro-EU to having a more cautious outlook. According to the official discourse, Finland is still in favour of a strong EU but in reality this vision blurred. The current vision is definitely far removed from the 'federalist' position that Finland took in the mid-1990s when it had just acceded to the EU and strived to get to its political and economic core. The public debate in that time was one of hope that the European project would get stronger with every round of enlargement and that every Member State would benefit from a deeper integration and from common EU policies, be it the euro or common foreign and security policy.

The public debate had remained largely positive towards these goals until the economic crisis of 2008 which caused a gradual erosion of public support. More and more sceptic voices emerged and the consensus on the intrinsic goodness of the EU has given way to two major but rather general viewpoints. On the one hand there is the official line of the government which promotes the view of the 'fair EU' i.e. traditional community method, stronger fiscal discipline and more transparency and control of the Member States' fiscal policies. The official discourse remains vague on how this fiscal discipline should be achieved other than by largely siding with the views of the German chancellor but not specifying any concrete policy measures. The Finnish prime minister often prefers talking about democracy and rule of law as the core of the European integration to presenting concrete policy recipes.

On the other hand, there is the 'eurosceptic' view which also dwells on the issues of fairness, namely whether Finland's support of the crisis-ridden southern European members can be justified. As regards other areas such as foreign, security and defence policy, the public opinion highlights Finland's profile as a country that promotes peace and conflict-mediation. There is little domestic debate on European defence; however, one can denote a rising interest in regional defence among the Nordic countries and a traditional reliance on national capabilities.

What is the main criticism on Europe, what do Finish people expect from the EU?

In Finland people have the perception that common rules have not been respected by all members of the EU family. This view is held by all political parties. One as the idea that Finland has committed itself to one set of rules but found itself in a situation where everyone keeps fending for their own sake. Another point of criticism is that the EU has been too bureaucratic and too expensive for Finland, a net payer to the EU budget. Big institutional reforms are not wished for by the general public. People think that there are already enough institutions in the EU.

What is hoped for is that the new rules and instruments that were designed to tackle the crisis will be respected. This is the central point in the government's discourse i.e. it is not enough to have sound common policies, it is equally important to respect common rules.

In the Finnish debate, competitiveness seems to be the catch-word and is put forward as the main solution for the crisis. This is the view that the parties to the right (e.g. the National Coalition) have adopted arguing that if the EU wants to succeed as a political project it has to innovate and become economically competitive.

The Greens, perhaps the most pro-EU party within the current coalition government, have been highlighting the social aspects of the crisis, in particular solidarity within the EU Member States and youth unemployment. In the national parliament Green MPs have questioned the motive behind the rescue packages.

I have personally raised the issue of *youth unemployment*. It is a serious problem for Europe as a whole including Finland. But it is also a very complex issue that reflects the lack of trust and solidarity among Member States e.g. on the issue of youth guarantees. I am convinced that we will not be able to tackle the crisis seriously if the social dimension of the crisis is overlooked. Youth unemployment will not be solved without cooperation and labour market mobility between Member States. We are facing the problem of dealing with a 'lost generation' of disillusioned young people who are a long way from the benefits of European integration and who simply have a very bleak vision of their personal future.

In my view, there are five different roads Europe can take: disintegration, Europe à la carte (pick what you want), a two-level Europe (north-south, rich – poor; permanent division-building tensions), a two-speed Europe (common objectives, with the long term goal of a complete overlap of EU and eurozone) and federalism. Greens are situated somewhere between the last two scenarios.

Finally: could you explain the phenomenon of the 'True Finns' and their position on Europe?

In the context of the European crisis, the True Finns emerged as a powerful critic of the EU and the Finnish government's policies. Whereas all the other parties were to a different extent pro-EU, the True Finns used their critical rhetoric to attract voters from all corners of the political spectrum. As a result they booked a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections in 2011, which made them the third biggest party in the Finnish parliament.

At the same time there could be many other reasons behind the popularity of the True Finns: the anti-immigration sentiments among the Finnish population, the declining popularity of the mainstream parties and the economic slowdown in Finland. Although the party is now in opposition it has influenced Finnish politics very strongly. Most other parties saw themselves forced to adjust their rhetoric.

Currently a Member of the European Parliament **Tarja Cronberg** was a Member of the Finnish Parliament from 2003 to 2007 and Minister of Labour from 2007 to 2009. She chaired the Green League from 2005 to 2009 and served on several parliamentary committees (foreign affairs, security and defence, employment). The focal point in Cronberg's work has been peace and security. In the 1990s she worked both in Russia and in the US studying the conversion of military industries into civilian uses. Together with Stanford University and the Perm Technical University she and her team studied the transformation processes mainly in the aerospace industry. As the Regional Director of North Karelia she was instrumental in establishing 'soft borders' between Finnish border regions and the Karelian Republic on the Russian side, which led to the establishment of Euregio Karelia, a cross-border region with common development programmes and projects. Later, as the Director of COPRI, Copenhagen Peace Research Institute she was involved in the further development of the Copenhagen School of Security Studies. In her political work she has specialised in defence and security matters, lately in questions of nuclear disarmament. She is the Chair of the European Parliament's delegation for relations with Iran.



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