

Finland (Left Alliance). “In Politics, There Are No Strategies You Can Copy Paste”

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What are the main issues at stake for the Finnish left? How did people in Finland react to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine? Why is ecology a top priority on the agenda? Mia Haglund, a deputy of the Left Alliance and a secretary general of the NGLA, discusses left politics in the party and beyond

— What is the configuration of the left in Finland? Can you briefly explain the balance of forces?

— I am a member of Vasemmistoliitto, or [the Left Alliance](#). It’s a political and parliamentary party, which is now a part of the Finnish government. Today, it’s the largest left party in Finland (aside from [the Social Democrats](#), although not everyone would agree that they could be described as “left”). We are a platform for people who come from left-leaning, social justice, environmental or feminist activist circles. Many members of the Left Alliance have formal and informal ties to other left-leaning organizations. There are also various small communist parties active in the Finnish political landscape, which are not represented in parliament or are not even present at the municipal level.

We have a youth organization as well. It’s quite common for people to be both members of a certain party and to take part in the youth organization, even though participation in the latter does not require party membership. Generally, Finnish youth organizations promote initiatives which are more daring and offer a broader perspective on society and its issues than the party. Since the Left Alliance is a part of the government, it is more focused on day-to-day politics. There are also various informal platforms and fields where people practice left politics or develop left ideas: research networks, cultural organizations, environmental and feminist circles. Together they constitute a large part of society, obviously larger than the political party itself, but the Left Alliance is the most visible and well-known among them.

— How does the Left Alliance position itself in respect to other political forces?

In comparison to the Social Democrats, for example, we have a more socialist profile — even though we share a common theoretical background. The Left Alliance was formed in 1990 as an alliance (hence the name) between different political parties. This is why we take it for granted that people understand that the Finnish political scene is split between the right, the centrists (the Social Democrats, who tend to be more conservative in their views on feminist and environmental issues) and the Left Alliance, which strives to be more progressive socially and culturally and has strong ties to unions and workers. Another thing that sets us, the Left Alliance, apart from the Social Democrats is that many of our party members are precarious workers, and precarity has always been a crucial issue on our agenda.

“We understand that left politics cannot be limited to caring about those people who

have a “9 to 5” stable job”

It has to recognize those who are self-employed, researchers who rely upon grants, cultural workers and others.

— How do you tackle this precarious labor politically? Do you consider universal basic income (UBI) to be a potential solution?

— Yes, we actually do. And this is another matter that sets us apart from the Social Democrats because they do not have a history of demanding basic income for people. Among our members are those who have been the strongest proponents of universal basic income. It is a central question for those thinking about a world in which we can provide people with security and autonomy at one and the same time.

— You are also a secretary general of the Nordic Green Left. What are its goals?

We work together as parties and in [the Nordic Council](#). We try to closely follow which decisions are taken in the country and how policies are implemented. We observe which solutions work, which don't, and analyze why. We also look at whether particular policies or programs fit a particular Nordic country, or not. The idea is to learn from each other, from each other's mistakes and achievements, to exchange experiences. Of course, Nordic countries have many things in common in terms of geography and climate. Living together with nature, and not against it, is also something that brings us together.

— Why has ecology become such an important issue for the left?

— If we don't have a planet, we don't have society. Just to merely continue to live means solving the climate change issue, thinking about global warming, biodiversity, keeping different species alive and maintaining the ecological balance the planet needs. I would hope that this is a universal concern and the left's role is to ensure that we work on this issue in a just way.

“The transition to a more ecologically-conscious life should not only focus on saving the planet for future generations but also take into account how people live here and now”

For example, there are poor and vulnerable members of society, or those whose work is related to the fossil fuel industry. All these people could simply lose their jobs in this transition. If we leave the transition to a more sustainable society to market forces, the solution will just be to increase prices, which can only deepen inequality.

In terms of the energy transition, it's really important to stay on board with the policies, as those who are socially vulnerable might feel that everything is being taken away from them. If heating my house is too expensive, I cannot have a car anymore, I can no longer eat properly, then it's easy to say: “I don't want this kind of policy and I don't care much about the future of the planet if I can't live a normal life now.” For example, we need to provide means of transportation which can be easily accessed. In a city like Helsinki, having your own car needn't be a necessity; you should be able to get from one place to another via public transport. We need to give people an opportunity to live a good life that doesn't involve us being dependent on fossil fuels. Therefore, ecology, or rather the ecological transition and its realization, is at the center of the leftist agenda.

— What has been the response to the Russian invasion in Ukraine? What is the Left Alliance's stance?

— In general, the Finnish discussion moved quite fast from trying to understand what was

happening — the reasons for the war, things we could do as a society in support of Ukraine and Ukrainians — to primarily focusing on Finland's membership in NATO. This question became dominant and, at times, it seemed that there was not much space left for other issues. It was a difficult question for us in the Left Alliance: when we became a part of the Finnish government, one of our main demands was Finland not joining NATO during that government's term. Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the public majority was against Finland becoming a part of NATO. In the aftermath of Russia's large-scale invasion, public opinion changed very fast because people in the country were frightened. Weeks or even days before the first attacks occurred, political and military experts shared a relatively similar view on the conflict: they didn't really expect a full-scale war to break out nor Russian troops to occupy Ukrainian territories, even when the military units massed around the borders. As a result, Finnish people lost their trust in this kind of political analysis. They started to see NATO as an accessible blanket that could make one feel safe — there was, at the end of the day, a very emotional reaction to the news.

“Although the discussion regarding Finnish participation in NATO was rather technical, it was nonetheless tense, and the emotional tension was always palpable”

This big shift in public opinion affected our party in many ways: it affected those who voted and vote for the party, it affected party members, and it affected decision-makers within the party. Eventually, it turned out that we lacked a broadly shared stance on this matter: there were those against Finland joining NATO, those for joining NATO, and those who didn't know what to think — people who preferred to trust the country's political leaders because they had more information available to them and were responsible for the decision. This was a difficult moment for our party: it was necessary for us to come together, talk, and finally find common ground. So, the first decision that we made as a party was to drop the demand we had had for Finland to not join NATO: we saw that there was a need for more space to develop different opinions, now both pro- and anti-Nato, even within our party. Moreover, had we held on to this demand, we would have had to leave the government and we would have become political pariahs for the foreseeable future. Those in the party who are members of the parliament and ministers could vote as they saw fit: some voted “yes,” some “no.” Although we had different stances on this question, this difference did not lead to a split in the party because we all decided that our priority was to keep people together. Yes, we left room for discussion and different opinions so that people could feel that they were being heard but, at the same time, they accepted the decision of the majority.

— What were the pros and cons which were put forward during discussions of the NATO question?

— The “pro” was quite simple: being a member of the alliance provides you with the strongest possible deterrence. People now want more deterrence — and there are no alternatives. Most EU countries are NATO members, as are most Nordic countries, except for Finland and Sweden. If there were other structural solutions available, other kinds of alliances — a European defense alliance of sorts — perhaps they would be part of the discussion. However, people really wanted something concrete, already existing, and they said: “Alright, we know what NATO is, and now we want to be part of it.” Any attempts to speak about the possibility of doing something that would be internal to the EU, or to rely upon the security guarantees already in place under the Lisbon Treaty, were dismissed out of hand.

The “contra” was that joining NATO would create a world divided into larger blocs, which could deepen existing tensions between countries and make them more permanent, closing doors that had until now been open. Politics always implies a dynamic of unpredictability. Within NATO, the known dynamic is that the US is a major power with a lot of influence due to its size, material resources and defense capabilities. Smaller countries tend to become dependent actors and you cannot know what

they will be asked to do in the future. This kind of political dynamic can become quite complicated. Yet these smaller countries do have their own defense forces and want to choose their foreign policy. We can see now how Erdogan has immediately put forward his demands. What will this bring to countries dependent on Turkey?

In Finland, of course, there is also the question of national memory and the trauma of the Winter War. When I said that the basis for the pro-NATO decision was emotional, this didn't mean that such emotions should be discounted. It's important how safe people feel. Even though there is no proof of an actual risk that Russia will target Finland in the same way it has Ukraine, it doesn't really matter.

"If there is a feeling of danger, it can't be quelled by any analysis"

So to say that NATO is a blanket that makes people feel safer now is not to say it lacks any justification but to recognize that that justification is a psychological one.

— And here we come to the question about the border. On the one hand, bordering the aggressor is a source of popular disquiet. On the other hand, closing the borders would be a sanction-like measure. What is your view on this?

—This question of the border has loomed very large over the past months. It's very tricky and I am quite upset about the new laws that give Finland the right to close the border. We could face a situation in which the only place where people can apply for asylum is at Helsinki airport. I don't think that this measure, which limits the number of people entering the country, is in accordance with human rights and with our intention to give people the possibility to seek asylum. It is a serious question, which was discussed too quickly, almost swept under the rug, as countering hybrid warfare seemed to be more important than securing the right to seek asylum.

There's also been a heated debate about whether or not tourist visas should be granted to Russians. People find it quite upsetting that those who support the war can continue to live their normal lives as carefree tourists, enter Finland and go on from there to Italy, or to the French Riviera. This undercuts what we were trying to achieve with the economic sanctions. At the same time, if we stop issuing tourist visas, we close the doors for those who need to leave.

"On the left, we believe that there should be a space for the Russian people to come together, to express their anti-war views, to build alliances with each other, to grow in strength so that they can change the current regime and its politics"

If there are no such places left in Russia, if everything is under grip of the authorities, then these places need to be elsewhere. The Left Alliance has really tried to give its support to the Russian people's resistance against the war.

— Are you aware of any particular initiatives in Finland that aim to help Ukraine?

— When it comes to support for Ukraine, the first thing we discussed was arms. Opinions on this differed among left political parties in Nordic countries. My personal opinion was that arms should be provided. Not everybody was comfortable with this idea but most parties came to the conclusion that they support this measure. Memories of the Winter War hastened this conclusion in Finland but it took longer in other countries.

We have also tried to establish connections with the left in Ukraine. We've been in contact with a group called [Sotsyalnyi Rukh](#) and we've asked them about their demands and wishes. They spoke a lot about the cancellation of Ukraine's debt so that the country has the resources to rebuild itself after such destruction. They also told us that, when the time comes, Finland will be able to help with

building educational infrastructure.

“Rebuilding Ukraine is not a task that should be postponed — it can start now”

And if we want to help, we need to maintain close contact with Ukrainians and listen to them carefully. I really hope that Europe is ready to take this step. There is a tendency among different European and US-based left forces and thinkers to look at the circumstances from above and not to listen to the Ukrainian left. Here in Finland, we are very sensitive to such issues and are ready to defend the Ukrainians’ right to decide what they need by themselves.

— You also take part in municipal politics. In Russia, municipal elections take place in September. Some people have been criticizing the elections, arguing that they’re meaningless while there is war. Some claim otherwise: elections are a form of resistance and politics on the municipal level can give us hope. What is municipal politics for you?

We had municipal elections a year ago and I’m in the City Council of Helsinki, so I definitely think that municipal politics is important. In Finland, you can do a lot on a municipal level. On the state level, representatives make decisions about the law but decisions about budget, education, city planning, climate change, environmental and energy policies are all taken on the municipal level. Regional authorities are in charge of the healthcare system but nonetheless it is governed more locally. At a municipal level you can gain a very good understanding of how different systems work in practice and come into direct contact with people. Many citizens in Helsinki get in touch with me all the time, they are aware of what is going on in their neighborhoods. For example, we’re now faced with a serious lack of workers in daycare. Having discussions with people about their day-to-day problems and concerns drives them to participate in politics.

Here, we have a strong participatory tradition, practiced in many places: the church has its elections, as do student unions, so you can go anywhere and try to actively shape your surroundings. Politics is embedded in society, you can do it everywhere: in organizations, political structures, parliamentary parties, at the municipal level, at the grassroots level and in many other ways. There’s no reason to put all of your hopes and efforts into one level of participation alone. But modes of organization, as well as political culture, differ depending on the place and time: in politics, there are no strategies you can copy paste.

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Mia Haglund

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