



Finland's Prime Minister Marin Loses to Pro-business Orpo

SINGAPORE — On April 2, Finland's left-wing Prime Minister Sanna Marin conceded defeat following the country's parliamentary elections, as the opposition, pro-business National Coalition Party (NCP) emerged victorious in a closely fought contest.

"We got the biggest mandate," NCP leader Petteri Orpo declared in a speech to followers, pledging to "fix Finland" and its economy. He will have to set up a coalition to obtain a majority in Parliament as Marin's stint as prime minister ends, and indicated that he would engage in talks with all political parties to obtain that majority. Marin has said her Social Democrats may govern with the NCP, but will not work with the nationalist Finns Party.



AP Images
Petteri Orpo

In January, Marin accused the Finns Party of being "openly racist," a charge the party dismissed. The Finns Party mainly aims to reduce what leader Riikka Purra has deemed "harmful" immigration from developing countries outside the European Union (EU). As did the NCP, it rallied for austerity policies to curtail deficit spending.

While progressive-leaning people globally have considered Marin, 37, the world's youngest prime minister when she assumed the role in 2019, to be a millennial exemplar, she has been castigated back home due to her government's public spending and partying. In particular, she riled some conservatives with her extravagant spending on pensions and education.

One of Marin's foreign policy legacies will be her attempt to seek NATO membership for Finland following the onset of the Ukraine crisis, an attempt that has since been successful.

Orpo slammed Marin for undermining Finland's economic resilience amid soaring costs of living and an energy crisis triggered by the conflict in Ukraine, and his party blasted her government for what it considered to be an irresponsible increase in public debt. Finland's debt-to-gross domestic product ratio rose from 64 percent in 2019 to 73 percent during Marin's stint in power.

First elected to Parliament in 2007, Orpo, who has hitherto served as a finance, interior, and agriculture minister, had focused on Finland's finances during the election campaign, an issue he lambasted Marin for neglecting. "The most important thing the National Coalition wants to change in Finland is that we stop increasing debt," he had told news outlet AFP before winning the vote.

"I want to fix our economy. I want to boost economic growth," Orpo said, adding that Marin "is not worried about the economy. She is not worried about debt." Besides aiming to address Finland's economic woes, Orpo said that leading a NATO-style Finland would be another key task on his agenda.



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on April 6, 2023

Orpo's emphasis on budgetary rigor might ruffle some feathers in the EU, as Finland is one of the "frugal" countries that has urged southern European countries to curb deficits.

Raised in southwestern Finland, Orpo joined student politics while studying economics at university. His political activities took up so much of his time that he took 12 years to graduate with a master's degree in political science, majoring in economics.

The pro-business NCP secured 48 of the 200 seats in Parliament, narrowly ahead of the nationalist Finns Party, with 46 seats, and Marin's Social Democrats, with 43.

Notably, although Orpo in 2017 dismissed a government partnership with the Finns Party, he mentioned in this year's election campaign that he is keeping options open, notwithstanding disagreements with the Finns Party on issues such as immigration, climate policy, and the EU.

"In my opinion, Finland cannot survive without more labor immigration. I want to keep Finland an open, international country," the new prime minister opined. However, "at the same time as we are increasing labor immigration, we have to maintain a strict asylum policy and keep immigration under control overall."

Despite her electoral loss, Marin seemed to strike an optimistic pose: "We have gained support," she said in a speech to party members, "we have gained more seats (in Parliament). That's an excellent achievement, even if we did not finish first today."

On Wednesday, Marin indicated that she would resign as the leader of her party, and rebuffed suggestions of any upcoming international jobs, although she plans to continue as a lawmaker. "I have come to the conclusion that I will not seek to continue as SDP leader at the forthcoming party conference in September," she told reporters in Helsinki. "I have not been offered any international posts. I will continue my work as a member of parliament."

Admitting that her stint as prime minister was challenging, she continued:

My own endurance has been tested at times during these years.

Now that the election result was like this, I believe that I also have the opportunity to reflect on my own life and turn a new page.

Democracy has spoken, the Finnish people have cast their vote, and the celebration of democracy is always a wonderful thing. I am grateful that our support has increased and that we look set to receive more mandates.

Arguably, Orpo's electoral victory is indicative of a broader shift in political dynamics across Europe in recent years, as pro-business and conservative parties have witnessed major electoral triumphs due to voters' desires for traditional European values and their worries about cost-of-living and immigration issues.

For example, in nearby Hungary, Viktor Orbán's conservative Fidesz party has been in power since 2010, winning several elections with large majorities.

Poland in 2019 saw the center-right Law and Justice Party (PiS), led by Jarosław Kaczyński, clinching a second consecutive term in the 2019 parliamentary election, with a majority in the lower house of Parliament. The PiS has been prominent in its criticisms of the EU as well as opposition to abortion and LGBTQ+ activism. That same year, Grzegorz Braun of the nationalist Konfederacja Party, with a more



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hardline stance against immigration and the EU, was elected to the Sejm, or the lower house of Poland's Parliament.

And following the disintegration of Mario Draghi's government last year, Italy saw the emergence of the conservative party of Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy become the leader of a center-right coalition government. Bearing in mind that Meloni's party only garnered four percent of votes in the previous election, her 2022 victory was particularly noteworthy.



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