**Finland: balancing centralized leadership and regional interests**

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**Abstract**

Analysing the response of the Finnish government to the COVID-19 crisis, this chapter shows that patterns of governance combined elements of centralized leadership, ministerial dominance, and scientific expertise. Decision-making was centered around the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and horizontal coordination created challenges. The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare was highly visible throughout the crisis, but occasionally the views of the health authorities and the government differed. After an initial seemingly passive phase, the government in mid-March 2020 declared a state of emergency and imposed strict anti-pandemic measures. The first wave of the pandemic was characterized by a sense of national urgency both in terms of policies and public opinion. Subsequently the government shifted to a decentralized, hybrid strategy under normal legislation, with targeted regional solutions favoured more instead of nation-wide measures. This produced occasional tensions between subnational authorities and the national executive while the confusing terminology of the authorities contributed to the increasing criticism of the government. However, overall, there was very little contestation of the adopted measures.

## Introduction

Finland's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has seen three main phases: the initial state of emergency declared on 16 March 2020, a cooling-off period during summer 2020 with very low infection rates and eased restrictions, and the period from autumn 2020 onwards with varying containment measures across the country, depending on the regional situation. During the pandemic Finland has received a lot of positive coverage in international media (Euractiv 2020; Yle 2021a). Indeed, the number of infections and deaths has remained low, which, in addition to any government policies, is probably explained by various factors, including the tendency of Finns to obey authorities and a cultural respect for personal space.

In terms of policies, after the initial three-month state of emergency period, Finland has primarily followed a decentralized, hybrid strategy, defined here as "a move from extensive restrictive measures

to enhanced management of the pandemic. Alongside the controlled dismantling of restrictive measures, the strategy focuses on testing, tracing, isolating and treating" (Tiirinki et al. 2020: 653). However, while Finland is a unitary state, the government has found itself constrained by sub-national authorities. The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) was highly visible throughout the crisis. Yet, there were occasional policy differences between health experts and the executive.

Patterns of governance in turn exhibit centralization in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) combined with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health responsible for much of the actual policy-making. The coalition cabinet led by Prime Minister (PM) Sanna Marin stayed mainly cohesive, in part by delaying difficult decisions until the pandemic is over. In line with the 'rally around the flag' phenomenon, normal politics was initially 'put on hold' and the public was highly supportive of Marin and other leaders. Standard patterns of party-political contestation started to emerge gradually, but the opposition at no point strongly criticized governmental COVID policies. Throughout the crisis, the terminology used in official communication about the pandemic created unnecessary confusion that could have been avoided.

**Centralized Leadership**

The Finnish political system is normally categorized as semi-presidential, with the executive functions divided between an elected president and a cabinet that is accountable to the Eduskunta, the unicameral national legislature. However, the new constitution, which entered into force in 2000, completed a period of far-reaching change that curtailed presidential powers and brought the Finnish political system closer to a normal parliamentary democracy. Presidential leadership has been replaced with rule by oversized coalition cabinets that typically bring together parties from the left and the right. (Karvonen et al. 2016)

The five-party cabinet formed after the April 2019 elections comprised the Social Democrats, the Centre Party, the Green League, the Left Alliance, and the Swedish People's Party. The government was headed by Social Democrat PM Sanna Marin. The main rift inside the cabinet was between the Centre and the other more liberal parties in the coalition. The largest opposition parties were the populist and anti-immigration Finns Party and the National Coalition (conservatives).

Finland is a unitary state, with no elected regional bodies.[1] The exception is the autonomous Åland Islands. Yet, as our analysis will show, the regional authorities do matter. The Regional State Administrative Agencies (*aluehallintovirasto*) and Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (*ELY-keskus*) are the primary regional actors. The former deals with the realization of basic rights and legal protection, accessibility of health and social services, sustainable use of the environment, domestic safety and healthy and safe living and working environments, while the latter focuses on advising businesses and promoting regional development. Instead of a constitutional court, the Constitutional Law Committee of the Eduskunta issues *ex ante* statements on the constitutionality of government bills and other matters, including on the various policies enacted during the pandemic. The strong role of the Constitutional Law Committee also means that courts have remained in the background during the crisis.

During the pandemic the decision-making style has been quite hierarchical, top-down leadership, with the PM and her office in a central role. The government established on 26 February 2020 a high-level COVID-19 Coordination Group in PMO. Chaired by Marin's state secretary, it brought together the leading civil servants (permanent secretaries) from sectoral ministries, director of Government Security, director of Government Communications, head of the Operations Centre, and the director of THL, and was supported by the ministries' heads of preparedness and preparedness secretaries. While there has been criticism of the passive role of the Coordination Group, it did nonetheless facilitate horizontal coordination. The Government Situation Centre and the Operations Centre were also located in PMO. The former is responsible for maintaining situational awareness based on information from the authorities, while the latter, established on 1 April 2020, maintains an overall picture of the progress made in implementing governmental decisions (VNK 2020a; 2020b; 2020c). The Operations Centre was criticized for remaining in the background during the first stage of the crisis. The evaluations of leadership during COVID-19 contain strong recommendations for further increasing the resources and powers of PMO in crisis situations (Mörttinen 2021; VNK 2021; Tiihonen 2021). Horizontal coordination remains challenging due to the silo mentality of the ministries and as the cabinet parties safeguard the positions of their 'own' ministries (Raunio 2021).

[1] During COVID in 2021 the government finally managed to agree on a reform of social and health services. As part of that package, Finland has directly-elected regional councils, with the first elections held in January 2022.

Starting from the first press conference, the focus was on Marin and her solid, fact-of-matter speeches and behaviour which received praise from across the political spectrum and attracted international media coverage. Throughout the crisis Marin has steadfastly supported her cabinet ministers. This applies particularly to her fellow social democrat Krista Kiuru, the Minister of Family Affairs and Social Services who was in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in charge of most COVID regulatory instruments. In line with the Communicable Diseases Act, handling COVID-19 fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and Kirsi Varhila, the permanent secretary in the ministry, has also appeared regularly in the media during the pandemic, explaining the governmental policies.

Decision-making has centred around the trio of PMO, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and THL (which operates under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health), also forming a nodal point of information regarding the pandemic both in terms of gatekeeping the influx of international expert opinion and assessing the domestic situation. PM Marin and Minister of Social Affairs and Health Kiuru clearly formed the nucleus of government decision-making concerning the pandemic. Hence, the COVID period has differed from the standard situation where the finance minister, held since the 2019 elections by the Centre, is the second most important portfolio in the cabinet (Raunio 2021). Kiuru has also received the brunt of the criticism, including occasionally publicly from her ministerial colleagues. In October 2020 she survived a non-confidence vote in the Eduskunta tabled by the National Coalition regarding conflicting accounts of face mask instructions (Yle 2020). The whole government also convened more often into informal sessions, particularly in the initial stages of the crisis, with active coordination and joint press conferences by the chairs of the five coalition partners.

Crises tend to concentrate power in the executive branch, but in Finland it is hard to detect any real weakening of the legislature. This may have been due to Finland having a broad coalition cabinet (cf. Bolleyer and Salát 2021) but is also explained by the presence of strongly institutionalized participation and information rights of the Eduskunta. During the state of emergency parliamentary approval is needed for government decrees implemented on the basis of the Emergency Powers Act. The government was thus responsible for the emergency measures, but they all required the consent of the Eduskunta. The government's use of emergency powers did nonetheless raise concerns and the Constitutional Law Committee issued several highly critical statements of governmental decrees (Neuvonen 2020). But as all attention was on governmental press conferences and the key ministers,

the Eduskunta plenary hardly provided a forum for COVID debates. And when the Eduskunta did debate the various emergency measures, the lack of any genuine alternatives did not facilitate meaningful exchange between the government and the opposition.

COVID also consolidated prime ministerial leadership in Finland. It was Marin and her cabinet who were responsible for introducing the various COVID policies and the government also represents Finland in the European Union (EU) meetings. Yet there is one exception: the Emergency Powers Act. The government, acting together with the president, determines whether the societal conditions necessitate the use of the emergency law. And, on 16 March 2020, having consulted the president, the government adopted the decree declaring the state of emergency. President Sauli Niinistö, the former long-standing chair of the National Coalition, adopted an active role during the initial stages of the crisis. During the last weekend of March 2020 media reported that Niinistö had suggested to the government the establishment of a new special decision-making body, a so-called 'corona fist', for dealing with the crisis, but Marin had rejected the idea. Apparently, Niinistö had brought up the idea of the 'corona fist' already before that. The Social Democratic party sent a letter to Niinistö, recommending that the president stays clear of matters belonging to the competence of the government. Sources from the offices of the president and the prime minister assured that there was no rift between the cabinet and Niinistö (Muhonen 2020). A couple of days later Marin thanked Niinistö in a press conference for his role as a "value leader", which can also be interpreted as a gentle reminder to the president of the fact that it is the government's responsibility to deal with the pandemic (Mörttinen 2021; Savon Sanomat 2020; Tiihonen 2021). Subsequently a division of labour between the two executives seems to have emerged: the president is reminding Finns of the seriousness of the pandemic while the government takes the decisions. Finns have thus learned that also during times of emergency it is the government, and not the president, who rules the land. From the point of view of power relations, this is perhaps the most important outcome of the COVID-19 crisis.

The international dimension was largely absent from domestic debates beyond the media actively reporting on the development of the pandemic across the world. While Finland closed its borders quickly, the government remained committed to European Union (EU) level measures. However, the €750bn Recovery Fund did cause considerable friction inside the coalition government and in the Eduskunta.

**Increasing Politicization**

Politicization gradually increased during the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of both party-political contestation and societal frustration with the restrictive policies. The coalition government had faced serious challenges, both in terms of policy outputs and internal unity, before the COVID period. But as soon as the seriousness of the pandemic became evident, these problems were pushed aside in favour of cohesive leadership. Yet, conflicts started to emerge, and they mainly occurred between the Social Democrats and the Centre Party. The Centre represents more sparsely populated areas with much lower infection rates, and holds key ministerial portfolios related to finance and economy. Regional differences in the severity of the epidemic sparked public and political discussion over the legitimacy of strict nation-wide measures from the outset, as many rural areas in Finland took months to contract a single case of the disease. There was strong pressure for the Centre Party to defend its constituents' interests, particularly with regard to Lapland, where income from tourism is highly important. Thus, it expressed discomfort with the tighter restrictions favoured by the Social Democrats. Marin appeared to choose a strategy of delaying difficult decisions concerning state finances and climate change until the COVID situation had improved, but gradually conflicts inside the coalition started to surface. The coalition almost fell in April 2021 during the so-called 'mid-term review' session. In the mid-term review session, the entire cabinet comes together halfway through the four-year electoral period to talk more freely about what the government has achieved, where it has failed, and whether its targets should be re-adjusted for the remaining two years. Previously these sessions have lasted around two days, but now it lasted nine days. The drama was not just about the Centre needing to prove that its voice counts in the cabinet, but about how soon the government should return to 'normal' and start enforcing budgetary discipline (Kujanen and Raunio 2021).

Overall, the public has remained supportive of both the government and the lockdown measures. From a comparative perspective, Finns trust their leaders and political institutions with interpersonal trust also high, and such trust is associated with positive evaluations of government performance during COVID (Altiparmakis et al. 2021 Jørgensen et al. 2021). Initially, normal party politics was put on hold, with solid public backing for lockdown measures and the PM. In the first phase the media and the public seemed to appreciate the swift action and tough line, and, interestingly, essentially no politician or media proposed less stringent policies or earlier relaxation of the emergency measures.

The opposition could hardly criticize the government for not taking the situation seriously. Instead, the government had to justify why no further restrictions, such as compulsory use of face masks, had been introduced. Also, comparisons with other countries, not least Sweden, conveyed the message that Finland had chosen the right course of action. In fact, it was quite remarkable, or perhaps even worrying, how strong the consensus was. There was no public debate about potential alternative ways of handling the crisis, although some critical voices, including many constitutional lawyers, pointed out that the state of emergency should be declared only in truly exceptional circumstances.

The public also agreed with the relaxation of measures during the summer, but from autumn 2020 onwards politicians, experts, businesses, interest groups, trade unions, and citizens increasingly disagreed about the COVID regulatory instruments whilst other policy issues returned to public debates. Particularly businesses and trade unions as well as the cultural sector became increasingly vocal and even defiant in their critique of the lockdown measures. However, throughout the crisis the political opposition has not seriously questioned governmental COVID policies (cf. Louwerse et al. 2021). This applies even to the Finns Party, which probably decided that pandemic is not the right time for anti-establishment rhetoric. Initially in late spring 2020 the support of the Social Democrats had soared in the polls, while that of the other cabinet parties and the opposition dropped or stayed at roughly the same level as before the COVID-19 crisis (Taloustutkimus 2020). While Marin and the government have continued to enjoy high approval ratings in handling the crisis, gradually party support figures started to resemble those before the pandemic, and in the municipal elections held in June 2021 the Social Democrats finished second, almost four percentage points after the National Coalition.

The government has not helped matters with its ever-changing vocabulary of "tier systems" and other concepts of pandemic governance, resulting in confusing communication. This has applied particularly to the second and third phases, with the ministers and health experts at times sending different signals about various issues such as the use of face masks. As Finnish cabinets typically contain three or more parties, achieving cohesive government communication is challenging even in normal times. But COVID experiences will no doubt intensify demands for further centralization of government communication to the PMO, a development already under way before the pandemic started. (Niemikari et al. 2019; Johansson and Raunio 2020). Overall, the communication strategy has been clearly linked to the jurisdictional disputes between the national and sub-national levels.

Marin, Kiuru and other leaders and experts repeatedly appealed to national unity and observance of instructions, stressing that 'together' we can survive the crisis. Marin also emphasized that the government would have to impose tougher lockdown measures, including a return to the state of emergency, should people and regional authorities not follow the recommendations. Occasionally there was also discrepancy between government communication and the letter of law, with the ministers – intentionally, perhaps – not clarifying whether their instructions were recommendations or legally binding orders.

Turning to the role of expertise, the government has regularly cited expert opinion throughout the pandemic, particularly that of THL, e.g., when declaring the state of emergency and in relation to face masks. The programme of PM Marin's government formed the backbone of this attitude: "We commit to knowledge-based policy-making and systematic impact assessment in all legislative preparation. We will engage in deeper cooperation with the scientific community" (VNK 2019). THL was in a central role, with particularly Director Mika Salminen often appearing alongside ministers in press conferences. Even when the scientific community disagreed about particular issues, such as face masks, Marin and her cabinet consistently referred to available scientific evidence when justifying their policies, but occasionally there were also disagreements between the government and the health experts. Furthermore, the government has benefited from the Finnish political culture, characterized by trust in scientific expertise and a deferential attitude towards authorities (e.g., Ruostetsaari 2017; Tiedebarometri 2019).

**From National to Regional Anti-Pandemic Policy**

The organisation of the Finnish COVID policy response relied significantly on containment measures. In terms of authority, the government declared a state of emergency on 16 March 2020 and took up additional powers under the Emergency Powers Act. Large gatherings of people were banned, most public facilities were closed, and borders were also effectively closed. Distance teaching and working was adopted in schools and workplaces wherever possible. Restaurants were closed from early April to the end of May. In addition to this, a notable restriction on personal freedom was imposed when the government isolated the capital region of Uusimaa from the rest of the country for nearly three weeks by closing its borders with police and military personnel to prevent all non-essential travel between the capital region and countryside. With COVID case numbers declining, the state of

emergency was abolished on 16 June 2020. Outdoor events were allowed with special arrangements, and restaurants gradually reopened.

In terms of organisation, the policy response shifted from strict national-level containment to a hybrid strategy, starting late June 2020, with regionally varying containment policies such as restrictions on restaurants' customer capacity and opening hours. Foreign travel became possible again, with a "traffic light" tier system introduced, categorizing travel destinations in terms of their COVID risk level. The government aimed at ensuring contact teaching for primary schools and high schools. In order to enable local and regional authorities to contain the virus without the government having to resort to exceptional use of its authority, a reform of the Communicable Diseases Act was introduced on 22 February 2021. Just a few days later, the worsening COVID situation compelled the government to declare a state of emergency again. This time, a three-week lockdown period was announced for March 2021, effectively closing restaurants, and shifting children over age 13 back to distance teaching.

During the second lockdown period in March 2021, PM Marin employed an increasingly alarmed rhetoric, pointing at the possibility of a curfew-like policy to come if the contagion numbers continued to rise despite existing policies. Additional restrictions on freedom of assembly were never implemented, as the governments' legislative proposal on the matter was deemed too vague, and therefore unconstitutional, by the Constitutional Law Committee. The matter was dropped as contagion numbers decreased towards the summer of 2021. The second state of emergency was abolished on 27 April 2021. This period also saw the government seek a nodal position in terms of control over information and communication regarding the pandemic. Under the Emergency Powers Act, the government decided on a new organisation of COVID communications under the Communications Department of the PMO, diminishing the role of other ministries' communications, and thus, of other officials. A brief but worried debate among journalists and experts followed.

Throughout, the priority of the Finnish COVID response was to protect public health and secure the healthcare system's ability to fight the virus. Healthcare resources were buffed and reorganised: non-essential care and surgeries were postponed, pharmacies' medicine sales were regulated, and procurement of protective equipment was stepped up. Under emergency powers, the government issued a decree obligating people with healthcare training to work in that field, if need be.

The treasurer response included a wide range of support measures from the outset of the pandemic, ranging from additional R&D funding and alleviations to tax and bankruptcy legislation for companies, to a communicable disease allowance to compensate individuals for losses caused by absences due to COVID. The government introduced several additional budgets, direct aid packages, and other fiscal stimuli to troubled sectors.

During the spring and summer of 2020, no policy to obligate the general public to use face masks had been issued, as experts and officials were divided on the utility of masks. Moreover, there were serious availability issues with masks in the early stages of the pandemic. By autumn 2020, experts favoured non-mandatory mask recommendation for situations, such as public transport, where distancing could not be guaranteed. Finland also launched a COVID tracking mobile app, which proved highly popular, but not actually effective in tracing.

Finland joined the joint vaccine procurement effort of the EU, seeking to vaccinate the entire population, free of charge. Vaccination rollout started in late December 2020, according to a prioritization plan, proceeding from healthcare professionals, risk groups, and the elderly, towards younger age groups. Like many countries, Finland experienced an anxiously sluggish vaccination program, amidst availability issues and initial concerns about side effects. By the end of May 2021, only 485 000 people of Finland's 5.5 million population had received two doses of vaccine. (Yle 2021b.)

**Conclusions**

What lessons, if any, can we draw from the COVID period? In terms of policies, the government has prioritized protecting the population, especially risk groups, and maintaining the capacity of the health care system. Overall, the numbers of infections and deaths have remained comparatively low, and for the most part the hybrid strategy has managed to find a balance between lockdown measures and keeping the society and economy running. Faced with a high level of complexity and uncertainty, the government has listened closely to scientific expertise, but has also occasionally deviated from the views of the experts.

The division of labour and occasional jurisdictional disputes between subnational authorities and the government have created confusion, as has the COVID terminology of the government and the health authorities. During the pandemic there were calls for further strengthening both the leadership of PMO and horizontal coordination in crisis situations. PM Marin on several occasions vented frustration with the limited powers of the PMO and the national government. COVID decision-making centred around PMO and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, with other ministries, including the powerful Ministry of Finance, in the background. The role of the president remained marginal throughout the crisis.

Finally, in terms of contestation and political culture, public approval of the PM and other authorities remained high, and while defiance towards restriction measures has certainly grown among the general public due to fatigue over the prolonged crisis, it remains relatively mild. The observant attitude towards authorities and experts among Finns probably matters, but it is also noteworthy how little, if any, contestation there has been over the main lines of COVID policies. Nonetheless, over time and particularly during the third phase of the crisis normal party-political dynamics re-emerged.

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