



# FINLAND PRIME MINISTER OUSTED, CONSERVATIVES WIN TIGHT VOTE - ASSOCIATED PRESS

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*Photo: People count the advance votes of the Finnish parliamentary elections at the Kallio administrative building in Helsinki, Finland*

Finland's main conservative party claimed victory in parliamentary elections Sunday in a tight three-way race that saw right-wing populists take second place, leaving Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Social Democratic Party in third, dashing her hopes for reelection.

The center-right National Coalition Party (NCP) claimed victory with all of the votes counted, coming out on top at 20.8%. They were followed by right-wing populist party The Finns with 20.1%, while the Social Democrats garnered 19.9%.

With the top three parties each getting around 20% of the vote, no party is in position to form a government alone. Over 2,400 candidates from 22 parties were vying for the 200 seats in the Nordic country's parliament.

"Based on this result, talks over forming a new government to Finland will be initiated under the leadership of the National Coalition Party," said the party's elated leader Petteri Orpo, as he claimed victory surrounded by supporters gathered in a restaurant in the capital, Helsinki.

Marin, who at age 37 is one of Europe's youngest leaders, has received international praise for her vocal support of Ukraine and her prominent role, along with President Sauli Niinistö, in advocating for Finland's successful application to join NATO.

The 53-year-old Orpo, Finland's former finance minister and likely new prime minister, assured that the Nordic country's solidarity with Kyiv would remain strong during his tenure.

"First to Ukraine: we stand by you, with you," Orpo told the Associated Press at NCP's victory event. "We cannot accept this terrible war. And we will do all that is needed to help Ukraine, Ukrainian people because they fight for us. This is clear."

"And the message to (Russian President Vladimir) Putin is: go away from Ukraine because you will lose," Orpo said.

Finland, which shares a long border with Russia, cleared the last hurdles of becoming a NATO member earlier in the week as alliance members Turkey and Hungary signed off the country's membership bid.

NCP's share of votes translates into 48 seats in the Eduskunta, Finland's Parliament, while The Finns, a nationalist party running largely on an anti-immigration and anti-European Union agenda, is to get 46 seats and Marin's Social Democrats 43 seats respectively.

Observers say the result means a power shift in Finland's political scene as the nation is now likely to get a new center-right government with nationalist tones. The government will replace the center-left Cabinet by Marin, a highly popular prime minister at home and abroad since 2019.



Government formation talks led by the NCP are expected to start in the coming days with goal of putting together a Cabinet enjoying a majority at the Parliament.

"I trust the Finnish tradition of negotiating with all parties, and trying to find the best possible majority government for Finland," Orpo told the AP.

"And you know what is important for us? It's that we are an active member of the European Union. We build up NATO-Finland, and we fix our economy. We boost our economic growth and create new jobs. These are the crucial, main, important issues we have to write into the government program," he said.

The positions of Marin's party on the Finnish economy emerged as a main campaign theme and were challenged by conservatives, who remain critical of the Social Democrats' economic policies and are unlikely to partner with them.

Orpo had hammered on Finland's growing government debt and the need to make budget cuts throughout the election. NCP is open to cooperation with The Finns as the two parties largely share view on developing Finland's economy though have differences in climate policies and EU issues.

While Russia's invasion of Ukraine prompted Finland to seek NATO membership in May 2022, neither the historic decision to abandon the nation's non-alignment policy nor the war emerged as major campaign issues as there was a large consensus among the parties on membership.

Finland, which is expected to join NATO in the coming weeks, is a European Union member.

The initial voter turnout in the election was 71.9%, slightly down from the 2019 election.

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Kostya Manenkov and David Keyton in Helsinki contributed to this report.