

What Sauli Niinistö's re-election means for Finnish foreign policy



Sauli Niinistö secured his re-election as Finland's President with a comfortable first-round victory on 28 January. [Matti Pesu](#) assesses what the result means for the country, particularly in the area of foreign policy, where the President has significant constitutional powers.

Finland's soil is not prone to landslides. However, in politics, Finland has just witnessed a historic landslide victory, which [secured President Sauli Niinistö's second six-year term](#).

The incumbent's re-election was no surprise; the polls have displayed Niinistö's popularity throughout his first term, which began in 2012. Although a second round would have been a minor surprise, Niinistö's 62.7 percent of the votes was nonetheless a stunning victory; the polls were right all along and Niinistö did not lose the high numbers which the Finnish media was keen to speculate about.

In Finland, the President is elected through a direct popular vote. The system was introduced in 1994, and, until these elections, no candidate had been able to win the race in the first round – a performance which requires 50 percent of the votes. Niinistö – a former National Coalition Party chair – ran as an independent candidate backed by a popular movement. It proved a shrewd tactical manoeuvre, and his support transcended party lines. Consequently, for the big parties such as the Social Democrats and the Centre Party, the elections were a major blow. The Centre Party's candidate, the former Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen, finished fifth with 4.2 percent of votes. Tuula Haatainen, a Social Democrat, came sixth with a modest 3.3 percent.



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There are a number of reasons for Niinistö's popularity. First, and quite paradoxically, Niinistö began to rise to favour in the 1990s when he as the Minister of Finance advocated strong austerity measures. The independently minded lawyer has ever since been one of the most popular politicians in Finland. An affecting life story – Niinistö was widowed in 1995 (remarried in 2009) and survived the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004 – has further increased his appeal.

Second, Niinistö's diplomatic activity has been considered a success. In 2017, he hit the jackpot by meeting Donald Trump, Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin and a host of other world leaders. Furthermore, 2017 was Finland's centennial, which gave Niinistö additional visibility.

Third, for many Finns Niinistö is the embodiment of a statesman. He is somewhat distant yet not indifferent, prestigious yet not arrogant, circumspect yet determined. He speaks in vague terms but still manages to convince the public and to convey his message. Lastly and importantly, Niinistö was the incumbent, and during a turbulent era in international politics, Finns clearly preferred stability and continuity to change.

A strong leader

Niinistö's first term was something of a paradox. On the one hand, he operated with ever more limited constitutional powers. In terms of presidential prerogatives, Niinistö is the least powerful President in Finnish history, since the office has been all but stripped of substantive domestic power. [The Constitution](#) however grants significant authority over foreign affairs, which the President, according to the Constitution, is responsible for in cooperation with the government.

On the other hand, mainly through his foreign policy activity, Niinistö was able to de facto assume a much stronger position than his predecessor, Tarja Halonen. During his first term, Niinistö indeed became the unquestioned leader of Finnish foreign and security policy, and he has consolidated his predominance during the rule of the current government led by Juha Sipilä. In terms of foreign policy, the government in office is weak, and as Prime Minister Sipilä has not expressed considerable interest in foreign affairs. Niinistö has stepped in and successfully filled the vacuum.

According to Niinistö's own [description](#), Finnish foreign and security policy rests on four pillars: strong national defence, Western partnerships, international rule-based order, and relations with Russia. It is noteworthy that, regardless of the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine, Niinistö has decided to maintain regular contacts with Vladimir Putin. However, in its bilateral interaction with Russia, Finland has acted out of the EU's common policy line, and the ambition of Finland's Russia policy has been modest. No new bilateral initiatives have been introduced. It seems that Niinistö simply likes to know what Putin thinks, and this connection to Moscow brings him a certain status within the community of Western leaders.

More importantly, Niinistö has spearheaded a major change in Finnish defence and security policy. Non-alignment has all but lost its practical relevance, and the old doctrine no longer drives Finnish security policy. Rather, [Finland's security and defence policy stems from Western partnerships](#). That is to say, bilateral cooperation with Sweden has intensified; a Swedish-Finnish Naval Task Group will soon be operative, and the countries exercise territorial defence together. Moreover, the focus of Finnish-NATO cooperation has moved from crisis management to supporting Finnish national defence and NATO's collective defence. In addition to this, militarily Helsinki is closer to Washington than ever before, and [the statement of intent](#) between the capitals facilitates ever more strengthened cooperation.

In other words, due to Finland's changed policy line, the country is more tightly connected to the European security system, and, as a result, Finland is part of the Western strategic deterrence in the Baltic sea region.

What to expect of the second term?

It is likely that Niinistö will hold on to his strong position. The question is: what will he do with this exceptionally strong mandate? Given the lack of foreign policy figures in Finnish politics, Niinistö will probably retain his predominance in foreign affairs. Unlike at the beginning of his first term, he now has a clear framework for pursuing Finnish interests, namely the idea of the four pillars. In addition to intensifying the existing partnership, Helsinki might thus pursue a limited global agenda, since Niinistö has hinted that Finland's global profile needs clarification.

It remains to be seen whether the President can resist the temptation to comment on domestic matters. Such an activity could be deemed unconstitutional, but it is something that the Finnish public wishes. Remaining outside of domestic quarrels might be wise, however, since domestic power battles could endanger his authority in foreign policy. The cobbler should thus stick to his last.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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