

# **Tearing Down the Welfare State - Militarization and State-Sanctioned Racism in Finland**

Saturday 26 October 2024, by [AHVONEN Omni](#), [KELA Juulia](#) (Date first published: 22 October 2024).

**Despite the Left Alliance being the second-biggest winner in the EU election, garnering 17.3 percent of the vote, contemporary fascism and “disaster nationalism” are on the rise in Finland, aided and abetted by the neoliberal class and its political representatives.**

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As Richard Seymour argues, “disaster nationalism” manifests as a triad of neoliberal austerity, increasing militarization, and state-sanctioned racism in the new far right. [1]. These factors favor the rise of mutated forms of contemporary fascism, which mimics its xenophobic and reactive politics without the immediate goal of dismantling parliamentary democracy overnight. Discursively, Seymour contends, “disaster nationalism offers...a politics of revenge” and “an addictive cycle of threat and release, in which self-respect is transiently secured by the destruction of a neighbour.” Such a politics is expressed in the Finnish context in an ethnonationalist ideology of racial exceptionalism, wherein the Other functions as a constantly looming threat to be debarred, punished, or extinguished.

The current right-wing government of Finland—a coalition between the National Coalition Party, Finns Party, the Swedish People’s Party, and the Christian Democrats—we argue, embraces this form of disaster nationalism in tandem with a programme of neoliberal austerity, increasing militarization, and state-sanctioned racism.

Like elsewhere in the West, the Finnish political landscape has radically shifted toward the right in the wake of recurring and overlapping political crises. Xenophobic sentiments and anti-immigration policies have become normalized, politicians with affiliations to neo-Nazi groups have gained seats in the parliament, drastic austerity measures have increased, homophobia is on the rise, and Finland has established itself among the most racist countries in the European Union. [2]

With liberal and social democratic political forces unwilling to confront the underlying root causes behind these crises—capitalism, colonial complicity, and state-sanctioned racism—the ground has been prepared for the rise of mutated forms of contemporary fascism.

## Neoliberal Austerity

The current right-wing government has introduced a comprehensive austerity program with the aim of tearing down the welfare state and considerably weakening any political resistance offered by labor unions or civil society. Under the guise of saving Finland from an “impending debt crisis,” Prime Minister Petteri Orpo’s government has embarked on a Thatcher-esque project of hollowing out the state from within.

The rhetoric around national debt has been peculiarly effective. [3]. The political language of the “debt crisis” has suffused public discourse, resulting in a severely distorted view of national debt. This successful propaganda campaign, led by the political right and exacerbated by the media, is constructed around tropes of “saving future generations” from the burden of collective indebtedness.

As a result, more than half of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year olds in the country say that national debt must be brought under control immediately, regardless of the resulting cuts in welfare and subsidies, which ultimately weaken purchasing power. [4]. Orpo’s government wants Finland to commit to a debt-ceiling of around 60 percent of Finland’s GDP. [5]. Currently, Finland’s debt to GDP ratio stands at around 75 percent. However, this ratio is well below average in the European Union and far from alarming.

To close this gap, the government is claiming to “adjust” public spending by nine billion euros in total during the current parliamentary term. [6]. Here too, the subtle political rhetoric of “adjustment” is meant to hide the fact that these policies constitute all-out economic warfare against the poor and the precarious.

These austerity measures include drastic cuts in housing subsidies, higher education, and funding of civil society organizations. [7]. Spending on already chronically underfunded health services is being further decreased and unemployment benefits are being cut. Across the board, social services are being dismantled.

Although the process of neoliberalization is not as advanced in Finland as it is in the United Kingdom or the United States, it is nonetheless evident that Finland is distancing itself from its social democratic past. Despite this, political commentators both inside and outside the country often refuse to recognize this trend, instead reproducing an exceptionalist discourse of an egalitarian Nordic welfarism. The rightward shift in Finnish politics, the accompanying radicalization of political rhetoric, and the creeping results of these cuts should all dispel such prevailing myths.

As in any other austerity program, the language of “economic stability,” “long-term prosperity,” and “rational management” is an ideological smokescreen to destroy the remains of the Finnish welfare state, concentrate the power of the bourgeoisie, and disarm the unions, civil society, and social movements standing in the way.

Although the swiftness and disregard for dissent of Orpo’s neoliberal program stands out in Finnish political history, it did not arise out of the blue. The steady degradation of the welfare state, the accompanying wealth concentration, and the deregulation, financialization, and privatization of the economy have been long in the making.

As Heikki Patomäki has argued, neoliberalism in Finland emerged in the 1980s through the process of liberalizing financial markets and removing restrictions on capital mobility. [8]. In 1991, the rapid overheating of the economy led to a banking and currency crisis, which plunged Finland into its worst recession since the 1930s. Instead of resulting in a turn away from free market policies, the

economy was further neoliberalized in the wake of the crisis, leading to increased wealth gaps and the gradual dismantling, commercialization, and privatization of the public sector.

In the 2010s, the governments of Jyrki Katainen (2011–2014), Alexander Stubb (2014–2015), and Juha Sipilä (2015–2019) continued to hollow out the welfare state under the guise of economic rationalism. During Katainen's and Stubb's governments, significant austerity measures were implemented both on the national and the municipal level. Hundreds of millions were cut from education and services for the elderly. [9]. Simultaneously, tax reforms that benefited the rich were implemented and the retirement age was raised. Similarly, the government led by Sipilä's Centre Party cut education spending by 800 million euros, in addition to cuts to civil society funding, sickness allowances, and other basic public services. [10].

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Nor have recent center-left governments been much better. Previous prime minister Sanna Marin's government cut state spending by 328 million euros and introduced a plethora of reactionary legislative measures such as, for example, restricting the right to strike for nurses working in intensive care units. [11]. Although Marin's ostensibly left-wing government served as a speed bump to the rampant neoliberal agenda pushed by previous center-right governments, it found common ground with the political right on questions of foreign policy.

So while the current right-wing government is imposing its neoliberal programme and colluding with the far-right in an unprecedented manner, the neoliberalization, militarization, and consolidation of the Finnish racial welfare state have deeper roots which must be addressed and tackled in order to chart pathways to a more just society.

### **Racial Militarization**

If the parliamentary left's track record on economic policy in the last government is shaky at best, its reactionary foreign policy leanings and acquiescence to US imperialism is much worse. Largely following the precedent set by the previous government, the past year of Finnish foreign policymaking has been characterized by amplified racial militarization: billions spent on F-35 fighter jets, NATO accession, an extensive military agreement with the United States, and, late last year, a 317 million euro arms deal with the settler-colonial state of Israel amid its ongoing genocidal onslaught on Gaza and war on Lebanon. [12].

On April 4, 2023, Finnish NATO membership was confirmed. [13]. On the one hand (or depending on

who one asks), the agreement only formally ratified the already-existing long-term cooperation between Finland and NATO: both it and neighboring Sweden have participated in NATO-led operations and exercises as enhanced members since 2013. On the other, the agreement has marked a major geopolitical rift from proclaimed Nordic neutrality. [14]. Additionally, the Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) was signed with the United States on December 18, 2023. The DCA was unanimously passed by parliament on July 1, 2024. The agreement allows US military access to fifteen Finnish bases, including across the Sápmi lands, and the potential creation of US-only military zones in Finland.

Sápmi, the term for the Sámi Indigenous territory across the Northern Scandinavian and Kola Peninsulas, spans the borders of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. In the face of increasing militarization in Sápmi, Indigenous reindeer herders have been concerned over the future of their herds, their livelihoods and the material basis of Sámi culture, with little avenue for political influence. The Sámi parliament in Finland was neither consulted nor informed in advance that the DCA included the Sámi homeland region of Ivalo as a site of potential US troops and weapons storage. [15]. US troops and civilians sent to Finland and Indigenous territories under the agreement will be subject to US, rather than Finnish, law. Finally, the agreement's ambiguous language does not explicitly restrict the placement of nuclear weapons on Finnish soil.

It bears remembering that the process of NATO membership was initiated by Marin's government, and following a reversal of the Left Alliance position on the matter, antimilitarization voices have been muted. Only one Left Alliance MP, Anna Kontula, made an initiative to reject the DCA, but this received no backing in parliament. Other long-serving Left Alliance MPs critical of NATO have been silenced and disciplined by their own party. The party's "red lines" on the DCA-agreement have also shifted on numerous occasions throughout its implementation. [16].

The suggestion that Finnish NATO membership is a pawn for defending imperial US interests and political hegemony in Europe is absent from Finnish political and media discourses. Still, the pervasive NATO narrative is so singularly focused on Russia that critics are quickly shut down as Putinists—a binary serving NATO's purpose of preventing and derailing alternative alliances or neutrality as responses to geopolitical conflict. [17]. "Putinism" and the political rhetoric around Russian aggression is repeatedly invoked as a trope to delegitimize dissent in a variety of social arenas. The Gaza solidarity encampments, for example, were accused of being a "hybrid operation" orchestrated by Russia, serving "Putin's puppets."

Any viable left opposition would have to adopt a stronger anti-imperialist, antimilitarist, and internationalist politics—confronting genuine concerns about Russian belligerence while opposing NATO's military interventions in the global South and US imperialism more broadly. The West's unconditional support of and complicity in Israel's genocide on Gaza is the latest and most devastating demonstration of this deadly imperial logic wreaking havoc on the Global South, Indigenous populations, colonized peoples, and the environment.

Meanwhile, the Finnish state continues to benefit from and contribute to other settler states' military violence. In 2022 the Finnish Air Forces signed an agreement worth approximately 8.4 billion euros with Lockheed Martin to purchase F-35 fighter jets. [18]. The total cost of the agreement has been estimated to reach 30 billion euros. [19]. Recently, in a parliamentary discussion on the national budget, the quiet part was said out loud as Minister of Social Security Sanni Grahn-Laaksonen explicitly justified the cuts to health services on the grounds of allocating funds to purchase the F-35 jets and "strengthen security." [20].

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On November 12, 2023, Finnish and Israeli ministers announced the sale of “David’s Sling” at 317 million euros. [21]. Closer to home, as it stands, this spring has already seen Nordic Response 24, a NATO exercise with twenty thousand soldiers in Sápmi, with the Finnish defense forces touting “economic vitality” for the area. [22] Zionism is thus not the only form of settler colonialism in which Finland is complicit, as militarization at home is inseparable from Indigenous dispossession and settler colonial domination over the Sámi people and their lands. [23].

### **State-sanctioned Racism**

As these shifts connect the country more overtly to global tides of militarization and interimperial rivalries, the past years have simultaneously seen concerted efforts to weaken migrants’ rights.

In 2022, when thousands of migrants were stranded between the Poland-Belarus border, Marin’s government initiated the building of a border fence between Finland and Russia with an estimated final cost running into the hundreds of millions. [24]. Without needing to belabor the endless ways in which racial capitalism is integral to social democracy, this move by the government nevertheless demonstrates in action the transnational knock-on effects of border militarization in Europe—and the need for these deadly efforts to be countered by broad antiracist and anticapitalist coalitions. [25].

Two years on, the current Finnish government has encoded the pushback of migrants into national law. On July 12, with 167 votes to 31, the parliament voted in a new law allowing the Finnish border force to temporarily halt the reception of asylum seekers’ claims, without the right to appeal. [26].

In mainstream discourse, the law has been attributed to events occurring between August and November 2023, when around 1300 migrants sought asylum in Finland through the Russian border. [27]. The government and media have framed the events almost solely as a “hybrid threat” from Putin, with Russian authorities facilitating the movement of people to the eastern border. [28].

Academic, legal, and Left Alliance opinion on the bill has been condemnatory, focusing on tensions between EU law and the bill, or the potential further erosion of Finnish constitutional rights and the stance of international human rights agreements. But the abrupt parliamentary consensus over a racist and dysfunctional bill (legal scholars say it may not ever be implemented in practice) should also be understood as a crisis of the Finnish racial welfare state. [29]. In other words, the border fence and pushback law are a continuation of state practices of racialized exclusion—still all but absent in public discourse—that are foundational to Nordic nation-states. The ramping up of these practices only crystallizes the disaster nationalism of the current conjuncture, externalizing the racist roots of the “border crisis” in a way that legitimizes the agenda of the far right.

Similarly, several other parliamentary maneuvers have considerably weakened migrants' rights this spring. In June, the government reduced financial support for asylum seekers, now at the lowest level acceptable under EU law. [30]. In April, Finns Party Justice Minister Leena Meri disbanded a legal taskforce working to change the Finnish criminal code to match EU antiracism frameworks. [31]. While criminal law will not solve state-sanctioned racism in Finland, the minister's decision was among a series of moves that have tested the waters of altering legal bodies and frameworks to her party's benefit. These alterations, according to the Finnish Association of Judges, threaten the independence of the judiciary.

The openly racist rhetoric of the Finns Party is also landing on the streets. Racist hate crimes have spiked. [32]. In June, two instances of racially motivated stabbings took place in Oulu, the largest city in Northern Finland. In the first, a man previously known to authorities as part of a banned neo-Nazi group stabbed and seriously wounded a twelve-year-old from a negatively racialized migrant background inside a local shopping center. This assault was followed by the stabbing of a negatively racialized migrant man, this time by a teenager. [33].

The far-right agenda is driven by a racialized exceptionalism wherein immigrants and negatively racialized people are linked to crime, burdening the welfare system, and a range of other social ills. While far-right forces inside and outside parliament rhetorically frame their agenda as protecting the welfare state and Finnish democracy from the Other, the Finns Party is fundamentally neoliberal on economic policy—implementing punitive antimigrant measures in the attempt to discursively “border” welfare while in actuality pushing for austerity. In the face of this cumulative austerity and in lieu of real political change, the cycles of “threat and release” in these potentially deadly new policies, which foster collective hatred, have functioned as effective means of garnering political support.

## **Toward Counterhegemonic Politics**

With the current government imposing its neoliberal shock doctrine in tandem with intensifying state-sanctioned racism and militarization, the parliamentary left has been unable or unwilling to challenge the seemingly hegemonic forces of neoliberalism and contemporary fascism in the country.

On the domestic front, the onslaught of capital on workers, the precarious, unions, and civil society continues largely unabated. On foreign policy, there's a parliamentary consensus on the need to support NATO and deepen bonds with US imperialism.

The current conjuncture in Finnish politics is in desperate need of a militant and organized left invested in anti-imperial and anticapitalist struggle. Overcoming the overwhelming sense of disillusioned apathy and reckoning with the rise of the far right, requires critical internationalist left analysis that centers racial capitalism and imperialism in its attempt to understand and overcome the injustices of the present moment.

Coming to grips with the intimate relationship between liberalism and fascism and the parliamentary unification of neoliberal and neofascist forces is a crucial first step in reckoning with the political and historical dynamics at play. [34]. This requires recognizing how neoliberalism in Finland, as elsewhere, reproduces itself through processes of “difference-making”, bordering, and racialization. [35]. These processes, in turn, produce a fertile ground from which mutated forms of fascism and far-right ideology are normalized and mainstreamed. As Lisa Lowe put it, “liberal democracy is not fascism's antidote, but rather its conditions of possibility.” [36].

But all hope is not lost. While the parliamentary left is straggling, hints of a growing grassroots internationalism are springing up on the streets. This is perhaps best exemplified by the Palestine solidarity movement, which has paved the way for a radical and openly anti-imperialist political alternative not offered by ostensibly left-wing parties. Grassroots organizing against Israel's genocidal onslaught on Gaza and war on Lebanon has brought Finland's support for the Zionist state under greater scrutiny. In strengthening international solidarity and connecting movements against racism and imperialism, collectives and organizers have created important spaces for a resolute politics of anti-imperialism.

Shedding light on Finnish settler-colonialism and the state's support for Zionism, grassroots movements provide alternative spaces for imagining futures free of capitalist exploitation, racial dehumanization, colonial domination, and patriarchal structures. As tends to be the case, it is those groups that the state marginalizes and deems "radical" that provide the best antidotes to our reactionary present by envisioning utopian futures in a time of widespread melancholy and despair. [37].

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## **P.S.**

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- Onni Ahvonen is a doctoral researcher in world politics at the University of Helsinki. His research examines temporality, utopia, and political imagination in the Caribbean Black radical tradition by exploring the political thought of Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, and other guerrilla intellectuals.
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