

'No more taboos in Helsinki' from Le Monde (11 February 1992)


Caption: On 11 February 1992, the French daily newspaper Le Monde considers the changes in relations between Russia and Finland during the 20th century and outlines the debate over the possible application for Finnish accession to the European Communities.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Lesourne, Jacques. 11.02.1992, n° 14.631; 49e année. Paris: Le Monde. "La fin des tabous à Helsinki", auteur:Niéto, Françoise , p. 9.

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http://www.cvce.eu/obj/no_more_taboos_in_helsinki_from_le_monde_11_february_1992-en-75951c5c-0c8e-4cof-80d9-7ed2a341bdfc.html

Last updated: 05/07/2016



No more taboos in Helsinki

Backing on Russia but looking towards the European Community, Finland is seeking a new identity

Stockholm

From our own correspondent

Since the war, Finland's policy has been one of caution and silence, and it has maintained a low profile, thereby securing major economic advantages in compensation for the major inconvenience of having the Soviet Union as its neighbour. Since 6 December 1917, when Finland ceased to be a self-governing Russian Grand Duchy and became independent, its relationship with its powerful neighbour went through many a rough patch, even going so far as armed conflict. After the Second World War, Helsinki found a *modus vivendi* that enabled it to retain its independence and develop its economy as it wanted, without attracting any adverse reaction from Moscow.

The collapse of the economy of the former Soviet Union had severe consequences for Finland, which went into deep recession, aggravated by the cyclical crisis of its Western trading partners: 130 000 unemployed, i.e. 11 % of the working population, and an economy needing complete industrial restructuring and readaptation — the only way to avoid a crisis. The disintegration of the Soviet Union would make Finland — unusually — turn several 'political' pages in a short space of time.

The risk of isolation

Taboos were broken in rapid succession: the Baltic Republics were recognised; the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance that had linked Finland to the Soviet Union since 1948 was repealed and replaced, 15 days before the official demise of the USSR, by a new agreement which did not include any of the negative military clauses enshrined in the Treaty initialled in Moscow. Another agreement, with the Russian Federation, was signed on 20 January in Helsinki by the Finnish Prime Minister, Esko Aho, and First Deputy Chairman of Russia, Gennadi Burbulis. In October 1991, discussions began as to Finland's possible accession to the EEC, and an application for accession will probably be submitted in the spring. In the wake of that development, the country's neutrality is also being called into question to some extent.

Finland, in the throes of an economic crisis, finds itself backing on to a newly recognised but weak Russia and the impoverished Baltic Republics, where democracy is still uncertain. On the other side of the Baltic, neighbouring Sweden had already applied for accession to the European Community. Could Finland risk being isolated at the northern tip of Europe, when, everywhere else, a new deal was in the offing? Until the beginning of the winter, many thought that the European Economic Area (EEA, incorporating the EEC and EFTA) provided enough European integration and that it was a member 'in all but name' of the Community, as the Conservative Trade Minister, Pertti Salolainen, said last year. In October, however, it was he who was the first to seek full membership. If the EEA Agreement — which has still not been signed — currently seems to be no more than an intermediate step for Finland, EEC accession remains psychologically and politically very difficult.

Once the 1948 Treaty had been repealed and the Soviet Union had collapsed, Finland was completely free from the aftereffects of the Second World War. However, by applying for accession to the European Community, would it not have to give up some of its sovereignty and curtail its independence? The Finns weighed up the pros and cons. The anti-Europeans thought that the picture given of the EEC was 'much too optimistic'. The pro-Europeans replied that 'Finland has more chance of being heard at the heart of the Community than on the fringes.'

According to a recent poll, a majority of Members of Parliament are in favour of accession, but some, mostly members of the Centre Party (formerly the Agrarian Party) — notably the Prime Minister and his Foreign Minister, Paavo Vayrynen — do not want to divulge their position. It is this group, whose electoral base remains in the farming community, who are the most reticent. The Conservatives and Social

Democrats, on the other hand, are eager to press ahead. They want the application for accession to be considered next June in Lisbon by the EEC's Council of Ministers along with the applications from Sweden and Austria. To wait for the next opportunity, along with — who knows — Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and the Baltic States, is considered embarrassing: Finland would be treated as if it were one of the former Eastern bloc countries. And if it remains isolated and neutral, in a few years 'it could find itself bracketed with Albania.' A depressing outlook ...

As far as internal politics are concerned, without the Centre Party (and the small Christian-Democrat Party whose anti-EEC arguments are based on the Bible) there would be a governmental crisis. Mr Aho must therefore persuade them that agriculture — highly subsidised at present — needs to be restructured, whether Finland joins the Common Market or not. Summing up the general opinion, Max Jacobsson, a seasoned Finnish diplomat, points out that 'the final result is not in doubt': the application will be submitted in the next few months, and it will be submitted in accordance with the terms laid down by the Centre Party. These range from maintaining the country's neutrality, or rather avoiding involvement in a military alliance, to preserving their 'Arctic agriculture' and, therefore, the acknowledgement of the need for specific arrangements, such as those made for the Alpine region.

'A well-intentioned State'

These discussions leave a large majority of people in Finland quite perplexed, since the recession has made them more concerned about their individual situations. As for living next door to the new Russia, Finland is just as uncertain as others as to the future of the vast Republic. 'Russia is not the Soviet Union,' explains Dag Anckar, a professor of political science, to those in Finland who are afraid of joining the European adventure for fear of reprisals from Moscow. He does not exclude some bloody score-settling in the former Russian Empire, but he feels that Russia, which hopes to become a capitalist democracy, should be considered 'a well-intentioned State'.

However, he points out that, while Finland must closely follow developments in the East, its foreign policy must be directed towards the West. 'The most important decision by far here is to become a full member of the EEC and, in this way, participate in its evolution,' he said, adding that it was 'absurd' to say that, if Finland acceded to the EEC, it would forfeit its independence.

In the meantime, the geographical situation remains the same: 1 200 kilometres of shared frontier with Russia; St Petersburg within 300 kilometres of Helsinki and, in the north, the Kola Peninsula. The three-pronged agreement — political, economic and geographical — signed on 20 January by the two countries aimed to strengthen their relationship as 'equals', stressed Mr Burbulis in Helsinki. Trade will be based on the market economy, convertible currencies and, for some time to come, the same absence of tariff barriers. However, a change of identity has considerably weakened Finland's partner, and it can hardly rely on trade with Russia to guarantee its economic recovery.

In Helsinki, it is hoped that this new Russia, once it is up and running again, will once again be a favoured trading partner for Finland. In the meantime, Mr Burbulis has said that, 'if Finland decides to apply for accession to the EEC, we shall support its decision. Finland is Russia's window on the West, and Russia wants to support the process of European integration in every way that it can.'

Françoise Niéto