

'Not much enthusiasm' from Die Zeit (14 October 1994)

Caption: On 14 October 1994, the German weekly newspaper Die Zeit focuses on the political and economic situation in Finland on the eve of the referendum on that country's accession to the Treaty on European Union.

Source: Die Zeit. 14.10.1994, n° 42. Hamburg. "Wenig begeistert", auteur:Schmid, Klaus-Peter , p. 21.

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Not much enthusiasm

A man is sounding the rally against Europe. His name is Paavo Väyrynen, and, sitting opposite him in Helsinki's quietly elegant Parliament, you would not take him for a fanatic. The Centre Party MP reflected soberly on endangered Finnish identity, on the disappointing outcome of the spring accession negotiations and on the dire straits in which farmers find themselves. 'We will have to pay for agriculture in other countries,' he complained, and predicted that 10 000 Finnish farmers would lose their livelihoods. He concluded, 'It makes no sense to enter the European Union under these conditions.'

On Sunday, the Finns will decide in a referendum whether they will follow their Government and approve accession to the European Union. Only once before has a plebiscite been called for this nation: in the 1930s, when they voted to end prohibition. This time, it is for the decision of the century. 'A new era will begin from 16 October onwards,' asserted one diplomat in Helsinki's autumn sunshine. Finland had to redefine itself, he told visitors to the Foreign Office, and this was not easy. 'People here are conservative by nature, they are rarely willing to accept the unknown.'

Admittedly, anything else would be surprising. In a country where industrialisation is still a recent phenomenon and whose citizens, although they live in the city, still have their roots in the country, where a summer house is one of the basic social amenities and private life and domesticity are holy, many find this opening-up to Brussels-led Europe simply too fast.

Those against accession have flocked to support Väyrynen: farmers fearful for their livelihoods, Protestant fundamentalists who do not agree with southern Europe's Catholicism, feminists talking indignantly of medieval conditions in Mediterranean countries, worried citizens fearing a sell-out of their lakes to the Germans; not to mention ex-Communists, Greens, far-Rightists. This motley crew has put itself into the hands of the most contradictory of them all. After all, it was Väyrynen, of all people, who submitted the Finnish application for accession to Brussels in March 1992. He was Foreign Minister at the time and, like 80 % of his countrymen, supported this move towards Europe.

Supporters are no longer in such an overwhelming majority. Reservations and scepticism about Brussels have increased; all parties are split down the middle into *ei* and *kyllä*, 'yes' and 'no', on the question of membership. Paavo Väyrynen himself is a perfect example. He is a member of the ruling Centre Party — as is the Prime Minister, Esko Aho, who succeeded him as Party leader and is a committed fighter for membership.

Most Finns sense that saying no to accession would result in political and economic isolation for their country at the northern extremity of Europe. They will therefore vote 'yes', even if they have no sense of euphoria. 'Yes'-campaigners acting on this strategy are positively burying the nation in information, the Government has opened 20 Europe Offices in the country and has talked directly to 250 000 citizens, according to their calculations. The debate is not exactly sending sparks flying; both sides' publicity posters are remarkable at best for their dreary functionality. Splashes of colour, as painted by the youth station, Radio Mafia, remain rare: it simply broadcast passages from the Maastricht Treaty — without comment, but it was obviously an effective deterrent.

The debate's lack of glamour has one advantage, at least: no one is promising miracles to the Finns. Their country, hardly smaller than Germany but with only five million inhabitants, is in a serious crisis, with a drastic unemployment rate of nearly 20 %. Until its collapse, the Soviet Union was a privileged trading partner; within one year, the Russian share in Finland's exports sank from nearly 20 % to 5 %. There are signs of improvement, but the general opinion is that they will not manage an upturn from the depths on their own. Ultimately, many believe, along with Erik Forsman, Director of the Confederation of Finnish Industry and Employers, that 'The European Union is no paradise, but it is the best alternative.'

In addition to the poor economic situation, security is also an issue. Finland shares a border with Russia running for a good 1 100 km, and it is possible to detect a hint of insecurity about the future of the neighbouring superpower in the oft-repeated assertion that the Cold War is now over. But the nation only

rarely expresses such fears. It was left to Finland's political élite to put this issue on the agenda. But even the experts have largely left open the question of what such concepts as neutrality and Finland's national independence will mean after accession to the EU. A Junior Minister, Veli Sündback, expressed the modest expectation that Europe should afford them more security, but this would be 'generally improved' following accession. In other words: Finland is not looking for a military guarantee; nor, on the other hand, does it want to become a member of existing alliances.

In the final phase, the fight for votes is mainly being conducted on television — and on the literary market. Three books about Europe have recently headed the bestseller list, with the journalist Olli Kivinen's 'The EU is not a cucumber directive' at the top. The senior editor and columnist of *Helsingin Sanomat*, the country's biggest newspaper, expects an 'Austria effect' in the last few days before the referendum, i.e. ultimately, a clear 'yes' vote in favour of over 60 %. Erik Forsman of the Confederation of Industry is prepared to bet on this as well: 'You know, the Finns are serious people. Once they are inside that little cubicle, they will think twice.' And if the Finns say yes, almost everyone is sure that the Swedes will follow — and why not the Norwegians as well?

Students at the University of Helsinki are inviting everyone to an 'Integration Ball' on Sunday, regardless of the outcome of the vote on accession. Opinion polls predict up to 50 % for the 'Yes'-votes, much more than the 'No'-votes. Even anti-EU Väyrynen seems to have given up: 'I still hope that we shall win, but — I fear that we shall not succeed.'

Klaus-Peter Schmid