

Progressive Person of the Year

The year 2020 was dominated by the Covid-19 crisis. No country remained unharmed by this pandemic, and Europe has to respond collectively to the resulting economic and social crisis. But some governments managed better than others, with more social dialogue and attention to vulnerable groups.

The experience of Finland is one of those where the results are not only better than in many other countries, but where some distinctive features of the crisis response, like taking care of the gender dimension, have also been remarkable.

The government of Finland in this challenging period has been led by a young Social Democratic politician, who had taken over this leading role shortly before, at the time of the Finnish presidency of the EU Council. Finland continued to play an active and engaging role in EU affairs, building bridges rather than creating cleavages.

In Finland, Social Democrats govern with a wide, multiparty coalition, showing the way to future progressive alliances which can be developed elsewhere too.

Besides, the successful start of the Prime Minister also represents an inspiration for other nations to be bolder with the promotion of female politicians to leading governmental roles.

Therefore, for the FEPS Progressive Yearbook, **Sanna Marin** is the person of the year.



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Progressive Person of the Year:

The interview

László Andor

interviews Sanna Marin

László Andor: *The year 2020 will forever be remembered as the one when the Covid-19 pandemic hit. It presented itself as an incredible challenge. Having served as a Prime Minister throughout that rocky period, which aspects of your leadership are you proud of?*

Sanna Marin: Our Government has aimed to prevent the spread of the virus, to safeguard the capacity of the healthcare system and to protect people, especially those who are most at risk. We can say that thanks to sufficient and timely measures, we have managed to curb the spread of the epidemic as well as to protect the lives and health of the people. This is thanks to all the people living in Finland who have done their part by acting responsibly and following the restrictions.

LA: *... and subsequently, what could have gone better for Finland?*

SM: Surely, like in many countries, mistakes have been made in Finland during the epidemic. Our preparedness for a pandemic as large as this had not been sufficient. We have however aimed to correct our actions and change our strategy based on the latest information.

LA: *When you became Prime Minister, the headlines underlined your age and gender. But again, when we look back at the past months, would you say that it mattered a great deal that Finland, Denmark and New Zealand had progressive, Social Democratic, female leadership? In other words: does gender matter?*

SM: The most important thing is to look at the policies that governments and their leaders are pursuing. As leader of the Finnish Social Democratic Party, I naturally believe that progressive policy is the best way to build a better society.

LA: *The government that you lead has four women leaders representing the parties which form the cabinet. What are the lessons from the coalition? Of this experience, what would you say is crucial to understand for other Social Democrats in Europe? Is the Nordic coalition settlement, which one can also see in the case of your neighbours, our future?*

SM: Finland has a long tradition of forming majority coalition governments and, in our case, this tradition still works well. However, it is important to note that the electoral system also has a major impact on what kinds of majorities are elected.

LA: *When looking back at the policies of your government in the past months, it seems that you have definitely been a frontrunner in trying to protect especially those already vulnerable in the times of crisis. What do you think can be done to manage the impacts of this crisis, especially concerning growing inequalities and exclusions?*

SM: The Covid-19 pandemic affects different people in very different ways. We want to protect people in high-risk groups from the disease because it can be very serious and even fatal for them. Similarly, restrictive measures have an uneven impact on people, depending on their profession, family situation or region of residence.

Both during and after the crisis, it is vital that we pay special attention to the position of the most vulnerable people in society. Recovery measures must also be implemented in a way that is socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable.

LA: *In June, the new Government Action Plan for Gender Equality was adopted in Finland. What do you see as new benchmarks of the fight for a modern, egalitarian society? What do you hope for Finland to achieve under your leadership? What should be expected from Europe in that field?*

SM: The Government's goal is to make Finland a leading country in gender equality. Our recently published Action Plan for Gender Equality consists of about fifty measures dealing with working life, economic equality, family life, education, and intimate partner violence, improving the position of gender minorities and gender mainstreaming.

The EU must also implement its strong gender equality strategy effectively. The EU needs to work systematically to promote equality and non-discrimination and to maintain the established terminology, such as "gender equality".

LA: *You have set as a challenge to modernise Finland, and many of your statements emphasise that it has to embrace two pillars: greening and digitalisation. How do they translate in terms of policies? And which are your expectations concerning Europe?*

SM: Over the course of this decade, we will need comprehensive measures to reform the economic structure in order to achieve climate neutrality – which we aim to achieve at the EU level by 2050 and in Finland by as early as 2035. All sectors of society and the economy play a role in the transition to climate neutrality, and the policies we put in place must not hamper our work to achieve a just and successful green transition.

We need to harness the full potential of digitalisation in order to reach our climate objectives. By investing in research, development, and innovation and by effectively adopting new technologies, Finland and the EU can play a leading role in this sphere.

LA: *The pandemic made people rally around their governments in a search for protection and encouragement. At the same time, many hopes have been invested in Europe with an idea*

that the EU should step up, act and pursue for example research to provide vaccination to the citizens. From your point of view, are there reasons to believe we are coming closer to Health Union?

SM: The Covid-19 crisis has demonstrated the importance of international coordination and cooperation in the fight against communicable diseases. It is therefore important for the future that we promote measures to prevent and combat health crises and to prepare for them at the EU level. To this end, the Commission's Health Union proposal a good first step.

The pandemic has also highlighted the need to reduce dependencies in certain sectors, such as medicines, protective equipment, and raw materials. In this vein, the discussion on open strategic autonomy plays a key role when considering the EU's resilience to crises.

LA: *Finland has been very determined regarding the principle of the rule of law and the fact that it needs to be protected and promoted in the EU. This was one of the major issues at the time of the Finnish Presidency, which occurred when you stepped in. What is your opinion about the discussion that has just finished? What do you think about the compromise that has been reached?*

SM: Strengthening the rule of law was a key priority of the Finnish Presidency, which ended just over a year ago.

In December, the European Council unanimously adopted the rule of law mechanism in line with the outcome of the negotiations with the European Parliament. It was important for Finland that the text agreed upon with the European Parliament remained unchanged, and we succeeded in this objective.

Strengthening the rule of law in the member states is essential. The regulation we agreed on at the European Council is a legally binding instrument that will eventually be directly applicable in all member states. We also considered it important for the mechanism to be as effective as possible. In this respect, decision-making by qualified majority is a key element of the regulation.

LA: *Looking forward into 2021, what are your predictions? And, in that context, what should Social Democrats consider as the most important to deliver nationally, EU-wise and internationally?*

SM: Our most important priority for 2021 is to defeat Covid-19. Rapid vaccination and more efficient distribution of vaccines now play a key role in controlling the pandemic. At the same time, we need to make sure that the new variants of the virus do not spread widely through Europe. Once the acute crisis is over, it will be time for reconstruction. We need to rebuild in a way that is socially, ecologically, and economically sustainable – in Finland, in Europe and around the world.