

WORLD

New President, New Path for Finland in Sunday

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Chronicle Foreign Service

Leader must guide isolated nation still fearful of Russian influence

Helsinki

In the summer, 50,000 people crowded into the Finnish capital's cobblestone Senate Square for a historic event — the former Red Army chorus, decked out in full military regalia, had come to play and sing with the Leningrad Cowboys, a local rock and roll band whose members sport exaggerated pompadours.

Oldsters such as Raimo Ilaskivi, the presidential candidate of the Conservative Party, gritted their teeth as the young Finns and aging Russians sang "Happy Together" and "Those Were the Days." Be-

fore the concert, Ilaskivi said that if he were still mayor of Helsinki, he would have forbidden it. He recanted after the concert proved to be a rousing success.

Two years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Finnish politicians are still striving to find the right combination of comfort and concern regarding their huge Eastern neighbor.

The issue will be on many voters' minds Sunday, when Finns pick their first new president in 12 years and only the fourth since the end of World War II.

There are four leading contenders to succeed two-term President Mauro Koivisto: Martti Ahtisaari of Koivisto's Social Democratic Party, Paavo Vayrynen of the Center Party, Elisabeth Rehn of the Swedish People's Party and Ilaskivi. Pollsters predict that a runoff between the top two finishers will be necessary. The runoff would take place February 6.

It is a sign of fatigue with politics-as-usual that the Social Democrats' Ahtisaari, a plump man with almost no eyebrows and a permanently sad cast to his face, is the

only clear favorite to make the runoff.

His appeal is his foreign affairs background as a diplomat and U.N. official. This kept him outside of day-to-day Finnish politics and away from the old, heavy Soviet influence.

Vayrynen of the Center Party stands in sharp contrast. Boasting strong support in rural areas, he is perceived as a smart tactician not opposed to back-room deal-making with the Russians — much like Urho Kekkonen, Finland's president for a quarter-century until 1981.

Respected and feared for his close Soviet alliances and often described as a virtual dictator, Kekkonen is said — according to a recently published memoir by a Helsinki-based KGB agent — to have been the frequent recipient of indirect financial aid from the Soviets, particularly at election time.

Vayrynen, foreign minister from 1977 to 1982, is claimed in the same book to have sought Soviet support by offering preferential deals with Finnish state industries. He has denied the charge, but it remains a sore spot for many Finns

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disquieted by the revelations of murky dealings that have begun to surface in the past few years.

"With Vayrynen, it's like going back," said Reijo Sinisalo, a local official in Lappeeranta, an eastern town close to the border.

The most pressing election issue, however, is whether Finland should join the European Union. The application process will be completed in March. A national referendum will be held in the fall, and full membership could come next year.

Many opinion-makers believe that Finland — which is suffering

FINLAND PROFILE

Population: 5,070,000 (end 1991)

Area: 130,559 square miles (13,000 square miles inland water)

Capital: Helsinki

Recent history: Formerly an autonomous part of the Russian Empire, Finland declared its independence during the Russian revolution of 1917. Following a brief civil war, a democratic constitution was adopted in 1919. Finland fought against the Soviets during World War II and lost a portion of its land in a peace treaty signed in 1947. Strong postwar economic ties with the Soviet Union resulted in prosperity for Finland, but the dissolution of the Soviet Union and worldwide economic



recession have threatened its stability.

Sources: *The Military Balance*, *The Europa World Year Book*, the Finnish Embassy

REUTERS GRAPHIC

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a deep recession and high unemployment and is increasingly dependent on exports and foreign investment — must expand its international position.

Ahtisaari is the most unabashed internationalist in the race. Heavily supported by trade unionists, he has decided to dispense with the vote of those who favor continuing Finland's isolation.

But resistance to European integration runs deep. Finland's population is the most homogenous in Europe; in its highly traditional culture, late-summer berry picking is akin to religious ritual, and talk of dance music usually means local versions of '50s swing tunes or the tango.

Pekka Ervasti, a political writer for the national tabloid *Ilta-Sanomat*, said that despite the end of the Cold War, there is still fear that foreign entanglements could put Finland in the position of "being a steppingstone for an alliance against Russia — a fear that we could become a battlefield."

Last month's post-election pronouncement by Russian ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky that Finland should be returned to the Russian fold has alarmed Finns and may be aiding the campaign of Defense Minister Elisabeth Rehn, the world's only woman defense minister.

In the last weeks of the campaign, Rehn's support in the polls has risen from 7 percent to 16 percent. Rehn, who was once an office manager and career guidance counselor, made a multibillion-dollar commitment in 1992 to buy 64 McDonnell-Douglas Hornet fighter planes that strengthened her public profile.

But such costly decisions push Finland deeper into economic crisis.

After decades of nearly full employment and expanding social benefits, the jobless rate now exceeds 20 percent, and there is heavy pressure to cut social and health services. Three-fourths of Finland's towns will do exactly that this year.

There is plenty of general talk by the candidates about the need for spending cuts at the national level and reducing the national debt, but few specifics.

Much like in the rest of Scandinavia and Europe, citizens have come to believe that generous social benefits are their right. A recent report that 100,000 Finns lived in poverty in 1993 caused considerable controversy and embarrassment. The unemployed in Finland receive up to 80 percent of their previous salary, and manufacturing workers average 38 days of paid vacation, triple the number in the United States.