

ПОЛІТИЧНІ ІНСТИТУТИ ТА ПРОЦЕСИ

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FINNISH PROTESTS IN TIMES OF COVID – BETWEEN POLITICAL DIVERSITY AND DISORDER POLICY*

The primary aim of this article is to examine the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the scale, thematic structure, and character of street protests in Finland. The analysis covers the period from 16 March 2020, when the Finnish government declared a state of emergency due to COVID-19, to 23 February 2022. The study is based primarily on data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), supplemented, where necessary, by police reports and local media sources. The collected data were aggregated, statistically analysed, and contextualized in order to identify the main characteristics of protest activity and police responses. During the period under study, 485 street demonstrations were recorded in Finland, 281 of which took place in Helsinki. Thus, the capital accounted for 57.9% of all protests, indicating a considerable concentration of protest activity around the principal national decision-making centre. Contrary to expectations associated with the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic, opposition to COVID-19 containment measures did not dominate the protest agenda. Demonstrations directed exclusively or partly against pandemic-related restrictions accounted for less than 15% of all recorded events. A significant proportion of protests concerned climate change, biopolitical issues, and the protection of human and civil rights, including developments outside Finland. Consequently, protest activity was predominantly associated with public interest groups, while issues characteristic of sectional interest groups appeared relatively rarely. Of the 485 demonstrations, 415 (85.6%) were peaceful, although police intervention occurred in 70 cases. The analysis also demonstrates the coexistence of negotiated management and more coercive forms of policing. The findings suggest that the geographical distribution of demonstrations, particularly their concentration in the national capital, may serve as an additional indicator of how citizens perceive the centralization of public authority and political decision-making.

Keywords: protests, COVID-19 pandemic, Finland, interest groups, civil protest, civil disorder, protest policing, human rights.

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ФІНСЬКІ ПРОТЕСТИ В ЧАСИ COVID-19 - МІЖ ПОЛІТИЧНИМ РІЗНОМАНІТТЯМ І ПОЛІТИКОЮ ПРОТИДІЇ ЗАВОРУШЕННЯМ

Основною метою статті є визначення того, якою мірою пандемія COVID-19 вплинула на масштаби, тематичну структуру та характер вуличних протестів у Фінляндії. Аналіз охоплює період від 16 березня 2020 р., коли уряд Фінляндії оголосив надзвичайний стан у зв'язку з поширенням COVID-19, до 23 лютого 2022 р. Дослідження ґрунтується передусім на даних проєкту Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), які за необхідності доповнювалися повідомленнями поліції та матеріалами місцевих засобів масової інформації. Зібрані дані було

узагальнено, статистично проаналізовано та розглянуто у відповідному контексті з метою визначення основних характеристик протестної активності та реакції поліції. Протягом досліджуваного періоду у Фінляндії було зафіксовано 485 вуличних демонстрацій, з яких 281 відбулася в Гельсінкі. Таким чином, на столицю припало 57,9 % усіх протестів, що свідчить про значну концентрацію протестної активності навколо головного центру ухвалення політичних рішень у країні. Усупереч очікуванням, пов'язаним із винятковими обставинами пандемії, протидія заходам із стримування поширення COVID-19 не стала домінуючою темою протестного порядку денного. Демонстрації, повністю або частково спрямовані проти пов'язаних із пандемією обмежень, становили менше 15 % усіх зафіксованих подій. Значна частина протестів стосувалася проблем зміни клімату, біополітичних питань, а також захисту прав людини та громадянських прав, зокрема у зв'язку з подіями за межами Фінляндії. Відповідно, протестна активність переважно була пов'язана з групами суспільних інтересів (*public interest groups*), тоді як питання, характерні для груп секторальних інтересів (*sectional interest groups*), порушувалися порівняно рідко. Із 485 демонстрацій 415 (85,6 %) мали мирний характер, хоча у 70 випадках було зафіксовано втручання поліції. Аналіз також засвідчив співіснування практик узгодженого управління протестами (*negotiated management*) та більш примусових форм поліцейського реагування. Отримані результати дають підстави стверджувати, що географічний розподіл демонстрацій, зокрема їх концентрація у столиці держави, може розглядатися як додатковий індикатор того, як громадяни сприймають рівень централізації публічної влади та процесу ухвалення політичних рішень.

Ключові слова: протести, пандемія COVID-19, Фінляндія, групи інтересів, громадянський протест, громадські заворушення, поліцейське регулювання протестів, права людини.

Introduction. The primary aim of this text is to examine the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic influenced street protests in Finland. Did issues associated with lockdowns, the closure of numerous institutions, the abrupt shift to remote work, and—above all—significant restrictions on freedom of movement and assembly affect the nature and course of political demonstrations? Did the subject of restrictions on personal freedoms during the pandemic become the dominant theme of these protests? Given the significant expansion of restrictions on civil rights and liberties imposed for pandemic prevention, was the police response primarily repressive in nature?

The timeframe is defined by key events regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 16, the Finnish government, together with the President, declared a state of emergency due to COVID-19. The end date is February 23, 2022—the day before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The following day, the pandemic ceased to be a matter of major significance. In the years that followed, the war became the paramount issue—specifically the potential for it to escalate into a conflict between Russia and Europe, thereby threatening life, health, and survival itself. This issue was, and remains, particularly critical for Finland, a nation whose identity has been defined for over two centuries by a continuous drive for non-dependence from Russia.

During the pandemic, 1,518,514 cases of COVID-19 and 11,466 deaths were confirmed (Finland, WHO). On 16 March 2020, the Finnish government banned public gatherings—including protests—of more than 10 people to limit the spread of the coronavirus. From 1 June 2020, up to 50 people were permitted to gather in public, and up to 500 with special permission. Restrictions under the Emergency Act were lifted on 16 June 2020. On 30 November 2020, restrictions on public gatherings, including protests, were reintroduced in Finland amidst the coronavirus pandemic. Gatherings of more than 10 people were once again banned in several regions. On 1 October 2021, most COVID-19-related restrictions on public gatherings—including those on larger protests—were lifted in Finland. On 28 December 2021, several new restrictions on public gatherings were reintroduced. Decision-making processes were rapid and centralized, while systemic solutions and legal instruments were often improvised (Moisio 2020; Tengvall-Unadike 2021; Niemikari & Raunio 2022). However, adherence to the rule of law, the avoidance of overly drastic measures, a reliance on recommendations rather than restrictions, and the efficiency of local governments ensured that pandemic-era regulations were generally effective (Scheinin 2021).

The text consists of the following sections. A literature review is presented after introduction, followed by the theoretical framework and methodological notes. Subsequent sections are devoted to the characteristics of protests in Finland during the COVID-19 period, their subject matter, and police actions. The final section presents the conclusions.

Literature review. Comparative analyses of protests in European countries are both numerous and

valuable. Notable examples include analyses of "disorder policy" (Rak 2024), the relationships between dependent and independent variables (Neumayer et al. 2025), and regressive movements (della Porta 2023).

While there is a wealth of literature on protests in individual countries, few works match the significance of those mentioned above. Publications specifically addressing protests in Finland are less numerous than those concerning other European nations, yet they are of exceptionally high quality. A prime example is the study by Maciej Skrzypek (2025), which compares the transformation of public gatherings from peaceful events into instances of civil disorder in Finland and Sweden. Although this work focuses on the critical turning point—crucial to the concept of civil disorder—that characterizes certain social protests, it does not encompass the entire spectrum of such protests.

Mikko Värttö (2025) analyzes social protests as a form of "informal citizen activity." However, his analysis does not cover every protest that took place in Finland during the pandemic; the author cites only a few select examples. Nevertheless, his conceptualization of informal citizen activity as a vital (and sometimes the sole) means for citizens to articulate their views aligns with the understanding of democracy as a state of sovereignty of political nation – the empowerment segment of the population (Rak & Bäcker 2025). I therefore concur with Värttö's (2025, p. 5) observation: "due to the inefficiency of the existing participative channels, people may participate in protests and demonstrations to make their voices heard. Especially in a crisis, these modes of counter-democratic politics may be the only option for citizens to impact emergency policies and measures". It is worth noting the significance of social protests—their scale, intensity, agenda-setting role, and the emotional nature of their expression. At each of these levels, it is possible to determine the extent to which they serve to stabilize the democratic regime or, conversely, act as a destabilizing force.

The text by Maarit Mäkinen (2025) regarding the role of the media in Finland during the COVID-19 pandemic offers valuable insights for analyzing articulation, particularly within the context of polarization processes. Polarization leads to a black-and-white view of issues, characterized by a lack of rationality and heightened emotionality (Brandsma 2017). In this context, extreme polarization serves as a significant indicator of the destabilization of the democratic regime.

Literature on protests in Finland during the COVID-19 era provides important inspiration for analyzing these demonstrations in terms of the relationship between the protesters and their social environment.

Theoretical frames. Protests are a form of action by interest groups. The topics of protests can be classified in various ways. Depending on the intended audience of the protest message, one can distinguish public authorities (state, regional, local), public opinion, or economic entities. Depending on the target group, one can distinguish political or other entities, as well as phenomena or processes. The latter type can include, for example, terrorism, fascism, or climate change.

The general division of interest groups into sectional and public (Binderkrantz 2008) allows for the division of protest topics into two groups. The former are those that pursue particular interests, usually economic, of a specific social group. Public interest groups, on the other hand, are characterized by those that address general issues, affecting all individuals (or categories thereof) without exception, or the entire environment in a given area. Environmental, cultural, feminist, and anti-discrimination themes are typical examples of public interest groups.

Joanna Rak (2024) precisely typologized strategies for managing social protests. She distinguishes five dimensions of police policy toward demonstrators. Firstly: the degree to which police respect and protect civil rights. Secondly: the level of police tolerance for disruptions to community life. Thirdly: the nature of communication between the police and demonstrators. Fourthly: the extent and manner in which detentions are used as a tool for managing protests. Fifthly: the extent and manner of employing force, either as an alternative to or in conjunction with detentions. Across all five dimensions, police responses can be positioned along a continuum ranging from negotiated management to escalated force.

Methodological notes. The primary source of data is the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). This dataset contains verified information on all protests, including those in Finland. In the case of violent protests, police reports are also included. Any uncertainties regarding the data are resolved by cross-referencing the information with reports published in local newspapers or other media outlets.

Once their reliability has been verified, the data will be aggregated and subjected to statistical analysis. Subsequently, the resulting data will be contextualized. Finally, their interpretation will enable the drawing of conclusions regarding the characteristics of protests in Finland.

How great were protests in Finland? During the pandemic in Finland, according to data from ACLED base, 485 street demonstrations were recorded both in Helsinki and many other cities. For comparison: in Sweden were recorded 2,165 events, protests, and demonstrations during the same period analyzed, both at

the national and local levels, too. In 2020, according to World Bank data, Sweden's population was approximately 10.356 million people. In the same year, Finland's population was 5.530 million people. To make the comparison between Finland and Sweden more visible, above data were calculated using the following equation:

Per capita event rate = number of recorded events / population size $\times$ 1,000,000

The population-adjusted comparison was then calculated as:

Population-adjusted ratio = Finland per capita event rate / Swedish per capita event rate

Population figures were taken from official national statistical offices or World Bank population estimates for the pandemic period. For consistency, the analysis uses approximate mid-period population figures: Sweden, about 10.4 million people, and Finland, about 5.530 million inhabitants. This means that Sweden's population was approximately 1.87 times larger than Sweden's

Total protest events:

Sweden: $2,165 / 10,356 \times 1,000,000 = 209.1$ events per million

Finland: $485 / 5,530 \times 1,000,000 = 87.7$ events per million

Thus, Sweden's per capita protest rate was approximately 2.38 times higher.

It should be noted that the aforementioned rate of demonstrations per million inhabitants in Sweden is, in any case, among the lowest in Europe (Bäcker, Filipiak 2026). Consequently, the average number of protests in Finland is among the lowest in Europe.

During the period under analysis, 281 protests took place in the Finnish capital. This represents 57.9% of all demonstrations held nationwide during that time. This concentration of protests in the capital is a natural tendency; it is in the parliament and the building of government that the most important decisions are made. Thus, for informal influence to be noticeable not only to participants but also to the media and decision-makers, it must be exerted as close as possible to the centers of political decision-making. At the same time, the percentage share of street demonstrations in the capital relative to all demonstrations nationwide can serve as a criterion for gauging public perception regarding the level of centralization within the state system.

Far fewer demonstrations took place in the other cities of Finland. Eight demonstrations were held in Espoo (population 321,000), Finland's second-largest city. This low number is due to Espoo's location within the capital's metropolitan area. In the third-largest city, Tampere (population 223,000), there were 34 demonstrations. Vantaa (population 211,000)—also part of the capital's metropolitan area—saw only two demonstrations, both held at Helsinki-Vantaa Airport. Oulu (population 196,000), the largest city on the northern Gulf of Bothnia, hosted 39 demonstrations. Meanwhile, Turku (population 184,000) in western Finland saw 33 protests. There were no demonstrations in Jyväskylä (population 136,000), whereas Kuopio (population 111,000) saw six. Lahti (population 104,000) hosted four demonstrations. In Rovaniemi (population 61,000)—a northern city and the administrative center of Lapland—five protests were recorded. In total, 116 demonstrations took place in cities with populations exceeding 100,000; including the capital of Lapland brings the total to 121 protests. This represents 23.9% of the total (or 24.9% when including the capital of Lapland)—half the number of protests held in the Finnish capital. For the remaining 102 cities (there are 112 cities in Finland in total), the share of protests was 17.2%. The occurrence of protests in cities—including those that are not regional capitals—can serve as an indicator of their significance as decision-making centers for the informal activities of interest groups. Furthermore, it may act as a criterion for assessing the level of spontaneous self-organization among social groups asserting their agency, or—in extreme cases—reveal atypical activity by established opposition factions within local government representative bodies. Categorizing a protest into one of these two groups requires a thorough analysis of its agenda-setting dynamics and the affiliations (or lack thereof) of the organizers.

Articulation: between emotionality and interest. The issues addressed by protests in Finland during the COVID-19 era were highly diverse.

Eighty-eight demonstrations were held under the banner of climate action. They were organized by various associations, including the "Fridays for Future" climate strike movement and Extinction Rebellion. In one instance, a protest was supported by a Member of Parliament from the Eurosceptic, national-conservative Finns Party. Such demonstrations served to articulate the views of a public interest group.

Only 38 demonstrations were held exclusively in opposition to measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19—such as lockdowns, the vaccination of children, or other preventive measures. However, many demonstrations featured combined demands; for example, protests against pandemic-related restrictions were held alongside calls for effective action against global warming or a demand to allocate 1% of the budget to culture. There were 31 such demonstrations involving mixed agendas where opposition to pandemic-control

measures was one of the stated causes. In total, there were 69 demonstrations against pandemic-related legal regulations.

Fifteen demonstrations were held to protest high fuel prices. These protests took place in numerous locations, including smaller towns such as Lappeenranta and Kajaani. The vast majority of these protests (12 out of 15) occurred in February 2022. They served as a means for truck drivers—organized as a sectoral interest group—to exert pressure on the government.

During the period under analysis, 15 demonstrations against fascism took place in Finland, whereas only one demonstration was organized by a neo-Nazi group. On October 4, 2020, activists from the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement (PVL) and Soldiers of Odin staged a National Socialist protest in Tampere before police intervened to disperse it. The PVL has been banned in Finland since September 2020 (Sallamaa & Kotonen 2020).

On a single day—August 1, 2020—the radical feminist organization Cult Cunth organized five demonstrations on beaches in Tampere and other cities to protest against double standards regarding toplessness. On July 17, 2021, the same organization staged twelve demonstrations featuring semi-nude individuals of both genders protesting the excessive sexualization of female breasts and the unequal cultural treatment of male and female bodies. Six demonstrations organized by LGBT groups demanding equality and rights can be viewed within this same biopolitical context; these are examples of public interest groups.

International issues also featured prominently. Eight demonstrations were held in support of Palestine, demanding an end to Israeli aggression. Eighteen demonstrations took place in defense of the Kurds—protesting aggression by Turkey and Iraqi forces, as well as calling for the release of their leader. One demonstration protested the Mexican government's repression of the Zapatista community. Twelve demonstrations were held with anti-Putin slogans; the most common demand was the release of political prisoners, including Alexei Navalny. On February 14, 2022, a demonstration was held against Russian aggression toward Ukraine; this protested both Russian military actions in the Donbas and the escalating Russian threats against Ukraine. Eleven demonstrations were organized to protest repression and the absence of basic civic values in Belarus. An equal number of protests were a reaction to the killing of George Floyd—an unarmed Black man—by a police officer in the United States. Eight demonstrations were held under the slogan "Stop Killing Afghans," mostly during the final phase of the US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. Additionally, two demonstrations were organized in Helsinki and Tampere by Polish women living in Finland as part of the Women's Strike movement, protesting drastic restrictions on women's abortion rights in Poland (Bäcker 2026: 48).

In total, over 60 demonstrations were held to protest human and civil rights violations in various countries around the world, accounting for approximately 12% of all demonstrations. This type of issue is typical for public interest groups. A significant number of these demonstrations were organized by political or war refugees from the respective countries. However, in some cases, Finns involved in the defense of human and civil rights on an international scale also participated in them.

A notable feature is the wide diversity of issues driving the protests. While topics related to measures against coronavirus were significant, they were far from dominant. Residents of Finland were prompted to protest by a variety of issues—typically the same ones as before the pandemic. From March 2020 onwards, this range of issues expanded to include measures against coronavirus.

The above overview of protest themes reveals a clear predominance of the type of advocacy typical of public interest groups during this period. With the exception of truck drivers, sectional interest groups generally did not organize street protests.

The level of protest activity by sectional interest groups can be viewed as an indicator of the ineffectiveness of the formalized cooperation between these groups and state and local government decision-making centers.

Rule of law and civil disorder. To what extent did protesters comply with the law, including anti-COVID restrictions?

Among the 485 protests held in Finland between March 16, 2020, and February 23, 2022, 15 involved rioting. This does not mean, however, that the remaining 470 demonstrations were entirely peaceful; police intervened in 70 of all of protests. In 30 instances, police detained protesters—usually due to aggressive behavior threatening the life or health of others (particularly police officers) or failure to comply with police orders. Typically, only one or a few persons were detained. However, in several cases, police arrested dozens of people. This occurred during demonstrations organized by the Finnish branch of the global environmental group Extinction Rebellion (XR). The organization's core principle is the use of non-violent civil

disobedience. For example, on October 8, 2021, XR activists blocked the entrance to the building where the government and the president were meeting by gluing themselves to the doors, windows, and each other, demanding immediate action against global warming.

The remaining 40 cases of police intervention were less spectacular. In these instances, police asked demonstrators to disperse or end the protest, set up blockades, or engaged in dialogue with protesters, urging them to comply with applicable rules. In one case, police escorted a male protester to protect him from potential aggression. When counter-demonstrators appeared, they were kept separate from their opponents. This police strategy can be classified as "negotiated management," according to the typology introduced by Joanna Rak.

A total of 415 demonstrations were peaceful in nature, accounting for 85.6% of all protests. This is not a particularly high figure. The significant rate of civil disorder (14.4%) among all protests stems from at least a few reasons. The first is the system of values, beliefs, and strategies adopted by several associations organizing the protests. Extinction Rebellion activists broke the law, believing that the values they championed justified their actions. However, their adherence to the principles of civil disobedience did not always center on key, achievable demands. On the other hand, far-right and conservative-nationalist groups that condone violence often put their ideas into practice during street demonstrations; the Soldiers of Odin are one such group.

A distinctive feature of Finnish protests is the incorporation of music into the event. A street protest in Helsinki, for instance, might involve a band playing on the open bed of a slow-moving truck, followed by a procession of the band's fans and supporters. Police intervention occurs only in extreme cases. On December 31, 2020, a small, vaguely motivated demonstration involving fewer than ten people took place at Citizens' Square in Helsinki; the protesters left after police asked them to turn down their music.

In Finland, the use of force by the police was governed by the principle of upholding the law, regardless of the slogans proclaimed by demonstrators or their organizational affiliations. The police remained impartial.

Conclusions Social protests in Finland during the pandemic differed from street demonstrations in other European countries. Protests against measures taken to curb the spread of the coronavirus accounted for less than 15% of all demonstrations. A significant portion of the demonstrations focused on combating global warming, biopolitical issues, and human and civil rights. Consequently, the themes of the majority of demonstrations were typical of public interest groups; issues characteristic of sectional interest groups appeared very rarely in street protests.

The proportion of peaceful demonstrations does not differ significantly from that in other European countries. As is the case across Europe, this share is very high, exceeding three-quarters of all protests. However, there is a notably high incidence of demonstrations involving police detentions of participants. Such a rate of temporary detentions indicates a strong tendency for the police to employ escalated force strategies. Equally high is the use of negotiated management strategies, which allow tensions to be resolved through direct communication between protesters and police officers.

The analysis revealed a clear predominance—also observed in other European countries—of protests and participant numbers concentrated in the national capital. Social protests are organized to influence public opinion, shape the agenda, and exert pressure on political decision-making centers. The capital's dominance in this regard is therefore entirely understandable. In this context, the percentage share of street demonstrations can serve as a criterion for how the public perceives the level of centralization in public authority decision-making.

In this context, it is worth testing the following proposal against a broader range of cases than just Finland. A situation where protests are distributed such that half occur in the capital, one-quarter in the ten next most important cities, and one-quarter in all remaining cities suggests that national, regional, and local centers of public authority are perceived as relatively equivalent. Conversely, the state is perceived as centralized when the share of protests in the capital exceeds two-thirds, and as extremely centralized when it exceeds four-fifths. Meanwhile, if the share of protests in regional centers exceeds one-half, it suggests that state authority centers are perceived as lacking significant powers.

This proposal requires testing on a much larger sample of countries and further verification through comparison with public opinion data.

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