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## **FINNISH GOVERNMENT COLLAPSES AHEAD OF EU PRESIDENCY**

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Finnish prime minister Juha Sipilä's centre-right government's surprise resignation on Friday (8 March) kicks off a political hot season in the otherwise cool Nordic country.

Voters are facing national elections on 14 April as well as EU elections on 26 May, while the country is also preparing to hold the EU's rotating six-month presidency from 1 July.

The resignation was a personal decision of the prime minister and came after the governing coalition failed to agree on a major social and health reform, 'Sote', which has been discussed for years.

Some speculate that the resignation was a political gamble by Sipilä.

Sipilä told Finnish public broadcaster Yle on Saturday that he will not seek re-election as chair of the Centre Party, if support for the party does not increase at the April elections.

The latest Yle poll published on 8 March found support for Sipilä's Centre Party had dropped to 14.1 percent, leaving it the third largest, behind the Social Democrat party at 21.3 percent and Sipilä's governing alliance partner, the conservative National Coalition Party (NCP) at 16.2 percent.

The result for the conservatives is also bad. It is the party's weakest performance in four years and the lowest during conservative leader Petteri Orpo's chairmanship.

The populist Finns Party is gaining support, and stand at 13.3 percent, while the Greens drop to 13.7 percent, but still hold the position as the fourth largest party in Finland, according to the Yle poll.

Finland organises health and social care through 295 municipalities, which is seen as inefficient.

It is estimated that by 2030 some 26 percent of the population will be aged over 65, up from just under 20 percent now.

The previous three Finnish prime ministers have all attempted to push the Sote reform through, without succeeding.

Sipilä's government aimed to centralise the responsibility in 18 elected regional authorities and to give patients "freedom of choice" in choosing from a range of public and private health care

providers.

Opponents fear that private providers will be able to cherry-pick patients and are worried over the level of service provided for people living in the outskirts of the northern European country.

The opposition Social Democratic party leader Antti Rinne, who may become the next premier, returned to duties less than two weeks ago after a long period of sick leave. The 56-year old politician fell ill with an infection while on a New Year holiday in Spain.

Sipila, now in a caretaker role, will still be in charge of the planning for Finland's time in charge of the EU presidency.

"We have a jointly drafted program for the EU presidency and we'll continue to work on that together," Sipila told YLE TV, adding that he would oversee the start of the EU presidency even if still in a caretaker role by 1 July.

In neighbouring Sweden it took over four months to form a new government, which would not depend on support from the populist Sweden democrats.

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