

'Gorbachev makes it easier' from Der Spiegel (11 September 1989)

Caption: On 11 September 1989, Mauno Koivisto, President of Finland, grants to the German weekly magazine Der Spiegel an interview in which he analyses relations between the Baltic States and the European Community.

Source: Der Spiegel. Das Deutsche Nachrichten-Magazin. Hrsg. AUGSTEIN, Rudolf ; Herausgeber BÖHME, Erich; FUNK, Werner. 11.09.1989, n° 37; 43. Jg. Hamburg: Spiegel Verlag Rudolf Augstein GmbH. "Gorbatschow macht es leichter", p. 170-172.

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‘Gorbachev makes it easier’

SPIEGEL interview with the President of Finland, Mauno Koivisto, about neighbours on the Baltic and the EC

Mauno Koivisto, 65, a Social Democrat and a banker by profession, was Prime Minister for several years and, in 1982, was elected to succeed the legendary Urho Kekkonen as President by a large majority.

SPIEGEL:

Mr President, in Poland, in Hungary and in the Soviet republics neighbouring Finland on the Baltic, there is a breathtaking transformation under way. Will this, in your view, lead to a goodbye to Socialism?

KOIVISTO:

The political developments in Eastern Europe are momentous events, developments that could not have been predicted. However, neither in Poland nor in Hungary is the situation being portrayed as a goodbye to Socialism. I also believe, from a Social-Democratic point of view, that we are still looking at Socialist systems here, albeit systems in which the state has adopted a role that the theoreticians of Socialism could not have imagined.

SPIEGEL:

Have the emerging political and economic upheavals in the Baltic Republics, above all in Estonia, a cultural relation of Finland, changed your relationship with these countries?

KOIVISTO:

The developments in the Baltic States and other neighbouring regions are not a foreign policy problem for Finland. The Finnish presence in our Soviet neighbours is unique both qualitatively and quantitatively with regard to economics, culture and tourism. There is a process under way that will probably further enhance informal relations between Finland and its neighbours.

SPIEGEL:

Moscow is going to grant extensive economic autonomy to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as early as the beginning of next year. Will Helsinki then have to adjust its trading policy towards these countries?

KOIVISTO:

For the moment, we are still talking here about resolutions of the Supreme Soviet. However, the representatives of the Baltic States are hoping that laws will be passed in Moscow that are in line with this idea of autonomy and will firmly establish it in the long term. For some years now, there have been ideas, although not official proposals, put forward by the Soviet Union that they should go over to trading in a convertible currency. In this context, it is interesting and even exciting to see how the decentralisation of the economy to regional level will be reflected in foreign trade. The Baltic States are talking of needing a currency of their own.

SPIEGEL:

Some time ago, you compared the economic relationship between Finland and the USSR with that between an industrial nation and a developing country ...

KOIVISTO:

I was quoting a Soviet comment that described Finland's attitude to the USSR as if to a colony: we mainly buy energy from the Soviet Union. Estonia apparently has such large resources of raw materials that it sells energy to the rest of the Soviet Union.

SPIEGEL:

In Finland, you have an acute shortage of qualified workers. Could you imagine importing workers from the neighbouring Baltic Republics?

KOIVISTO:

At present, we already have trainees with us, and we also have some construction workers from Estonia.

SPIEGEL:

In many parts of their country, the Estonians are able to receive Finnish television. This makes them the only Soviet citizens who are able to have a constant direct comparison of their own system with the capitalist West. Is Finland not indirectly responsible to some extent for causing the unrest in the Baltic?

KOIVISTO:

The former party leader in Estonia, Karl Vaino, claimed on a number of occasions that Finnish television was deliberately making difficulties in Estonia by using extra powerful transmitters to broadcast programmes to Estonia. This was vehemently denied by Finnish television. In particular, there was a row about a television advertisement. A well-fed butcher is shown praising the large selection of meat behind the glass of an overloaded shop window. In the view of the Estonian party leadership, that was a deliberate provocation.

SPIEGEL:

So, a neighbour who awakens desires ...

KOIVISTO:

Since our languages are so closely related, it is easy for Estonians to understand Finnish after learning it for only a short time. The Estonians have been receiving information from the West via Finland for a long time — and especially about developments in their own country. From the fall of Khrushchev to Chernobyl: it was always the Estonians who were better informed and who received information sooner than the whole of the rest of the Soviet Union.

SPIEGEL:

Around two thirds of Finnish exports go to Western Europe, and the proportion is still rising. Would it not be in the long-term interest of Finland to consider accession to the EC?

KOIVISTO:

It is certainly true that Finland is very dependent on foreign trade, and, in this regard, it is even one of the most dependent countries in the world. I have stressed on a number of occasions that our country would not be in a position to feed five million people except in close cooperation with the outside world. We therefore have to look to the future and, above all, adapt to developments that are taking place elsewhere. We are prepared for that.

SPIEGEL:

Adapting to the developments in Europe, as you say, and yet not becoming part of it — how will that actually work?

KOIVISTO:

To date, in the negotiations between the EC and EFTA, of which Finland is a member, there have not been any arguments put that would really exclude us from Western European integration. The discussion was largely restricted to the concept of the customs union. But the idea of a customs union is very vague, and its provisions are very imprecise.

SPIEGEL:

EFTA is crumbling. Norway's Government is considering making a second attempt at acceding to the EC; as recently as this summer, Austria applied for accession ...

KOIVISTO:

Processing the Austrian application and, if it actually comes to it, possible negotiations are, in my estimation, likely to take a number of years. Austria has told us that it will remain a loyal EFTA country and take an active part in EFTA until such time as it accedes to the Community as it is hoping. We in Finland take the view that it will not be possible to reconcile our policy of being a neutral country with membership of the EC.

SPIEGEL:

Then surely the same would also have to apply to Austria. Or is Vienna neutral in a different way from Helsinki?

KOIVISTO:

That is entirely possible. And, incidentally, the way I understand it, the EC has not any great interest at all in attracting new members. In public discussions in Finland, the impression is often given that the EC is somehow trying to attract Finland as a member, as if we have to withstand the temptation. That is not consistent with reality. We do not want to join the EC at all. And it seems inappropriate to me that we have to give a special justification for why we do not want to become members. It is our assessment that we have the opportunity of economic cooperation without being a member.

SPIEGEL:

The basis of Finnish neutrality is the 1948 Treaty of Friendship with the Soviet Union. Are you afraid that — if you ever were to feel like joining the EC — your membership bid could fail as a result of a veto from Moscow?

KOIVISTO:

When Finland was negotiating with the EC in the 1970s about a free-trade agreement, the Soviet Union took a very negative position. But its position on international cooperation has markedly changed since then. After all, the Soviet Union has been trying to forge links with the European Community that are comparable with diplomatic relations.

SPIEGEL:

Have Finland's 'special relations' with the Soviet Union undergone a change as a result of the economic and political upheavals in the East that followed Perestroika?

KOIVISTO:

Yes. Perestroika is creating new opportunities for economic cooperation both inside and outside the Soviet Union. And it is revising the attitudes that underlie this cooperation. It means new challenges for Finland.

SPIEGEL:

Are relations between Helsinki and Moscow better or worse today than in the time before Gorbachev?

KOIVISTO:

They continue to be good and to be strong. They have developed towards less compulsion. The stiff, declamatory style has now given way to a more human and measured approach. I recently stated — and it was even quoted in *Izvestia*: It used to be that while we spoke of problems in common, the Soviets spoke of their achievements. This practice of speaking at cross-purposes is now completely gone. This is directly linked to Perestroika. Gorbachev is making many things easier.

SPIEGEL:

Gorbachev's problems with Perestroika are well known, of course, and there are more than a few people — in the West as well, and particularly in the West — who fear that Gorbachev could ultimately fail after all. Do you share these concerns?

KOIVISTO:

I am quite convinced that there is no alternative to his policies and that the 'centralised command economy', as the Soviets themselves call it, has had its day.

The previous system suffered from the old people's home syndrome: the country's leaders were elderly and in poor health. And it seems that the centralised planned economy bears part of the blame for the earlier stagnation. When all the details of production are laid down from the centre in all-embracing commands, it leads to people on the lower levels feeling that all responsibility has been taken away from them. It is precisely in centrally controlled states that alienation has long been a serious problem.

And those who speculate that a system that is even more strictly controlled from the centre could be the alternative are simply not living in the real world.