

**Lauri Nurmi: Sanna Marin**

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## **An up-close portrait of a politician and a global superstar**

Passionate, rebellious, contradictory, stubborn. Former Finnish prime minister Sanna Marin has been called many things.

In just a few years, Sanna Marin went from local politician to prime minister and world-famous super celebrity. Marin's prime ministership was an exceptional one in Finnish history, with the Covid-19 pandemic, Putin's war in Ukraine and Finland's NATO membership. She became a fan favourite and a global role model, especially for many women. Marin was also subjected to harsh criticism, much of it directed at her self and her appearance.

Why and how did Marin become so popular, and at what price? How did she rise to the world political stage and become one of the most followed Finns? How did her background as a child of a working-class family with two mothers influence her values? And have Sanna Marin's values changed now that she has left Finnish politics and moved into the top tier of political influence?

Political journalist and non-fiction writer Lauri Nurmi has followed Marin's life since her days in local politics and seen the determination and passion with which she has built her career. In this book, Nurmi takes a behind-the-scenes look at Marin's life so far, and describes the major turning points in her political life. Nurmi's previous book, "Finland's Secret Road to NATO", came out in 2023 to great reviews and much discussion.

**Lauri Nurmi** (b. 1980) is a political journalist for *Ilta-lehti*. He was awarded the Finnish Journalist of the Year Award in 2017 and the Aamulehti Journalist of the Year Award in 2018. In spring 2017, the Finnish Association of Newspapers and Magazines named

Nurmi as the best perspective writer of 2016 in their Best of the Year competition. Nurmi graduated with a Master's degree in Political History from the University of Helsinki. In recent years, Nurmi has written numerous about power struggles within political parties, foreign and security policy and labour market policy. Nurmi's previous books include biographies such as *Sauli Niinistö - Mäntyniemi Herrra* (2018) and *Antti Rinne - Koko tarina* (2019).

**Praise for Lauri Nurmi's journalism:**

"Nurmi is a classic political journalist with excellent sources."

– Judges for the Suomen Kuvalehti journalism prize

"Lauri Nurmi's unauthorised biography of Jussi Halla-aho is a high-quality and thorough work." – *Kulttuuritoimitus*

"Lauri Nurmi's text is enthusiastic, in places ecstatic." – *Helsingin Sanomat*

**“Sanna Marin” by Lauri Nurmi**

Sample translation by Laura Kalmukoski

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## CHAPTER 1

### A GAME OF THRONES

Ambition, even arrogant and naked ambition.

One word defines Sanna Marin more than a thousand other qualities.

"The Social Democrats must be steered left. During Jutta's time we were too right-wing," explains the 28-year-old from Tampere. After Helsinki, Tampere is the second most populous urban area in Finland.

Enthusiasm flickers across my conversation partner's face. We are sitting in the dining room of the Scandic Patria hotel in Lappeenranta. MPs from SDP, the Social Democratic Party, are filling their plates with summer delicacies, but Marin can dine in peace. She is an unknown. A great unknown. Even to her own.

We both have our motives. A couple of months earlier, Marin was elected Vice Chair of the democrats at the party conference in Seinäjoki. In SDP, it is customary to elect a young person, even one under thirty, as Vice Chair. The elected candidate is thus thrown into the ocean full of predatory political fish to see if he or she learns to swim.

Marin's ambition is to move up in politics: first to become Member of Parliament, then to reach the top. I understand this on a sunny Tuesday in the small town capital of South Karelia. I have recently begun my work as a political journalist for the Tampere-based newspaper *Aamulehti* and am attending the SDP parliamentary group's summer meeting for the first time. And so is Marin, with the mandate of Vice Chair.

Marin says she supported Antti Rinne, a middle-aged man, when the trade union leader wanted to bring down – and succeeded in replacing – a young woman, Jutta Urpilainen, as leader of the SDP.

The previous evening, toasts of camaraderie were raised at Lappeenranta Casino. There was a chorus of "Happy Birthday" to Antti Lindtman, the chairman of the Vantaa Parliamentary Group. Lindtman is only 32 years old, but he has been considered the future party leader for a while now. "In politics, youth is a disease that gets better every year," Lindtman has joked to the guests at the main dinner table. Lindtman is surrounded by a lot of hustle and bustle. Marin is left alone. She is considered a bit serious, even humourless.

Lindtman has also been asked to challenge Urpilainen, but he does not want an open war. "We considered several people and tried to find someone who would have the guts. We couldn't find anyone in the parliamentary group who dared to challenge the Chair," says Juha

Kähärä, who worked for the trade union Pro, about discussions within the party in the summer of 2013.

In politics, it is fascinating to understand the importance of the intergenerational cycle. As politicians fight for a grip on power, those in their fifties look to the young for support. If a young and ambitious party member jumps on the wagon of a winner early on, he or she may have a shortcut to the top.

Sanna Marin would not have become the prime minister of the Covid years and the international star that she is today without the daring moves of trade union democrat Antti Rinne in autumn 2013 and spring 2014. In all likelihood, Urpilainen would have been succeeded as party leader by Lindtman a little later, and he would have led the party to the 2019 parliamentary elections and, perhaps, become prime minister afterwards. But in life, things happen one way, and alternative events are only a fascinating history of unrealised opportunities. It is important to understand, however, that Marin's rise to world fame was not written in the stars. So a few words on the rise of Rinne are in order before moving on to a review of the atmosphere in Lappeenranta.

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On a Friday in October 2013, Rinne turns the front of his car towards the Vierumäki Sports Academy. He parks in the yard of Raidelinna, a semi-detached house built by the Union of Railwaymen and the insurance company Turva in the early 2000s.

Kähärä of the trade union Pro and Mika Häkkinen of the Metal Union have lured Aslak Haarahiltunen of the Metal Union and Vesa Mauriala, president of the Rail Professionals, to plan a democratic revolution. This is a foursome without whom Rinne would not become leader of the SDP and prime minister of Finland. They are also unwittingly paving the way for the rise of Sanna Marin.

The so-called "formers" have all gathered here: the former head of the political department of SDP, the former head of organisation and executive director of the mighty Kyme Region. These are influential party-loyal men in the shadow of warm-blooded political stars. If the party Chair loses their respect, they will stop pulling her cart and want a new master. This has happened to Urpilainen, who, in the view of left-wing democrats, has cozied up too much as finance minister with right-wing prime minister Jyrki Katainen.

Around the white dinner table, there is talk of a much bigger earthquake than a one-party personality game. "We went to Vierumäki because we wanted to bring ideological and more left-wing thinking back to the SDP and Finland as a whole," says Häkkinen.

The Formers want to bring back left-wing economic theory to the party's platform – and above all to put a left-wing economic policy advocate as prime minister. In their eyes, Urpilainen represents a right-wing economic line at a time when the Social Democrats feel they have travelled the so-called third road to its bitter end – the financial crisis of 2008.

The "Project" is launched with ideological fire on 2nd and 3rd of December 2013. Tinkering is far from the campaign plan. In a bird's-eye view photograph taken by Kähärä, seven pieces of white paper are spread out on a corner sofa in Raidelinna Castle, with the caption "Foundation". On the papers are written, in order of importance, the target groups of the campaign: 1) Young people, 2) Veterans, 3) Trade union folks, 4) Right-wing democrats, 5) Intellectuals, 6) Female activists and 7) Members of parliament.

Political hobbyists may not understand that MPs carry relatively little weight when someone is running for party leadership. "The revolution was made by people in their thirties and forties," says Mauriala. Young democrats and young adults like Sanna Marin from all over Finland. Although Marin will not be joining Rinne's campaign organisation, it is justified to call her one of the fellers of Jutta Urpilainen.

Throughout the year, polls have been gloomy. "The Centre Party most popular, SDP has collapsed", the national broadcaster Yle declared in April 2013. In the spring, the opposition party, the Centre Party, has risen to the top in surveys with 19.4% of the vote. The prime minister's party, the Coalition Party (19.2%), has held its ground, as has the opposition party The Finns (18.6%) led by Timo Soini. The SDP (16.2%) has paid the price.

As leaves turn yellow, the slope becomes a free fall. "SDP dives deeper and deeper", Yle reports in September. Juha Sipilä's centre-right party is polling at 23.8%, while support for the Social Democrats falls to 15%. "Changing the chairman will not raise the poll numbers," Urpilainen comments. She would like to remain in power.

Sanna Marin, a rank-and-file member of the party council, disagrees. She wants Urpilainen out, and quickly. Already in March, at the party's spring meeting in Helsinki, Marin has demanded that part of the discussion at the autumn meeting be held behind closed doors. This demand will not be met.

So Marin has made a veiled threat: I will speak my mind, but preferably hidden from the public. It is a sign of her tough character that Marin is willing to speak her mind, even at the risk of a public backlash.



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On Saturday 30 November, 2013, the party council gathers in Salo. The plan is to nominate candidates for the European elections, discuss the party's budget – and discuss the state of the party. Marin proposes that an advisory vote for the party Chair be held before the party convention in May. In practice, the result would bind the 500 delegates of the party conference. "Support is very low, and the party leadership must take responsibility for this issue too," Marin argues in Salo on Saturday.

Small headlines emerge about the power struggle simmering inside the SDP. The news are mostly small because Marin is still unknown to the general public. However, her open desire to have Urpilainen replaced crosses the news threshold. "SDP party council member: debate on future Chair to begin", the news channel MTV3 reports on its website in the early afternoon.

Marin's speech is the lead story in *Aamulehti*. The people of Marin's hometown will also get to read Vesa Laitinen's far-sighted column "Sanna Marin, the new leader of the SDP." Laitinen has heard Marin's pungent and critical comments on television and found them refreshing, surprising and courageous. "It's a familiar story. When you open your mouth at a housing association's annual meeting, you soon find out you've been elected to the board. The same fate may await the young chairman of Tampere City Council, Sanna Marin," concludes Laitinen.

A majority of the 61-member council gives Marin's proposal the boot on Sunday. *Helsingin Sanomat* mentions Marin's name laconically in an article about the European election candidates: "The party council rejected the proposal of Sanna Marin, a member of the Tampere party council, by a clear majority on Sunday."

Young Marin is a figure outside the party elite. She airs her annoyances on her blog on Sunday: "I had hoped that the councillors could have assessed the policies made and the party's low support and the reasons for this, without the pressure of the media and the fear of flashy headlines. However, this was not deemed necessary."

Nevertheless, Marin is determined to keep her speech frank, and the fact that its content has hit the headlines cannot have come as a surprise to her. "My critical speech at the meeting was widely reported in the media," she writes. "Its core message was that the party's approval ratings are alarmingly low and that the policies being pursued have not been as social-democratic as they could have been. The time for ranting and denial is simply over. If there is

no change of direction, conclusions will have to be drawn at the party conference in May – including by party leadership."

Marin sees herself as a maverick in her quest for power within the SDP. She does not regret calling for a membership vote, but hopes the proposal will serve as "a head start for a more open party democracy". "That party members would be given a greater say in deciding party affairs. The much-talked-about people's movement can, in my opinion, only be fuelled by genuine participation," Marin stresses. In other words, Marin would transfer power from the party elite to the broader membership. The idea is typical of young politicians, even idealistic. They may forget that open member democracy would also open the door to a takeover of the party, if some cabal succeeded in persuading its supporters to join the SDP in droves. Or perhaps Marin relies on the power of personal charisma in politics and expects the membership ballot to favour bright and flashy wordsmiths – perhaps one day herself.

Marin does not flag Rinne's name in the initial heat of the battle, but she calls for Urpilainen to be toppled and for a resistant trade union democrat to be put in charge of the SDP. "In my opinion, the SDP now needs someone like Lauri Ihalainen to run for party Chair. There are three reasons for this, and they are not related to age or gender," Marin writes in her blog on 11 January 2014.

In her post supporting Ihalainen, Marin reveals her own early ambitions to those who can read the power games of politics. The labour minister in the Katainen government and former chairman of the Central Union of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK) is, in Marin's eyes, "hard-working and reliable". "The SDP now needs a Chair who represents a belief in stable social development. In the belief that even in difficult times we can get through with our own work and our own efforts. A counterweight to the populism that has reared its head," Marin writes. Marin praises the achievements of Ihalainen, who was born in 1947. Ihalainen is 38 years older than Marin. "He represents continuity and the traditional supporters of the labour movement. Despite this, he does not create the stereotypical image of a blustering trade unionist pamphleteer whose only interest is in raising the wages of paper and metal workers."

The young woman from Tampere takes it upon herself to turn a respectable carpenter into a near-saint. To Marin, Ihalainen is a good negotiator, who works on behalf of the whole nation. "Fairer working conditions for both traditional workers and academic gig workers."

Marin's deepest intentions – even if she denies them herself – are revealed at the end of the article: "Thirdly, Ihalainen is no longer pursuing his own career in politics. ... In other words, he has no need to kick other potential actors aside for his own interests. At this time, the SDP needs a Chair who will unite the different strands of the party and focus on the overall

interests of the social democratic movement. A person who could serve a single term as party leader and who would pave the way for the next Chair and give room for the party's renewal."

One cannot avoid the thought that Marin's logic for choosing Ihalainen is this: Ihalainen would replace the failed Urpilainen in the spring of 2014 and then, at the age of 70, voluntarily give up the chairmanship in 2017, leaving Marin to run and succeed his favourite. Why else would Marin, who is known for her ambition, choose a one-term chairman for the SDP, an already crippled duck, as it were?

Marin's proposal is dead on arrival. When Ihalainen is unavailable, Marin chooses Rinne, known as a feisty left-winger, as his race horse. Marin does not take a public stand for Rinne, but uninhibitedly criticises Urpilainen, opening the way for her only challenger. "The SDP's support is at rock bottom. Unfortunately, this is no longer just a temporary phenomenon. The trend has been worrying for some time. The party has failed both to retain its traditional supporters and to attract new groups of supporters. If this trend continues, the future of a small party lies ahead," Marin writes in her blog in January.

As spring arrives, Marin is getting annoyed. She feels that the power struggle between Urpilainen and Rinne is being reduced to a wrestling match between a man and a woman in the public eye. "The question of the Social Democrats' Chair is arousing passions not only in the party, but also in the media. And rightly so. But there is one aspect of the news coverage that I find hard to digest – the focus on what's between the future chairperson's legs," Marin says in March.

Instead of looking at genders or cleavages, Marin thinks we should ask questions. Am I happy with where the party is at the moment? Am I satisfied with the party's policies? Am I satisfied with SDP's support? And am I satisfied with the party as an operating environment – does the operating culture support development? By answering these questions, Marin says, we can assess how successful Urpilainen has been in her job.

"It's quite clear that electing a brand new Chair is always a leap into the unknown. It is therefore necessary to first assess whether you want change at all, and if so, to take a step towards something new. Even if that step ultimately turns out to be a misstep. Parties will not change if you don't try to change them," Marin analyses. And she wants to change the SDP and already sees herself in the party's front ranks as a bright young woman alongside Rinne's middle-aged male counterparts.

Marin sees the gender balance of the party leadership as an issue of equality. "When you talk about the Chair and Vice Chairs or the party leadership as a collective, you have to

take into account the representation of both genders. There are people of both genders who are qualified and influential."

She concludes her assessment of Urpilainen with a blunt statement: "The proof is now in the pudding, and at least I have a clear idea of what Urpilainen's SDP is like."

Marin tells her supporters what kind of democrat she considers herself to be. "The author is a trade unionist, and a party activist who considers herself a leftist feminist."

Spring 2014 is a time of political breakthroughs for Marin. Local Social Democrats vote for next year's parliamentary candidates and for party Congress delegates for the Seinäjoki Congress. Marin is successful in both elections. In Marin's district, SDP elects 15 candidates to run for Parliament. Marin comes third in the race with 2,445 votes, losing only to Pia Viitanen (2,789 votes) and Jukka Gustafsson (2,633). She is followed by MP Hanna Tainio and former MP and Olympic hero Marko Asell. Marin wins the election for the party Congress delegates by a landslide. She picks up 4,655 votes, leaving Gustafsson, who got 3,477 votes, in her dust.

At the beginning of April, the Pirkanmaa Social Democrats' party congress group unanimously nominates Marin as their candidate for SDP leadership. And on Sunday the 27th of April, Marin proposes that she should run for Vice Chair. Marin says she is "throwing herself wholeheartedly into the game". "My own political strengths lie in municipal and regional politics, environmental, climate and energy policy, and equality issues. Because of my educational background, I look at the world in particular from the perspective of administrative and social structures, and through changing these structures," he said.

Marin sometimes comes across as dull and bureaucratic – a dry writer – but her early popularity stems from a frenzy to change the political platform of her party towards a greener and more left-wing direction. The SDP must, in Marin's view, be a relentless advocate for equality, human rights and the weakest of society. But from between the lines of dogmatic declarations, pragmatism tends to surface like a weed pushing its way through cracking asphalt all the way to sunlight.

In Tampere's municipal politics, Marin is in favour of building a brand new tram – a hotly debated topic in Tampere at the time – a tall "tower hotel" in town centre, strong private housing developments, and the dream of Finland's most impressive new ice hockey arena. All of these projects will also come true. An urban growth policy that fosters local business is to Marin's liking. She is in an unholy alliance with the right-wing Coalition Party and local ice-hockey legend Kalervo Kummola. "As a party, we need to get more involved in creating new, growing business in Finland and, through them, new jobs and employment. We must now

invest, invest in skills and create a basis for sustainable growth. We must raise the employment rate and bring unemployment below 5%," Marin writes in her blog.

This unabashed ambition is summed up in the fact that Marin believes that she is the one who has the intelligence to make this change. "Good values and ambitions need to go hand-in-hand with political intelligence, pragmatic action and dedicated people. I am ready to take up the post of Vice Chair of the SDP, if that is what the party delegates at the Seinäjoki meeting want."

And that is what they want.

On May 9th, 2014, with the help of Rinne's supporters, Marin is elected SDP's second Vice Chair with a resounding majority. At the party convention, many wear pins of support for both Marin and Rinne on their lapels. As the chairman of Tampere City Council, Marin is known locally as a fiery left-winger and a relentless critic of Urpilainen's politics, but nationally she is unknown.

In the election for Vice Chairs, Lindtman receives 889 votes, Marin 724 and Education Minister Krista Kiuru 650. (There are three Vice Chairs.) Marin ousts Eero Vainio from the Vice Chair position. Vainio is a year younger than Marin. The party's women's organisation Demarinaiset congratulates the newly elected Vice Chair and quotes the poet Tommy Tabermann: "We should not wait for miracles. Miracles must be made."

In Seinäjoki Arena, Rinne defeats Urpilainen by 257-243 votes. It's a big result for Marin's career – and for the SDP. Urpilainen's rhetoric about dreams is no longer effective. "People are forced to work for wages that aren't livable ... In a world of greed, the value of people and workers ends before the next quarterly review," Rinne blusters. The man on stage is an old-school left-wing lawyer ready to fight on behalf of workers. Rinne wants to break the bourgeois hegemony and lead the SDP openly to the left.

Marin will be the young and passionate left-wing woman who, in time, a change of course by the democrats would bring to the very top of Finnish politics. Marin is part of the party's transformation and one of its faces, but it would be an exaggeration to say she is the architect of the turnaround.

The group of men who launched Rinne's campaign do not stay to celebrate in the lobby bar of the Vaakuna Hotel in Seinäjoki, but in the name of propriety turn their bows towards the seascapes of Helsinki and the sauna of Hotel Strand. "We went straight to where the campaign had been led. It was fun. We had a proper reset. We decided that the job was done and we could crack open the bottle," says Mauriala.

While Rinne's entourage is still sweating it out in the Strand, Vice Chair Marin, a left-wing feminist, is getting annoyed. The news has been dominated by photos of 51-year-old Rinne and 38-year-old Urpilainen dancing a forced reconciliation waltz. And the fact is that Rinne's core circle is largely made up of men.

"The SDP is not stuck", Marin titles her blog post. "Those with a mighty pen should remember that although the party's chairman changed after a democratic vote from Jutta Urpilainen to Antti Rinne, the new party leadership is still made up of three men and three women. So there has been no "manning" or hollowing out of the party leadership, which is still based on the 50-50 principle." Marin shows off her administrative humour. "This principle has slipped a little when it comes to ministerial appointments, with four women and only two men appointed in the last ministerial cycle. The situation should be rectified with the new Chair, when Antti Rinne replaces Urpilainen as [finance] minister."

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These steps led Marin to Lappeenranta in August. In the dining room of the Scandic Patria, I want to know how Marin sees the future of the SDP and why he supports Rinne so strongly.

"After Rinne, the next Chair of the SDP may not be Lindtman," says Marin.

Her assessment can only mean one thing: the 28-year-old city councillor sees herself as the future chairman of the SDP. Marin's ambition is striking, even by political standards. It is unashamedly uninhibited. I wondered aloud who Rinne's successor would be – could it be a woman from Tampere.

"Maybe," Marin smiles.

At 14.44 we both stand on the platform of Lappeenranta railway station and board the InterCity train. Marin pulls her trolley alone. Her appearance is far from that of an international fashion model. She would not be accepted for photographs in fashion magazines. Her smile is beautiful and natural. There is a fire in her eyes – a fire to make a difference and to change the world –, but there is also uncertainty and outsidersness, and a late summer glimmer of loneliness. She is only at the beginning of her political journey.

We wish each other a safe journey home. On the train, I write my column. I predict that if Rinne leads the SDP for long enough, Marin from Tampere will have time to grow into the role of Party Chair. After Rinne, the SDP would not necessarily be led by Lindtman, but by Marin.

After the column is published, Marin sends me a text message with a smiley: "Good writing."

Passion and ambition are something extraordinary. Marin is not even a Member of Parliament yet, nor has she turned thirty, but she has her sights set on her party's chairmanship and, through that, the position of Prime Minister of Finland.

I tell my closest colleagues that a young politician I met with will be the queen of votes in the next parliamentary election and a possible future prime minister. They don't believe me. In national politics, everyone is talking about another young left-wing woman who has collected 47 599 individual votes in the European elections, but has been relegated to a reserve place. Her name is Li Andersson.