

The case of Päivi Räsänen, Finnish MP

Background:

Dr. Päivi Räsänen has served as a member of the Finnish Parliament since 1995. 2004-2015: Chair of the Christian Democrat Party. 2011-2015: Minister of the Interior.

In June 2019, the board of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland announced its official partnership with the LGBT event "Pride 2019". In response, longstanding Finnish member of parliament Päivi Räsänen directed [a tweet](#) at her church leadership questioning this decision. After a criminal complaint was filed against Päivi for the tweet, the police went digging into Päivi's past and Päivi faced a total of 13 hours of police interrogations over several months.

On 29 April 2021 the Finnish Prosecutor General, Raija Toiviainen, formally charged Päivi with three counts of "agitation against a minority group" for publicly voicing her opinion on marriage and human sexuality in a 2004 pamphlet, for comments she made on a 2019 radio show, and the tweet directed at her church leadership in June 2019. Bishop Juhana Pohjola is also charged for publishing Päivi's 2004 pamphlet. The crime of "agitation against a minority group" falls under the 'war crimes and crimes against humanity' section in the [Finnish criminal code](#).

Päivi and Bishop Pohjola faced two days of trial at the Helsinki District Court on 24 January and 14 February 2022. On 30 March 2022, the Helsinki District Court unanimously acquitted Päivi and the bishop, stating that "it is not for the district court to interpret biblical concepts". The court also ordered the prosecution to pay more than 60,000 EUR in legal costs. The prosecution then appealed the "not guilty" ruling in April 2022 and continues to demand tens of thousands of Euros in fines and that Päivi's publications be censored. Unlike many other legal systems, under Finnish law the prosecutor can appeal "not guilty" verdicts all the way to the Supreme Court of Finland. On 31 Aug-1 Sep 2023, the [Helsinki Court of Appeal heard her case](#). On 14 Nov 2023, the court confirmed Räsänen and Pohjola's acquittal.

Key Principles:

The right to freedom of speech is a fundamental right protected in all major human rights treaties and is the foundation of a democratic society. Vaguely worded "hate speech" laws undermine this important right by criminalizing speech based on highly subjective definitions of "offense". Ultimately, this has a chilling effect on free speech, undermines public discourse, and drives diverse and minority views from the public square.

What's at Stake:

Freedom of speech was hard won and is now protected by all major human rights treaties, it is the cornerstone of every free and democratic society. It's not just Mrs. Räsänen's freedom at stake, it's everyone's. If the state can tell you what you can and cannot say, and even what you can and cannot think, then we do not live in a free society.

Bottom Line: Everyone should be free to express their deeply-held beliefs about important issues without fear of censorship or criminal sanction.