

On becoming Finland's foreign minister

LIFE IS FULL of somewhat absurd coincidences. Or that's how I felt on April 1st when I was appointed foreign minister of Finland. It happened to be my 40th birthday. No April Fool's joke.

Three weeks into the new job, and I still pinch myself every morning. Is this really happening? I have moved from one dream job (member of the European Parliament) to another.

Becoming foreign minister is naturally a great honour. For an EU- and foreign policy-buff like myself it just does not get much better than this.

It might sound a bit strange, but I actually enjoy reading policy briefings about places that I have not even visited, well at least not yet.

Changing hats from MEP to foreign minister was not that difficult. Many issues in the European Parliament are closely linked to foreign policy.

Nevertheless, the two mandates are

very different. As an MEP I tried to serve all Europeans, with a Finnish twist. Now, it's all about Finnish foreign policy.

For me my new job boils down to three things: First, it's about driving Finnish interests on the international scene. As a smallish country in the north-eastern corner of Europe we are not exactly in the geographic core of the European Union.

In order to com-

pensate for our geography and size, we simply have to be active and drive our interests in the EU and international organisations.

Second, it's about representing, even branding Finland. We are a high-tech country (Nokia), we love design (Marimekko), we have an excellent educational system (top of the PISA rankings) and we love our sports – we're the fastest people on earth, well at least when we're behind the wheel.

As foreign minister I am one of the elements, albeit small, that projects an image of Finland. The scary thing is that I actually have to be careful of what I say... well, sort of.

Third, it's about motivating our diplomatic service. Finnish diplomats are top-class, true professionals who are prepared to serve their country in all conditions.

Being a diplomat is no easy task. As a matter of fact, it's a great sacrifice.

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There are not many jobs in which you have to be prepared to move around the world every four years. My job is to make sure that the foreign ministry continues to be an exciting work place.

The first weeks in my new job have been exciting, to put it mildly. The learning curve has been steep, but rewarding. I am also psyched about the fact that I can continue to write for *Blue Wings*. If you enjoy my columns as much I enjoy writing them, then I must be getting at least a little part of my new job right. ■■

Alexander Stubb is Finland's new foreign minister.