

IN ENGLISH

PARLIAMENT  
*of*  
FINLAND



# Power is vested in the people

Finland is a republic, in which power is vested in the people. Every four years Finns elect Parliament, which decides on national matters.

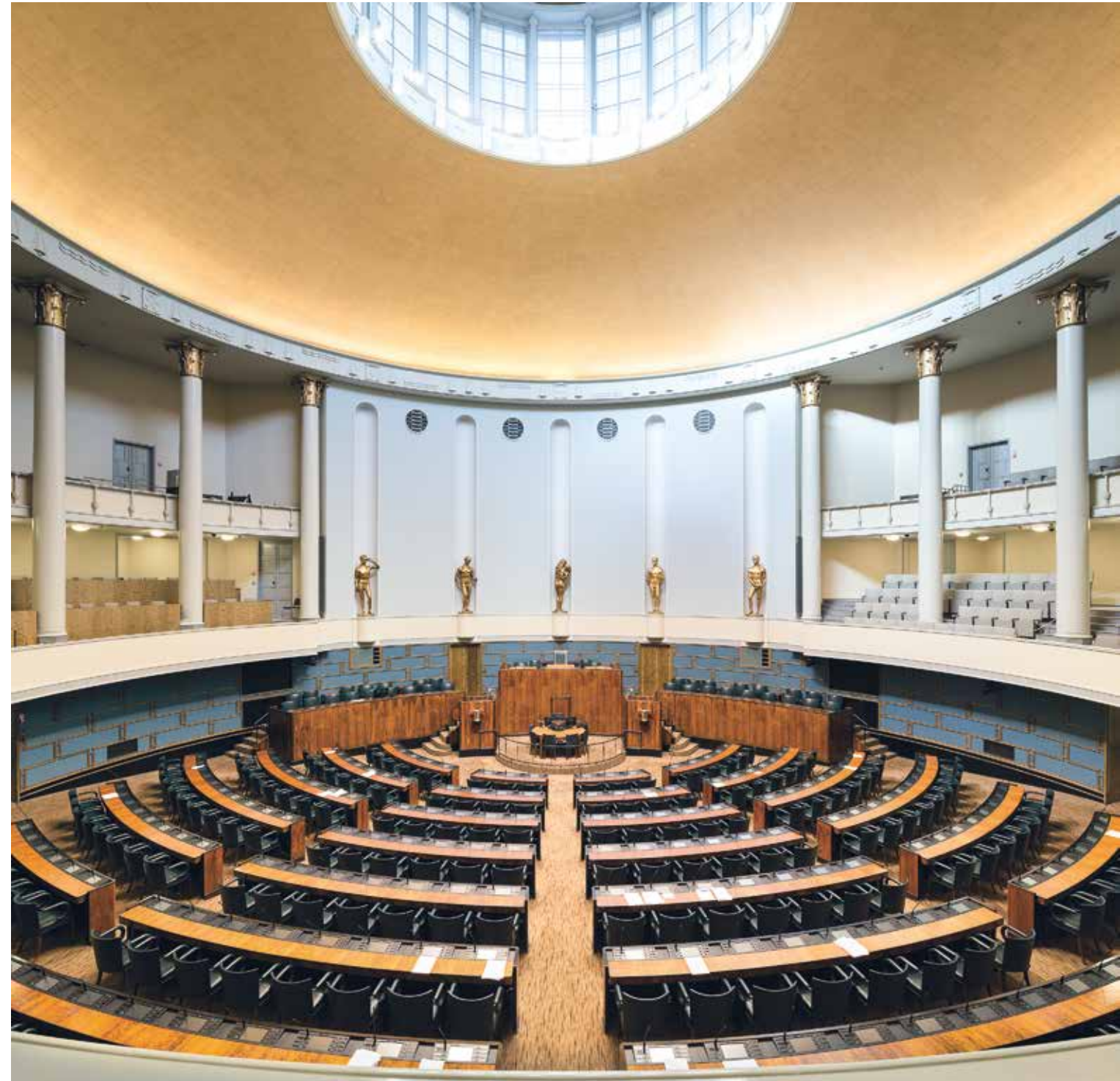
Parliament enacts legislation and approves the state budget. It also elects the Prime Minister and oversees the Government. In addition Parliament approves major international agreements that are binding on Finland and influences European Union affairs.

Parliament decides on legislation, the budget, international agreements and confidence in the Government in plenary sessions, which are open to the public.

Every citizen can participate in public affairs by voting. Parliamentary elections are direct, proportional and secret. Every citizen who has reached the age of 18 by election day has the right to vote. Each citizen who is eligible has one vote.

Elections are direct: voters cast their votes for the candidate of their choice. Elections are also secret, which means that only the voter knows which candidate he/she has voted for. To ensure secrecy a citizen must vote in person under the supervision of an election official. The voter fills in a ballot in a voting booth, folds it and drops it in a ballot box anonymously.

Finns have elected MPs in direct elections for over a hundred years. The world's first 19 women MPs were elected in 1907 in Finland.





# The plenary session— legislation and political debate

The plenary session is the most visible aspect of Parliament's work. During each term Parliament meets in plenary session four times a week, from Tuesday to Friday.

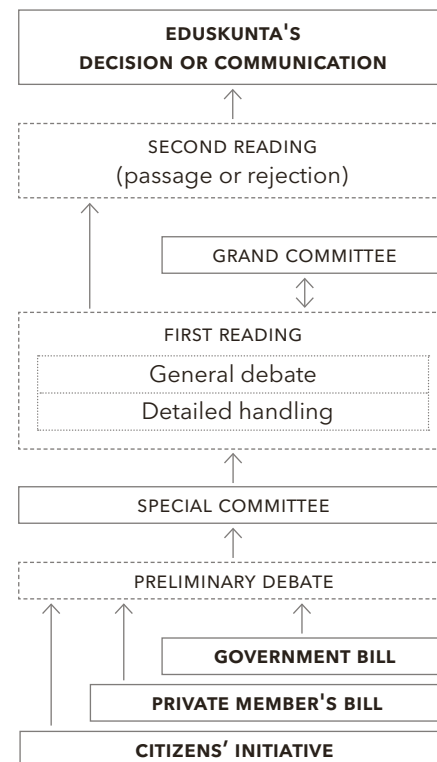
Parliament's most important task, enacting legislation, takes place in plenary session. Parliament enacts new legislation or amends existing legislation on the basis of a Government proposal or a Member's motion. 50 000 voters can bring a legislative proposal to the deliberation of Parliament by signing a Citizens' initiative. Most legislation results from Government proposals, which average about 250 a year.

It generally takes 2–4 months to consider a proposal, but major legislative projects can take years.

The handling of proposed legislation begins with a preliminary debate in plenary session. The purpose of this debate is to provide a basis for work in the committee to which the proposal is referred. After committee handling a proposal returns to the plenary session, where it is given two readings. In the first reading the content of the bill is decided section by section. In the second reading the bill is either approved or rejected. Once it has been ratified by the President of the Republic, an Act is published in the Statutes of Finland.

The plenary session is also an arena for timely political debate. In many people's opinion the most important plenary session is Question Time on Thursdays, when ministers must answer MPs' oral questions.

The public is welcome to watch plenary sessions. There are also live webcasts of sessions on Parliament's website.



*The legislative process.*



Opposition groups have an important role in a democracy: They criticize government decisions, present alternatives and demand that government ministers justify their decisions.

The plenary session is an arena for timely political debate between MPs from both government and opposition parties.







### Speech and decision-making

Visitors to Parliament often wonder where all the MPs are, when a plenary session is under way and half the seats in the hall are empty. The answer has to do with the different nature of sessions. Although all of them are plenary sessions, in practice some are reserved for decision-making and others for speaking.

When it is time to make decisions everyone is present unless they are unable to attend because of a work-related trip, illness or some other valid reason.

Speaking sessions are an essential part of democracy, since MPs have been elected to represent the people and its opinions. In Finland MPs have the right to speak about a matter that is being discussed for as long and as many times as they wish. Another part of democracy is that MPs are not obliged to sit and listen to everyone else's opinions.

All the speeches that are given in plenary session along with the results of all votes are included in the records of plenary sessions. These are available on Parliament's website about two hours after the end of each plenary session.

*The speakers of parliament elected after the 2019 parliamentary election (right).*





# Committees prepare decisions

A committee is the most important place where an MP can influence matters, since all parliamentary decisions are prepared by committees.

After the preliminary debate in plenary session, a Government proposal is referred to the appropriate committee. For example legislation concerning schools is referred to the Education and Culture Committee and tax laws to the Finance Committee. A committee can also issue a statement to another committee.

In committees MPs hear experts' views concerning what impacts legislation is likely to have. Experts can be civil servants at ministries or agencies, university researchers or representatives of non-governmental organizations or interest groups, for example.

By asking questions MPs can get a thorough understanding of the content of legislation. Most MPs work in two different committees.

On the basis of expert hearings and debate a committee forms an opinion on a Government proposal. In its report the committee can recommend the approval of a proposal as it is, amendments to the proposal or its rejection.

After the committee stage a proposal goes back to the plenary session. MPs can propose amendments, but most often the committee report is adopted as Parliament's decision.

Parliament has 16 permanent special committees plus the Grand Committee, which focuses on EU matters. The composition of a committee reflects the

*Each MP is member of two committees, on average. The Speaker, deputy speakers and MPs who act as government ministers are not appointed committee members.*

*Here are pictures from the Audit Committee (right) and the Administration Committee meeting (below).*



## Every MP deals with EU affairs

Compared with many other member states, in Finland Parliament plays a strong role in deciding on European Union affairs. The Grand Committee serves as Parliament's EU committee. Its most important task is to ensure Parliament's influence and parliamentary oversight in EU decision-making.

In the case of the European Union's common foreign and security policy, Parliament's views are expressed by the Foreign Affairs Committee.

The special committees consider EU affairs that fall within their task area and issue statements on them to the Grand Committee. Every MP deals with EU affairs through committee work.



relative strengths of different parliamentary groups. MPs from parliamentary groups representing both government and opposition work together in committees.

Most parliamentary committees have 17 members and 9 deputy members. Exceptions are the Finance Committee with 21 members and 19 deputy members, the Audit Committee with 11 members and 6 deputy members, Intelligence Supervision Committee 11 members and 2 deputy members, and the Grand Committee with 25 members and 13 deputy members.

Committee agendas and records of committee meetings are available on Parliament's website and can be used to follow the handling of matters.



*It generally takes a month or two for a committee to handle a matter, but urgent business can be dealt with in a few days if necessary. Major legislative projects can take many months or even years.*

*MPs belonging to government party groups generally support government proposals, but do suggest amendments to these during committee deliberations.*

*The picture is from the Environment Committee meeting.*

**Committees' task areas:**

**Grand Committee**

Formulation of national policy associated with membership of the European Union, with the exception of foreign and security policy. In dealing with EU affairs MPs from the Åland electoral district have the right to be present and to speak. The Grand Committee also considers any legislative proposals that are referred to it by the plenary session.

**Constitutional Law Committee**

Deals with all matters pertaining to the constitution and any legislation which has a bearing on international human rights, the autonomy of Åland, elections, citizenship, language and defence.

**Foreign Affairs Committee**

Changing or repealing major international agreements or other international obligations requiring Parliament's approval, the management of foreign affairs, general security policy, peace-keeping policy, foreign trade policy, development cooperation and international organizations.

**Finance Committee**

State budget proposal and other Government proposals and motions regarding finance, legislation pertaining to taxes and similar charges as well as state borrowing.

**Audit Committee**

Oversight of the management of government finances and compliance with the budget.

**Administration Committee**

General organization of state administration, state administration at the regional and municipal levels, administrative procedures, state personnel policy, general regional and structural policy, public order and safety, rescue services, the Frontier Guard, immigration matters, municipal affairs and church matters.

**Legal Affairs Committee**

Matters involving family, estate, corporate, contract, property, criminal and procedural law as well as courts and tribunals.

**Transport and Communications Committee**

Road, rail, air and inland water traffic, navigation and communications.

**Agriculture and Forestry Committee**

Agriculture and forestry, veterinary medicine, hunting, fishing, reindeer husbandry and animal protection.

**Defence Committee**

Military service, the Defence Forces and legislation pertaining to emergencies.

**Education and Culture Committee**

Education, training, science, the arts, culture, sports, youth work and student aid.

**Social Affairs and Health Committee**

Social and health care, social security, social insurance and pension legislation.

**Commerce Committee**

Commerce, industry, business, consumer protection, competition, private insurance, energy, and finance and securities markets legislation.

**Committee for the Future**

Matters involving future development factors and development models, research regarding the future and evaluation of the consequences of technological development on society.

**Employment and Equality Committee**

Work environment, labour and employment, equality and non-military national service.

**Environment Committee**

Housing, land-use and building legislation, waste management, environmental protection and nature conservation.

**Intelligence Supervision Committee**

The Intelligence Supervision Committee serves as the parliamentary watchdog of civilian and military intelligence operations. The committee also serves as the parliamentary watchdog of the other activities of the Finnish Security Intelligence Service.









*An MP presenting the work of parliament to an international group of visitors.*

*Below a picture from the Left Alliance Parliamentary Group during their weekly meeting.*



# An MP Work Week

A Member of Parliament is a legislator, a wielder of social influence, a representative of an electoral district and an international actor. An MP represents his or her party, but as a representative of an electoral district an MP is also expected to keep up with regional matters. Electoral districts are drawn so that sparsely populated areas are also represented in Parliament.

An MP work week in Parliament House typically runs from Tuesday morning until Friday afternoon. The day often starts with a committee meeting or another meeting. Most MPs work in two committees.

Plenary sessions are held in the afternoons. Sometimes the topic of the debate is so interesting or important that the plenary runs late into the evening. On Thursdays at 4 p.m. there is a question hour, during which MPs pose questions for the government ministers to answer. These question hours are broadcast live on the parliament web page and on television. There is always a live audience as well.

Members form parliamentary groups according to political party, and these play a key role in parliamentary work on a practical level. Parliamentary groups

convene on Thursday afternoons before the question hour to decide what stance to take on matters being considered by Parliament.

The most visible part of an MPs work takes place in the plenary session and in the committees. However, MPs work outside of the parliament building as well. And the work week is not limited to the four days of meetings and plenary sessions each week.

To keep in touch with their constituents most MPs travel extensively around their own electoral district, or meet delegations from their district when they visit parliament. Many MPs also actively participate in local government.

Practically every MP has duties related to parliamentary work that require travel abroad. Parliament elects Finland's representatives to international organisations such as the Nordic Council, the Council of Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE. The committees familiarise themselves with legislation in their field in other countries. International organisations also ask MPs to monitor elections in other countries.





# Who can become an MP?

Almost anyone can become an MP. Candidates must be at least 18 years of age and Finnish citizens. Parliamentary elections are held every four years, at which time MPs are elected in direct, proportional and secret ballots. Each citizen who is eligible has one vote.

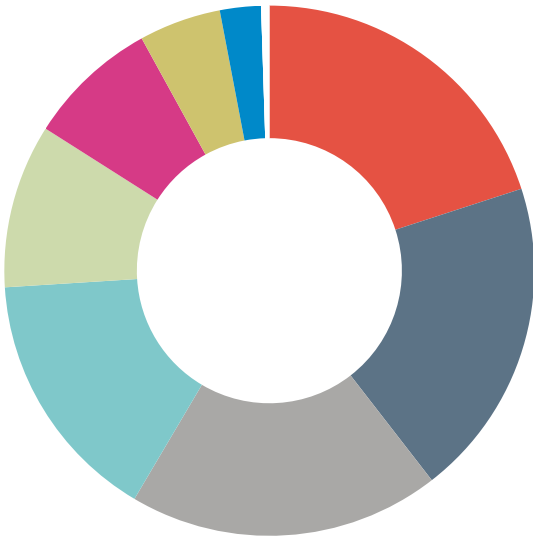
An MP is a legislator, a wielder of social influence, a representative of an electoral district and an international actor. Although a large part of an MP's week is spent in committees and plenary sessions, Parliament is not the only place where an MP works.

In addition to a political party an MP represents an electoral district and is expected to keep up with

regional matters. Electoral districts are drawn so as to ensure that sparsely populated areas are also represented in Parliament.

Nearly every MP has tasks that require work-related trips abroad.

As a voter you can follow your MP at work in many different ways. For instance All of MPS' speeches in the Plenary Hall are recorded in webcasts as well as the record of plenary sessions. Moreover, practically all MPs have their own website or on social media, where they provide information on timely parliamentary work.





# A Symbol for Finnish Democracy

The Parliament Building is a symbol for Finnish independence and democracy. It was designed by architect *Johan Sigfrid Sirén*, and completed in 1931. The Parliament Building belongs to the Finnish people and is open to the public. In fact, tens of thousands of people visit it every year.

The Parliament Building is considered to be a complete work of art, in which each detail is considered and part of larger architectural vision.

The façade of the building is Finnish granite from Kalvola in Häme. There are 46 steps that lead up to the distinctive 14 columns on the façade facing Mannerheimintie.

The interiors are equally impressive to the exterior. Sirén designed the most prominent rooms himself, including furniture, doors, hand-rails, as well as the silver-plated voting urns in the plenary session hall. Most of the light fixtures are also designed by Sirén.

Many leading designers of the time helped the architect decorate the Parliament Building. Important contributors to the design were sculptors *Gunnar*

*Finne, Johannes Haapasalo, Carl Wilhelms and Hannes Autere*, painter *Bruno Tuukkanen* and interior designers *Arttu Brummer, Werner West, Rafael Blomsted* and *Elsa Arokallio*, as well as textile artist *Greta Skogster*.

The plenary session hall is round and bears a resemblance to an ancient Roman temple or theater. In his design the architect paid much attention to acoustics, which is good, much due to the dome-shaped ceiling. Also, the dome is lined with tiles made from pressed sugar-cane, which are beneficial to the acoustics.

The five sculptures titled *Work and the Future* that adorn the plenary session hall are by Finnish sculptor *Wäinö Aaltonen*. The sculptures depict Finnish ideals. From left to right, they are the *Settler, Intellectual Work, the Future, Faith* and the *Harvester*. She is turned away and will soon become part of the past. The child, however, is the only figure to look directly towards the MPs. The child represents the future, and even raises his hands as a greeting to MPs, perhaps to remind them that their decisions are far-reaching.

*The only daylight to reach the plenary session hall comes from small windows at the very top of the dome.*





# Parliament Art Collection

Parliament has a sizable collection of Finnish art from the late 19th century to the present day. The largest number of works are in offices. These are mostly graphic and photographic works on paper. Larger paintings and sculptures are located in lobbies, meeting rooms and corridors.

The art collection includes portraits of 35 Speakers of the Diet and the unicameral Parliament. These portraits have been painted by distinguished artists, from *Albert Edelfelt* and *Eero Järnefelt* to *Kimmo Kaivanto* and *Marjatta Tapiola* as well as one by photographer *Elina Brotherus*. Many speakers have chosen the artist who made their portrait.



Pekka Halonen's "Log Floating" (1925) remained the artist's last monumental work. Halonen carefully observed loggers on inland waterways and produced several sketches for this painting. Although originally the Grand Committee meeting room, it today serves as meeting room for the Finance committee.



"Where Strawberries Grow" is Jukka Lehtinen's steel sculpture, which stands outside the main entrance to Little Parliament, the 2004 annex to the Parliament Building. Wild strawberries grow beneath the sculpture.



# Additional information about Parliament

## Parliament's online services

Parliament's website [www.parliament.fi](http://www.parliament.fi) provides information on Parliament and legislative work. It includes pages on plenary sessions, committees, MPs and legislative matters.

## Watch Parliament in session!

The public is welcome to observe plenary sessions of Parliament. They are held from February to June and from September to December on Tuesdays and Wednesdays at 2 pm, Thursdays at 4 pm, and Fridays at 1 pm. The doors to the public gallery open 15 minutes before each session. The session hall is accessible for persons with disabilities.

Address: Mannerheimintie 30.

You may also follow webcasts from the session:  
[verkkolahetys.eduskunta.fi](http://verkkolahetys.eduskunta.fi)

## Visitors' Centre

The Visitors' Centre is located in the Little Parliament building. The Visitors' Centre is also a popular venue for seminars on timely issues.

Address: Arkadiankatu 3.

## Library of Parliament

The Library of Parliament is open to all. In addition to Parliament it serves anyone who needs information about Parliament, the law or society.

Address: Aurorankatu 6.

## Photo credits

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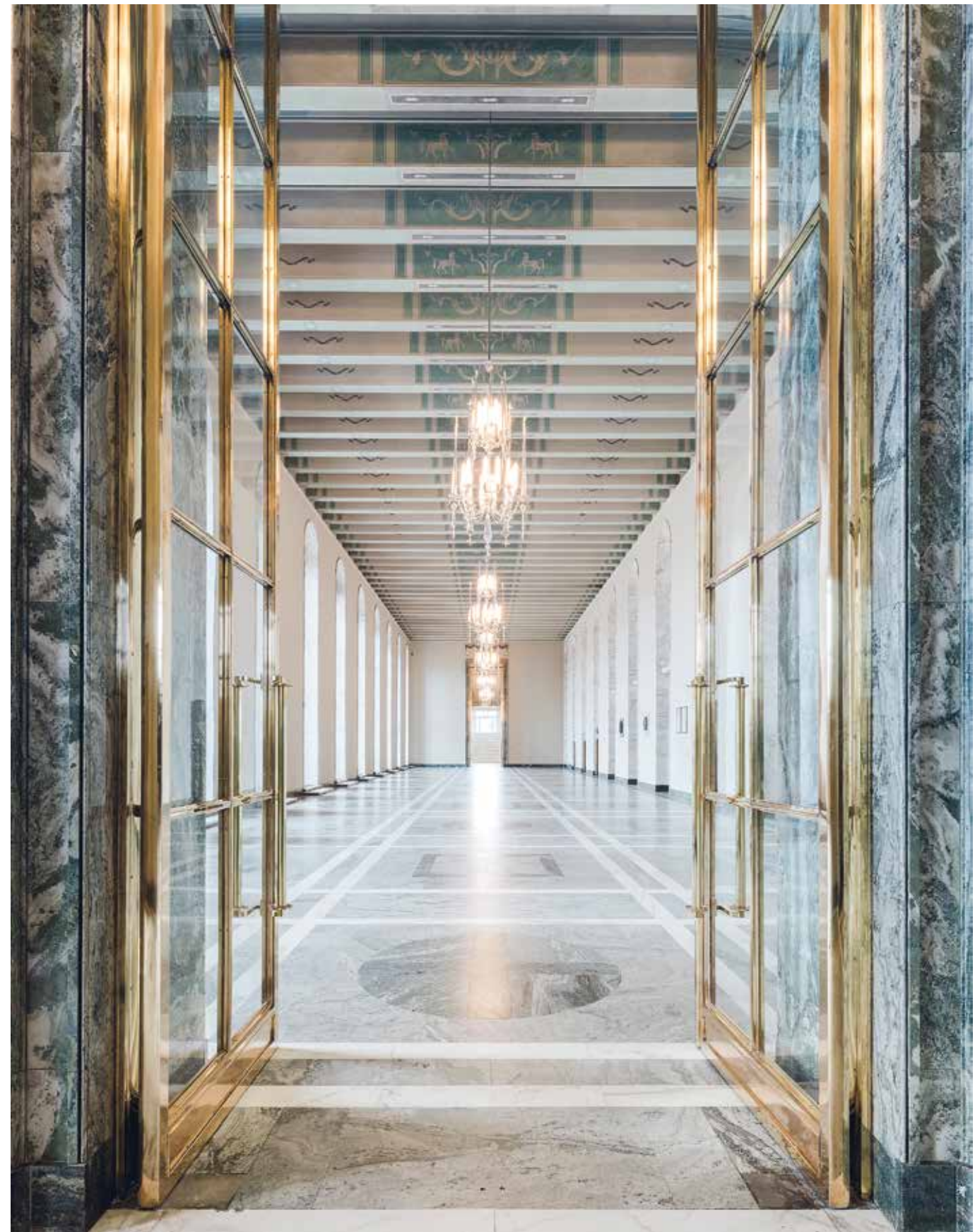
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10/2019

