

THE NEED FOR MULTICULTURAL APPROACH IN FINLAND

*A European paradox: Europe needs immigrants, but the Europeans do not want them.
Max Jacobson (2)*

How about Finland?

The general internationalization has increased crossborder migration also in Finland. This is due to the deep-going changes in the neighbouring areas and Finland's accession to the European Union in 1995.

The new immigration to Finland is young; in larger numbers less than 10 years. This increased immigration has created a number of unsolved problems, especial the high unemployment rate among many immigrant groups as well as the negative attitudes among the main population.

But most important: there is also the awareness of the change to a more open and multicultural society.

Old ethnic minorities

It has been said that with regard to immigration Finland has been almost in isolated "island" untouched by either European or global migration streams. But concerning the history this not true.

In the old cemeteries of Turku and Helsinki there are old tombs with names of many different nationalities and religions. In 1900 eight percent of Helsinki's inhabitants had been born abroad. A century later, in 1999, this proportion was 5.7 per cent.

Immigrants to Helsinki a century ago came mostly from Russia and its Baltic provinces and from Sweden. A hundred years later about half of the immigrants in Helsinki are still born in Russia or Estonia, where as the proportion of immigrants from other parts of Europe has staved around 10 per cent.

The big change in a hundred years was that the proportion of immigrants from outside Europe has grown from a fraction to around 40 per cent of immigrants in Helsinki.

Finland has a few old ethnic minorities as follows:

- The Swedish-Finns in some coastal areas have been living in Finland for some 1000 years and represent six per cent of population - 300,000 people.

- The Lapps, the only indigenous people in Finland numbering 6400 persons according to an estimate in 1992. The Sami people have mixed with the main population and many have double identities.
- The Jews have arrived in Finland for a long time ago via Sweden and later from Russia. A law in 1918 guaranteed them Finnish citizenship. At the moment there are 1300 members in the Jewish congregations in Finland.
- The Tatars, a Turkish related people from Niznij-Novgorod Russia arrived in Finland by families in the 19th century. The Tatarian language and culture have survived until the fourth and fifth generations while in Russia many Tatars have forgotten the language. There were 939 Muslim Tatars in Finland in 1980. In Finland Tatars, as well as the Jews, have been employed especially by trade and textile industry.
- The Romanies started to arrive in Finland in the 16th Century via Sweden. A law in 1637 allowed anybody to kill a loitering gipsy. It is estimated that we have in Finland 10,000 Romanies and in addition 3000 in Sweden, originally coming from Finland.
- The Russians are not generally counted to the ethnic minorities in Finland, although we have had a small Russian minority for a long time. Eg. In 1900 there were 6000 Russians in Finland, mainly merchants in Vyborg, Helsinki and other towns. After the Russian revolution of 1917 33,000 Russian refugees arrived in Finland, but many of these continued to other countries. Of these only a half were ethnic Russians and another half ethnic Finns.

New ethnic minorities in Finland

Finland never has had flows of labour migration. Our foreign population came in small numbers e.g. as students or due to a marriage to a Finnish citizen. Only during the past ten years greater numbers of immigrants and refugees have arrived in Finland.

With a population of 5.2 million persons Finland has been quite a homogeneous society until the 1990's.

In January 1990 there were only 21,000 foreign citizens in Finland - or only 0.4 per cent of the population. The number of the refugees was only 2000.

In 1991 the pattern changed dramatically due to the political crisis in the Soviet Union. The number of foreign citizens tripled in a few years. At the end of the year 2000 there were about 92,000 foreign citizens in Finland, including over 20,000 refugees. The latest number, on May 30th 2001, gave 93,368 Foreign Citizens in Finland. But still the proportion of foreign population, 1.8 per cent, is one of the lowest in Europe.

The real number of the "foreigners" in Finland is about 130 - 140,000 persons - as a foreign citizen may apply for the Finnish citizenship after living in the country for five years - and in some cases the time may be shorter. But it must be borne in mind that the number of immigrants is still low in the Western European context.

If Finland had proportionally as many immigrants than e.g. in Germany, Finland would have a half a million immigrant population. It must also be remembered that many immigrants were returning former Finnish emigrants and their children.

Refugees in Finland

The Finnish refugee policy has been quite restrictive. Since 1986 there has been an annual refugee quota established with the UNHCR.

Initially the quota was 500 but was increased due to the pressures of the worldwide refugee situation aiming 1,000 refugees annually. In 2000 the quota was 650, and in 2001 about 750 refugees. The biggest refugee groups have been the Somalis, the citizens of the former Yugoslavia and the Vietnamese.

There has been a considerable increase of asylum seekers arriving in Finland from Eastern Europe, and especially from Poland and Slovakia. This development stimulated a debate culminating in an amendment to the Aliens Act in summer 2000. The amendment imposes a seven-day time limit on the Directorate of Immigration to issue a decision on certain asylum applications stipulated in the Act. Also the family relations will be investigated through DNA Tests. Altogether there are nearly 20,000 refugees in Finland.

The profile of the foreign population in Finland

The Russians form the largest foreign group in Finland. There are over 21 000 Russian citizens, 11 000 Estonian citizens - and 2000 still with the Soviet Union passport in Finland. Some 60 per cent of the Russians are women due to marriages with Finnish men.

The proportion of children is only 10 per cent while the old persons (over 65 years) are well over the other nationalities.

Many of these Russians are Finnish "returnees" called the Ingrians. They are descendants of the Finns who from 1617 onwards settled areas around later St. Petersburg occupied by Sweden. Since 1990 about 20,000 Ingrians have arrived in Finland and there are still long queues waiting for entry permission. Generally immigrants from Russia are well educated, and in the future it is expected more immigrants from Russia to Finland.

After the Russians the most numerous in Finland are the Estonians - about 11,000 citizens. Due to the closeness of the Finnish and Estonian languages, the Estonians have good chances to find work in Finland and integrate quickly to the host society.

After Estonians come citizens of Sweden - mostly former Finnish citizens and their children to return to Finland. The next largest group are the Somalis who started to arrive as refugees since 1990 the peak year being 1992.

Altogether there are foreign citizens in Finland coming from about 150 different nationalities from all over the world.

The immigrant population in Finland is heavily concentrated in Southern Finland - a half in the province of Uusimaa - and especially in the "metropolitan" area of Helsinki. The majority of the immigrants are at the working age, the largest group being 25-34 years of age. The proportion of children is about 20 per cent - or approximately as much as in the whole Finnish population. But e.g. among the Somalis the children consist of nearly half and 40 per cent among the persons from

the former Yugoslavia. The proportion of women in the immigrant population is 49 per cent, but there are big differences among the nationalities.

Attitudes towards the immigrants

The new immigrant groups arrived in Finland at the time when the recession was the deepest in the early 1990's, and this was a major factor behind resentful attitudes among Finns.

Another factor of importance was the role of media. According to studies by Magdalena Jaakkola (1995 and 1999) in Finland there has been a growing mood of attitudinal severity towards foreigners due to the increase in numbers of immigrants and refugees in the 1990's. Another reason has been the bad unemployment in Finland. (10)

The tightening attitudes have been shaped by the anxieties related with the influx of immigrants (with different cultures) from the undeveloped countries.

Even with the economic recession in Finland there is still high unemployment among the immigrants due to the marginalization in the labour market.

The key question will be the attitudes and the potential discrimination of the employers towards the recruitment of the immigrants. Work would be the best way to integrate the immigrants into the Finnish society as well as for the course of multiculturalism in Finland. The issue of integration and, by implication, of creating social cohesion, has become one of the most important challenges for political decision-making - not only Finland but in the whole European Union.

In Finland "multiculturalism" has been considered to be an issue directly related to immigrants: firstly as a being a consequence of their presence, and secondly as giving them the responsibility to learn Finnish customs and the Finnish language while preserving their own culture.

According to Matti Similä (2001) whether foreign residents will ever actually be regarded as "Finns", will depend on whether Finnish identity stresses ethnic origins of Finnish citizenship, residence in Finland and participation in the Finnish society. Perhaps there will be a need for a new term - e.g. "new Finn" - in Finnish "suomenmaalainen" (a person living in Finland) as suggested by Outi Lepola.

The major message of this presentation is that the minority communities in Finland are to stay and to grow in the future. There is a challenge of change through out the whole Finnish society.

Consequently we should trust to each other and develop a mutual respect and partnership.

It is a two way process. Okan Daher, a Tartar of fifth generation living in Finland and teaching the language of the Tatars, has formulated the process of integration well as follows:

"The minorities should aim to maintain their language, religion and cultural heritage, but at the same time to try and adapt themselves flexibly to the circumstances of the main society."

We Finns and our immigrants, "the new Finns", together should aim to build a prosperous, open, tolerant and democratic society with many ethno-cultures in harmony with the European and global integration.

At the same time more and more Finns, especially the young and educated, are going abroad to learn and work - and hopefully to return back to multicultural Finland one day.

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