

‘COMPLETELY NEW CHALLENGES’?: *Continuity and revision in Finnish political parties’ objectives on immigration, 1986–1991*

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Abstract


This study analyses the discussion of four Finnish parties – Centre Party, National Coalition Party, Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDP) and Finnish People’s Democratic League/Left Alliance (SKDL/VAS; *Suomen kansan demokraattinen liitto/Vasemmistoliitto*) – on foreign workers, refugees and asylum seekers in 1986–1991. The turn of the 1990s marked a period of substantial change in Finnish immigration policy and legislation and included the first comprehensive immigration policy papers by the parties. The study sheds light on the contemporary history of Finnish party politics and discourses on immigration and the challenges faced by mainstream right-wing and left-wing parties when dealing with immigration. The analysis of a wide range of policy papers and documents produced for parties’ internal use indicates that the changes in foreign policy, developments in national demographic and economic circumstances as well as the parties’ broad base of supporters and distinctive ideological traditions facilitate explanation of party stances. The parties’ objectives of the period represented both continuity and revision in relation to previous decades’ considerably restrictive politics.

Keywords

Finland • political parties • refugees • asylum seekers • labour migration

Introduction

For a long time, our country has lived in the European borderlands, where foreigners’ migration has been rare. The upheavals in Europe and the world put our country’s foreigner policy ahead of completely new challenges (National Coalition Party 1991).

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The contemporary history of Finnish political parties' objectives on immigration and immigrants remains understudied. This article analyses Finnish parties' political discourse concerning immigration from 1986 to 1991, a period of remarkable reassessment of Finnish immigration and refugee policy and legislation. The focus is on the immigration objectives of the four electorally most successful political parties¹: the Centre Party (*Keskustapuolue*), the National Coalition Party (*Kansallinen Kokoomus*), the Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDP) and the Finnish People's Democratic League/Left Alliance² (SKDL/VAS; *Suomen kansan demokraattinen liitto/Vasemmistoliitto*). In addition, the Finnish Rural Party's (*Suomen Maaseudun Puolue*) role is discussed briefly as its views on immigration were referred to by other parties.

The study supplements previous research by addressing the perceived role of immigration during an important transition period in Finnish politics in general and in immigration politics in particular. The analysis of policy papers demonstrates how the parties perceived labour migration in an era where the Western European integration was increasing and the national labour force seemed to be diminishing. The parties' outlooks on Finland's responsibility, or the lack thereof, for asylum seekers and refugees and the most desired goals and means of refugee policy are also assessed. Regarding immigrant policy, the study analyses how the immigrant groups' rights were taken into account by different parties. Material from the earlier period also provides the basis for an analysis of intra-party discussions that offers an empirically based view into mainstream parties' thinking on immigration politics.

The article begins with outlining the social and political circumstances at the turn of the 1990s in Finland. This is followed by an introduction to the research setting and the studied parties. Empirical analysis tackles three themes the parties discussed: labour migration, refugee policy and disagreements within and between parties. Finally, the findings' relevance for understanding Finnish (party-) political history on immigration and the research framework's benefit for understanding party politics on immigration are highlighted.

Societal transformations at the turn of the 1990s

Between 1986 and 1989, Finland experienced an economic boom that led to an overheating of the economy followed by one of the most severe depressions in Western Europe (Honkapohja & Koskela 2001). The Finnish foreign policy framework was also experiencing a change. During the Cold War, especially the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union had reduced Finland's possibility to participate in Western European integration. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Finland's room for manoeuvre increased and the country became more comprehensively involved in Western European integration by becoming a member of the Council of Europe (1989) and participating in the negotiations for the European Economic Area (EEA) (Karvonen, Paloheimo & Raunio 2016: 19-20).

Another transformation was taking place regarding patterns of movement and demography. In the 19th century and most of the 20th century, Finland had characteristically been a country of emigration, but in the 1980s, it became a country in which immigration surpassed emigration. It was not only returnees from Sweden and asylum seekers that caused this development but also the immigration of other groups, such as labour migrants and international students. Finland's encounter with immigrants did not, however, begin in the 1980s. The country had received more than 30,000 refugees from (Soviet) Russia already between 1917 and 1923. During the World War II (WWII), more than 400,000 evacuees from the Eastern parts of the country ceded to the Soviet Union – and more than 60,000 people from Ingermanland – were settled on Finnish soil (Leitzinger 2008; Välimäki 2019). During the Cold War, there were only a few international protection seekers in Finland, except for some 150 defectors from the Soviet Union. The overall number of residence permits granted was low, and most of the immigrants came from other Nordic states. In the 1970s and early 1980s, immigration was a marginal issue in Finnish politics although Chilean and Southeast Asian resettlement refugees gained some attention (Leitzinger 2008; Välimäki 2019).

Similar to other Northern European countries, the ageing population and the drop in the fertility rate indicated that the Finnish population was at risk of decrease. This development was believed to cause potential problems since the number of the working age population was shrinking (e.g. Koljonen & Parkkinen 1986). In public and political debates, immigration was identified as a potential solution to this development.

In cultural terms, Finland was commonly imagined as a homogenous nation. The idea and heritage of cultural nationalism were widely accepted (Puuronen 2004: 25, 34-35; Tervonen 2014). Some studies consider the current period (since the late 1980s) as an era of growing nationalism and patriotism (Pietikäinen & Luostarinen 1996: 175). A similar trend was also observed in many other West European and Nordic states (Björge & Witte 1993). However, societal diversity was recognised and supported by legislation. The constitution recognised both Finnish and Swedish as national languages and the Orthodox Church as the second national church, and the right of the Sami and Roma minorities to preserve their languages and culture was recorded in the constitution (Saukkonen 2013: 90-91).

Major changes in Finnish immigration legislation and policy began to take shape during the 1980s and early 1990s. Finland enacted its first Aliens Act in 1983. The preparation of the second Aliens Act began in 1988, and it was enacted in 1991. Finland took its first annual resettlement refugees in 1986, and this policy has continued since then. The annual quota for 1986 was 100 persons, and the number was gradually increased by government decisions. In 1989–1991, the quota was 500 persons. Before 1990, there had only been a few dozen asylum applicants annually but, in 1990–1991, the number grew to a few thousand³ (Kuosma 2004: 739-747; Välimäki 2017, 2019). Most of the asylum seekers came from Somalia. News stories describing their arrival were a major topic in the media (Pietikäinen 2000: 184-186). The increase in immigration encountered also political opposition, especially in the early 1990s from the populist Finnish Rural Party (Lepola 2000). The growing opposition was also evident in surveys conducted in 1987 and 1993. The attitudes were clearly more tolerant towards foreign workers and refugees during the economic boom and low numbers

of asylum seekers in 1987 than in 1993 when the recession had hit the country hard and asylum seekers were a frequent news topic (Jaakkola 2009: 22, 30). Similar links between economic cycles and attitudes towards minorities and social outgroups have been identified in Western Europe and North America (Hainmueller & Hopkins 2014).

During the research period, the parties' voters were divided on receiving either foreign workers or asylum seekers and refugees (Jaakkola 2009; cf. Lahav 1997: 382; Odmalm 2011). The polls conducted in 1987 and 1993 demonstrated that less than 20% of each studied party's voters were in favour of more foreign workers residing in Finland in the future (Jaakkola 2009: 26). Attitudes towards refugees were more in favour but still less than half of each party's sympathizers supported the idea of more refugees living in Finland, sympathizers of SKDL/VAS being most in favour and sympathizers of the Centre Party the least (Jaakkola 2009: 26).

Research material, questions and methods

This study uses qualitative content analysis to analyse documents produced by the highest decision-making bodies of the four parties, i.e. the policy papers, memos and proceedings of party congresses, councils, executive committees and governments and the subcommittees, that dealt with immigration between 1986 and 1991. Policy papers often contain elevated language, and for instance, idealism may be allowed more than in everyday politics. Sometimes, the policy papers also include relatively vague argumentation, and most of the time, this language is intended to resonate in many potential constituencies simultaneously. Policy papers cannot, however, be regarded as reflecting the day-to-day decision-making, and within parties, there are differences in opinion on many issues discussed in official statements. Nonetheless, policy papers are often the most explicit documents of a party line, a medium through which the aims of the party are declared. These papers are accepted by the central decision-making bodies and are distributed within the party to determine the position on a particular issue. Moreover, the parties' election candidates and politicians are expected to share these goals to a significant degree. In addition, the discussion within party bodies is taken into account to understand the introduction of certain policy objectives.

The research setting provides the study with broader relevance since recent social scientific research has mostly focused on the radical right-wing parties' immigration stances (e.g. Jungar & Jupskås 2014; Pyrhönen 2015). The approach adopted illustrates the circumstances that existed before the radical right-wing parties arrived in the political agora. The mainstream parties' stances on immigration have not been studied extensively until recently (Bale 2008; Bucken-Knapp, Hinnfors & Spehar 2014; Hinnfors, Spehar & Bucken-Knapp 2012; Odmalm & Bale 2015; Välimäki 2017). Moreover, detailed historical and empirical studies on immigration politics are largely lacking in Finland (see however Leitzinger 2008; Lepola 2000; Rajas 2014; Välimäki 2017, 2019).

The research questions are: How did the four parties define desired immigration and immigrant policies towards the most discussed immigrant groups of the period, i.e. foreign

workers, asylum seekers and refugees? How do the party stances compare to previous politics on immigration and immigrants?

The empirical analysis is based on Skinner's (2002) view that understanding the prevailing contextual frameworks in which political views take place is crucial for the interpretation of actions and discourses. Contexts inevitably influence and set limits for actors'—such as political parties' and party members'—utterances, decisions and legitimisation strategies (Skinner 2002: 42-43, 87, 116-117). Relevant contextual frameworks that are incorporated in the analysis of the empirical material of this study include, first, the domestic and international policy developments and discourses and, second, the party-specific ideological traditions. The traditional and prevailing ideological and attitudinal positions on immigration of the Finnish population in general, and the parties in particular, are essential in analysing party positions (Bucken-Knapp, Hinnfors & Spehar 2014; Odmalm & Bale 2015) as well as the social and political circumstances and developments in which these discussions take place.

Immigration and ideological traditions of the parties

Preparation of the first broad policy papers regarding immigration began in all four parties in the late 1980s through multiple party congress initiatives (Välimäki 2017: 307-310). In addition to activism within parties, the above-described developments in the Finnish society were additional background forces urging parties to state their immigration policy goals. Another significant factor was the preparation for the renewal of the Aliens Act. The parties often directly referred to amendments they wanted to actualise in the new legislation.

Before the 1980s, it had principally been the Finnish governments and responsible authorities who had defined policies and decrees on immigration (Leitzinger 2008; Välimäki 2019). Despite the novelty of dealing with immigration politics in their policy papers, the parties were not, however, forced to formulate completely new rationales for their stances. In the previous decades, the parties had declared their views e.g. on minority issues, human rights and social policies. They had also previously stated their views on international cooperation. Parties drew explicitly or implicitly from their previous standpoints on these more conventional policy concerns when formulating views on immigration politics.

The parties' ideological backgrounds differ considerably. The National Coalition Party is a moderate right-wing party whose policy is largely based on principles of individualism and modern economic liberalism. The party's policy programme is value liberal and perceives equality of opportunity as the basis of its policies. However, there has also been support for value conservatism and patriotism within the National Coalition Party (Mickelsson 2015: 301-304; Vares 2017: 422-425). The Centre Party's policy programme is centre-rightist in economic terms and, with regard to values, a mixture of nationalistic, liberal and conservative elements (Centre Party 1986; Mickelsson 2015: 298-300).

The political programmes of both SDP and SKDL/VAS are largely based on modern left-wing ideas (Heywood 2012: 100-105) and value-liberalism, which is indicated in their support of an extensive public sector, tolerance, international cooperation and solidarity (SKDL/VAS 1986; SDP 1987). The previously radical communist agenda is largely diminished in SKDL/VAS, but its views on capitalism and market liberalism are still predominantly critical (Mickelsson 2015: 207-208, 219-221). Both SDP and SKDL/VAS have histories as advocates of social equality and the rights and standpoints of less well-off people and minorities in the Finnish society (e.g. SKDL/VAS 1979). SDP is a more mainstream left-wing party with policy programmes that stress a pragmatic stance towards capitalism and the social democratic virtues of securing Nordic-style welfare services and the rights and needs of the working class (Mickelsson 2015: 292-298; SDP 1987).

Labour migration – emerging issues of European integration

The parties did not perceive a need to recruit foreign workers actively through state measures. This stance resembled the objectives of the specialist committee appointed by the Ministry of Labour and the parties' voters (Advisory Board for Migration Affairs 1990: 12; Jaakkola 2009: 26). In addition, SDP and Finnish trade unions had already in the 1970s opposed the recruitment of foreign workers (Bergholm 2012: 412-413). The West European labour migration programmes of earlier decades were considered by the Centre Party as unsustainable regarding labour market and immigrant integration outcomes (Centre Party 1990a). During the recession of the early 1990s, when the level of unemployment was rising, parties were even less eager to propose an increase in foreign workers. However, the Centre Party and SDP thought that residence permits for foreign labour should, in principle, be easier to acquire (Centre Party 1989; SDP 1988). In addition, at least some members of SKDL/VAS favoured prepared amendments to the Aliens Act, which were thought to make residency in Finland easier for foreign workers (SKDL/VAS 1989b). The National Coalition Party (1989a) had a positive stance on the increased movement of labour across international borders:

In the next few years, due to the principle of reciprocity, Finland will relax the norms regulating labour mobility to the Western European level. -- These arrangements must be pursued through cooperation arrangements between the EC and the EFTA countries.

The turn of the 1990s marked a time of uncertainty as European integration – including the four freedoms of movement – was prepared to take a major step forward. The Nordic countries were considering application for membership in this broader and more comprehensive community (Arter 2008: 314-320). One of the planned freedoms was the movement of people within the prospective European Community (EC). The development seemed to be leading towards a common European labour market, which would be parallel and complementary to the common Nordic labour market that had been institutionalised in the 1950s. The National Coalition Party unreservedly supported joining the European labour

market (National Coalition Party 1989a), while other parties were more sceptical. According to the Centre Party (1989), the last word in labour policy should be left to the national parliaments. SDP, SKDL/VAS and the National Coalition Party stated that the minimum standards of working conditions and labour rights, as expressed in the Finnish legislation, should remain at the previous level (National Coalition Party 1989b; SDP 1991a; SKDL/VAS 1987, 1989c). SDP (1991a) speculated whether the social policies of other EC countries would have an uncontrollable influence on the development of Finnish social policies.

The differences in party positions reflect the divergent views on market liberalism, international economic cooperation and European integration. The common European labour market was a divisive question, especially for the Centre Party and SKDL/VAS, since they had reservations about accepting the potential supra-national decision-making and international agreements that would potentially influence national labour market performance, legislation and social policy. The chair of the Centre Party, Paavo Väyrynen (1988), stated explicitly that '[Finland] should not go into the common labour market'. The Centre Party and SKDL/VAS' members of parliament and these parties' supporters were also in 1994 divided on the issue of Finland's membership in the European Union (Paloheimo 1995, 2006: 269). The National Coalition Party, on the other hand, supported the West European orientation in Finnish foreign policy and market liberalism in economic policy (National Coalition Party 1989c; Vares 2017: 423-424). These ideological standpoints reflected in its relatively favourable stance towards the European labour market. Bucken-Knapp *et al.* (2014) and Odmalm (2011) have marked similar ideological backing for mainstream left- and right-wing parties' decisions concerning labour migration.

For the SDP, the issue was more complicated since the party was generally in favour of European integration but was also worried, as was SKDL/VAS (1990a), about its impact on the labour market and working life conditions that might influence their core supporters, the working class. SDP was concerned about the possible worsening of labour conditions and wanted labour legislation to remain a part of national decision-making (SDP 1991a). These concerns reflected the Finnish trade unions' interests of the present and later decades (Alho 2015; Bergholm 2018: 499-501). As a vocal advocate of trade unions, SDP proposed that their involvement should be guaranteed in the EEA and EC labour policy development to strengthen 'wage earners' promotion of interests' (SDP 1990a; SDP 1991a). Similar issues have remained concerns for the Finnish (and Swedish) left-wing parties and trade unions in the 2000s (Alho 2013, 2015; Bucken-Knapp *et al.* 2014). In the beginning of the 1990s, the Centre Party, SDP and SKDL/VAS wanted to ensure that there would not be two separate labour markets in Finland where foreign workers would concentrate on low-paid sectors where working conditions risked deterioration. According to the parties, citizens of other EC member states should be under similar legislation as that for Finnish nationals regarding working conditions and labour rights (Centre Party 1990a; SKDL/VAS 1991a). SDP (1991a) regarded it

reasonable for workers from the EC countries and their families to enjoy the same benefits as Finns – EC rules on social policy and working conditions do not seek to tie the hands of different countries to a certain range and level of services. They require that citizens of different member states may not be placed in differing position.

In the Nordic Council, the status and rights of Nordic workers and citizens in the prospective EEA and the EC negotiations were also considered relevant. For example, the Nordic Council's International Committee (1989) suggested:

Nordic countries would seek solutions in their EC cooperation to ensure equality for Nordic citizens and EC citizens while travelling in Western Europe and the same opportunities to move freely and apply for jobs in this area.

Finnish parties supported equal rights for Nordic and EC citizens, which would cover not only the rights of free movement and social rights of workers but also strengthen the basic and political rights of all foreigners in Finland (Centre Party 1990b; National Coalition Party 1989b; SDP 1988; SKDL/VAS 1989a). The aims of strengthening the legal position enjoyed by foreigners were connected to the preparation of Finnish legislation to meet the Council of Europe's membership criteria. The member countries were required to guarantee certain basic rights for foreigners in their jurisdiction (Lepola 2000: 129-144; Välimäki 2017: 309, 2019).

Parties considered the role of labour migration to be minor in addressing the labour shortage in Finland. The Centre Party, the National Coalition Party and SDP thought, in line with a committee appointed by the Ministry of Labour (Advisory Board for Migration Affairs 1990: 76-77), that the employment of Finnish nationals was the priority and that there would hardly be a significant number of migrants moving from EC countries to Finland, though intra-EC movement was thought to be able to ease shortages in particular sectors, such as construction (Centre Party 1990c; National Coalition Party 1989b; SDP 1991a). Here, the parties were continuing previous decades' protectionist objectives of securing the position of the native labour force against extensive international competition.

In addition to questions related to the European and Nordic labour markets, the final years before the dissolution of the Soviet Union caused immigration-related concerns in Finland similar to the calculations of other West European states (Favell 2008: 702-703). The Advisory Board for Migration Affairs (1990: 77-78) noted that there could be hundreds of thousands of potential migrants leaving the Soviet Union. Some of them were thought to need humanitarian assistance, but people searching for work and better living conditions were also considered to be possible migrants. The parties were concerned as well. SKDL/VAS (1990a) stated:

more and more people are coming to Finland from the neighbouring areas of the Russian Federation, from Estonia in hope of a better life – – this must not lead to unmanageable consequences in Finnish society.

SDP's (1990b) memo concluded that there might be a number of people moving from Eastern Europe to Finland due to increasing unemployment. The Finnish government even formulated a plan for receiving tens, or even hundreds, of thousands of people from the East (Kosonen & Pohjonen 1994: 514). However, the most worrying scenarios did not occur (Välimäki 2019).

Consensus on gradually expanding refugee policy

Most of the Finnish immigration-related political and public discussion of the period was related to asylum seekers and refugees (Lepola 2000; Pietikäinen 2000). The parties stressed, above all, Finland's duty and responsibility to help refugees and express solidarity. The ideas of humanitarianism and international responsibility, obligations and agreements were recurring themes in policy papers and intra-party discussions. These viewpoints have remained an essential part of the Finnish political discourse on immigration from the 1970s to the 2010s (Lepola 2000; Rajas 2014: 76; Välimäki 2017, 2019). For instance, the National Coalition Party stressed that 'Finland needs to take its continuous responsibility for solving the world's refugee situation and securing life in dignity for all the citizens of the globe' (National Coalition 1988). The Centre Party (1990a) stated:

Finland's immigrant policy needs to be developed by the principle of responsible internationality. Finland has committed itself to several international agreements which regulate human rights and relationships between men.

There were differences in how the parties viewed the most feasible way to assist refugees. The National Coalition Party declared that there were three options in Finland's refugee policy that could be attempted to affect the current situation. First, Finland should try

to influence through its foreign policy and policy in the United Nations the international system and other nations in a way that circumstances where refugees come about did not occur in the first place (National Coalition Party 1988; see also Pakolainen 1987).

The second measure to tackle refugee crises was to allocate development aid to decrease the number of refugees and alleviate the consequences of forced displacement. For the National Coalition Party, resettling refugees, let alone receiving asylum seekers to Finland, was the last possible measure to solve refugee crises. The Centre Party demonstrated Finland's role similarly. The party underlined Finland's responsibility to fight the forces causing refugees to flee. According to the Centre Party (1990a), Finland should allocate more financial support to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other international refugee-assisting organisations, and the annual number of resettlement refugees should be increased gradually. The Centre Party thought that asylum applications should always be considered; asylum seekers should have the right of appeal, and they should not be deported to a country where they could face persecution (Centre Party 1990a, 1990c; Pakolainen 1987).

Left-wing parties – SDP and SKDL/VAS – approached Finland's national policy role from a different angle. SDP (1988) highlighted the Finnish immigration policy's need for 'a profound modification'. The party also stressed the importance of 'humanitarian means' and that politically persecuted refugees should be favoured. SDP also wanted to see an increase in the number of resettlement refugees and considered financial support for international refugee organisations as an important policy for Finland. These have been,

and still were in the late 1980s, the main elements of the official Finnish refugee policy that emphasised foreign policy considerations, assisting refugees close to their countries of origin and action through international organisations (Välimäki 2019). SKDL/VAS also stressed the international and humanitarian nature of the refugee policy (SKDL/VAS 1990a). The party emphasised the importance of the need not to include economic calculations or other reservations and that the policy should 'be based on human rights'. According to SKDL/VAS, legislation should be put 'to the same level as other West European countries'. This meant for SKDL/VAS that the basic rights of refugees and asylum seekers needed to be better defined in the new legislation (SKDL/VAS 1989a).

Many remarks in the National Coalition Party and Centre Party documents portrayed immigrants merely as objects in Finland's policy. Different administrative measures were suggested, along with the importance of maintaining control in this policy realm (Centre Party 1990a; National Coalition Party 1988). This was also a common portrayal of immigrants in Finnish political (Lepola 2000; Rajas 2014: 73-75) and public (Raittila & Vehmas 2005: 24-26; Välimäki 2012: 272-277) discussions in the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s. In addition, SDP and SKDL/VAS approached refugees and asylum seekers as people or groups that should be administered and controlled through government policy and legislation. However, these parties – more often than the two centre-right parties – supported immigrants' needs, i.e. they were considered as subjects rather than objects. This approach was particularly evident when the parties dealt with issues concerning immigrant rights. Both SDP and SKDL/VAS supported improving immigrants' political rights and asylum seekers' legal protection during the asylum process. One of the most significant amendments the parties wanted in the new Aliens Act was asylum seekers' extended right of appeal (SDP 1988; SKDL/VAS 1989a). Other parties were also in favour of this amendment but did not discuss the issue as broadly as SKDL/VAS and SDP did (see also Lepola 2000).

SDP and SKDL/VAS also stood out in their way of considering fighting xenophobia and prejudices towards refugees and other immigrants to be an important task for politics (e.g. SKDL/VAS 1990a). SDP (1988) considered this goal to be derived from its labour movement background:

Finland's attitude towards refugees, migrants and foreigners is still too often based largely on an isolated society's prejudices. In the worst case, this comes up as racism and discrimination. – – For a global movement such as the labour movement it is natural to stress the significance of humane and unprejudiced foreigner policy.

Often, the party objectives gave the impression that asylum seekers and refugees were not considered permanent inhabitants of the Finnish society and that international protection was a temporary state of affairs, as most would return to their countries of origin. This line of thinking bears a resemblance to the political considerations in other Western European countries concerning the *Gastarbeiter* programmes of the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s (Castles & Kosack 1973). This reasoning – in addition to the fact that the level of immigration was still rather small – could explain why the immigrants' civic and social integration was not extensively discussed by the parties. The Finnish debate on immigrant integration

gained more speed when preparation for the first Integration Act began in the latter part of the 1990s (Lepola 2000; Rajas 2014; Saukkonen 2013; Välimäki 2017, 2019).

Little contestation within and between parties

Based on intra-party meeting proceedings, on matters of immigration politics, there was relatively little disagreement inside the parties. The inter-party struggle, on the other hand, and the need to highlight party lines on immigration issues emerged in the most pronounced manner before the 1991 parliamentary election. Publicity related to Somali asylum seekers ensured that these issues were on the agenda (Niemi 2016: 167-168). The Centre Party (1990d, 1991a), SDP (1990c, 1991c, 1991d) and SKDL/VAS (1990b) discussed, within their party bodies, how asylum seekers were a constant theme when campaigning and how some Finns held xenophobic beliefs. In addition, these parties' potential supporters were perceived to be divided on the acceptance of asylum seekers. This division within parties' sympathisers was also evident in the polls (Jaakkola 2009). After the election, SDP's executive committee concluded that 'it should be found out – what the basis of the wage earner social democrats' opposition to refugees is' (SDP 1991b).

The Centre Party (1990d, 1991b), SDP (1990c) and SKDL/VAS (1990b) members considered asylum politics to be a particularly difficult topic because they believed that the populist Finnish Rural Party would try to use existing anti-immigration attitudes to gain votes. Finnish Rural Party's success was, however, rather humble, since the party gained nine seats in the 1987 and seven seats in the 1991 parliamentary elections. Similar politicisation of asylum issues by right-wing populist contenders had already been carried out, e.g. by the Norwegian Progress Party and Swedish New Democracy, in the elections at the turn of the 1990s (Brochmann & Hagelund 2012b: 174-176; Dahlström & Esaiasson 2011) and also elsewhere in Western Europe (Taggart 2017). The issue was even discussed during the SKDL/VAS delegation's meeting with Gennady Yanayev, the Secretary of the Soviet Union Central Committee, in December 1990. SKDL/VAS put forth the idea of the Soviet Union signing the international refugee convention so that the Soviet Union would process Somali asylum applicants who were entering Finland via the Soviet Union (SKDL/VAS 1991c). SKDL/VAS justified this proposal by referring to the Finnish Rural Party, which was described as 'using the Somalis coming via the Soviet Union to agitate anti-refugee attitudes in Finland' (SKDL/VAS 1991c).

The parties did not explicitly criticise the immigration objectives of other parties, other than Finnish Rural Party's. Furthermore, they contested Finnish Rural Party's alleged xenophobic and anti-immigration sentiments but paid less attention to its concrete proposals. For instance, SKDL/VAS (1990a) concluded:

The right-wing forces have sparked hatred towards foreigners also in Finland. Racism always means a narrowing of civil rights and democracy. The Left Alliance is ready to cooperate with all citizens and movements defending human dignity and tolerance.

The party bodies of SDP and Centre Party proposed two different approaches to these dilemmas prior to the 1991 parliamentary election. The members of SDP's party government insisted on keeping the party line, based on international agreements, solidarity and tolerance and acting as a counterforce to the Finnish Rural Party (SDP 1990c). The SDP executive committee thought that this should be the policy 'even though a couple of votes might be lost' (SDP 1990d). The members of the Centre Party's party government's executive committee, on the other hand, thought that it would be better to give the immigration issue as little visibility as possible, be careful in taking firm stances and concentrate on other themes (Centre Party 1990d, 1991a). After the election, also SKDL/VAS's chair, Claes Andersson, estimated that the 'refugee question took votes from us, but we could not even contemplate a different kind of policy' (SKDL/VAS 1991b).

Conclusions

Findings of this study suggest that between 1986 and 1991 an agreement prevailed in the parties on Finland's responsibility to fight the causes and consequences of forced displacement, tackling anti-immigrant politics, ensuring the strengthening of the legal position of immigrants in Finland as well as not encouraging the extensive labour migration. Regardless of party, there was also a somewhat solid support for expansive refugee and immigrant policy, i.e. stressing the goals of increasing moderately the provision of international protection in Finland, support for international organisations that assist refugees and signing international agreements regarding the legal status of immigrants as well as accommodating these provisions in national legislation.

This consensus was influenced to some extent by common party principles. Consensual decision-making is a crucial part of the parties' constitutions and Finnish political culture. Finnish parties have also followed the Western European pattern of ideological convergence since the 1980s (Paloheimo 2008). The relative novelty of discussing immigration politics in their policy papers (Välimäki 2017) may have led the parties to think that it was reasonable not to intensify differences at the intra- or inter-party level. Moreover, parties' objectives were influenced by West European political trends, such as European labour market integration and the Nordic tradition of promoting tolerance, endorsing an expansive refugee policy often based on humanitarianism and immigrant policies based on social equality through widening the scope of basic rights and legal protection (Brochmann & Hagelund 2012a). The arguments based on securing national working life standards and the role of national decision-making were the most relevant in party discourses regarding foreign workers. Although the end of the Cold War made Western European integration relevant, the parties did not consider the intra-European labour market as a solution for the imminent labour shortage.

With regards to deepening the understanding of Finnish history of immigration and immigrant politics, the analysis indicates that the parties' objectives represented both continuity and revision to previous decades' politics. The policy of not encouraging

labour migration, discriminatory immigrant legislation, restrictive admission policy and providing only a few residence permits on grounds of international protection had been central elements of post-WWII Finnish politics (Kuosma 2004; Leitzinger 2008). The discourse of expansive refugee and immigrant rights policy objectives took a major step into the political agenda in 1986–1991, although also these approaches had predecessors. The expansion of refugee policy dates back to at least the 1970s Finnish government's decisions of receiving resettlement refugees from South America and South-East Asia. The strengthening of the legal position of foreigners – while being to a significant degree on the agenda due to preparation for Council of Europe membership – could arguably also be interpreted as a continuum of the Finnish parties' demands for social equality in the 1960s and 1970s (Mickelsson 2015; Välimäki 2019).

The analysis of intra-party debates and policy papers indicates that Finnish mainstream parties were conservative in their manner of relying, to a significant degree, upon their previously adopted ideologies and party-societal contexts when articulating their objectives on immigration politics. The two centre-right parties stood out in their emphasis of maintaining administrative control of immigration and slightly less expansive refugee policy. These goals of the Finnish centre-right resemble Gudbrandsen's (2010) findings on conservative governments' refugee policies in Norway (cf. Bale 2008; Bucken-Knapp *et al.* 2014). The National Coalition Party stressed market liberalism and pro-European integration stances, which were reflected in its solid support for the intra-European labour markets. Partisans of the left have been found to be more in favour of extending immigrant rights (Lahav 1997: 389) and expansive asylum policy (Odmalm 2011: 1074), and this was also evident in the Finnish case. However, SDP and SKDL/VAS wanted to make sure that the rights and position of the Finnish workers were also secured in the context of the common European labour market. Hence, the left-wing parties encountered to a certain degree a balancing act between rights-based and advocacy-based approaches to immigration.

In addition to the ongoing changes in societal and international contexts' influence on parties' stances, the expectations of possible supporters' views were equally important. The Finnish parties strived for resonance with the public views that arise from these mainstream parties' broad support base, which forces them to account for the differing preferences of various potential constituencies, i.e. to strive – to a considerable degree – for status as a *catch-all party* (Kirchheimer 1966) of immigration politics. This consideration may sometimes prevent mainstream parties from taking firm stances on immigration in order to not alienate some of the possible supporters (cf. Bucken-Knapp *et al.* 2014; Lahav 1997; Odmalm & Bale 2015; Välimäki 2017). However, the intra-party discussions of the Centre Party, SDP and SKDL/VAS prior to the 1991 parliamentary election imply that parties can at times also decide to ignore some of their potential sympathizers' views, such as perceived xenophobia, in order to keep the party line on immigration issues. The study of party politics on immigration should regularly consider this inter-play between ideological and strategical viewpoints. The studies analysing both intra- and inter-party debates would enable us to consider complicated discourses, views and influences and understand the struggles or unanimity inside and between political parties.

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Notes

1. There are 200 seats in the Finnish Parliament. In the 1987 parliamentary election, SDP gained 56 seats, the National Coalition Party 53 seats, the Centre Party 40 seats and SKDL/VAS 20 seats. In the 1991 parliamentary election, SDP received 48 seats, the National Coalition Party 40 seats, the Centre Party 55 seats and SKDL/VAS 19 seats (Statistics Finland 2017).
2. In 1990, the Finnish People's Democratic League's name was changed to the Left Alliance.
3. Asylum applications in Finland in 1986–1991: 23 in 1986, 49 in 1987, 64 in 1988, 179 in 1989, 2,743 in 1990 and 2,137 in 1991 (Finnish Immigration Service 2017; Leitzinger 2008: 217-221).

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