



**Ilkhom Khalimzoda** is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, specialising in intercultural communication and migration. Originally from Tajikistan, he has lived in Finland since 2008. His research focuses on media engagement and acculturation of Russian speakers in Finland and Latvia. Khalimzoda brings perspectives to discussions on migration and integration, and is known for his work on social cohesion and disinformation.

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Integration of immigrants

# IT IS NOT POSSIBLE WITHOUT COLLABORATION OF THE LOCAL POPULATION

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Integration cannot come from immigrants alone. Even if this crosses the cultural boundaries of the Finns, Ilkhom Khalimzoda, a Tajik migration researcher in Finland, believes that newcomers and immigrants should all move towards each other. Otherwise, everyone would just keep to themselves and segregation would continue.

*The interview was conducted by Dirk Bornschein\**

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***Bornschein: Please, let us speak first about the perceptions of the population. Are there social conflicts about migration in Finland and if so, where do they lie?***

**Khalimzoda:** Disagreements or social conflicts often arise in connection with immigration. In our perception, there are two sides, at least in this respect.

One is the more liberal, pro-immigration, and welfare state society, which sees the need for the new arrivals because the number of older people is increasing, the number of taxpayers is decreasing, and to maintain the welfare state, it is believed that Finland needs around 20,000 to 40,000 new people a year.

**Khalimzoda:** And that's what you hear from the federation of workers, different sectors of the economy, that they need labour. This is one side, but the other side, which is in power at the moment, use the slogan to control immigration, although that sounds really funny because there is no uncontrolled immigration, except for a small number of people who cross the border illegally and seek asylum, really a very small number.

If you ask the politicians, what they refer to with controlled immigration? They say that it refers to the number of immigrants we can take in and integrate into society. But it is a perennial question of what integration means and how long it takes.

This fear is no longer just a discourse, it has become a policy, and in this sense Finland is sending a very negative signal abroad and has already fallen briefly in the indices that measure the country's attractiveness for foreign labour.

***Are there fears that you can understand or that have a real basis in some way?***

**Khalimzoda:** That's a good question. I think the fear, which I perhaps understand, is that there is a perception that the new arrivals are mainly from the Middle East or from many other related countries. And that means that they are far from our cultural way of living.

It is a symbolic but also realistic threat that the population perceives. And to a very small extent I agree with that. The fear becomes real when you take in a large part of a population that practices a different culture or religion and when you make some mistakes at the same time: for example, when you don't build the necessary cohesion or interaction or the way of living together in the country, or when you reproduce the image of a threat. The people who come here then see how they are perceived and that they are unwanted and discriminated against.

**Khalimzoda:** As a consequence, they also don't make an effort to integrate into society to see what the Finnish way of living is like and - what is valued in this country - how they can serve this country, if we can generalise that. Without that process, they quickly go into their own communities, their own language groups, their own cultural and religious groups, and then they form an alternative society. Ultimately, a country that does not embrace the challenges of integration will consist of several alternative societies.

***In this understanding, we have to create societies without discrimination. How do we get there?***

**Khalimzoda:** First of all, the Finnish experience or practice of integration is very different from many other countries. In Finnish integration programmes, they prioritise employment. For this reason, they offer a three-year integration programme where they teach you the language and then the re-education, whatever you need in order to be employed.

But until you reach the level of education that enables you to take up a job, you receive social welfare. You can concentrate on your integration studies. And the well-being of the people arriving is also part of completing integration. This also has certain disadvantages, e.g. it is assumed that only the newcomers have to integrate, although all the scientific literature says that it is a two-way integration.

On the other side, some sections of the population also believe that integration means assimilation, where you slowly give up the practice of having the language, the culture or whatever. This is something totally different.

***How successful has integration into the labour market been?***

**Khalimzoda:** There have been budget cuts, but they have a very comprehensive system with social workers and counselling guidance to help them figure out what they want to do for the rest of their lives. It's been successful so far, unlike in the Baltics, as Finland has paid and covered all the costs for people while they are studying, while they are learning Finnish, while they are getting a profession or being educated for the profession that they already have. After these 3 years, they are expected to start their professional life. I think this policy is very unique and it's been very successful.



**Khalimzoda:** There have been studies in Finland where thousands of CVs or applications with immigrant and native names were sent to companies, and you could clearly see how foreign-sounding names were immediately disqualified from even being invited for an interview. So what the company is systematically looking for is not a professional, regardless of background, but a professional with a Finnish name and the relevant credentials. Besides, in Finland, they have a very comprehensive education system, integration system, but when it comes to promoting immigrant-led organisations or people or experts or community leaders, they might be a bit slow to pick up.

**Khalimzoda:** The problem they have is that the immigrants don't have much contact with the local population. There's not so much involvement of the local population now. In a nutshell, my wife went through the Finnish integration programme, I haven't. So I don't speak the language at a very advanced level, but my wife does. And she did it in nine months because it's a very intensive programme, she studied every day for five, six hours. What you also get is the opportunity to intern or work in a day care in other institutions. There is this difference between who is eligible for the integration programme and who is not. I am not because I have come to this country as a high-skilled worker, so it's assumed that I have to have a work contract already and that's the basis on which my residence permit is granted. But not everybody can do the integration programme, so that is the difference. And if you can't do this integration programme, like me, living here for seven years and working in English as part of the academic sector, the language becomes a big challenge, because Finnish is not a language you can learn here and there, easily.

***And the major problems that skilled workers have in learning the language then burden their integration into society, don't they?***

**Khalimzoda:** The integration programmes shouldn't just be available for refugees. I understand the logic that there is this unemployment and that you get the integration programmes through unemployment, but I think it's really a vague version of the integration programme and that this programme should be open to everyone who comes to this country.

I would be really happy if I could join an integration programme and learn Finnish during my summer, but there is no such programme, so I have to make an effort to learn Finnish and try to understand the society, make more friends and socialise, but it's my very own effort.

*... And not everybody...*

**Khalimzoda:** Not everyone is interested in making this effort, and especially when you consider that Finns are culturally very reserved and not easily approachable when it comes to making friends and socialising. Then it becomes even more difficult to be part of society, and it is always better, easier and more comfortable to be part of one's own immigrant community.

*With consequences in the long run...*

**Khalimzoda:** Yes, this leads to misunderstandings, less contact and more bubbles within society that don't understand or interact with each other. This doesn't mean that they don't interact on the street, but they don't interact intellectually. There is no dialogue. There is no empathy for the way of living and thinking and the exchange about it. I have many positive impressions of Finland, but one of the negative ones is that many people I have met see the Finnish way of living or the Finnish reality as the only reality of the world. For example, not everyone is thinking about waste reduction, or not everyone is thinking about equality the way Finns think.

And I think that paralyses us because we are such an educated nation and so forward thinking, but we don't realise that there are so many cultures, lifestyles and priorities. I think people need to let go of the idea that the Finnish reality is everyone's reality.

***This might be seen as a typical experience in societies getting more and more multicultural?***

**Khalimzoda:** Yes, that's the case in many countries, the systems are completely different, we do things completely differently. There should also be a scope in the bureaucracy and in the economy how you take things from a very small community level to the larger society. Having a rule is fine, but it should be explained, or you need to find a way to maneuver more options, not just ABCD answers, but you need to offer more different options and find ways to bring people closer together, bring the academic bubble together with the politicians, the business community, the academia, we're not used to that.

***That has been very intensive... Before we turned to the topic of integration, we started with the perceptions of the population. Can you deepen these perceptions a little bit? What do liberals think about the more nationalists and the other way around?***

**Khalimzoda:** I think what the liberals think about the right wing is that with their conservative values they are taking the country back into isolation, stopping immigration and increasing social conflicts within the society, tightening the economy and destroying the welfare system. And what the more centrist or what right-wing parties think about the liberals is that they are increasing the national debt enormously. They are out of control in terms of immigration and they are ruining the whiteness or the national identity of the country.

***Is there still an opportunity for open discussions, in the sense of the necessary culture of debate? Or do you think that the positions have hardened and there is no more movement between the two sides?***

**Khalimzoda:** I see the problem more in the context of politics, because what we see is an ongoing debate that sometimes is toxic. Since the right-wingers have been in power, they have been doing everything they promised: They're tightening up immigration rules, citizenship rules, language tests, citizenship tests, and shortening the waiting period. What is significant is that all these measures are being implemented very, very quickly. So there is a culture of debate, but in practice the measures are being implemented too quickly.

***How do you explain the deep roots of the immigration debate in your country? You spoke of the need to survive economically, to finance the welfare state and so on. Is there a deeper historical background to this immigration debate?***



**Khalimzoda:** I don't see any historical trauma in the context of Finland that has had consequences for attitudes towards immigration. Finland has been a country of emigration, even today, I think if I'm not mistaken, there are almost 15,000 people leaving the country. But we don't see it because there are about 20,000 people coming in. We don't see it like in the Baltic States, for example. They've been occupied and re-occupied.

Immigration to Finland only started at a noticeable level from the 90s onwards, when the Soviet Union collapsed, because all the students from Somalia were studying in the Soviet Union. After the collapse, they attempted to immigrate to Finland and also Russians started moving to Finland. Before that we had the asylum seekers fleeing the Yugoslavian war and in the 80s, we had the Iranians fleeing from the Iran-Iraq war, but those were quotas. In 1999, with the financial crisis, the situation for immigrants became much worse. But that was it. After 2000, the situation started to improve steadily.

**Khalimzoda:** Finnish populism is very different from Latvian populism, I would say. And the policies are still very liberal, very accommodating, we are welcoming.

***But, as you told me, this has changed. In your opinion, what are the reasons?***

**Khalimzoda:** It is true, the situation is deteriorating at the moment. As I understand it, there are three reasons, because of the economic situation in the country, and the economy has always been the number one reason, I think. The second is the changing landscape in the whole of Europe. Finland has been watching very closely what's happening in Sweden and what's happening in Germany. And the third is that there are very small incidents, for example, of people from immigrant backgrounds getting involved in some kind of crimes.

**Khalimzoda:** But these amounts are really limited, but still it resonated so much with the population that after these incidents we had three right-wing motivated attacks and injuries or killings of people with an immigrant background, but they don't get the same resonance.

***What are the interests of the political parties, not only the governmental parties, the opposition too, related to migration?***

**Khalimzoda:** Yes, it's very blurry now, because the centre and the right wing have joined forces they now rule the country. The previous government was more liberal, which made Finland more attractive. The current government is pushing forward numerous measures to limit immigration. Because there's also the perception that the social benefit or the welfare system is being abused. No one is talking about the war in Ukraine and the financial drain it has caused in Finland, but it's easier to blame immigration and cut the integration budget.

**Khalimzoda:** At the same time, they are also cutting down the welfare state for the most powerless or weak, they are cutting student benefits, housing allowances. It starts with immigration, but they cover even more aspects.

***Let's talk about some other actors. The media, for example. How does the media react to all of what is going on? And why do you think that is the case?***

**Khalimzoda:** Well, I have a very positive perception of the media in Finland and how they depict the situation at the moment, starting with the public broadcasters. I think they do a really great job in criticising or challenging or giving a very neutral point of view and covering all the events in society without censorship. That's why their budget has been also cut by the ruling party. And there are some yellow press newspapers that are known to be anti or less objective or more provocative. They continue with their work in that direction, but there are still really high standards of ethics and control.

**Khalimzoda:** For example, many of the media cannot publish the names or the nationality or anything that identifies the social category of the person involved in, for example, in criminal cases. This is also done in order to protect the minority populations, because if something happens, the first question is: Who is it? Is it an immigrant? I don't see many problems in the media landscape, but there is one aspect that I might want to tackle, which is that the media, of course, is the conveyor of the political discourse that is going on. And the political discourse is very toxic at the moment, and conveying this toxicity, I think it's a phenomenon that influences all of us living in Finland, who want to be part of the society, who want to contribute or be a good citizen in the society. The media, they are quite liberal, but they carry the toxic discourse. Because they have to be the media and reflect the political and social situation.

***In the context of this media discourse, what role does the Academy play as a counterweight?***

**Khalimzoda:** Some of them reacted in terms of the need, the skilled workers and the aspects related to technology, biology, all the other sciences that they need, foreign skills that they need. Some of them made it clear and challenged the government, but not many. I may have a bias in relation to academia, being here, but I think academia plays a very positive role in producing knowledge, but what it lacks is the communication of that knowledge. What we have clearly seen now is the current government's lack of interest in knowledge, so they are basically cutting funds for academia as well, they are no longer relying on the knowledge produced at universities or in the special groups that they have designed themselves.

Finland is known as a very civilised society, where social institutions, government institutions really work hand in hand with the knowledge they get from academia. They rely on evidence-based decisions, but now that doesn't seem to be the case anymore.

***Could you be more specific. Which are the major topics of academia doing research in the topic of migration?***

**Khalimzoda:** In the topic of immigration, I would say one of the most important topics is well-being of immigrants. Employability will be another one. I think these are the main topics if I look into our profile at university.

***And racism as a research topic?***

**Khalimzoda:** Yes, it is. It is on the rise. It's turning to be one of the important topics, but there is resistance to it as well. It is because people in Finland think that Finland cannot be compared with the phenomena taking place in the United States. And they perceive that Finland is not a colonial state. And thirdly, they think that the Finnish society is already a good enough place to be.

**Khalimzoda:** On the other hand, it is interesting that some Russian speakers, who make up 3% of the population, know and believe that they have dominated the country, which lead to Russian speakers developing a superiority complex, which is why they tend to treat other immigrant groups badly. So it's also about the immigrant community and the mixing of all the other nationalities within the immigrant community. This discrimination is an everyday practice, unfortunately, it's part of the society. But what I meant before is the systematic and structural discrimination.

***One of the main changes in the European party systems in recent years has been the rise of well, so-called right-wing populist parties. Often less global with more national values and politics. What do you see as reason for this rise of populist parties in Finland?***



**Khalimzoda:** Yeah, it's a difficult question. I think the rise can be explained first of all by the regional landscape. For example, as I said, Finland is looking at its big brother, Sweden. And that's been the case in Sweden. And it's been the case in the Netherlands. It's, and perhaps I'm wrong, it's been the case in France or in Germany.

Secondly, in periods of turmoil like this, where we have a war in Ukraine, and a war in Gaza and wars in many other parts of the world. Economic restraint, when the pockets are smaller, I think the values become more important. The third reason is, that many immigration scholars would not emphasise, but I think that there might be also the cases of bad examples of immigrant led or caused problems that are occurring in Europe. For example, the radicalisation, rising crime rates and more isolation and marginalisation. I think that also plays its role in it.

***What is the relationship between immigration and democracy for you? And how do you understand democracy in this context?***

**Khalimzoda:** Well, my understanding keeps evolving. So, when I think about the previous question and the role that times of turmoil play for society and politics, democracy is also being challenged. I have been told about democracy since the day I came to Europe, in 2008. Imagine being told about democracy, and of course, I value democracy, I like it. But when I take a step back and look at democracy, then I'm not sure where it's going anymore. For example, populism is something that challenges democracy.

**Khalimzoda:** When you don't want active participation from all parts of the society, then I think populism is not challenging democracy, in fact it's against democracy. And if you exclude people, if you systematically discredit them, that's against democracy. So, I think in the last few years I've had a growing sense of how democracy has been used or abused.

***Could you please tell me how you would define populism in this context?***

**Khalimzoda:** The classical one is a group of people against elites, corrupt elites, right, that's one element of populism and saving the nation, preserving the values and therefore opposing the foreigners, that's the second very important component and I think I'm in line with these two components of populism which makes it populism in a way.

*From your perspective, do you have recommendations for other European countries or the EU on how to handle migration?*

**Khalimzoda:** Yeah, first and foremost, I would be very precise because the phenomenon is very complex. You have immigrants from very vulnerable groups, even criminals. So it's like in any other society. I would have strict rules within the country to manage immigration. By strict I mean laws, punishments, which are really light here in Finland. And that's been criticised a lot. I understand this recovery or re-teaching or re-educating model of punishment, but the reaction could be quicker and sometimes this is not good enough.

**Khalimzoda:** So, in summary, I would be very careful with immigration. I would re-educate, re-train everybody involved in the immigration process, starting with the border patrol agents, because I've worked with them, and their perception is that immigrants are a threat. But this person could be a very, very vulnerable person, or victim of human trafficking, sex trafficking or whatever, or he's fleeing war. I would be really compassionate at the borders, in the way we deal with things and the way we discuss them, so that our language should be inclusive, welcoming and empathic, but within our different instruments of government. And we need really strong channels of communication with immigrants, communities and community leaders to hear their wants and needs and how they want to integrate into society and what they're complaining about.

***Finland seems to be very liberal. But you want them to be stricter. But then they have to change the basics of their society in order to adapt society to immigration.***

**Khalimzoda:** Yeah, it's good to illustrate what I meant. For example, now it seems that the government is really strengthening or tightening the rules. For example, they are increasing the citizenship time. I don't think that's in touch with the reality. It's not good in terms of strictness. But they want to introduce a citizenship exam. I agree with that. Because citizenship should be something that you know.

**Khalimzoda:** For example, by living here for five years, you have to know things, you have to be committed, you have to prove that this can be given to you, it's a nationality, right? But I do not agree with tightening the rule that someone is deported if they remain unemployed for three months or longer. It's ridiculous, it's out of touch with reality, because everyone living in this country as an immigrant, knows that if you lose your job, it can take at least six to nine months to find a new one, and they have data for that, they have proven evidence. That's what I meant when I said they don't listen to the data. If you're an immigrant dependent on an immigrant work visa and you don't find work within three months, you are deported.

***Ilkhom Khalimzoda, thank you for this interesting talk.***

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