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Current confrontation on immigration

# WE NEED TO BE PATIENT FOR HISTORIC CHANGE

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Finnish migration researcher Pasi Saukkonen regrets the increasing distance between academic research and politics in his country. The system of academia gaining merit does not value participation in the public debate and, above all, migration academics do not understand how politics making works.

*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 immigration in your country, and if so, where do they lie?***

**Saukkonen:** In Finland as well as in many other countries migration has become a hot topic during the last few decades. There is a quite clear tension between a certain kind of consciousness that Finland, because of its demographic development, needs immigration. We need labour force from outside of Finland. And at the same time, we have a clear segment of society that is against immigration. And this segment is strongly concentrated under a certain party, the Finns party, that in the most recent elections got 20% of the vote and are participating in the coalition government that we have at the moment. This party was very successful in getting their views on migration very clearly on the government program.

### ***Are you talking about asylum migration?***

**Saukkonen:** Asylum migration has always been a relatively marginal phenomenon in Finland. There were two occasions where we have received more asylum seekers, first in the early 1990s, where Somalis living in the Soviet Union arrived to Finland seeking refuge. The second time, in 2015, some 30,000, mainly Iraqi young men, decided to come to Finland. In terms of sheer numbers, it has not been a big issue, but it has a big symbolic value. All the parties in the current government are conservative parties, but also their policies are very right-wing. The Finns party is, in contrast to many populist nationalists in other countries where they have a somewhat left-leaning agenda, driving right-wing economic and social policies.

Finland has traditionally been very much a country of political consensus, where the differences between the major parties were not that big. Most parties could easily participate in a coalition government with other parties. Nowadays that is no longer the case.

***So, this consensus-oriented Finland, you know, is in risk in a certain sense. And if so, why is that?***

**Saukkonen:** The last three coalition governments in Finland, they have had, let's say more polarising policies than governments before them. So, now we have a right-wing government. The previous one was quite clearly a left-wing government, and before that we had another right-wing government. So, there is a certain kind of pendulum moving back and forth. And I think it started because of the financial crisis in 2008. And, also with the breakdown of Nokia's dominance in the mobile phone market. Nokia was very important for the Finnish economy, and so those two things and the aging demographics have meant that the public finances in Finland have become more vulnerable than what it was before. Right-wing parties have started to pursue more neoliberal policies than they did before. As a reaction the left-wing parties have moved leftward.

***Could you explain the composition of the Finnish political left?***

**Saukkonen:** After the Second World War, Finnish political left was divided into politically quite moderate social democrats and a more radical left that was strongly dominated by communists. Towards the end of the 20th century, the extreme left became weaker, and the social democratic party gained a strong, even central, position. The far left is nowadays organized under the party called the Left Alliance trying to combine the traditional grassroots support and the preferences of young, educated voters in the big cities with their more identity based policy. The third party in the left is the Greens that in European comparison has traditionally also been quite moderate but took a turn towards more radical and more identity-based politics in 2019. In terms of election results, that was not a good move. So, the left political landscape is quite varied, and dynamic.

*You started the question about the societal conflicts surrounding immigration with the composition of the party landscape. And you emphasized that, in your opinion, immigration was not massive.*

**Saukkonen:** Yes, there is perhaps another detail that I would like to mention in this context. In Estonia, a few years ago, a very conservative, nationalist party called EKRE, with a strong anti-immigration programme won the national elections, even though there were hardly any immigrants in the country. Finland is not as extreme a case as Estonia. But we can still see a similar kind of migration as it really is and migration as people think that it is.

**Saukkonen:** In Finland, the immigrant population is very regionally concentrated. One half of them live in the Helsinki region. In the other big cities, the proportion of immigrants is already much lower. And if we look at the latest national elections, the share of support for this radical, right-wing nationalist, populist party, the Finns Party was almost without exception higher in those cities where the share of the immigrant population was lower. People vote based on the propaganda of the Finns Party, which is pushing this view, that immigrants cause problems in the Finnish society and that crime rates, are an example of that.

And therefore, I think that the social conflict we are talking about, is more in people's minds than in the Finnish society as such.

***How can you explain this phenomenon? Are there collective traumas or belief systems at play?***



**Saukkonen:** Well, I defended my doctoral dissertation in 1999, and it was a book about the concept of national identity and a comparison between Finland and the Netherlands. I lived in the Netherlands for many years in the 1990s. While preparing my dissertation, I read a lot about Finnish political history, about nation-building and different kinds of discourses about Finnish nationality. And what became clear to me was that the Finnish understanding of the Finnish nation was very much based on the idea of homogeneity.

That Finland is a homogeneous country, that although we have some minorities, the truly Finnish ones are Finnish-speaking, white-skinned, Evangelical Lutheran, even united by a shared ancestry in the remote past.

***Do you see a connection to racism?***

**Saukkonen:** Yes, yes, there is definitely a connection. In Finland the homogeneity of the nation was also promoted as an asset, an advantage. It was the reason why Finland had both kept independence during the war and climbed from a poor country to one of the richest ones in the world in the 20th century.

And if you think like that about homogeneity as a crucial advantage, then it is very easy to think that immigration is a real threat, that it creates differences that we do not like in this country.

Of course we can find similar ways of defining the nation in many other countries as well, but I would say that in the Finnish case the emphasis of national unity and homogeneity is exceptionally strong.

***If I understand you correctly, that might have been good and right for the past, but not for the future of the country?***

**Saukkonen:** That's the point.

***I would like to ask you about specific players, for example the academia. What are the topics that academia is working on in the field of migration?***

**Saukkonen:** How should I put this? In 2007-2008 I was first the vice-chairperson and then the chairperson of The Society for the Study of Ethnic Relations and International Migration. Already then there was a certain tension between those who wanted to carry out, let's say, as objective research as possible, and those who had quite strong an activist agenda, very critical towards public authorities, for example. When I was the chairperson, I tried to strengthen the scientific and politically neutral nature of the studies in this field. And I lost badly.

**Saukkonen:** So, if we look at what has happened since then, it has been exactly the opposite of what I would have liked to happen. The activist agenda has grown into a powerful position, strongly emphasizing anti-racism, anti-colonialism, feminism, intersectionalism and so on. Which are all good things in themselves. I have nothing against that in principle, but this approach has become all too dominant in this field. And people who want to study issues related with migration, as I like to do, as objectively and neutrally as possible, we are nowadays only some dispersed individuals. This description of the course of events is obviously my subjective view, but that is also what you asked.

***From your personal point of view, what are the consequences for society and the role of science in society when you see what is happening?***

**Saukkonen:** I think that the most important consequence is that these two societal spheres, that of policymaking and that of academic research, are growing increasingly apart. There is even less interest in mutual interaction than previously was the case. Therefore, we are lacking proper public discourse on matters related to immigration or integration. Politicians tend to be quite ignorant about what is really happening, and a big part of academia does not understand how policymaking works. One reason behind this development is of course also that the academic world has grown isolated from society because of its contemporary system of gaining merit. You must focus strongly on publishing in international peer-reviewed academic journals. So, participating in public debate is not valued. And I think that's a really sad development. We are very few, at least in this country, who are trying to act differently.

***Can you give me an example of the orientation that you have just criticized?***

**Saukkonen:** In Finland, for example, the proportion of people who have received international protection in Finland, as asylum seekers or refugees, is 10 to 15 per cent of the total immigrant population. That is clearly a minority. But both the nationalist populists and much of academic research make this segment look bigger than it really is. In fact, really many of those that have moved to Finland, have come for family reasons.

So even though we have received larger amounts of asylum seekers only twice in the last 30 years, image of refugees in the public discourse is much stronger, much bigger than that.

***And that creates a gap.***

**Saukkonen:** That creates a gap, that creates social tensions and prejudices and all that kind of stuff.

***According to you, what is the relationship between immigration and democracy? And how do you understand democracy in this context?***

**Saukkonen:** I'm also a political scientist, asking what my idea of democracy is a big question.

Well, I see democracy as the ability of people to influence the public decisions that affect their own lives. And in a representative democracy, the most important instrument to achieve this goal is elections. And the problem with democracy is majority rule, which of course always means that minorities have problems in getting their voices heard and their interests promoted.

**Saukkonen:** British sociologist Anthony Giddens called a society a bordered power container, in which it is somehow very clear who is inside and who is outside, who is one of us and who is one of them. International mobility strongly challenged this notion of society. The borders have become porous, and not just the borders of Europe, but also the borders of different countries. People come and go, and the society is in constant flux. And then the questions such as who's inside and who's outside, and who's one of us and who's one of them, and what rights do different people have living in Finland, for example, arise? It has become much more complicated than it used to be. We should really take this complexity seriously. As I see it, and I am very sorry about this, it is that the dominant discourse of today is that of the populist nostalgic right-wing nationalists who would like to go back to the world of bordered power containers.

***What can we do to cushion this process of historic change?***



**Saukkonen:** Another difficult question. One thing that comes to my mind is that we need to be patient. The mindset of people must change, and that kind of change does not happen easily. So, the perspective has to be long-term, not a simple, short-lived project, but an enduring agenda.

That is one side. On the other hand, much of the public debate, which is to some extent in opposition to this nostalgic nationalist view, is trying to convince people by saying that they are wrong. The focus is on the most vocal representatives of populism. But that is probably not the right way of achieving results because they hardly will change their mind. We should rather focus on those people who are somehow there in between, still hesitating how to orientate towards the world of today and the societies of today.

***According to you, how should your country deal with immigration? And why is that?***

**Saukkonen:** Rather than immigration, I actually prefer to talk about mobility. And mobility is both international and domestic. But what it means is that I am trying to change the way people think about people and societies, from the idea that we are very place bound, that we have roots somewhere, to accepting that it is quite normal for human beings to be on the move. Mobility is not something that we should view as strange or exceptional or something that is a threat, but rather that the stable population is the exception. And I think this view could help us to change our way of looking at people and societies in a more future-oriented way. The fact that mobility is natural doesn't mean that we must accept everything, I am definitely not a defender of a completely free mobility that would have disastrous effects. Mobility must be regulated somehow but from the basis of seeing it first as a natural phenomenon.

***From your Finnish perspective, do you have recommendations for other European countries? Something other countries can learn from Finland?***

**Saukkonen:** I think the most important lesson Finland can give is the focus on solving problems, political pragmatism, even though also this country has become much more ideological and polarised in recent years. So we are, in a way, also facing the risk of losing this pragmatic attitude. Finland used to be quite good at that. It was a kind of a forced pragmatism during the Cold War because the Soviet Union was truly a threat. There was a need not to disagree too much and to have one voice vis-à-vis our eastern neighbour.

**Saukkonen:** The Finnish minority policy as such has maybe also not been that bad. Finland is a bilingual society, we have Swedish speakers and Finnish speakers, and both are official languages. We also have two officially recognized national churches, the Evangelic Lutheran Church and the Orthodox Church of Finland. The indigenous people, the Sami, have cultural autonomy in their domicile region. The position of other minorities also gradually improved in the end of the 20th century. So generally speaking the Finnish way of dealing with ethnic and cultural differences has been quite successful in guaranteeing cultural rights while not threatening the integrity of the society.

***That's interesting, a very national view on one hand and minority policies on the other.***

**Saukkonen:** Right, there is indeed a kind of a paradox, a strange relationship between the quite liberal, inclusive minority policy and the conservative, and exclusive, notion of the Finnish nation.

***In the case of a dialogue on migration issues in Finland, what should be the goal of this dialogue?***

**Saukkonen:** The first goal, and quite a challenge, is to organize this dialogue in such a way that people who disagree with one another are participating in it. I've been working in this field for more than 20 years, and I hardly ever have had to deal with people who disagree with me. And that is truly a problem.

**Saukkonen:** We know that there are people in this society who strongly disagree with, for example, the liberal and open-minded concept of Finnishness but they do not participate in these events. At the other extreme the same thing is happening among the populist nationalists. So how do you get people out of these bubbles and to join true dialogues?

If one succeeds in this once, the next step would be, to make it continuous, they have to meet a second time and a third time and so on. Only then things might start changing. That is enough to strive for.

***Pasi Saukkonen, thank you for sharing your ideas.***

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