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Samuli Salminen is a researcher at Suomen Perusta, where he focuses on the economic impact of migration in Finland. He holds two Bachelor's degrees in social sciences as well as statistics and has experience in analysing public finances and social services related to immigration.



WE USED TO BE UNITED IN A VERY EQUAL SOCIETY

Simo Grönroos criticises a political system in which the opinion of the majority is no longer heard. Immigration costs too much. And it would help everyone if people were supported by the government close to home with what they need.

Bornschein: *All countries hold common belief systems, or historical experiences that often still have an impact on the society, sometimes traumatic ones. Which do you consider to be the most important ones for Finland?*

Simo Grönroos: Well, I think Finland is a small nation that has been under Swedish rule for six or seven hundred years and then we were under Russian rule for a hundred years and we had to fight against the Soviet Union. So I think Finland is a small nation that has had to fight for its independence, like David against Goliath, that would be one perspective for looking at what it means to be a Finn.

Samuli Salminen: It is common knowledge that the Finns were really united because we had a common enemy. There are still heated discussions about the Civil War, but basically the nation was united during the Second World War. It's like a defining experience to be a Finn.

Did I understand correctly that a high degree of cohesion is important for both of you, maybe an equal society?

Grönroos: Yes, and a very equal society. Finland was one of the first countries to give women the right to vote at the beginning of the last century. We have been a very, very, very equal state in that sense and an ethnically united nation. We didn't have any kind of ethnic clashes or problems like that. National unity has been an important source of meaning for us. And of course the religion, 30 years ago almost everybody was member of the Lutheran Church.

Do you see this unity being jeopardised by immigration, and if so, where exactly do the conflicts lie?

Grönroos: Well, the situation is very, very worrying. For a long time, Finland was a country whose population emigrated. But now Finland has taken in immigrants and their numbers have been increasing year by year. In 2023, 70,000 people moved to Finland, a very, very high number. We have only 5.5 million inhabitants and 10 years ago 300,000 had a migration background, now the number of people with a migration background has increased to 500,000, so 10 per cent of the total population. You see this especially in the capital region, in Helsinki with 18 or 19 per cent, and in two other cities, Espoo with about 25 per cent and Vantaa. In some neighbourhoods you don't even recognise anything, you look at the people who live there, you look at the shops, ethnic stores, barber shops with more foreign languages than Finnish. It's too much for a country of our size.

Salminen: What has changed, let's say during the past 10 or 15 years, is the composition of immigration. 30 years ago, they came from Sweden, Russia or Estonia, culturally close to us. Now they arrive from outside of Europe, culturally quite far away, from the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

But how do you think people are coping with immigration?

Grönroos: In a recent survey before the European elections, border security was mentioned first, and this is related to immigration, while the issue of the labour force was considered less important. Then we are worried about the gang violence in Sweden. Our streets in Helsinki are no longer safe anymore, especially for young people.

Salminen: In another European survey, when asked "My country accepts too many immigrants", 80 or 90 per cent of people around European countries agreed, including the Finns.

That sounds as if the integration of the new refugees has made no progress.

That's the way it is. And there are several reasons. Most of them do not have the necessary skills to be fully integrated into the labour market. They can't find work, or find it very irregularly. And, of course, we must not forget that they are culturally very different, for example in the position of women, who tend to stay at home. In a way, they are even encouraged to do so, because according to the general understanding of multiculturalism here, people are helped to preserve their own culture and language, alongside the Finnish language, of course. The sometimes generous social benefits also make people more passive. The second generation of immigrants also does not do well in school. However, this is partly due to the low socio-economic status of the parents, which is inherited.

So from your point of view, the benefits of refugee migration for the shortage of skilled labour are very limited?

Salminen: Several studies have concluded that immigration costs us much more than we get back. So it's not good for Finnish society either. And if you look at the crime statistics, many immigrant groups commit a lot more crimes than the native population. This is bad for our security and of course people in Finland were used to trusting their neighbours. It was safe here. But with immigration, our security and the feeling that we are all in the same boat decreases. The different ethnic, cultural and religious groups destroy the unity of society. And the greater the diversity, the more supporters it has. Diverse societies tend to have more ethnic conflicts, even civil wars. I think, immigration is bad for public finances, leads to more insecurity and divides our society. At this rate, the Finnish population will be a minority in the big cities within a few decades.

It makes me think of the fate of the North American Indians. There are many examples of what can happen when immigration exceeds the native population. But much of the private sector, especially the big corporations, is not aware of these facts.

Where do you think their interests lie?

Salminen: Two reasons: It is obvious that they need cheap labour. If you want to start a business and need to hire people, you can either find Finnish people, whom you should pay more money, or you find someone who does the same job for less money. That's the way a market economy works. But of course the big companies have realised that it's cheaper for them to promote more open immigration. You don't have to raise the wages if you know that you can hire the waitresses or cleaning ladies from Bangladesh or India or Africa. That's just one reason, of course.

More importantly, although it is little talked about, the corporations want to import new consumers to grow the market and revenues. Every person who moves to Finland or Europe needs a mobile phone, needs a house, clothes. More people means more business. So, the overall answer here is, cheap labour and more consumers, which is why big corporations promote immigration. They are less interested in security, the interests of the taxpayer or social capital.

That sounds to me like a criticism that could come from the political left

Salminen: Of course you can ask why the left is not interested in this, an interesting question. We have been doing very well economically for a very long time. People think we have more money than we actually do. They want to help the whole world, share all our wealth and are not so interested in the consequences. And of course, perhaps the biggest reason, is that most immigrants tend to vote for more left-wing parties.

What consequences do these conflicts have for the political landscape in Finland?

Politically, Finland is very much polarised. It's basically the Finns Party, which we are affiliated with, against every other party in the field of immigration. Basically, all the others are very pro-immigration. Of course, the Finns Party and no one else is against highly educated people. But this is a minority within the immigrant population, maybe five to ten per cent, who fall into this category. Yet it is this kind of immigration that is quite often promoted in the media.

But, in the current situation, there is one big exception to this polarisation in the political field, there is more support against immigration when it comes over our eastern border. Russia, as you probably know, has weaponised immigration and migrants, sending them across border, together with Belarus. That's something of an exception. If the same immigrants came over our western border, the Finnish Party would be the only party against this kind of immigration, even though the immigrants would be exactly the same people.

When we talk about immigration, we always have to take into account the question of integration. How successful have been the public measures to integrate migrants.

Grönroos: Well, there is the aforementioned violence from street gangs.

Salminen: Second-generation immigrant youth, they are children of immigrants, children who were born here. Most of them receive some kind of social benefit, much, much more than native Finns of the same age. And depending on the immigrant group, it's many, many times that amount. So, the worst case are children of immigrants coming from the Middle East, more than half of them receive social benefits, although they were born here and went to the same schools, but by the time they reach 20 years, about 60 per cent of them received social benefits, while at the same time, about 10 to 15 per cent of native Finns received it. Those are the figures that I published, based on the official statistics. Moreover, if you look at the results of the PISA study in the context of educational attainment, the children of the second generation are not integrated in our society. So what we can observe is a huge gap between native children and immigrant children in terms of education.

What is the state of the migration debate as part of the culture of debate in your country? What is going well, what is going wrong in this debate?

Grönroos: As a rule, only those who express support for migration are invited to participate in seminars or expert discussions. In political debates on television, on the other hand, they have to invite us, although we are mostly the only ones who argue against immigration, despite the fact that most people are against large-scale immigration. However, financial experts, lobbyists or trade unions and human rights activists are much more in favour of immigration. Considering that the issue is discussed almost daily or weekly, it's a bizarre situation: most people are against large-scale immigration while the TV or newspapers are full of supporters. I think the public debate on immigration is quite one-sided.

How does the media react in this debate and why do you think that is the case?

Salminen: Yes, the media. The majority of the Finnish population is critical, but if you open any of the biggest TV channels or our national broadcaster, then you get a different picture. There is one very big newspaper that has sort of monopolised the Finnish media landscape. They are all very much pro-migration. They normally invite people who express pro-immigration opinions. Almost every day you hear this message, that Finland needs more and more immigration.

Grönroos: Journalists generally don't represent the political views of the normal population. Some studies conclude that they favour left-wing parties or the Greens. But in general, it's a big question. Why does the media and some parts of the society promote immigration, even though it leads to a lot of problems? I don't know.

Salminen: And that's how the Finn's party got elected to the parliament in the first place. They started to express other views, supported by a huge number of Finns.

Do you see opportunities to engage in a genuine dialogue with the aim of coming closer to a social compromise in this highly emotional debate?

Grönroos: I used to believe in a real dialogue, but the problem is that some parties represent the interests of big corporations. Their candidates get a lot of money. So the message is then: "Immigration is good for society", and of course it is good for them. How can you have an open dialogue with people who are puppets for others?

Besides the media, what role does academia play for you?

Grönroos: There is a lot of academic research on immigration in Finland, but it is not hard science. Our think tank does real calculations on the economic aspects of immigration, but most of the studies on immigration are humanistic studies or sociological studies. It's mostly about the experiences of immigrants here, the kinds of problems they have.

Salminen: I would like to add something. When you asked about the role of academia in the debate, we had to think for a few seconds. That is a big indicator that the academia has been, I would say, quite a bit side-lined from the debate. They are not playing a big role, although they are lobbying for the immigration. But also you don't see the results that come out of academia so much, so I would say that they don't influence the debate.

In some countries, the issue of racism against migrants plays a major role, especially in the academia.

Grönroos: Well, of course there are studies about immigrants being victims of racism. It is always on the surface. Last summer there was a lot of talk about racism and the government even made a statement against racism. So I think it's there now, and then there's talk about immigrants feeling racism and what we could do, but it doesn't go into an actual discussion.

Let's take a look at Europe. How does the government in your country see the common European asylum system and how do you see it?

Grönroos: Well, the government voted in favour of the migration pact a few months ago, but of course our party is in favour of reforming the whole migration system.

Grönroos: We would stop the immigration of refugees and help people in neighbouring countries, because immigration to Finland and Europe makes Europe less safe and creates many problems for the economy and the assimilation process. And if we would stop the humanitarian immigration and just help the people in refugee camps. It would be a win-win situation because there would be less problems in Europe and the money would be used to help in refugee camps where people are really in need. Nobody is in the refugee camp just for fun. You could buy school books and better houses, better food and better education, medical supplies for many more people there than you could pay for one refugee in Finland or Europe where you have to elevate their living standards to match the European ones. But of course, there are a lot of corporations that are against this kind of idea. Even if the immigrant is not good for public finances, he is always a good customer for some of the economically powerful corporations.

One of the main changes in the European party systems in recent years has been the rise of the right-wing parties, often less global, with more national values and politics. Besides immigration, what do you see as reason for this?

Grönroos: Now, of course, not all parties represent the views of the native population in terms of immigration and, for example, federalism and things like that, and so there is room for new parties that represent the attitudes and opinions that more and more people have in many European countries. So on many issues there can be about seven parties in a room, usually the Finnish party is alone against all of them. It's almost like a two-party system.

In the discussions, when it is about immigration, many people use the word democracy. What is the relationship between migration and democracy for you?

Grönroos: Well, of course, a lot of people are critical of immigration and if their thoughts are not represented in the parliament, there are some problems and it's even a funny situation now because in many statistics, you can see that the majority of people are critical towards immigration, but in the parliament, when they make the laws, they usually make it more and more easy for immigration. So democracy, if you just look at the immigration, I would say that democracy doesn't work on this particular issue, so there is a problem. And I think that with large-scale immigration and a multicultural society, it is more difficult to have a real democracy. I would take the relationship between Scotland and England as an example. If the differences become too great, it could mean that the Scottish people want an independent Scotland because then democracy would work better.

Salminen: That's what happens when the politicians in power no longer represent Scotland. I think immigration in some ways works against this kind of democracy because it tends to remove the ability of the people to govern themselves. I would like to say that we may have only seen the beginning of the problems associated with immigration. In Europe, the population is declining, but in Africa and the Middle East it is growing and there are a lot of unemployed people. Many of them would like to go to Western countries. The migratory pressure from there will not diminish in the next ten years. So we will probably see an even more people wanting to come to Europe than we do now.

Arwen Godingen (European Diplomats): Thank you so much, Simo and Samuli. I was just wondering within the broader scope of the EU and probably your neighbouring countries, what do you think there should be a collaboration to deal with this issue of immigration or not?

Grönroos: Well, I think... Each state can deal with immigration on their own. Of course they can work together, but basically I think every nation, if the political will is there, can make better policies state by state.

Simo Grönroos, Samuli Salminen, thank you for this interview

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