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Integration of immigrants

GOOD CONCEPTS, BUT LITTLE FUNDING

Finnish researcher Tuomas Martikainen regrets that those in power have no long-term vision. The challenges posed by immigration are enormous and need to be cushioned by social reforms. For him, the state's response is rather reactive.

*The interview was conducted by Dirk Bornschein**

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Bornschein: How does the population perceive immigration in Finland?

Martikainen: I would like to start by saying a few words about migration to Finland. For two decades in the post-war period, we were a bit like Spain, Italy, Ireland and a few other countries in Europe, where people mainly left to work in neighbouring countries. This changed after the end of the Cold War. Simultaneously, Finland has also grown to be a more prosperous country compared to the quite difficult post-war times. On the other side the immigration: over the last more than three decades the immigrant population in this country has grown from very small beginnings to about one in ten of the total population living here. 1990 was the turning point, because of the fall of the Soviet Union. It changed Finland's geopolitical situation and we had, for example, a Finnish ethnic return migration from the Soviet territories, and then the country actually became open to asylum seekers because previously they ended up in Sweden. That's when it all started.

And where do the immigrants come from?

Martikainen: About a third from the so-called Western countries, approximately one third from the former Soviet territories, and the last third is from all around the world. And among the last group are mainly those who have arrived as asylum seekers or resettled refugees.

How has the society evolved with their immigration trends?

Martikainen: Until around 2008-2009, migration was not a political issue, just one marginal issue among others. I wouldn't say that Finland was very welcoming to migrants, but it wasn't a major political issue. But that changed with a kind of right-wing development, similar to other European countries. It started to accelerate and they began to organise themselves, first on social media. They joined the political party of so-called True Finns or Finns, with their first major electoral victory in municipal elections in 2008. In 2011, they got a landslide vote and became a major party on the national level.

Martikainen: They have grown to be among the three or four largest parties in this country and are currently in government for the second time. They have, so to say, overtaken airspace, and their view on migration and immigrants is based on a very limited perspective. Their primary focus has been on refugees and asylum seekers from Muslim societies, as well as Africans, and some people whom we might say that are culturally more alien to Finland than maybe many of the others.

A significant imbalance...

Martikainen: Yes, this image is in my own opinion quite distorted. Humanitarian migration has been only 10-15% of immigration, which has been primarily based on family, work, some international students and earlier ethnic return migration from the former Soviet Union. Labour migration's importance has grown during the past ten or so years. Migration has nevertheless intensified the political debate and the issues raised are largely dominated by this right-wing party, while many other issues are considered secondary.

Martikainen: Right now, it is even more hostile than it has ever been before, it is becoming increasingly polarising, which is of course the intention of these political actors because their own support benefits to some extent from keeping the issue on the agenda.

What does this mean for voters' beliefs on the subject of immigration?

Martikainen: The first survey I remember was in 1987, and since then we have recognised a negative attitude towards Russians and the Roma. Nowadays we can say that there's, of course, an ethnic hierarchy, how people are viewed. Some are seen as more favorable, for example, Americans or West Europeans, while some groups are seen with quite a distance, the Russians, people from the Middle East and Somalia. Somalis are quite a large group among the migrants in Finland.

Martikainen: The overall impression is generally more negative, but if you have a foreign friend or you know somebody or you go to a shop with some of them, then I think the relationships are generally good and it's not considered a problem. The main problem is at a higher level of abstraction, even though it's true that people from certain areas, including Africa and the Middle East, experience more racism and harassment in Finland, compared to others. On the other hand, for one reason or another – and this has been also documented since the 1980s – Finns have always viewed Islam in quite negative terms.

How widespread are these negative views?

Martikainen:

Overall, based on different value surveys, so it's approximately one fifth, about 20% of the population that is more xenophobic, and the rest, you know, more open-minded in this sense.

Are there other social conflicts related to immigration? In some countries the question of housing is related to immigration, in others education or security...

Martikainen: I usually don't focus on the background issues, because they come and go and when you hear a topic you can almost guess what the positions of people in these particular ones are.

A common argument is that we are on the way to where Sweden is going in terms of a segregation regarding housing, in terms of crime, in terms of security of people, in terms that some schools are getting worse. And then it's, of course, blamed on the migrants. So, we do have these discussions. When we talk about housing, for example, we need to remember that while the policies have been a bit different within Finnish cities, most of them have had a policy of trying to mix social housing with other types of housing. As a consequence, we don't have those strong migrant-only areas that you would find in some other countries.

Like in Sweden...

Martikainen: Of course, we have areas where there are more, and we have a certain number of schools where there are people from more diverse backgrounds, but this is a question of scale. Yes, we have these debates, and sometimes they are topical, and sometimes there are real social problems behind them. It's more about through which narrative you think that the issues should be solved, regular social policy measures, social work or a bit more policing or whatever, or some special measures that we need to get rid of these people or we should put more people in jail and so on. Currently we have a more right-wing government whereas many Finnish companies would lobby for easier access to foreign labour force, that would be labour migration to Finland, while the True Finns party that is in charge of these issues in the government, make it more difficult.

When we start to distinguish the political actors, the voters, the government, the private sector, as you say, this last group is interested in skilled labour?

Martikainen: Yes, of course, that's the case. But nevertheless, if we look at these last decades, we have actually had one focus and vision: the level of integration. I think those policies are quite well developed and theoretically the system is quite okay. In terms of resources, that's another question. But in terms of the political visions regarding the role of immigration to the country, it's almost non-existent. Most of the parties, they tend to have an interest, either, let's help refugees or let's get more labour force. But, many people in the Finnish establishment are unable to see how elevated the effect of immigration can be. I would say that overall the state's response to most developments has been fairly reactive.

There is something that came to my mind when I was listening to you in the beginning of this statement here, you talk about narratives. In some countries, arguments come and go, but the narratives continue to become more and more closed. How do you see this for Finland?

Martikainen: You are right. If you look at the political parties, they all have their own history and their main issues around which they have developed, even though they might change to some extent over the years. They just keep repeating their narrative, adding some new things to it, but some of the key elements behind it, in my own opinion, stay the same.

And the labour unions today, which are still quite powerful in Finland. They have not been interested in taking immigration into account, although there might be more unorganised labour...

... They are skeptical towards migration?

Martikainen: Basically, yes. They think that we need to protect the organised labour force that we have, and their rights. And if you have people coming from the outside, they make the system weaker.

But, personally I try to look at the numbers and see who these people actually are, why they have arrived here. What are the factors behind that? That's my own storyline.

You said that the integration policies have been quite organised. But how successful were the public measures to integrate migrants?

Martikainen: Well, the system that we have is quite good, okay. But, I think there's way too much noise about migrant integration, to start with. It's something that takes time, depending very much on the people who come, sometimes a shorter, in other cases a longer period of time. So patience, I think, this is actually a keyword. Let's see the situation in 50 years, from now. Or the ancestors who came a hundred years ago, how are their children doing now? Why should we have people who feel excluded in large numbers among us? Up to a certain point, it seems quite normal to me that this process causes various kinds of social unrest. We need patience.

But don't the challenges depend on the type of immigration?

Martikainen: Yes, we can observe different types. Someone comes from wherever, with whatever background you might have, from anywhere in the world, and you end up as a nice middle-class tax-paying citizen. This is a sort of dream come true of politics, but of course, unfortunately, this does not often correspond to reality. Or you come maybe as a low-skilled, poorly educated person. Where do you integrate into? You integrate with the poor of the society. Okay, that's where you end up. If you come with a kind of Elon Musk background, then you end up among the cosmopolitan elite of your society because that's where you go. And if you can offer the basic skills usually you can stay. That's the usual storyline of the immigrants.

People tend to become more like those who are around them.

Martikainen: For example, if you come from a very, very religious country, to let's say Germany, which is less religious. You're likely to become less religious, but you will still probably be more religious than most of the Germans around you. And after the story of the newcomers, there are others, their kids. In your case, as a German. Imagine meeting your third-generation American-German cousins in the USA and talking to them. They would seem pretty old-fashioned to you. In your eyes, they are more like Americans, but they still have strange-looking German surnames. They will have changed quite a bit because the societies around them are changing and because they are with other people. And exactly the same thing will happen to the migrants who come here, and has already happened.

Discussions and their quality always depend on the culture of debate. How do you see the ability in Finland to exchange views on such debates and to see “pros and cons” in context?

Martikainen: I don't think it's that bad, but, the anti-immigration movement, simply keeps its agenda. The people who are inside the system really believe in it, okay, they think this is the truth and the only truth and nothing but the truth. But there's a massive insistence on their part. And this creates a counter reaction. Of course, there are still plenty of arenas in which you can discuss these matters, you know, without too much trouble. But again, if we look at the polarisation of the population on many questions, we tend to find that people who vote for the True Finns have different opinions in many aspects.

Martikainen: On the other hand, if they can gain more voters, they could theoretically be the largest party in the country at any given time but as we have a multi-party system, they wouldn't become a majority in the foreseeable future.

Tuomas, we still need to mention the role of the academia on one hand and the media on the other. In this regard you talked about their tendency to paint a simplified picture. First: How do the media handle the issue of migration?

Martikainen: Mainland Finnish media is generally quite good. Even the yellow papers are in a quite good quality. Maybe the problem of misinformation and polarisation lies much more in the social media and other types of news platforms that go all around.

And the academia, which are their main topics they are working about?

Martikainen: If you look very carefully, you can find almost anything. Research on migration and integration is a very large field, also worldwide. In Finland at the moment we have, if I make a guess, let's say, 300 researchers working full-time on this from a very wide range of backgrounds: from health sciences to laws of social sciences, humanities, education... I mean there's a very big group. We also have people in national statistics who are creating information all the time. Something that has become more important over the years is research on exclusion and racism and discrimination.

Martikainen: These types of perspectives, that if you turn them around it's easy to understand that they blame the society for the difficulties that these people have. I think that the refugee population in Finland has been far more studied than, let's say, labour migrants or marriage migrants or international students. These are all significant groups. There's a tendency to look at the disadvantaged. And there are some academic trends like post-colonial studies, for example, which sensitise us towards history of contemporary social structures, but at the same time also direct us to look at certain type of things. Post-colonial studies are quite big now. In 10 years' time there will be another major trend going through the social sciences. I think this is my personal overall assessment.

One of the main changes in the European party systems in recent years has been the rise of the right-wing populist parties, often less global with more national barriers and politics, what do you see as reasons for their rise?

Martikainen: Well I think in simple terms it's a counter reaction to the globalising forces of the beginning from the 1980s and 90s and 2000s. There's probably a causal relationship, because that has changed national societies quite extensively in different places and not everybody was a winner in that story. It's probably not the only reason but I think it's significant in a way.

Your overall vision makes me think about the relationship between immigration and democracy, as you see it.

Martikainen: Probably there is a very close relationship between them. Over time, immigration changes the electorate. In that sense, it's a smart idea to take care of the immigrants so that they will find their place in society, as the other children are also a future electorate. On the other hand, if people are not satisfied with something, they have a channel through which their voices can be heard. I think this is also part of the story. Another issue in the past two years is that we may also ask, what is the role of external actors in the rise of the dissident political voices within Europe. I think of Russia, for example.

According to you, how should your country deal with migration and why?

Martikainen: Well, first of all, I would like to have an answer from the country as to what it wants with immigration. That should then be the basis for how we deal with the phenomenon of migration.

Your first recommendation, a good and balanced discussion.

Martikainen: Yes, exactly. It's better to have an answer to that, because knowing what you've said makes it easier to live with the consequences, whatever they may be. We've ended up here through our own actions, so we'd better deal with it now. That's perhaps the first recommendation, so that people feel a different level of responsibility when dealing with these kinds of problems.

The second recommendation is that when we look at the current situation, I would like to ask whether we should proceed in good faith. Public policy often emphasises security. People may think that they are safer if there are more people in prison, whereas in the long term this most likely contributes to the insecurity that people feel. I think on both of these issues we should be able to live with the consequences, whatever they are.

How important is it to learn from history and what is that supposed to be?

Martikainen: The point here is that there are some people, who are more interested to learn from history, than others, and if they are interested, what is that supposed to be? My opinion is that migration is a constant in human history, sometimes we have more of it, sometimes we have less, but we're not going to get rid of it. And most likely it's for the better, but not always and in all cases. At times, it might be smart to take the newcomers.

Tuomas Martikainen, thank you very much for this talk.

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