

# Russian Immigrants in Finnish Society

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Ethnicity and multiculturalism are global issues which have become visible as in Finland as elsewhere all over the world during the last decades. Although immigration and ethnic diversity are fairly small in Finland in relation to other European countries, the issues are already a remarkable part of everyday life of Finnish society and many of its localities. (1)

Research concerning Russian immigrants has substantially increased in Finland in the 21st century. The studies are mostly based on comparisons between Russians and other immigration groups, for which reason there is not much information about Russians as a separate nationality. In addition, only a few social work studies related to Russian immigrants in Finland have been done. However, nowadays the population with Russian background is a significant nationality in Finland and more often also a client group in the social services, especially in the big cities; therefore it is essential to know some facts about their life in Finland. The article will give a general review of immigration of Russian people in Finnish society on the basis of studies and statistics mentioned at the end of text. Firstly, it will show some facts and briefly unfold the history of immigration in Finland. Then the article will give a picture of Russian immigrants living in Finland and their integration and adaptation to Finnish society. It will open up those questions mainly from the viewpoint of employment, and the problems connected to the status of Russian-speaking population. At the end the article will summarize the text and look to the future by marking out some challenges for social work in relation to Russian immigrants.

## **The Background of Immigration**

Immigration in Finland differs in many ways from the immigration in other western European countries. For example, the number of immigrants in Finland is the smallest in Europe. In 2006 there were almost 5.3 million inhabitants in Finland, and the percentage of foreign citizens was 2.3 % of the whole population (121,739 people). Compared with other western European countries, the majority of immigrants who have moved to Finland are migrants and returnees from its neighbouring countries Sweden, Russia and Estonia. Asylum seekers and refugees from distant countries have been the minority immigration groups in Finland.

Most immigrants come to Finland from Russia and Estonia. The number of people from these countries has regularly risen since the 1990's, and their percentage is 35 % of all foreign citizens: the percentage of Russians is 20.8 % (25,326 people) and Estonians 14.5 % (17,599 people) (figures from 2006). The Swedes are the third biggest immigration group (6.8 %) and the Somalis the fourth (3.8 %). Most foreign citizens live in the biggest cities in Finland (Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa, Turku and Tampere), almost half of them in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area.

In relation to other western European countries the history of immigration policy is quite short in Finland, for primarily immigration started only in the 1990's. Traditionally Finland has been an emigration country which people have left to go work abroad, for example, to Sweden, Australia and the USA. Before the early 1990's the majority of immigrants were returnees from Sweden. The first big groups of refugees came from Chile to Finland in the

early 1970's, and at the end of the decade Finland took about a hundred Vietnamese refugees. However, only since the early 1980's have there been more immigrants living in Finland than people moving out of the country. The growth of immigrants has been enormous during the last two decades: the increase was four-fold from 1990 to 2006. In the early 1990's the number of asylum seekers and refugees increased in Finland due to wars and other crises in the world. In addition, the number of Ingrian Finns and other ethnic Finnish returnees from the former Soviet Union rose rapidly after they got remigration permission to move to Finland. However, in spite of the growing numbers of immigrants, the labour force has not increased in Finland.

### **A Picture of Russian Immigrants**

There are over 25,000 Russian citizens living in Finland, but the number of people speaking Russian as their mother language is 42,000 (figures from 2006). Even though there are Russian immigrants living in every province of Finland, they have mostly settled themselves in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area and its neighbouring municipalities, where their number is almost 10,000 (2006). In addition, many of them are living in South-East Finland, close to the Russian border. Considering the age and gender of Russian immigrants, the majority of them are of working age and annually more Russian women than men move to Finland: in 2006 the proportion of women was 61 % of all Russian immigrants.

The Russian-speaking population has been a part of Finnish immigration history from its beginning, when the first migratory wave of Russians happened already in the early 18th century. Overall Russian citizens moved to Finland in three migratory waves before the Second World War. The people who moved to Finland during these three waves are called "Old Russians" whose 3000 – 5000 descendants live in Finland at present. The remigration of Ingrian Finns and other people of Finnish origin from Russia and the former Soviet Union form the great foundation for the present immigration, when over half of Russians come to Finland as returnees. Marriage and family ties (moving with family) are other quite common reasons for Russians to get a residence permit. Considering all marriages between foreigners and Finns, the most common form of marriage is contracted between a Russian woman and a Finnish man. In 2003 the number of this kind of marriages was 3500, where as only 300 Finnish women were married with Russian men.

The Ingrian Finns and their descendants form the majority group of returnees of Finnish origin. They are the descendants of the Finnish people who inhabited Ingria – located nowadays partly in Russia and Estonia – since the early 17th century. Nationalities of Finnish origin have lived in this area for thousands of years, but in the 18th century control over the territory passed totally to Russia. In the 1930's and during the Second World War about 50,000 Ingrian Finns were exiled to different parts of Soviet Union. At the end of the 1980's there were about 61,000 Ingrian Finns in the Soviet Union. At the time the societal transitions in the Soviet Union, the ethnic awakening of Finns living there, and the stirring of interest in Ingrians in Finland led the Finnish authorities to start trying to determine the willingness of ethnic Finnish citizens in the Soviet Union to move to Finland. In early 1990 the Finnish president stated in a television interview that Ingrian Finns would be treated as returnees in Finland. Already in 1991 over 5000 citizens from the former Soviet Union arrived, and since then the number of people moving to Finland from the former Soviet Union or Russia has been about 2000 every year. In studies the ethnic return to one's roots, especially among old people who lived in Finland in wartime, has been mentioned as a principal reason for remigration. The younger generation has seen moving to Finland more as a dream or thing

that distinguishes them from Estonians and Russians. In addition, the economic straits in Russia, as well as ethnic mistreatment, have driven Ingrian Finns from Russia to Finland.

A Finnish research group (2) has placed immigrants moving from Russia (as well from Estonia and the Soviet Union) to Finland in four groups: 1) ethnic Finns, 2) spouses or children of ethnic Finns, 3) ethnic Russians and 4) Russian-speaking citizens from the former Soviet Union. The first and biggest group consists of Ingrian Finns and others of Finnish origin. They are ethnically Finnish people who are authorised to remigrate because one of their parents or two of their grandparents are ethnic Finns. However, there are also people in this group who have moved to Finland for other reasons than remigration (e.g. work, education or marriage) and who do not feel themselves as returnees. The second group consists of people who have moved to Finland as the spouses or children of ethnic Finns, and the third group is composed of ethnic Russians who have moved to Finland for reasons of work, education or marriage. The fourth and the smallest group consists of Russian-speaking citizens from the former Soviet Union who are neither ethnic Russians nor Estonians and who have moved to Finland for other reasons than remigration (e.g. work, education and marriage).

### **Employment as a Prerequisite for Integration**

The concept of integration of immigrants began to be discussed in the early 1990's in Finland. At that time the stream of immigrants to Finland was large and it was the difficult recessionary period in Finland. Many jobs were disappearing, which meant that the immigrants had few chances of being employed. In this situation employment was considered an essential way to integrate immigrants into Finnish society. The Integration Act (493/1999) (3) aims at enabling immigrants to participate in the functioning of the Finnish society just like everyone else living there. Learning Finnish or Swedish, which are the main national languages, is one of the essential prerequisites for integration. The objective regarding immigrants of working age is to facilitate their access to work life and ensure that the Finnish society can benefit from their competence and education. At the same time they receive support for the preservation of their native language and their own culture. The Integration Act emphasises the immigrants' own responsibility to participate actively in the integration process, and provides the authorities with tools for supporting the integration process.

When considering the integration of Russian immigrants to Finland from the viewpoint of employment, it can be noticed that the Russian immigrants have not been very successful in finding their place in the job market. The educational level of Russian immigrants in Finland is fairly high: almost 40% of them have graduated from the university or polytechnic, whereas the corresponding number of the whole Finnish population is 30%. Despite this fact unemployment among people with Russian backgrounds is notably higher than that of Finnish citizens. The Russians and Estonians have been more successful than refugees in finding employment in Finland, but the unemployment rate of Russian citizens is twice that of Estonians. In 2001 the unemployment rate of people coming from Russia (and the Soviet Union) was 40%, whereas the corresponding percentage of unemployed Estonians has dropped to 20%. One reason for the difference is probably the fact that most Ingrian returnees are moving from Russia and they do not have a promise of employment when they arrive in Finland. Estonians, on the other hand, must have to have residence and work permits before they move to Finland.

At the moment there is intense discussion in the state administration and publicity about the recruitment of a foreign labour force to Finland. The essential point is the concern about

whether Finland's own labour force is big enough, for which reason it has been stated that employers should look to employees from other countries. This way the interest in employing immigrants has also increased. For example, during the last few years Finnish enterprises have shown a growing interest in employing Finnish-speaking Ingrians in fields where there is a shortage of workers and in various positions in Finnish-Russian trade.

### **The Problems of Adaptation of Russian-speaking Population**

Russian immigrants have adapted themselves to Finland quite well on the whole. However, their life seems to be harder than, for example, that of the Estonians. The Russians feel more discrimination, they are more often unemployed, and their health is inferior to that of Estonians. The Working Group of the Finnish Advisory Board of Ethnic Relations published a report (4) clarifying the status of the Russian-speaking population in 2002. Especially the report calls attention to the language, culture, education and rights of Russian-speaking people in Finland. The report shows that there were still many faults in society concerning Russian-speaking population in the early 2000's. Firstly, the Russian-speaking people do not have enough possibilities in practice to have education and information in their native language, even if the legislation requires these opportunities to be provided for them. Secondly, the status of Russian-speaking people is weak in the job market. Racism and discrimination against Russian-speaking people, language requirements, as well as difficulties in supplementing their studies and confirming degrees taken in their former home country were seen as obstacles to employment. Thirdly, the attitudes of Finns towards Russian-speaking people are still negative. There is a great deal of prejudice and discrimination directed towards Russian immigrants by Finns; this prejudice and discrimination is exacerbated by descriptions of Russians as 'mafia' and 'criminals' in the media every now and then. Russians are rated as the most unwanted group of foreigners, along with the Arabs and Somalis in attitudinal surveys. The prejudice of Finnish people seems directed especially towards the Russian-speaking population, because adaptation has been most problematic for the immigrants' children who come from Russia and the former Soviet Union and who speak only Russian. The negative societal attitudes (e.g. the attitudes of authorities, the lack of knowledge of Russian culture) towards Russian-speaking people prevent them from enjoying their full rights

### **Summary**

Although the immigration in Finland has short history and the number of immigrants is still small, multiculturalism is reality in Finland. This article has opened up shortly the life of people with Russian backgrounds who form the biggest immigration group in Finland. As we have seen, the remigration of Ingrian Finns is the significant reason for immigration in Finland, although the Russian people move to Finland also for the reasons of marriage and family ties, work and education. They have adapted themselves to Finland quite well on the whole, but there are still many faults in society concerning Russian-speaking population. Considering the integration of people with Russian backgrounds to Finland from the viewpoint of employment, their status in the job market is weak. In addition, Russian-speaking people neither have enough possibilities to have education and information in their native language, and there is a great deal of prejudice and discrimination directed towards Russian immigrants by Finns. In order for Finnish society and its service system to take the special needs of this biggest immigration group in our country into account, we need more multidimensional research data about their life and individual experiences. We should give more space to the voice of Russian people living in Finland, taking into account their different gender, age and life situations. Especially, we need to pay attention to children and young

people with Russian backgrounds in future research projects. Those of them who move to Finland with their parents speak only Russian and their roots are in Russia, for which reason their adaptation to Finnish society seems to be more difficult than the older generations. That is a big challenge for Finnish social work and its research.

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