

Year 2009-2010

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Freelance journalist from Finland was awarded with the short-term writing fellowships under the Winter Course programme 2010.

His Visiting Report

In his study on *What is the Finnish immigration debate really about?* aimed to sketch some of the central challenges for Finland, as it faces both rising numbers of immigrants and a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment. He intended to examine the anti-immigrant discourse that is gaining popularity in Finland through examining blog posts and discussion forum post as well as the official response to the discourse by government ministers. He highlighted the shift in the political spectrum from moderately pro-immigration to seeing immigrants as a serious problem, and the 'mainstreaming' of anti-immigrant discourse.

At the very outset Rudanko said that this Christmas, Finnish newspapers have been decrying the removal of references to Christianity in Christmas celebrations in some schools. In the name of not offending anyone, schools have decided to remove traditional Christian Christmas songs from their Christmas events. Government ministers have been upset by this, and have emphasized that singing Christmas hymns in schools is not a form of propagating Christianity to non-Christian students, but part of the Finnish tradition.

This incident, relatively trivial in itself, is indicative of the larger debate on multiculturalism and immigration being waged in Finland today. Historically, Finland has taken very few immigrants, and has been a fairly homogenous country, with numerically small but well-integrated minorities comprised of Swedish-speakers and Russian-Orthodox Christians. In recent years, the picture has changed significantly. Finland still admits relatively few immigrants and refugees, but the numbers have risen, and the scene in cities like Helsinki and Tampere is no longer so uniformly white and Christian. This raises a number of challenges for both Finnish identity, and the relationship of that identity with the state, and for the Finnish welfare state.

The rise in the number of immigrants and refugees has led to the inevitable backlash, the formation of anti-immigrant parties. This is typical over much of Western Europe. From the British National Party to the Sweden Democrats, recently elected to Parliament in Finland's Western neighbour, far-right parties have been gaining popularity. In Finland, the True Finns party is more moderate than many of its European counterparts, but it has been able to raise the issue of immigration to the national spotlight.

In innumerable blogs and newspaper articles, the opponents of immigration publish warnings that what has happened in Western Europe, will happen in Finland as well, if immigration goes unchecked. The favourite examples are the unrest in the immigrant-dominated suburbs of Paris, and closer to home, the problems in Swedish suburbs with large Middle-Eastern and North African population. As elsewhere in

Europe, Muslims are particularly demonized. Perhaps the most-demonized group in all of Finland are the Somalis, many of whom have come to Finland fleeing conflict at home. Somalis are routinely linked to crime and violence. Whenever there is crime, especially violent crime, committed by foreigners, the most avid anti-immigration advocates call for all foreigners who commit a crime to be expelled. It remains to be seen what effect the botched terrorist attack in Stockholm will have in Sweden and Finland.

He opined that it is a distinct possibility that the next Parliamentary elections next spring will be fought largely over immigration. The True Finn Party, the spearhead of the anti-immigrant movement, has been gaining on the traditional parties in polls, and they might well be a power-broker in the formation of the next government. Their rise has led to more traditional and moderate parties to toughen their stances on immigration. The Social Democratic Party, for instance, has emphasized that immigrants either have to integrate into the Finnish way of life, or leave.

All the major parties decry racism, but there is a growing discourse against anti-racism. It is very typical in online discussion forums and blogs to claim that the attempt to avoid racism can justify anything, or even that it is the native, white and Christian population which is facing discrimination. The discussion is deadlocked – those favouring liberal immigration policies accuse the other side of racism, and the opponents of immigration say that they are not racist, just realistic, and that an increase in the number of immigrants will have seriously detrimental effects on the country.