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Photo: George Arabadjisky.



## “Mind the Migrant”: reflections on being a migrant in Helsinki and Finland’s migration strategy

**Keywords:** Helsinki, Finland, migration, highly-skilled migrants, superdiversity, multiculturalism

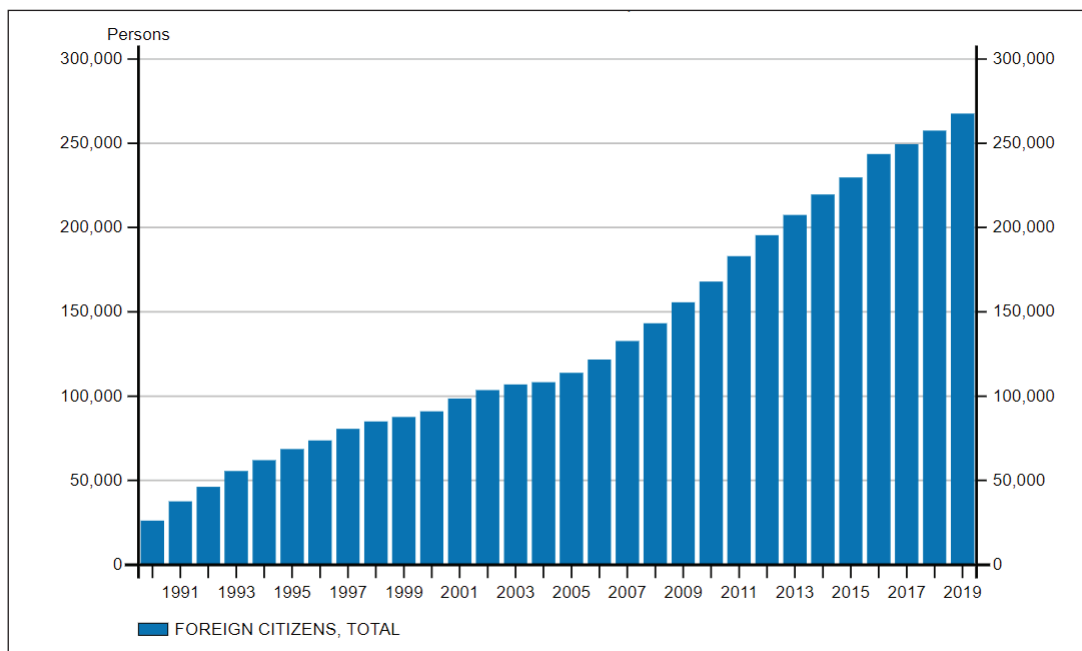
*This paper discusses Finland’s Future Migration Strategy 2020 through my personal reflections as a highly-skilled migrant in Helsinki and my social encounters with other highly-skilled migrants. The paper focuses on three aspects regarding the migration strategy: a) Finland is a safe and open country, b) everyone can find a role to play, c) diversity is part of everyday life. These principles are put into dialogue with concepts such as “creative social policy”, “superdiversity” and “multiculturalism” in order to call attention to current and possible future challenges for Finland regarding migration and integration policies as well as creating cities of inclusion. The paper argues that migrants are a great “brain gain” for Finland, however in order to tap into the full potential of these individuals, a paradigm change is crucial at a societal and policy level. In summary, the paper suggests, such paradigm change can take place when the following steps can be put into action: a) more in-depth research is undertaken to understand migrant lives, b) researchers collaborate with local authorities and NGOs, c) policymakers consider making long-term strategies, d) migrants are involved in the actual policy decision-making processes, e) civil society is more informed about other ethnic/national/religious communities, pluralism and urban inequalities.*

As a social anthropologist who researches about migration, I have been roaming

around Europe for a decade. Yet, I have hardly written about my personal experiences as an academic nomad. It has been three months since I moved to Helsinki and I still find it difficult to appreciate a Karelian pastry. When a close Finnish friend expressed her disappointment in me, I could only reply, “I guess when you lack the sentimental value, the pastry itself doesn’t quite make it!” Fortunately, there has been some positive progress in terms of my integration: I had invested in two Moomin mugs in my first week in Finland – after all, Moomin mugs are the bit-coins of Finland (!)

In my institute, my research explores the professional and social networks of highly-skilled Turkish migrants in Helsinki, Stockholm and Copenhagen. My main objective is to understand how these individuals’ everyday lives are affected by their anomalous condition of being ‘highly skilled’ on one hand and ‘migrant’ on the other. I am especially excited for my fieldwork in the Helsinki region, which is a new context for me. So far, I have been mostly spending time with an international group of people, and often, we would reflect upon where we see ourselves in the Finnish society: “Where does Finnishness begin and where does it end?”, “Where are we at that spectrum, if there is any?”, “To what extent we want to blend in, and where do we draw our boundaries?”

Table 1. Population by citizenship 1990-2019. Foreign citizens, total. Source: Statistics Finland/Population structure.



Despite the differences in the way we may answer these questions, we, the highly-skilled migrants, feel concerned about remaining ‘invisible’ in migration discussions as we are thought to be free from pressures to integrate. Moreover, considering that integration can only be a reciprocal process in which adaptation, negotiation and transformation involve both parties – in this case the migrants and the dominant (Finnish) society – it would be only meaningful if we can debate together about what kind of direction to give to the local culture, if not national. Hence, I would like to put my reflections in dialogue with Finland’s Future Migration Strategy 2020, an action plan which was adopted as a Government Resolution on 13 June 2013.

The Action Plan has the main goal of including migrant communities in the process of building a shared future through development programs in the areas of civil society, cultural life, local practices and labor market. The strategy aims “to create an immigration policy which supports the building of an unprejudiced, safe and pluralistic Finland, and enhances Finland’s international competitiveness”. I find the Strategy’s three principles especially relevant for this article:

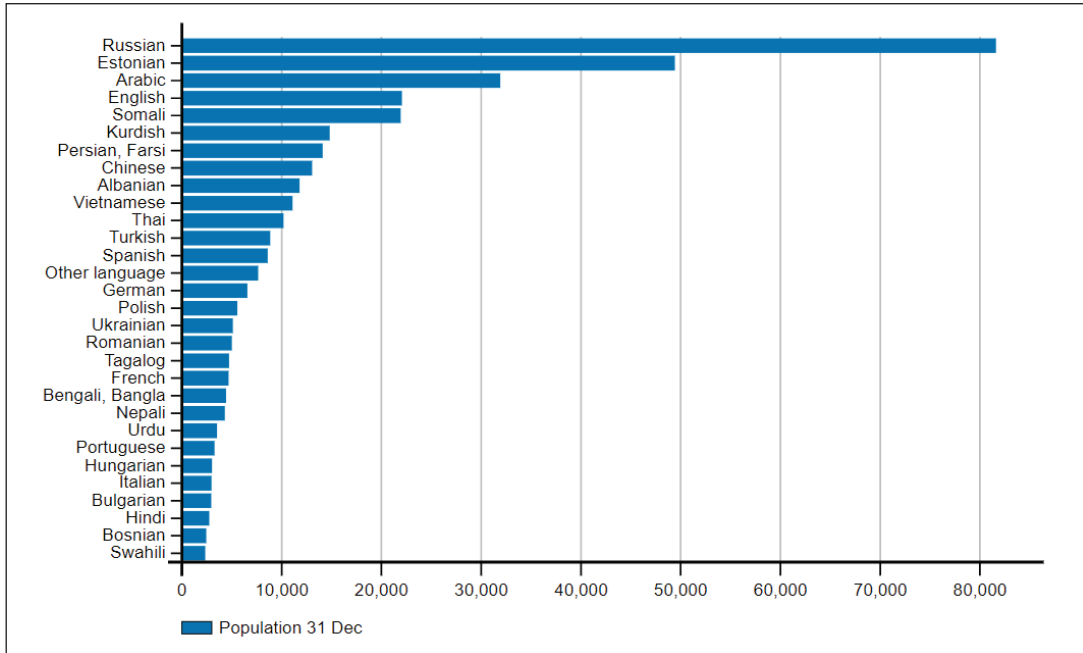
1. Finland is an open and safe country
2. Everyone can find a role to play
3. Diversity is part of everyday life

I will reflect upon these principles based on my interactions with other highly-skilled migrants in Helsinki. Starting with the first one, I can claim that, at an institutional, or structural level, we have all been feeling included and respected since our first days. Our experiences with the local and national-level authorities, as well as in work places and service points such as museums, libraries, restaurants/cafes and even saunas reflected such “openness” and “safety” that Finland strives to offer.

I believe, this had been a timely strategy on the behalf of the Finnish Government, as “the twenty-first century Finland is a net receiver of migrants: the number of those entering the country each year is higher than the number of those leaving” (Habti & Koikkalainen 2014, 3). Even though the share of foreign citizens living in Finland is 3.4 per cent, and the share of the foreign-born is 4.8 per cent of the total population, Finland has been receiving an increasing flow of immigrants since the 1990s (see Table 1) (Statistics Finland 2019). Finland is becoming a country of immigration and has been gaining popularity particularly in the last decade amongst highly-skilled migrants and international students.

A modern-day Finnish person, especially who dwells in the urban areas does not only interact or share spaces with the historically-familiar migrant/minority groups, e.g.

Table 2. Biggest numbers of foreign-language speakers 2019. Source: Statistics Finland/Population structure.



Swedish, Russian and Estonian speakers, but also gets to cross paths with English, Arabic, Somali, Kurdish, Persian speakers. These are statistically the biggest language groups (see Table 2), and I could add Turkish, German, Italian, Romanian and Spanish speakers, based on my social encounters in Helsinki. Finland does not seem to be in the periphery anymore, however, is it ready to embrace multiculturalism and superdiversity?

I will discuss the question above in relation to the third principle, but for now, this discussion takes me to the second principle. The Action Plan suggests, more opportunities and services need to be established for migrants in order to support them “create networks and accumulate skills that will help in becoming more involved as members of society.” Surely, this principle requires Finland’s job market to recognize migrants’ skills and accreditations, as well as to actively support self-employment and entrepreneurship. Finland as a country built on determination and progress will have to find ways to build a socially cohesive society. The first step would be to acknowledge that, migrants stimulate the transfer of knowledge, skills, innovations, technological expertise with their (transnational) activities.

Finland has an aging population, in fact, Finland has the third biggest share of population that are aged above 65 years, after Italy

and Greece (Statista 2020) and demonstrates the second highest increase rate in aging population after Liechtenstein (Eurostat 2020). Finland’s investment in migrants and integration programs can provide a vast human potential to create a multilingual and multicultural country that is increasingly more productive and connected to the rest of the world. Thus, it is vital to change perceptions regarding migrants by implementing policies that value their skill-sets and knowledge as well as presenting positive/success stories on media sources. For policies and any kind of social projects which concern migrant lives, an ‘empathic’ approach is crucial. For instance, the EU co-funded project, “Maximising Migrants’ Contribution to Society” (MAX Project) suggests allocating migrants in charge of migration policies.

Clearly, these initiatives need to be supported by a paradigm change in the making of social policies. In a webinar organized by Helsinki Inequality Initiative (INEQ), Johannes Kananen presented his forthcoming book: “Creative Social Policy: The Collective Emancipation of Human Potential”. In Kananen’s words, “Creativity is about finding ones place in a community, gaining a sense of self-understanding and purpose and flourishing as a human being.” Hence, “creative social policy” would assume, “every human being has a creative potential and that this

potential may be realised individually in various ways during the life course.”

Kananen further discussed the need to revise the mainstream notions of social policy that are based on neoclassical economics and a technocratic way of policy making. Instead, he suggested, “it is time to look at each member of society as an individual and as an end in itself in order to create structures for people to realise their goals and aspirations.” I believe, this kind of policy change would highly benefit migrants as well; inclusive and innovative ways of rebuilding social policies are necessary to reduce inequalities as a whole.

So far, I elaborated on how to potentially understand the first two principles. These are rather top-down level programs that can be implemented, however the third principle is a critical one: “diversity is part of everyday life”. This statement would make most of us say, “yes, sure!” In urban areas like Helsinki, it is a given. Nevertheless, the concept of superdiversity is a fairly new construct, pioneered by anthropologist Steven Vertovec in 2007 in his article, “Super-diversity and its Implications”. In a nutshell, Vertovec focuses on the British case, specifically London, and recommends the policymakers and researchers to acknowledge that, since the Cold War period, the migrant populations in the city had become more complex and layered. In another words, he was pointing out a diversification of diversity, i.e. superdiversity. One may argue, superdiversity is a hyperbolic concept for Helsinki, I can hear, “we are not there yet...” Then, we may turn our focus to ‘superdiverse spaces’ for now, but eventually the concept will make it to the mainstream.

In my opinion, Vertovec’s important argument — also for its relevance to the Finnish case — is the following: “New, smaller, less organized, legally differentiated and non-citizen immigrant groups have hardly gained attention or a place on the public agenda” (Vertovec 2007, 1027-1028). He explains, the multicultural policies which aimed at promoting tolerance and respect for different collective identities were mainly concerned and limited to the African-Caribbean and South Asian communities of British citizens. I see a similar shortcoming in the Finnish case regarding dealing with multiculturalism and approaching superdiversity; there needs to be a recognition of the newer migrant groups, also an increased awareness that there are different kinds of migrants with different kinds of needs. As a highly-skilled migrant I may be feeling secure in the job market, but I may need more assistance in the housing market compared to a low-skilled migrant

who has been living in Finland for a longer time.

The dimension of intersectionality needs to be addressed here, one’s sex, gender, age, religion, race, social status, class and health conditions (e.g. having disabilities play out with their migrant status and may result in different kinds of needs). The current Covid-19 pandemic shows, “its consequences are the gravest to those who are already in a marginalised position” (ETMU Blog 2020); hence more knowledge production and research needed on how migrant communities are affected in Finland. Currently, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare is conducting a survey called MigCOVID, which aims at “examining the effect of the coronavirus epidemic and related restrictive measures on the daily life, health, quality of life and mood, as well as experiences of service use among foreign born persons” (THL 2020).

Now, how do we tie these all to the “everyday life”? Because, it is the everyday life that deeply affects migrants’ hopes and dreams, sense of self-esteem and wellbeing. In turn, these have an impact on the migrants’ future plans. When the anti-immigration discourse strengthened in the UK after the Brexit vote, I felt hopeless. I remember the day my next-door neighbor told me “to go back to my country”, not even knowing that I was a PhD and a lecturer, contributing directly to the UK’s higher education on a below-average salary. As migrants, we deal with stereotyping and assumptions on a daily basis; unfiltered commentary on our bodies, accents and behaviors. The other day, at a bar in Kallio, I was approached in Finnish and when I excused myself for not speaking the language, the stranger exclaimed, “I thought you were Finnish, but your friend a foreigner!” My friend and I come from the same country; the only difference is, I arrived here recently and I do not speak Finnish, but my friend has been living in Finland for seven years and had passed the Finnish language test for citizenship. In that person’s mind though, the only difference was that one of us was darker.

I also sense so much excitement from the locals to meet and get to know ‘foreigners’, sometimes expressed with such raw curiosity that can come across as deprecatory. When I take evening walks with my Spanish friend, we often get subjected to catcalling, not only in English but also in Spanish, which makes us self-conscious about our ‘foreignness’. There were times when guys popped up at our tables in bars and cafes, with a casual “Where are you from?” and a brave “May I join you?” There were quite many encounters already where we felt exoticized and fetishized...

My academic and her diplomatic status give us a sense of recognition and security in the boundaries of our work places; but in the public space we are not immune to objectification.

When I shared these experiences with two other friends who have been living and working in Helsinki for several years, one of them commented, “6 years ago, when I first came here, you would hardly see people from African and Middle Eastern countries. I was feeling like an alien, being a non-white man! But things are changing now.” The other friend agreed and gave an elaborative example, “Couple of times people approached me, wanting to touch my hair” whilst pointing at her luscious curls. It is important to understand, we prefer our differences to become our assets valued in the Finnish society rather than vulnerabilities and stigmatizations. Our real-life contexts where we live and work play a crucial part in the structuring of our social lives as well as our social and career mobilities (Habti & Koikkalainen 2014).

When I have positive experiences in my daily life, and these often happen too, I feel more ‘at home’ in Helsinki. One morning, two strangers – both Finnish women – smiled and complimented my outfit; they made my morning! I met Finnish people who were well-travelled and showed me great generosity and kindness. I stayed with a Finnish family during my first weeks, and I thought the level of hospitality and warmth they showed would be possible only in one’s own family. In my experience, Finnish people who have lived abroad for a while and returned, and those who travel often and have invested in foreign languages seem to have a more constructive and positive rapport with migrants like myself.

To sum up, for Finland, strengthening of an inclusive political and public discourse is essential to make the population aware that, “we are diverse and we live together”. I believe, there is so much that NGOs, research institutes and universities can do for informing the local communities about the new cultures that are now part of the Finnish society. For instance, my research is in collaboration with the City of Helsinki which gives me a chance to make an impact at the local level regarding the highly-skilled migrants, their conditions and challenges. These kind of collaborations do indeed have great potential to create cities of inclusion.

For us researchers and the academic institutions in Finland, my recommendation would be to invest in more interdisciplinary and in-depth research which focus on migrants’ lives. In addition, as Professor Mau-

rice Crul from Free University of Amsterdam highlighted in his webinar, we must also study the diversity attitudes and practices of people without migration background, so we do not miss out on the impact of the actions of the most powerful group in society (The Migration Society 2.0 Lecture Series 2020). To my earlier question of, “where does Finnishness start and end?” I can say that it depends, because identities are contextual, social and dependent. Today and in the future, Finnishness will have more layers with the new cultures merging through migration flows, globalization and transnationalism.

On a final note, I will give it straight in Finnish fashion: coping with multiculturalism will not be easy! Multiculturalism is a never-ending project and even countries which thought they had had a hold of it then declared “Multiculturalism has failed utterly” (Connolly 2010). Simply because, it requires hard work: on a societal level, it requires reflexive discussions on “who we are”, which is especially an arduous task for countries with a relatively young national-identity. Or, it is incredibly uncomfortable to talk about collective identities as facing one’s national history will inevitably bring about wicked stories alongside the glorious ones. Either way, this conversation will need to take place in Finland’s public discourse, sooner or later. And meanwhile, let us “mind the migrant” is all I am saying.

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Pasi Saukkonen

## Vimmainen maailma

Kirjoituksia muuttoliikkeestä, monikulttuurisuudesta ja nationalismista

Kansainvälinen muuttoliike on aina muuttanut maailmaa. Läntiset yhteiskunnat, Suomi mukaan lukien, ovat entistä monikulttuurisempia. Samalla uusnationalistiset liikkeet ja puolueet hyödyntävät ihmisten epävarmuutta ja kaipuuta takaisin kansallisvaltioiden maailmaan. Rasistisia näkemyksiä viljellään etenkin sosiaalisessa mediassa, ja niin islamistiseen kuin kansallismieliseen ajatteluun sisältyy äärimmäisiä, fasistisina pidettäviä piirteitä. Elämme vimmaista aikaa.

Tähän kirjaan on koottu erikoistutkija, dosentti Pasi Saukkosen vuosina 2015–2019 julkaisemia Siirtolaisuus-Migration-lehden kolumneja sekä muita kirjoituksia maahanmuutosta, monikulttuurisuudesta ja nationalismista. Kirjoitukset kommentoivat ajankohtaisia tapahtumia ja keskusteluja. Ne myös tarjoavat tietoa kirjan teemoista. Teoksen päättää aikaisemmin julkaisematon kirjoitus, joka kokoaa tärkeimmät kehityskulut ja katsoo kysyvästi tulevaisuuteen. Mitä tapahtuu seuraavaksi?

Siirtolaisuusinstituutti 2020. Julkaisuja 35. 125 s.



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