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Estonians in Finland – a two bladed sword

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During the past decade over 50,000 Estonians have moved to Finland, mostly for work-related reasons. Some estimates state that this number might be close to 100,000. Rapid and extensive migration has caused problems and challenges that were previously unknown. This article is based on two small surveys (both qualitative and quantitative methods were used) conducted in Estonia and Finland, which are put in a broader context with the help of larger studies. It introduces everyday challenges that migration has created and argues about the reasons and possible solutions.

While thousands of Estonians have found a better standard of living in Finland than in their native country, rapid and extensive migration from the southern to the northern shore of the Gulf of Finland has caused challenges and problems that were previously unknown.

Over a short period of time, Finland has become a country with the largest Estonian community worldwide. Since the 2000s, the major destination country for emigration and working abroad has been Finland. In 2012, the people who relocated to Finland made up 59% of all emigrants and the people working in Finland made up 65% of all people working abroad but residing in Estonia. Different databases give different statistics about Estonians living in Finland.

According to Statistics Finland, over 50,000 Estonian citizens lived in Finland in 2015. But it is estimated that if weekly commuters, unregistered workers, members of families etc. are

counted, this number could rise up to 100,000. This is over 7% of the entire population of Estonia.

The study "Migration potential of the working-age population in Estonia in 2013" showed 45% of the people intending to work abroad said the main reason for going abroad was due to the lower wages in Estonia. The second most common reason was the higher living standard and the social guarantees in the destination country. Also Telve's recent study on workers commuting between Estonia and Finland showed that the most important criterion for choosing a mobile way of life was an increase in income. Social guarantees and better working conditions were also important for commuting men.

Emigration from Estonia to Finland is slowing down, but more and more research about the effects and consequences of this trend have been conducted. It can be recognized that as long as the wages in Estonia remain lower than in other EU Member States and especially in Finland, the Estonian population will continue to be highly motivated to work abroad.

Turku University of Applied Sciences coordinates the REGI Project funded by the EU Central Baltic Interreg 2014–2020 Program. Other organizations participating in the project are the Estonia Centre of Southwest Finland, Baltic Region Healthy Cities Association and Tallinn University Rakvere College in Estonia. The project is aimed at supporting Estonian families where some of the family members live in Fin-

land and some live in Estonia or the entire family lives in Finland. REGI aims to take a hands-on approach in tackling challenges caused by work-related migration from Estonia to Finland.

As a part of the REGI project and in the beginning of 2016, Tallinn University Rakvere College conducted an online survey and focus group interviews among social workers and teachers in West-Viru county in North Estonia to gain insight about the challenges families and communities are facing after one or both parents of the family have moved to Finland for work.

Social workers pointed out that intensive emigration during past 7-8 years is definitely a topic where more research should be conducted. They also agreed that a family in which one of the parents is working abroad is similar to a single parent family. Children of these families might even be in a better situation because income per family member is larger compared to families where both parents are living and working in Estonia. A parent working abroad can provide more, which might mean more possibilities for travel and practice different hobbies etc. This is however true only when relations within the family are good.

Teachers gave examples of families where one parent moving abroad for working reasons has brought positive effects both for the child and the family. If a parent who is more dominant or more prone to use violence has moved, then the other parent has managed to establish a more peaceful environment. Which in turn has had a positive effect on the child's development and success in school. But these examples tend to be exceptions, rather than the rule.

Problems are more serious when both parents move and they haven't arranged an environment that supports their child enough or there isn't a caring and supervising adult available. Social workers described several cases where an attentive neighbor has informed the local government about children in that kind of situation. Social workers said that if enough attention and support by an adult isn't available, problems in school quickly appear. It estimated that there are approximately over 650 families in Estonia where both parents are working abroad, most of them in Finland. This study, conducted by University of Tartu, pointed out similar pros and cons of the social workers of West-Viru county.

Better income, job security and attitude towards people in general are among the main reasons why Estonians move to Finland. For that they are willing to tolerate a wide spectrum of inconveniences ranging from travelling to long work days. This on the other hand quite often has a strong impact on family ties.

One of the key obstacles in solving these kind of problems is that an up-to-date and

comprehensive database or register is not available. Parents often don't inform the local government in Estonia that they are moving. A municipality will become aware of these families only after this family isn't able to solve the situation by itself.

Both teachers and social workers propose that an early warning system might help to prevent problems from occurring, but as a precondition, local governments must be aware of these families. Nowadays teachers receive information from children, not from parents. Local government only intervenes when a school isn't able to find adequate solutions, e.g. when a child is systematically avoiding his/her school duty.

Schools, teachers and social pedagogues see their role mainly as recognizers of the problem and supporters. Usually families are open for help, but this is not always the case. If a family does not accept help or support or does not admit something is wrong, the end result could be that their child drops out of school or changes schools.

Local governments in Estonia can convince parents to organize parenting in a more effective and supervising way or to find alternative solutions in order to ensure a safe environment, e.g. to place their child in a boarding school.

The other set of problems is connected to bureaucratic procedures with a parent who is working abroad. Quite often, when family ties haven't been strong enough, families fall apart after a parent has moved abroad. This means dealing with officials, e.g. in order to settle custody issues, understanding and translating official documents. It is not uncommon that these matters go beyond an ordinary person's capabilities and hiring a lawyer is not financially possible.

Social workers also admit that their knowledge and connections with their colleagues in Finland are insufficient to provide adequate support to families who are also facing cross-border issues or to counsel them preventively. Closer co-operation both inside Estonia and between Finland is seen as a necessity.

In a way, this last statement is in conflict with the attitude of social workers and migration specialists in Finland. During the REGI project, we have conducted personal interviews where these specialists state that they don't see Estonians as a problematic migrant group, since they adapt to Finnish society quicker than people from other countries. This sentiment can be fortified by a study conducted by the Bank of Finland, which showed that Estonians find employment easier than other migrants. According to our experience, Estonians in Finland don't feel the same way.

Last autumn we conducted a small survey among Estonians living in the Turku area.

There were 92 respondents, 73% of whom were women. The majority (56%) of the respondents were 26–50 years old and in Finland mainly for work. The survey was supplemented with a group interview of 16 Estonians. The Estonians in the group were all employed and had been living in Finland for over four years. The survey respondents had a lot of experience of living in Finland; 72% had been living in Finland for over four years and 56% lived here with their family. According to the survey, 22% of the respondents were in Finland permanently and 42% were here temporarily but were not planning to move to Estonia. The higher wage level in Finland is an important reason to stay in Finland. Although the vast majority of the respondents are planning to tie their future with Finland, they find that they have insufficient information about work-related legislation, rights of employees etc.

One aim of the survey was to find out what kind of support Estonians living in Finland would like to receive. The survey highlighted the importance of information about Finnish legislation; employee rights, employment law and family law. The respondents also desired more information about the Finnish school system, school culture and opportunities to study in Finland. Finnish health services, occupational healthcare and occupational safety were also subjects on which more information was desired. The group interview that supplemented the survey was aimed at determining in more detail what kind of support Estonians would especially have liked to receive after moving to Finland.

The interview revealed that many found taking care of official matters difficult, especially since it was not possible to get all the necessary information in one place. In other words, there was no office that would guide them to the right places; the immigrants had to find out what they must do and which places they must contact without help. Many receive information from the Estonians already living in Finland. The interviewees were also uncertain about the correct order for handling official matters with different officials. The interviewees found the biggest problem to be learning Finnish. However, many were able to independently find a Finnish-language course; the interviewees had not received any guidance with finding courses. On the Finnish-language courses, the challenge was studying through English and not directly from Estonian to Finnish.

The results of the survey can be considered approximate, since the respondents cannot be considered to represent all the Estonians living in the Turku Region. Another thing that must be taken into account in the interpretation of the results is that Estonians have a strong ethos

of being able to cope. The survey was probably taken by those who are active and doing well. Estonians are more likely to keep quiet about failures and difficulties.

During the REGI project, we have found that closer cooperation between Estonia's and Finland's social authorities is an absolute necessity to map issues that work-related migrants and their families are facing. And even more importantly to find solutions that work in both countries to ensure the wellbeing of people, families and communities.

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