

# Migrant Rights X Finnish Immigration Policies

Summary report of the public forum, 25th August 2023, 18:00–20:00, Oodi Library, Helsinki

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## Welcome and introduction by event co-organizers & panel moderators

**Nitin Sawhney** (Aalto University, [Trust-M](#) research consortium focusing on creating trustworthy digital public services for improved integration of migrants), **Johanna Leinonen** (Deaconess Foundation, [Mobile Futures](#) research consortium promoting a fair and inclusive society through focusing on trust and two-way integration), and **Ditmar Hasanaj** ([Helsinki LEFT ry](#), a new, immigrant-led, grassroots chapter of Left Alliance, which aims to better represent and integrate minority groups into Finnish politics) welcomed the audience of the full Majiansali auditorium by stressing the urgency of debates and actions regarding the new [Government Programme](#) on immigration policies.

Safer Space Rules were established (see the [slideshow compilation](#) of the event for details).

## Opening talk: Dissecting the Government programme – asylum, deportation, integration, politics of differentiation

**Erna Bodström** ([migration researcher and specialist, University of Helsinki](#)) gave an overview of the core features of the government programme. It proposes significant changes to the existing policies, openly stating that it is, in many aspects, including asylum-seeking, meeting only the lowest level of EU stipulations in providing international protection. The proposed actions would increase inequalities, also within different migrant groups.

### Asylum-seeking process

The new programme states that it strives for better quality and efficiency and aims to protect people and democracy. This manifests in several restrictions on current rights, for instance:

- The interview of the asylum seeker is the most important part of the process. According to the new programme, applicants could not go through the interview record to correct the possible mistakes.
- The programme would restrict applicants' rights to appeal to one appeal level only as well as restrict any subsequent applications. Consequently, this would limit the power of the court system.

In general, striving for “quality” does not manifest in the programme in concrete actions; rather, it significantly narrows asylum-seekers' rights.

## **Deportation and the undocumented**

The following proposed actions are de facto related to all migrants, even if they are presented in the government program under the section covering asylum:

- Restricting the right to social services and security for undocumented migrants.
- Enabling detention on new grounds and for a longer duration – a financially heavy proposal as this would mean new detention centers.
- Examining possibilities to convict undocumented for a prison sentence.

These measures would generally add costs to Finnish society, not make migration policies more efficient.

## **Integration (through work)**

In research contexts, integration is generally understood as a multifaceted process that includes aspects of culture and belonging. In the government programme, integration is defined as one's ability to join the workforce. Even with this narrow definition, integration is made harder by:

- Limiting integration period: migrants need to learn Finnish faster but are offered fewer integration services.
- Limiting the length of stay for work-based migrants who have become unemployed.
- Introducing stricter permanent resident and citizenship requirements.

In sum, while the programme claims to help and encourage the integration process, only one action is mentioned to achieve this goal, language learning in workplaces. However, this is a measure dependent on employers, not supported by concrete government policies.

## **Politics of differentiation**

The programme features numerous features that position migrants in different categories, including the following:

- The Government wants to introduce a target country model for labour migration. Labor migrants will be primarily recruited from the EU and EEA countries, India, the Philippines, Brazil, and Vietnam.
- A minimum annual income of 40,000 Euros would speed up the process of getting the permanent residence permit from 6 to 4 years.
- Family reunion would be hardest for those who have been granted international protection: The Government will examine the possibilities of introducing a pre-entry language test for family.
- Social Security system might be configured differently for immigrants vs. permanent residents – this is expressed vaguely but might mean lesser benefits for the former.

(See the [slideshow compilation](#) of the event for details.)

## Opening talk: Integration through work - demographics and ethos of the program

**Teemu Haapalehto** (Director of Immigration Affairs, [City of Espoo](#)) discussed the Government programme from two vantage points, demographics, and integration policy. He explained that Espoo has witnessed a significant rise in the number of immigrants; for instance, in 2022, there were 67,000 non-Finnish speakers in the city.

### Demographics

A Statistics Finland researcher, Pekka Myrskylä, has noted in a recent interview that over the past 20 years, there are 15,000 less Finns in the workforce but 149,000 new jobs have been filled by immigrants. The current demographic reality and trends have not been considered in the Government programme:

- The target is 100,000 more employed and Finland needs this desperately: We have a massive budget deficit and need more people to boost economic viability.
- Over 100% of the growth of work in Finland is due to immigrants. Still, the Government wants to discourage migration to Finland, and also offers very limited means to employ those who have already arrived – this was also clear in the talk by Erna Bodström.

In sum, what is the target in light of the demographic development in Finland, if the programme restricts migration and discourages those who have migrated from staying here?

### Integration policy

A very strong meta-level idea comes through on the Government programme: “the lack of willingness and motivation to integrate.” Based on Timo Haapalehto’s experience, this is not so. Espoo has introduced [new services](#) that have been successful, matching qualifications. Yet, Finland generally has not provided good services and the existing ones need to be improved. We know from research that there’s recruitment discrimination, suspicion, and even xenophobia.

## Panel Discussion

### Panelists

Riina Bhatia, Deputy Councillor, City of Helsinki, Green Party  
Erna Bodström, DSSc, Migration Researcher, University of Helsinki  
Teemu Haapalehto, Director of Immigration Affairs, City of Espoo  
Julia Ståhle, President, Swedish Youth of Finland  
Nick Walters, PhD, Co-Founder & Chair, Helsinki LEFT ry

## **Introductions by other panelists:**

**Riina Bhatia:** Personal background as a daughter of a migrant; studied asylum policies and their relation to the economic system; has worked in the field and now at [VTT – the Technical Research Center in Finland](#) where diversity/integration/gender are important themes, seen as related to innovation and creativity. Here as a policymaker and activist.

**Julia Stähle:** Personal background as a daughter of a migrant; important to discuss because that is not obvious. In the [SFP party](#), it is recognized that the Government programme entails the aforementioned underlying attitudes, and it is important to raise awareness of them: The program is not a law yet, so there are opportunities to have an impact. SFP contributed to changing the wording in the programme in part to conditional and tentative actions –” We are looking into...”.

**Nick Walters:** Personal background: Grandparents as Jewish refugees to the UK, but they were called economic migrants, aliens. No party in Finland has had a clear space for immigrants, so Helsinki LEFT was founded: It will be an immigrant-led chapter of the Left Alliance that will focus on the political representation and participation of minority groups.

## **Questions & Responses by Panelists:**

### **Johanna Leinonen: What changes are the most concerning and why?**

**Riina Bhatia:** Erna Bodström and Teemu Haapalehto gave a good overview. There is not one aspect but the compilation of the proposed action and what they try to accomplish. As an example: What the companies Wolt or Foodora have accomplished is not necessarily technological innovation but how they can bypass labour regulations. Maybe the proposed restrictions would end up being good for businesses? The neoliberal narrative explains this development of exploiting the vulnerable.

**Nick Walters:** Agree with Riina Bhatia. The parties in the Finnish Government are economically right-wing, they wish to weaken labor laws and severely attack workers' rights, before turning their attention to immigrants. Worried about the combination of this kind of politics.

**Julia Stähle:** Disagree: The programme is a result of the unwillingness of the Coalition party to include the Social Democrats in the Government, coupled with the fact that the only issue for the Finns Party is immigration. There are some good things about labor in the programme as well.

### **Ditmar Hasanaj: Why do you feel these changes are being proposed, and how can we counter them?**

**Teemu Haapalehto:** The Constitutional Committee of the Parliament will most likely find this Government programme impossible to implement.

**Erna Bodström:** It should be noted that the programme by the Finns Party, published before the elections, has many similarities to the Government programme.

**Nick Walters:** The tactic of the UK's Conservative government, of creating a "hostile environment" for immigrants, especially the most vulnerable immigrants such as asylum seekers, are being copied in Finland. The goal is to divide immigrants into different categories, and to create ethnic tensions between Finns and immigrants, so that they are not united in defending themselves against austerity and attacks on workers' rights and social welfare. We need solidarity between different groups.

**Riina Bhatia:** It's clear this programme is ideological from the Finns Party. We need to pay attention to who the members of the Constitutional Committee are.

**Teemu Haapalehto:** Cities may be able to provide some counterweight to this development. In many European countries, immigration/integration policies differ between capital regions and governments. In Finland, the cities of the capital region have to support immigration. For instance, last year, 30% of children in Espoo were immigrants. We need to make sure they have equal opportunities. It could be that integration policies will be implemented differently locally.

**Audience question: How can we increase the number of immigrants voting? Parties listen to people who vote.**

**Nick Walters:** This is a big problem. We have plans to disseminate information about immigrants' voting rights and raise awareness.

**Riina Bhatia:** What do the members of the audience think? My experience: Many people are unaware of their rights and opportunities. We have to take more agency and not leave it to bureaucracy.

**Julia Ståhle:** We need to make events like this where everyone feels welcome, with no prerequisites; we need different grassroots strategies.

**Erna Bodström:** Talk to your friends – that is the simplest and perhaps the most impactful way to have an impact.

**Audience question: Discrimination is a reality, especially in job interviews. How to solve this problem?**

**Teemu Haapalehto:** Espoo has established the aforementioned competence centre for highly educated immigrants. It aims to serve 450 people annually. The current rate is 55% success.

We organise matchmaking events and change the order of recruitment - encounters first that may then result in interviews and jobs.

**Riina Bhatia:** The solutions may be dependent on the level of the job.

**Erna Bodström:** The ethos seems to be: “Migrants need to integrate; Finns need to do nothing.” This attitude needs to change. Everyone needs to participate in the process.

**Nick Walters:** I agree: We need concrete processes, and to change attitudes. This can be done by healing divisions between Finns and immigrants, particularly in rural areas, where there’s more support for the far-right, but less contact between Finns and immigrants.

### **Audience question: What is good integration, and how to achieve that?**

**Julia Ståhle:** You have a community; you feel at home and welcomed. Community keeps you in a place. It is about finding the middle way: You also have to adapt but you need to keep your identity.

**Riina Bhatia:** Integration is linked to curiosity and respect. My father became Finnish when he began taking on Finnish habits – but integrated is not assimilated.

**Erna Bodström:** It seems that ministries think of integration like this: “You need to work, you need to smile, you need to speak the language (but it is unclear how proficient you need to be), and migrants don’t have families.”

**Nick Walters:** The Government programme is intentionally disingenuous about integration. The demand to “integrate” based purely on language is contradicted by the plan to cancel the residence permits of immigrants after just three months of being unemployed. It should also be noted that if you are working low-paid jobs, you may not have the energy to participate in civil society.

### **Audience question: Language skills – do they matter? Even if someone has done school here s/he can be discriminated against.**

**Erna Bodström:** Language is a euphemism for racism.

**Riina Bhatia:** Curiously, the language barrier is used as a bottleneck because you learn the language at work.

**Teemu Haapalehto:** Those raised in this country are the moment of truth for immigration/integration policies. We know there are inequalities in the labour market and education results that are not encouraging. How we operate as a civil society is not inclusive

enough. These bleak results raise the question: Are these people offered the competencies and help to be full members of society?

**Johanna Leinonen:** If we talk about people born here, we are not really talking about integration but other significant and structural issues.

**Audience question: Do we know about the schedule of the implementation of the Government programme?**

**Julia Ståhle:** Follow the ministries and their proposals to the Parliament. The legislation takes a long time and note that many issues in the programme include the clause that issues “will be investigated”.

**Erna Bodström:** Asylum-related measures are intended for 2024, progressing in stages.

**Nick Walters:** Addressing the attacks on workers’ rights and trade unions, which affect everyone, should be the immediate priority, even before confronting the attacks on immigrants.. But everyone should be active in any way possible; support and join trade unions, NGOs, and political parties as actively as you are able, or otherwise, passively. Talk about these issues with your friends.

**Julia Ståhle:** Contact your representatives. The programme can be changed: It is not a law but a guideline.

**Nick Walters:** One concern is that one could be eager to accept a somewhat watered-down version after drastic action proposals. Let’s not settle.

**Johanna Leinonen: How can we have a say as a civil society?**

**Riina Bhatia:** Politicians listen to voters. Create political pressure for not only your favorite politicians but others, as well. Trade unions are important. Go to demonstrations; not only show power but feel empowered!

**Julia Ståhle:** Keep your politicians accountable.

**Ditmar Hasanaj:** Speak with your Finnish friends, raise awareness.

**Audience member:** More immigrant representation is needed, and immigrants also need to be active in supporting that.

**Audience member:** Participation is often impossible due to language barriers and time. I work with a dozen immigrant groups: Immigrants want to work. These policies will not work – immigration will happen. This (programme) is about fascism and segregation, not immigration.

**Nitin Sawhney: What can we do as civil society?**

**Audience member:** Restrictive policies will not work, and we need to communicate this everywhere.

**Audience member:** Day-to-day politics is a slow process; note that there will be many opportunities to give feedback.

**Audience member:** Put pressure on your own workplace to take a stand!

**Audience member:** We can do a lot at the municipal level.

**Teemu Haapalehto:** Interact with people from different backgrounds.

**Riina Bhatia:** Many people are concerned but they don't understand what to do. It's a worrying time but action helps. We need gatherings of people; we need to compile and share information about targets and points of intervention.

**Julia Stähle:** Remember to use your networks, your places of power.

**Erna Bodström:** Friends are the avenues of impact.

**Nick Walters:** Agree: You can be as active or passive as you want and are able, but be a supporter of trade unions, a political party, and/or non-governmental organizations. Contact us at Helsinki LEFT and we will do our best to help advise you.

**Ditmar Hasanaj:** The system is not perfect, but we should use it and not let things get worse. Use your anger to make things better.

**Audience member:** Reminder: These issues are happening everywhere, and the answers should be international.

**Organizers:** Thank you for your great input and participation. This is just the first step. Be in touch for any ideas and comments - let's not lose steam.

**Event Website:** <https://trustmproject.aalto.fi/migrant-rights-x-finnish-immigration-policies/>

**Next demonstration:** [Me emme vaikene](#), 3 September 2023, Helsinki 13-19hrs.



Rapporteur: Minna Horowitz, [DECA consortium](#)