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EMN Finland Conference 2026

A long-term vision and strategy for immigration? – Aiming for a more uniform and efficient immigration administration

Finland faces a wide range of challenges that affect the whole of society, which are linked to immigration policy in one way or another. The population is ageing and the dependency ratio is increasing. In practice, Finland's natural population growth ended in the mid-2010s, and it is solely due to immigration, why the number of labour force and population in Finland has not started to decline.

Finland currently has high unemployment, but in the long term, the labour market needs international labour. By 2038 some 880,000 people will retire, which is equivalent to 37% of the total current employed workforce. Even achieving full employment without immigration is not enough to maintain the current size of the workforce over a period of 10 to 15 years. Although jobs are changing with digitalisation and automation, many sectors that are critical to society, such as social and health care jobs, will continue to need people in the future. This is the assessment of MDI in its "Makers of the Future" project.

On the other hand, the internationalisation of the labour market has raised awareness of the phenomena of labour exploitation and human trafficking, which particularly affect foreign workers. Exploitation is being identified in an increasing number of sectors. Thus, the internationalisation of the labour market is also linked to occupational safety and health and the work of the police.

Migration issues are also increasingly being treated as a geopolitical issue, for example due to hybrid threats such as the instrumentalisation of migration. As a result, migration issues also increasingly affect foreign and security policy.

Local communities, such as municipalities, have a greater responsibility for integration, which is reflected in the future of the entire country. According to a report by ETLA Economic Research, the effects of immigration on society are positive depending on the type and time span of immigration. Work-based and high-skilled migration quickly produces

EUROOPAN MUUTTOLIIKEVERKOSTO

Maahanmuuttovirasto
PL 10, 00086 MAAHANMUUTTOVIRASTO

puh. 0295 430 431

faksi 0295 411 720

www.emn.fi

EUROPEISKA MIGRATIONSNÄTVERKET

Migrationsverket
PB 10, 00086 MIGRATIONSVERKET

tfn 0295 430 431

fax 0295 411 720

www.emn.fi

EUROPEAN MIGRATION NETWORK

Finnish Immigration Service
P.O. Box 10
00086 FINNISH IMMIGRATION SERVICE

tel. +358 295 430 431

fax +358 295 411 720

EMN http://ec.europa.eu/emn



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positive effects on public finances, while humanitarian immigration is burdensome in the early stages in terms of public finances, even though the impact may improve with effective integration. Therefore, the pressure to improve integration is only increasing.

The mobility of people cuts through the functions of society, touching the broad lines of international politics, the national labour market and local communities. Immigration as a topic has also intensified political divisions in most OECD countries in recent years. The discussion mixes several different perspectives: growth, labour force and innovation, cultural identity, the effects of immigration on public finances, the maintenance of good relations between population groups, global conflicts and the connection between immigration and security policy, as well as the functioning of the international refugee and asylum system.

A sustainable immigration policy must be comprehensive

The image of immigration, which regularly emerges in public debate, frames the phenomenon through a kind of dichotomy. Those who are critical of immigration emphasise immigration as a burden on public finances, a national security risk and a threat to social cohesion. Advocates of immigration cite labour shortages, an ageing population and international humanitarian obligations.

It is clear that there will always be differences of opinion on immigration in society. However, at the level of immigration legislation and administration, society should strive for the most long-term and consistent view on immigration policy. In their shared publication, "Finland's Choices" the Permanent Secretaries also emphasised the need to agree on coherent main lines of immigration policy that will stand the test of time.

Immigration is not a separate policy area. It touches on several different policy areas, such as labour, integration, security and external relations. A well-functioning immigration policy therefore requires a comprehensive approach and a wide-ranging strategy.

The siloed nature of migration policy is a phenomenon recognised in many countries: a report by the European Migration Network charted the migration strategies of EU and OECD countries. According to the report, Finland only has sector-specific strategies for migration and, in general, only 11 of the 25 countries that responded to the report have broad-based strategies. As a special mention, the report highlights the Netherlands, which is the only

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reporting country that has integrated all its sectoral strategies into one broad comprehensive strategy.

A comprehensive migration strategy includes several sectors or the entire spectrum of migration. It may include:

- immigration issues (legal and irregular immigration, labour shortages, international protection, reception and integration);
- issues related to emigration (inclusion of the diaspora and reintegration);
- internal migration.

An immigration policy that is sustainable and supports the society i.e. whole-of-government approach requires a long-term and cross-sectional approach as well as policy coherence. This means that different administrative branches and agencies:

- Develop and implement immigration policy together.
- Ensure that decisions taken in one sector do not have adverse effects in another (sector).
- Seek to reconcile the potentially very different interests and objectives of different stakeholders (e.g. labour market needs vs. security).

The international community has also called for a comprehensive approach to immigration. The European Union Pact on Migration and Asylum (i.e. the Pact) underlines the importance of a strategic, comprehensive and coherent approach to asylum and migration management. For example, Article 7 of Regulation (EU) 2024/1351 requires Member States to develop a migration strategy. The EU aims to address migration comprehensively and cross-cutting across administrative branches, and requires the Member States to do the same.

EMN conference brings experts together to discuss common views

Immigration policy in Finland has traditionally been based on government policies, the EU's immigration and asylum policy, and international agreements. It has been shaped as a series of reactions to larger international developments. What has received less attention is our own shared vision of the common goals for immigration in different sectors of society.

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That is why we need in-depth reflection on the different dimensions of migration and, above all, on its role in building Finland's future.

The 2026 national conference of the Finnish National Contact Point of the European Migration Network will bring together decision-makers, civil servants, researchers and representatives of organisations to consider outlines for what a shared vision of Finland's migration policy could look like.

The aim of the conference is to promote dialogue between different parties and to find new perspectives on how immigration policy could be more closely integrated into the functions of society. The conference aims to conceptualise migration as a cross-cutting theme and seeks to find the common ground on which we could build Finland's immigration policy in the future.

About EMN

The European Migration Network (EMN) was established by a Council of the European Union decision on 14 May 2008. EMN is funded by the European Union. The purpose of EMN is to provide up-to-date, objective, reliable and comparable information on migration and asylum issues in its member countries to support policy-making in the European Union. The EMN disseminates the comparative data it collects and analyses not only to policy makers and public authorities, but also to the general public.

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