ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF IMMIGRATION PROCESSES IN FINLAND

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The article analyzes the role of religion in the context of the contemporary Finnish migration system. The European migration crises have become a national challenge for Finnish society. The integration of (im)migrants, whose ethnic and/or religious affiliation is often opposed to the value-based and ideological foundations of Finnish civic identity, is accompanied by a number of problems. The most significant of them is the escalation of racism and discrimina-tion against migrants by Finns and social structures. The Finnish Immigration Service (MIGRI) has been confronted with an unprecedented number of religious conversions from Islam to Christianity by Muslim migrants who use religious conversion as a way to gain asylum or avoid deportation to their home countries on the grounds of a risk of religious persecution. The Ecumenical Council of Finland has criticized the ambiguity of the methods for assessing the credibility of religious beliefs of newly converted Christians. At the same time, the in-creasing number of decisions to deport aliens to unsafe areas has divided the Finnish public into those who support accepting asylum seekers from Muslim countries and those who support anti-immigration movements. An analysis of statistical data and empirical material in the works of Finnish researchers shows that religious conversion is a popular migration strategy despite its low efficiency, the manifestation of Islamophobia in Finnish society to-wards migrants with Muslim background and the possible negative consequences of religious conversion from Islam to Christianity. The authors conclude that religion is an important as-pect of social consolidation and integration of foreign cultural migrants, but the formation of religious identity in school education largely contributes to the opposition of 'us' and ethno-religious 'others' in Finnish society.

Keywords:
Finland, migrant crisis, asylum seekers, deportation, religious conversion, ethnic and religious identity, migrants with Muslim background, discrimination

Introduction

Among Western European countries, Finland has a low number of immigrants — 461.2 thousand people, but it corresponds to 8.5 % of the population. Due to the population ageing and declining birth rate (2016 was the first year

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when the number of deaths exceeded births in Finland) immigration has become a nationally significant issue [1, p. 75]. The sharp increase in the number of asylum seekers of non-Finnish ethnicity and/or non-Christians as a result of the recent European migration crises has challenged Finnish society. "Christian nationalism" [2, s. 117], both in the value-political ideology of the state and in the civic identity of the majority, is one of the reasons for the tightening of Finland's immigration policy and the revision of approaches to the integration of (im)migrants into Finnish society. It exacerbates racism and discrimination against migrants, refugees and asylum seekers by Finns, government agencies and politicians. This is illustrated by the socio-political resonance in July 2023, caused by the racist and anti-immigrant statements published on the Internet by Riikka Purra[1] — the Deputy Prime Minister of Finland, Finance Minister and the leader of the Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset). Her refusal to resign was supported by 40 % of respondents in a poll of the Finnish population.[2]

The increase in the number of decisions by the Finnish Immigration Service (Migri) to deport aliens has divided Finns into those who support migrants and those who oppose asylum. It was also one of the reasons for the unprecedentedly high number of conversions to Christianity among Muslim migrants. The frequent use of religion as a basis for granting asylum has led to the problem of methods for assessing the authenticity of religious beliefs. In addition, the armed conflict in Ukraine has demonstrated the importance of religious identification and obvious differences between different categories of migrants in Finland.

Since March 2022, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has registered more than 6 million Ukrainian refugees in Europe,[3] of whom 66,749 have requested asylum in Finland.[4] In contrast to the migration crisis of 2015, when Migri recorded 32,477 asylum applications (including 20,484 asylum seekers from Iraq, 5,214 from Afghanistan, 1,981 from Somalia and 877 from Syria),[5] this situation was not considered a "refugee crisis" and has

[1] Finnish far-right finance minister accused of racist online comments, 2023, *The Guardian*, URL: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/11/finnish-far-right-finance-minister-riikka-purra-accused-of-racist-online-comments (accessed 02.04.2024).
[2] MTV:n kysely: Riikka Purran pitäisi erota, sanoo 47 prosenttia vastaajista, 2023, *MTV Uutiset*, URL: https://www.mtvuutiset.fi/artikkeli/mtv-n-kysely-riikka-purran-pitaisi-erota-sanoo-47-prosenttia-vastaajista/8741180#gs.3bl5oh (accessed 02.04.2024).
[3] Ukraine Refugee Situation, 2024, *The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, URL: https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine (accessed 02.04.2024).
[4] International protection, Applications 3/2033—2/2024, 2024, *Finnish immigration service*, URL: https://tilastot.migri.fi/index.html#applications/23330?l=en&start=626 (accessed 02.04.2024).
[5] International protection, Applications 1/2015—12/2015, 2024, *Finnish immigration service*, URL: https://tilastot.migri.fi/index.html#applications/23330?l=en&start=626 (accessed 02.04.2024).

not caused a surge in negative sentiment among the population.[1] On the contrary, the right-wing parties in the Nordic countries welcomed the arriving Ukrainians. For example, Riikka Purra made a distinction between refugees from the Middle East and Ukraine and explained why the latter deserve Finnish hospitality and assistance.[2] According to Purra, Ukrainian refugees are distinguished by their European origin and Christian faith, their number mainly includes women and children and, most importantly, their stay in Finland is temporary.[3] This statement, widely regarded as racist and Islamophobic [3, p. 256], vividly illustrates contemporary Northern European migration policy.

However, political processes make adjustments to Finnish "hospitality" towards all Christians. Thus, the deterioration of interstate relations between Finland and Russia has led to discrimination against Russians. Since October 2022, Finnish authorities have introduced restrictions and then an entry ban for Russian citizens, despite the fact that "the participation of the Russian Federation in an armed conflict is not a sufficient basis for discrimination against all Russians and classifying them as a potential security threat" [4, p. 29]. In November 2023, Finland closed its land border with Russia. Finnish authorities explained their decision by the serious threat to national security caused by the "influx" of several hundred asylum seekers from African countries at the eastern border points crossing Russia as a transit territory.

Theory and method

The study focuses on asylum seekers in Finland who immigrated from Muslim countries due to unfavourable social and political conditions. This category of migrants is most vulnerable to manifestations of racism and discrimination in Finnish society, and people with Muslim religious and ethnic identities face significant obstacles to integration. According to the theory of Finnish sociologist Vesa Puuronen, in the modern world, the dominant form of racism is based primarily on cultural differences [5, s. 56—57]. The "old" racism based on the biological superiority of some ethnic races over others is gradually being supplanted by the ideas of the "new" cultural racism, according to which non-Western cultures are backward, conservative and in conflict with Western values.

[1] For comparison: in 2014, the number of asylum seekers was around 3,000.

[2] Muhonen, T. 2022, Ukrainasta pakenevat ovat aivan eri asia kuin Lähi-idästä tulevat "elintasosiirtolaiset", sanoo perussuomalaisten Riikka Purra, *Helsingin Sanomat*, URL: https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000008700536.html (accessed 02.04.2024).

[3] Temporary protection for those fleeing Ukraine, 2023, *Finnish immigration service*, URL: https://migri.fi/en/temporary-protection (accessed 02.04.2024).

The theoretical basis of the study includes research on the adaptation of migrants in Finnish society [6—9] and stereotypes regarding the ethnoreligious identity of Muslim migrants [10—12]. In this context, the specifics of religious identity formation within the Finnish school system play a crucial role [13; 14]. The paper pays special attention to the examination of the deportation procedures in Finland [15—17], the activities of asylum supporters and anti-immigration movements [18; 19], as well as religious conversion from Islam to Christianity among asylum seekers [20; 21]. The problem of religious conversion of migrants in the global [22—24] and Finnish [25] contexts is of significant interest within the framework of this study.

The source base of the study includes interview materials with asylum seekers, refugees and Finns, published in the works of Finnish researchers, as well as documents regulating the legal aspects of immigration and integration processes in the country. The main document regulating all issues related to migration, in addition to the Constitution of Finland of 1999, is the "Aliens Act" of 2004. The objective of this Act is "to promote managed migration and provision of international protection with respect for fundamental and human rights and in consideration of international treaties binding on Finland".[1]

The research methodology involves the analysis of statistical data, including the religious composition of Finland's population and information on asylum seekers and deportees published by Migri.

The study aims to substantiate the importance of ethnic and religious factors for migration and integration processes in Finnish society. Ethnic and religious affiliation is essential for the self-identification of both migrants seeking to integrate into a fundamentally new social and legal environment and Finnish citizens defending their national interests. However, the increase in the number of cases of religious conversion as a migration strategy for legalizing refugee status has revealed the contradictory role of the religious factor.

Discrimination and racism in Finland

The "Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021—2027"[2] is the main document that defines the general vector of integration policy for EU countries. As a guide to the integration and inclusion of migrants and refugees, this document focuses on combating discrimination against persons with a migrant

[1] Aliens Act (301/2004; amendments up to 389/2023 included), Section 1. Objectives of the Act, *Ministry of the Interior*, URL: https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2004/en20040301_20230389.pdf (accessed 02.04.2024).

[2] Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021—2027, 2020, *European Commission*, URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0758&qid=1632299185798 (accessed 02.04.2024).

background. Discrimination is a particularly pressing issue in modern European society. It can be based solely on a migrant background but may be exacerbated due to ethnic origin as well as religious beliefs.[1] The main principles of this plan form the basis of the Finnish national migration strategy developed by the Ministry of the Interior. This indicates that Finnish integration policy is inclusive and anti-discriminatory.

According to the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), Finland is among the top ten in the world. The effectiveness of the Finnish migration policy is 85 points, and "anti-discrimination" as one of the key indicators reaches its maximum.[2] However, the "Government Report on the Need for Reform in Promoting Integration" (2021) highlights the need to strengthen integration measures and confirms that racism and discrimination against migrants not only exist in Finnish society but also significantly hinder their successful integration.[3] The first signs of racism appear in the school system and subsequently manifest themselves in all spheres of life, including the labour market, education, and mental health.[4] Research on this issue shows that, despite the inclusiveness of integration policy, it focuses on the differences between migrants and the local population, and positions them as "others" based on ethnic, cultural or religious criteria [e. g. 6, p. 4].

A study of stereotypes in public consciousness related to migration, discrimination, and racism in Finnish society has revealed three main myths about migrants [7, p. 8—14]. First of all, there is a myth that immigrants are fundamentally different from the majority of Finns in a negative way—they are less educated, unwilling to assimilate, inclined toward a dependent lifestyle, and more prone to criminal behaviour, etc. This approach not only contributes to the division of society into two groups: us and them "us" and "others", but also extrapolates the widespread negative public stereotypes about an ethnic and/or religious minority group to all its members. Such mythologized prejudices are used in public discourses to justify various restrictions on migrants. According to a second myth, discrimination and racism are not a minor social problem, since discrimination

[1] Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021—2027, 2020, P. 7, *European Commission*, URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0758&qid=1632299185798 (accessed 02.04.2024).

[2] The Migrant Integration Policy Index. Finland, 2020, *Migrant Integration Policy Index*, URL: https://www.mipex.eu/finland (accessed 03.04.2024).

[3] Valtioneuvoston selonteko kotoutumisen edistämisen uudistamistarpeista, p. 36, 2021, *Valtioneuvosto*, URL: https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163237/VN_2021_62.pdf (accessed 02.04.2024).

[4] Ibid. P. 36—37.

against migrants is part of everyday life. This position removes responsibility from the host society for the occurrence of discrimination and makes the fight against its manifestations unnecessary.

A myth of privileged immigrants (the third one) has the opposite argument and presents migrants as a separate group with a privileged position in Finnish society compared to majority Finns. This myth comes from the belief that the state provides significant benefits to refugees based simply on their immigrant status. Such an argument is actively used by the ideologists of the Finnish anti-immigration political movement to justify racist sentiments in society. They present refugees as "economic migrants" or "surfers seeking a higher standard of living" [26].

The legal definition of the concept and status of a refugee is set out in Article 1 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees[1] and confirmed by the Finnish Aliens Act.[2] However, its interpretation at the national level depends on the constantly changing state and political interests [27, p. 51]. Thus, the concept of "migrant" implies "voluntary" or "economic" migration, whereas the concept of "refugee" indicates "forced" or "political" displacement.[3] The political agenda actively exploits these concepts and interprets them in accordance with the priorities of various state and political structures. While Denmark has traditionally had the strictest immigration policy among the Nordic countries and Sweden has taken the most liberal approach [28, p. 82], Finland has always occupied an intermediate position in this regard [17, p. 2]. However, nationalistically oriented parties have recently actualized anti-immigration and nationalist ideology in Finnish society [29], and liberal and center-left parties have included some aspects of anti-immigration discourse in their political programs. All this contributed to the tightening of state migration policy. In particular, a significant increase in the number of asylum seekers predictably led to an increase in the number of

[1] According to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the term "refugee" shall apply to any person who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country". The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, *The United Nations*, URL: https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/conventions/refugees.shtml (accessed 02.04.2024).

[2] According to p. 11 of Section 3 of the "Aliens Act", "refugee means an alien who meets the criteria laid down in Article 1 of the Refugee Convention". (Aliens Act (301/2004; amendments up to 389/2023 included), 2023, *Ministry of the Interior*).

[3] Apostolova, R. 2015, Of Refugees and Migrants: Stigma, Politics, and Boundary Work at the Borders of Europe, *American sociological association culture section*, URL: https://asaculturesection.org/2015/09/14/of-refugees-and-migrants-stigma-politics-and-boundary-work-at-the-borders-of-europe/ (accessed 02.04.2024).

decisions to deport foreign citizens who were denied refugee status. This has led to serious divisions in Finnish public and political discourse and has divided citizens into those who oppose the asylum practice and those who sympathize with the deportees.

Protests against deportations: the "Right to Life"

Since 2015, Migri has registered 10,481 deportation decisions and 3,469 decisions to cancel deportation.[1] For example, during this period, Finnish authorities deported 1,166 Iraqi citizens, 397 Somali citizens, and 202 Afghan citizens, while also making 432, 104, and 154 decisions, respectively, to cancel deportations. However, deportation is an expensive, lengthy and often controversial procedure, which is significantly complicated by legal obstacles to the return of refugees to potentially unsafe areas. This leads to a significant gap between the number of deportation decisions and the actual deportation of aliens from the country [17, p. 2]. Despite the recognition of Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq as completely safe territories since May 2016, many refugees from these countries remain illegally[2] in Finland after the decision to refuse asylum [18, c. 152].

In addition, asylum seekers have intensified protests against the tightening of asylum conditions and deportations, which, according to the protesters, contradict the principle of non-refoulement.[3] The first large-scale political protest was the "Right to Life" [19, p. 981]. It began in the autumn of 2015 when Iraqi and Afghan asylum seekers, who had arrived in Finland at the peak of the migration crisis, asserted their right to live in the country. Despite the small number of protesters — about 100 people — this event received wide publicity and led to both demonstrations of support and counter-demonstrations, as well as the persecution of the protested asylum seekers. Thus, the activities of Finnish volunteers from the "Refugees Welcome" movement [16, p. 135] to provide assistance to asylum seekers served as one of the reasons for the mobilization of anti-immigrant

[1] Deportation Decisions 1/2015—2/2024, 2024, *Finnish immigration service*, URL: https://tilastot.migri.fi/index.html#decisions/23332/52?l=en&start=540 (accessed 02.04.2024).

[2] In 2017, approx. 2300 illegal residents were encountered in Finland, the greatest number of them were Estonians (331), with Russian nationals (291) and Iraqis (171) as the next largest groups. International Migration 2017—2018 — Report for Finland, 2018, *Ministry of the Interior*, URL: https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/161174/25_2018_International_Migration_2017-2018.pdf?sequence=4 (accessed 02.04.2024).

[3] Article 33 — Prohibition of the expulsion of return ("refoulement"), The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, *The United Nations*.

movements. Most of them, such as the "Soldiers of Odin", strongly associate migration processes with a national threat and seek to protect their homeland from "Islamization", "cultural invasion" and "terrorist threats" by closing state borders [12, p. 135].

The main demands of the "Right to Life" included a suspension of deportations, as their legality was questioned due to the incompetence of the interpreters of the significantly expanded staff of Migri in the autumn of 2015. This department of the Ministry of the Interior is the main state agency for asylum, residence permits and deportation. According to the Aliens Act, it may decide to deport an alien even on the grounds that "there is reason to suspect that he or she may commit an offence which is punishable by imprisonment in Finland".[1] In addition, asylum seekers were severely restricted in receiving free legal assistance at asylum interviews, and the time for filing an appeal to administrative courts was reduced from 21 to 14 days, while the normal appeal period in Finland is 30 days [18, p. 987]. In this way, the protesters sought to draw the attention of state authorities to the obvious discrimination and human rights violations against asylum seekers.

Another controversial aspect of asylum decisions is the credibility assessment of an applicant's fear of being persecuted in his/her home country. On the one hand, the "Aliens Act" emphasizes that it is immaterial whether the applicant actually possesses the origin-specific, religious, national, social or political characteristic which attracts the persecution, provided that such a characteristic is attributed to the applicant by the actor of persecution.[2] On the other hand, the asylum seeker must justify this fear of being persecuted in his country of nationality, or his inability or unwillingness to avail him of the protection of that country.[3] Formally, the credibility assessment can be divided into three parts [15, p. 7]. The first part is internal credibility measured by examining how logical and detailed the asylum seeker's story is. The second part is external credibility based on a comparison of this story with external facts, for example, the situation in the country of origin and provided documentary evidence. The third part is social credibility used to justify the social and cultural perspective of reading this story by authorities. This need for the credibility assessment has been one of the reasons why Muslim migrants (mostly from Iraq and Afghani-

[1] Aliens Act (301/2004; amendments up to 389/2023 included), Section 148. Grounds for denial of admittance or stay, 2023, *Ministry of the Interior*.

[2] Aliens Act (301/2004; amendments up to 389/2023 included), Section 87b (422/2014). Reasons for persecution, 2023, *Ministry of the Interior*.

[3] Article 1 — definition of the term "refugee". The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, *The United Nations*.

stan) have chosen to formally renounce their religion in favour of Christianity, which is predominant in Finnish society to increase their chances of receiving asylum.

Religious conversion as a modern migration strategy

The specifics of religious conversion among migrants in the host country require special consideration. In 2017, the conversion to Christianity became the most common ground for appeal to administrative courts in Finland after a deportation decision,[1] as Muslim migrants who change their religious beliefs may face persecution in their home country, including the death penalty. While Migri does not have official statistics for asylum applications based on conversion to another religion, it estimated that they accounted for about 70 % of the 7,500 filed appeals [21, p. 2]. In a study of the deportation of Iraqi refugees to Iraq, interviewees claimed that there were rumours actively spread in reception centres, on social media, and on the streets that Finland only grants asylum to people who convert to Christianity or who justify their application by their sexual orientation [20, s. 257—258]. One of these interviewees confirmed that he had converted to Christianity and renewed his asylum application because he believed that he could stay in Finland after changing his religion. But in practice, an applicant is often unable to confirm the authenticity of his/her religious beliefs and substantiate the veracity of the grounds for appealing a negative decision on deportation. However, more and more migrants from countries with Muslim cultures want to join the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland (ELCF).

In Finland, the majority of the population — 65.2 % — belongs to the ELCF.[2] Although over the last twenty years, the number of the ELC followers has decreased by 20 % (according to statistics, the number of non-believers in the country has increased by the same amount),[3] it is still the most influential religious organization in the country, and its status is defined by the "Church Act" in the

[1] Statistics for 2017: Clearly less asylum seekers than the year before — over 2,100 asylum seekers submitted their first application, 2018, *Finnish Immigration Service*, URL: https://migri.fi/-/vuoden-2017-tilastot-turvapaikanhakijoita-selvasti-edellisvuosia-vahemman-ensimmaisen-hakemuksen-jatti-reilut-2-100-hakijaa?languageId=en_US (accessed 02.04.2024).

[2] Population and society, Population structure on 31 December 2022, Religion, 2023, *Statistics Finland*, URL: https://www.tilastokeskus.fi/tup/suoluk/suoluk_vaesto_en.html#Applicants%20for%20asylum (accessed 02.04.2024).

[3] Ibid.

Constitution of Finland.[1] The Constitution proclaims freedom of religion and conscience,[2] but at the same time, it preserves the traditionally strong relations between the state and the ECLF. This fact indicates the importance of the religious aspect for the civic identity of Finns, despite the high level of secularization in the country. In addition, this determines the attractiveness of the ELCF among other Christian organizations for Muslim migrants who have chosen religious conversion as a way to increase their chances of receiving official refugee status and successfully integrating into Finnish society. However, all issues related to asylum and deportation of newly converted Christians are resolved by the Ecumenical Council of Finland. The Council is a forum of Christian churches where issues related to migrants and refugees are discussed at national and European levels and with the participation of the Commission of the Churches on Migrants in Europe.

The Ecumenical Council first raised the issue of conversion of asylum seekers to Christianity in October 2016, in one of four recommendations for the "National Action Plan on Fundamental Human Rights, 2017—2019": "Immigration authorities react with suspicion to conversions, which forces converts to take a test on religion that has given unreliable results. The process of belief-testing, according to which it is decided whether a person is truly Christian or not, is discriminatory and against freedom of religion, and the present form of exam does not serve the original purpose, the investigation of grounds for asylum" (cit. in: [21, p. 6]). Thus, the credibility assessment of religious beliefs by Finnish state authorities is contrary to fundamental human rights and freedoms. But at the same time, religious beliefs are sufficient grounds for asylum or the cancellation of a deportation decision only if their authenticity can be proven.

Migri's efforts to assess the credibility of religious beliefs of asylum seekers have been condemned by Finnish Christian communities. In an interview with the Lutheran World Federation, the leader of the ELCF — the Archbishop of Finland Tapio Luoma expressed concern about the safety and religious freedom of deported refugees and asylum seekers.[3] He briefly summarized a paper signed in August 2019 by the leaders of the member churches of the Finnish Ecumenical

[1] The Constitution of Finland 11 June 1999 (731/1999, amendments up to 817/2018 included), Section 76. The Church Act, *Ministry of Justice*, *UNHCR*, URL: https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/1999/en/86918 (accessed 02.04.2024).

[2] The Constitution of Finland 11 June 1999 (731/1999, amendments up to 817/2018 included), Section 11. Freedom of religion and conscience, *UNHCR,* URL: https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/1999/en/86918 (accessed 02.04.2024).

[3] Finnish church: an integral part of society, 2019, *The Lutheran World Federation*, URL: https://lutheranworld.org/news/finnish-church-integral-part-society (accessed 02.04.2024).

Council. This paper drew the attention of the Finnish authorities to two main issues. Firstly, in addition to the fact that some asylum seekers who receive a negative decision are being returned to unsafe areas, they face a risk of persecution due to their conversion to Christianity. Secondly, assessing whether the conversion is genuine or asylum-motivated is problematic. Churches are worried that secular authorities lack the necessary experience in the religious and cultural spheres to make an objective decision. At the same time, the authorities do not pay due attention to the opinions of experts from the parishes where asylum seekers were baptized. In addition, the ELCF is interested in attracting new members in the context of the secularization of Finnish society and the declining number of its parishioners.

Religious identity in Finnish society

In recent decades, the world has seen an unprecedented increase in the number of conversions from Islam to Christianity, but it is not possible to estimate their exact number. This situation has arisen largely due to the ambiguity of self-identification among newly converted Christians. For example, in the Middle East, Muslims who converted to Christianity often avoid the term "Christian" and identify themselves as a "Muslim-background Believer" or a "Muslim Follower of Christ" [22, p. 3]. In Finland, as in most Nordic countries, on the contrary, newly converted migrants must demonstrate a change in their religious beliefs to be granted asylum on the grounds of a risk of religious persecution in their home country. Therefore, their new religious identity must exclude any ambiguity in breaking with their previous religion to be recognized by secular authorities.

This underlines the importance of missionary work by Christian churches among migrants who intend to convert to another religion to remain in the host country. In this regard, Christian churches have committed to opposing racism and discrimination[1] and have included in their charters recommendations to explain to Muslims the possible consequences of baptism both in the country of origin and in the host society [24]. At the same time, migrants who intend to convert from Islam to Christianity are warned that an open declaration of their new religious affiliation could also threaten their relatives in their homeland [25, p. 166].

[1] Migration, 2024, *Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland*, URL: https://evl.fi/en/our-work/our-policies/migration/ (accessed 02.04.2024).

On the other hand, despite the primacy of democratic values in Western countries, newly converted immigrants with a "Muslim background" may be subject to Islamophobia due to the strong association of Islam with their ethnicity [23]. While Muslim religious organizations and mosques in Finland play a significant role in integration processes, and the formation of a positive image of migrants and their identity [8, p. 94], there are widespread fears in Finnish society about the growth of extremism and radicalization among Muslims. A Pew Research Center poll on "Being Christian in Western Europe" found that a majority of Finns — 62 % — believe "Islam is fundamentally incompatible with [their country's] culture and values".[1] This is the highest rate among Western European countries. It indicates that religion has become a key element of immigrant identity in the modern world. At the same time, the membership of migrants in a religious community plays a decisive role in their integration. [11, p. 8]. This has led to the formation of three widespread false assumptions [10, p. 20]:

1) since migrants come from countries where Islam is the dominant religion, they are frequently assumed to be Muslim, even though, in reality, they may follow other religions or be atheists;

2) not only are all migrants assumed to be Muslims, they are all Muslim in "the same way" regardless of numerous social differences, adherence to different movements in Islam and variations in beliefs;

3) the mass displacement of migrants and the escalation of international extremism (stereotypically associated with Islam) have led to a situation where "migrant" equals "Muslim", and "Muslim" equals "terrorist" in public discourse and consciousness.

To promote the integration of migrants with a "Muslim background" and to overcome existing social misconceptions, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture has included lessons on studying Islam along with other religious traditions in the school curriculum [9, p. 221].

Finnish immigration policy sees education as an important element of integration [14, p. 82]. Finnish school education is a national project and Christianity is its important component. Although religion does not play a significant role in the

[1] Being Christian in Western Europe, Western Europeans divided over whether Islam is compatible with national values, 2018, *Pew Research Center*, URL: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/nationalism-immigration-and-minorities/ (accessed 02.04.2024).

daily lives of most Finns, Lutheran traditions are an important part of Finnish culture. These traditions are actively promoted by schools, where religious lessons are compulsory for everyone [13, p. 4].

Most students attend religion classes based on the teachings of the ELCF as the dominant religious organization in the country with the largest number of followers. Children whose families do not belong to the Lutheran Church can choose to join these classes or attend classes in secular ethics. There is also a third group of students (mostly Muslim) who attend classes in the religion of their families, if at least three students in the class request it.

However, religious differences among students become most noticeable not when children are assigned to different religion classes, but when the school holds Christian events. When various Christian holidays are celebrated in Finnish schools, non-Christian children are offered an alternative program [13, p. 8]. This approach emphasizes the religious background of each student and contrasts "Lutherans" and "others". Since most Christians of other denominations prefer to attend events organized by the Lutheran Church [13, p. 9], all children are conditionally divided into "Christians" and "others".

Thus, religion is an important tool of identification in school education. It highlights religious differences and encourages students to define their religious identity, even if they come from a secular family. In this context, it is the non-Lutheran alien who is the "other". This also contributes to the equation of ethnic and religious identities in Finnish society.

Conclusion

The European migration crises have had a significant impact on the integration and immigration policies of the Nordic countries. For Finland, with its predominantly ethnically, culturally, and religiously homogeneous population, the need to accept and integrate a significant number of asylum seekers with other ethno-religious identities has become a national issue. Despite the government's commitment to pan-European political principles of inclusiveness and anti-discrimination towards migrants, Finnish society is conditionally divided into those who support asylum and those who support nationalist anti-immigration movements. The most manifestations of racism from state structures and political parties, as well as from Finns, are directed at Middle Eastern and African migrants. Unlike Ukrainian refugees, they are stereotypically associated with Islamic radicalism and perceived as a potential threat to public safety.

Despite Islamophobia and a significant increase in the number of negative asylum and deportation decisions, most migrants from Muslim countries have

shown a desire to stay in Finland. Many of them chose conversion to Christianity as a ground for asylum applications or appeals against deportation decisions to Finnish administrative courts, despite the possible negative consequences of religious conversion. This migration strategy has led to a number of social problems: from the ambiguity of the credibility assessment of religious beliefs of newly converted Christians with a "Muslim background" to obstacles to their successful integration due to their ethnicity. It is important to note that the Ecumenical Council of Finland has not always been able to defend the right of new members of Christian churches to receive asylum on the ground of a risk of persecution on religion.

Religion is one of the main aspects of integration processes in Finnish society, and religious identity is actively formed in school education. Religious identification plays a significant role not only for Christian Finns (Lutherans), but also for Muslim refugees or newly converted Christians with a "Muslim background". The state, Islamic and Christian religious organizations make many efforts to integrate people with other religious and/or ethnic identities into Finnish society. However, the Finnish society still strictly adheres to the opposition of "us" and "others" with a negative connotation. On the one hand, it is connected with the stereotypical thinking of the majority of Finns in relation to migrants from certain countries, and on the other hand, the Finnish integration policy reinforces the perception of "us" and "others" in different spheres of social life.

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