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THE MIGRATION BETWEEN FINLAND AND ESTONIA – INFORMATION AND SUPPORT IS NEEDED

Estonians are the largest foreign population in Finland

Since 2010, Estonians have been the largest (21.6%) foreign population in Finland. They find employment and do well compared to the other immigrant groups. Due to how well they cope, they often get less attention and their special needs are not noticed. Nevertheless, it is important to compile the experiences of Estonians and use them to learn how we could together build Finnish society into one where Estonians can feel proud of their roots and of Finland. Being of two countries can easily create a sense of rootlessness and of not belonging to either culture.

Turku University of Applied Sciences coordinates the REGI Project funded by the Central Baltic programme. The project is aimed at supporting Estonian families where some of the family members live in Finland and some live in Estonia, or the entire family lives in Finland. Other organisations participating in the project include the Estonia Centre of Southwest Finland, Baltic Region Healthy Cities Association and Rakvere College of Tallinn University in Estonia.

Estonians permanently in Finland

The REGI Project conducted a survey of Estonians living in Southwest Finland. 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 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. Of the respondents, 54% said that they speak fluent Finnish and only 6% reported that they have little to no Finnish-language skills. Estonians find employment well in Finland; 52% of the respondents were working full-time and only 11% were unemployed. It is thought that Estonians travel between Estonia and Finland. However, 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.

Estonians need information about Finland

The aim of the REGI Project is to support families where some of the family members live in Finland and some live in Estonia. Only 5% of the respondents belonged to this group. REGI also strives to support Estonian families that have moved to Finland. 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. The Estonian school culture is more authoritarian, and the teaching style of Finnish teachers can easily be confusing. Finnish health services, occupational healthcare and occupational safety were also subjects on which more

information was desired. There is plenty of information on Kela services available online, but the problem in general seems to be finding the things one needs online.

In recreation, Estonians are the most active in sports and culture, and they would like more activities in those fields. Handicraft, theatre and other cultural events were also among the wishes of the interviewed group. They were also interested in nature activities, and the most common wish was for activities for families. In January, the REGI Project started several types of group activities for children and adults, and training for professionals and volunteer workers will start later in the spring.

Support is needed right after moving to Finland

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, and one woman voiced her frustration at every place sending her somewhere else. Many would have liked help from an interpreter in the early stages. Finding work was found to be challenging at first, and the interviewees would have liked more support with it.

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.

Strong ties to Estonia

According to the survey, Estonians seem to adjust well to Finland. 56% of the respondents said that they keep regular contact with Finns and Estonians in Finland, and all respondents had friends or relatives in Estonia. Only 6% of the respondents said that they have no friends or relatives in Finland. Also in the interview, the Estonians said that their relationships with relatives have not been affected by the move. Some of the interviewees said that they visit their home country a few times a month, while others only visit a few times a year. Many of the interviewees found it hard to get to know Finns.

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. Based on the survey, the Estonians in Finland seem to feel well and seem satisfied with their daily lives. They are here on a permanent basis or intend to stay for a fairly long time.