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# Unjust to everyone? Responses to deportation of asylum seekers in Finland

[opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/karina-horsti/injustice-to-everyone-moral-responses-to-deportation-of-asylum-seekers-in-finland](https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/karina-horsti/injustice-to-everyone-moral-responses-to-deportation-of-asylum-seekers-in-finland)

Karina Horsti

How does Finland's unjust asylum policy reflect on its citizens? The Government's stance is harming both asylum seekers and Finns.



A reproduction of artist EGS's Europe's Greatest Shame #11 on display outside the Ateneum in Helsinki. Flickr/Amnesty Finland. Some rights reserved. "Right to live! No to forced returns!" Asylum seekers, mainly from Iraq and Afghanistan, have been camping in the centre of Helsinki since early February. They and their supporters are protesting the Finnish Immigration Service's negative decisions on asylum applications, and what possibly follows from them: detention and removals. Nearby, another group protests with slogans such as: "Finland first, close the borders".

It has been common to identify such protests as extreme ends of a spectrum. I disagree: civic engagement for human rights at the asylum seekers' protest needs to be seen as at the core of a democratic society, not at its limits. Therefore to refer to those who are indifferent to Finnish asylum politics – to use the words of Finnish president Sauli Niinistö – as "[tolkun ihmiset](#)" (sensible people in English) is a misjudgement.

The anti-immigration protesters, however, can be defined as extremists. The slogans they use refer to recently established movements that are further to the right than the nationalist populist Finns party. In addition, a large poster "Ilja Janitskin for president" indicates support for a misinformation platform, Janitskin's MV-lehti. The platform is known to disseminate lies and hostility towards asylum seekers and their supporters. This protest is one fraction of a broader anti-immigration movement that began to take shape in Finland during the early 2000s. It is part of the wider European nationalist populist landscape.

## The response to asylum seekers in Finland



A reproduction of artist EGS's *Europe's Greatest Shame #11* dominates the square outside the Ateneum in Helsinki. Flickr/Amnesty Finland. Some rights reserved. Asylum seekers have always been at the centre of the public debate on immigration in Finland. What is new is the persistence of the asylum seekers' protest (which has gone on for more than two months) and the public attention that it is receiving. Academics and cultural practitioners have published letters with more than 13 000 signatories, Lutheran pastors have read out negative decision documents in church, and the national art museum, Ateneum, demonstrated its support by displaying a reproduction of graffiti artist EGS's work *Europe's greatest shame* (2017) on its façade. The museum faces the square where the protest takes place. Such wide public support across Finnish society for a protest generated by asylum seekers who face deportations is unprecedented.

Asylum seekers have always been at the centre of the public debate on immigration in Finland.

Public support for the new protest movement and the political activism around it is grounded in the humanitarian response to the arrival of 32,000 asylum seekers in 2015. The number of arrivals is ten-fold compared to figures in previous years. Similar to the responses all over Europe that year – what Germans have termed *Willkommenskultur* – many Finns welcomed asylum seekers: for instance, they showed hospitality by donating clothes and food.

While such humanitarianism is based on the idea of our common humanity and dignity, humanitarian action nevertheless often constructs a hierarchical relation between the one who helps and the helpless victim. However, the gap between the helper and the helped can, at least partly, be bridged by encounter and engagement.

The support the asylum seekers' protest has received does contain a sense of solidarity, based in a tradition of more political rights-based activism. However, rather than a shift from one kind of moral response to another, I suggest that we would be better off understanding the current protest as an entanglement of humanitarianism and solidarity. Humanitarianism is not completely apolitical, as many critics often claim, but through humanitarian action a critical rights-based agency can develop.

By becoming engaged in the hospitality movement, Finnish volunteers have built relationships with the newcomers. These relationships have developed in both face-to-face and mediated encounters. Online spaces play an important role in the hospitality movement: volunteers are recruited and coordinated through Facebook groups and websites.

Participation in these spaces has created a sense of community and shaped new identities. These were not only online spaces for Finnish volunteers, but many of those asylum seekers who could speak English or who picked up Finnish quickly have also been present in these groups.

When negative decisions started to filter through from the Immigration Service, asylum seekers and their supporters circulated desperate messages in the social media spaces that had been created to facilitate the

welcoming of refugees. Volunteers were sad and distressed that the person or the family that they had become friends with would be deported. They felt that the Immigration Service's decisions were unjust.

For those volunteers, the asylum seekers had begun to matter in a personal way. By knowing them, they saw them as human beings, as friends. And by knowing one they were ready to support others in similar situations.

## Witnessing vulnerability

Feminist philosopher [Judith Butler](#) argues that our relationship with others is central to being human and that this is what makes everyone vulnerable. We are not hurt only by violence or pain that is directed at us but also by violence towards a person connected to us. Witnessing violence also hurts. This connection requires proximity, be it mediated or physical. We feel morally more responsible for people to whom we feel close.

Butler also points out that the understanding of every person's vulnerability, even those we don't know, is perfectly conceivable. Without knowing someone, we can still treat the person as a person, as someone who matters to someone else, as someone's daughter or son.

In 1967, Martin Luther King proclaimed justice to be indivisible. He said that "[injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere](#)". In this case, it is perhaps not so much a question of injustice "everywhere" as it is about injustice to everyone. The distress of the Finnish volunteers or the scope of the public debate about asylum seekers rights is actually focused on local identities, the nation, and on Finnishness.

## Low recognition rates for a Scandinavian country

Finland's [recognition rates](#) of Iraqi and Afghan asylum seekers are lower than the [EU average](#). In the last quarter of 2016, the Finnish Immigration Service made positive decisions for 45% of Afghani applications. At the same time, the EU average for Afghans was 61%. For Iraqis, the difference was even more significant. 25% of the decisions were positive in Finland whereas the EU average was 63%.

In the Nordic context, Finland's recognition rates are lower than those of Sweden, Norway and Denmark. This step away from its neighbours became more pronounced in May 2016 when Finland tightened its practices. The Immigration Service changed the [Country of Origin Information](#) on Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan, and decided that these countries were "safe" for returns. In addition, references to a "humanitarian protection" permit in cases where a person couldn't be forcibly deported were deleted from the Aliens' Act.

Many of those who support asylum seekers argue that the changes to the Aliens Act and asylum policy in May 2016 were the government's attempt to manage the 32,000 asylum seekers who arrived in 2015. This had happened at a moment when two conservative parties, the Centre Party and the National Coalition Party, were in a coalition with the nationalist populist Finns party.

## At the core of Finnish identity and history

This is not a Finland many Finnish people are willing to identify with. The negative decisions of course hurt the asylum seekers most directly but they also hurt many Finnish citizens. In Finland, as in the other Nordic countries, people trust the state and its laws more than elsewhere in the world. Finland is among the four top countries in the [Eurobarometer](#) opinion survey when it comes to people's trust in their government.

Now the state acts in a way that many feel is not right, and people's sense of justice is hurt. Injustice was not directed at them personally but it was done in their social environment, to people they consider friends.

Stories of forced returns, the detention of families with children, and anonymised negative asylum decisions have been shared in online spaces with notes such as "This is not the Finland I recognize!" "Not in my name".

Someone wrote on a piece of cloth at the protest camp in Finnish: "I don't want to be ashamed of my country – Let's respect human rights!" In a recent opinion piece in the national newspaper [Helsingin Sanomat](#), former Finnish president Tarja Halonen demanded the suspension of forced returns. She ended her article: "This is also about the kind of mark we draw about ourselves in history".

Someone wrote on a piece of cloth at the protest camp in Finnish: “I don’t want to be ashamed of my country – Let’s respect human rights!”

Returns and deportations of people who have been denied the right to stay in Finland have constituted the key technologies of immigration policies. This policy, the state believes, discourages people from seeking asylum in Finland. Nevertheless, the execution and their human consequences have rarely received public attention in Finland. The public was focused on arrivals, not removals. Until a couple of months ago, the fact that Finland detains children with their families prior to deportation did not receive any public attention.

Deportations and removals are now no longer considered outside the realm of citizen concerns. They are also about “us”: who “we” are and what “our” society will be like, also in the eyes of the future generations, as President Halonen argued.

Are these new policies about safe countries, leaving non-deportable people undocumented and current decisions made in the Immigration Service legal? This question is currently before the administrative court. What is debated publicly, however, is the question of whether these decisions are right.



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