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**Minorities, Majorities and Truly
Finnish Finns: An Analysis of Political
Rhetoric Concerning Minority Rights**

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**Minorities, Majorities and Truly Finnish Finns:
An Analysis of Political Rhetoric Concerning Minority Rights**

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Abstract

This article analyses political rhetoric concerning minority rights in Finland. The international discussion about the development of multicultural policies in western democracies provides a framework for this analysis. Will Kymlicka (1995) distinguishes between the minority rights of two different types of minorities in modern nation states: on the one hand, old national minorities, and on the other hand, new minorities that have emerged as a consequence of immigration. Kymlicka (2010) argues that the international backlash and retreat from multiculturalism has mainly occurred in relation to the acceptance of ethnic-cultural diversity among immigrant groups. In this article, the support for a backlash against multicultural policies coming from populist and far-right parties is studied in the case of minority rights statements of the political party called the True Finns. The article argues that Kymlicka's assessment is not completely accurate in this particular case. The statements of the party are not only about policies relating to immigrants. In the political rhetoric of the party the basic principles of group-specific rights for minorities are disputed. Thus, any real or imagined minority who is not considered truly Finnish, or not considered sufficiently representing 'Finnishness', can become the target of the rhetoric.

Keywords:

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Introduction

In the 2000s, multiculturalism has been widely debated by politicians in Europe. It is argued that there has been a general backlash against multicultural policies (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). In this article, the support for a backlash against multicultural policies coming from populist and far-right parties is studied in the case of the minority rights statements of a political party in Finland called the ‘True Finns’. The theory of multicultural policies outlined by Will Kymlicka (1995, 2001, 2010) provides an analytical framework for this article. Kymlicka (2010) argues that the international backlash and retreat from multiculturalism has mainly occurred in relation to the acceptance of ethnic-cultural diversity among immigrant groups. The article discusses to what extent this argument holds true in this particular case. The study is based on an analysis of the discourse of the official party programme and political statements of Members of Parliament (MPs).

All modern nation-states are characterized by the existence of cultural or ethnic minorities. Minority rights relate to the fact that minorities often are located in a vulnerable societal position or have special needs that require group-differentiated rights. Furthermore, minority rights often have to be seen in the context of, and as a response to nation-building and its consequences for the minority: ‘While minorities do make claims against the state, these must be understood as a response to the claims that the state makes against minorities’ (Kymlicka, 2001: 2). The key questions in multicultural policies therefore include aspects about both the nature of societal groups as well as their rights. Firstly, what and who are the minorities that have a right to be recognized, and secondly, what group-differentiated rights and claims can be regarded as legitimate and possible? On the one hand, who can claim to be a *minority* and what are the rights that it can demand, and on the other hand, who can claim to be a *majority* and to what extent has it a right to impose its demands on the minority? Thus, there is reason to also keep in mind the sociological aspects of minority-majority relations, and not only the political and legal aspects of multiculturalism (cf. May, Modood, & Squires, 2004). The political solutions involve finding a balance between universal and particular values as well as between collective rights and individual rights, including basic human rights. These complexities are not always well-understood in general public debates, where the voice of the majority and the hegemony of majority rule easily become dominant. As is described in this article, the rhetoric of populist political parties can provide a case in point.

A Theory of Minority Rights

Human rights and freedoms of individuals can be perceived as difficult to combine with collective rights of specific groups and minorities. In a liberal society that emphasizes the equal rights of all *individuals* it can be seen as a challenge to take into account collective social structures and group interests.

An important contribution to bridge this gap is provided by the Canadian philosopher Will Kymlicka. In the widely influential book *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Kymlicka, 1995) he provides an overview of the discussion regarding multicultural policies and minority rights. As his starting point, Kymlicka takes questions that largely have their origin in existing multicultural situations in North America. Both Canada and the USA can be regarded as individualistic societies where the rights of the individual are emphasized. From this perspective, a key question easily becomes why and how demands for collective rights should be accepted in addition to the more self-evident rights of individuals.

Kymlicka (1995) argues that some forms of collective rights are fully compatible with liberal democratic principles. Group rights can be viewed as admissible within liberalism and even essential for freedom and equality. The liberal tradition and its emphasis on the rights of the individual can provide a basis for a multicultural policy since the cultural demands of groups can be motivated and legitimated by the needs of the individual. Therefore, some forms of group-specific rights are not only possible, but a necessity in a democratic society. In many of his publications, Kymlicka (e.g. 1995, 2001, 2011) outlines examples of multicultural solutions and minority rights protection that can be found within the framework of western democratic political systems. He argues that there are no simple models of multicultural policies that can be applied to all societies. According to Kymlicka, there are significant differences between different minority groups and different claims for minority rights. Nevertheless, a general trend towards greater acceptance of minority rights can be found in western liberal democracies (Kymlicka, 2001, 2010, 2011).

Kymlicka (1995: 10–11) explicitly distinguishes between indigenous peoples and ‘national minorities’ on one hand, and immigrant ‘ethnic groups’ on the other. This general dichotomy reflects two different modes of incorporation into national society, which affect the nature of the group and the type of relationship they desire with the larger society. Kymlicka’s own work has largely focused on national minorities in so called ‘multi-nation states’, especially in Canada (e.g. Kymlicka, 2011). However, his dichotomy actually relates to a more general and universal distinction between different types of minorities. According to Kymlicka (1995: 10–17), national minorities typically wish to maintain themselves as distinct societies alongside the majority culture, and the minority demands various political solutions to ensure the survival of their distinct culture. Immigrants, however, typically wish to integrate into the larger society, and to be accepted as full members of it, but their demands relate to a modification of the mainstream society to make it more accommodating of cultural difference. Kymlicka (1995: 10–17) argues that demands for group-specific rights often have more legitimacy if the minority group in question has a long history in the nation. As he points out, especially the first generation of immigrants have difficulties arguing for their demands since they have chosen to move to a new society, while indigenous peoples and national minorities obviously have not been able to choose the majority society

they live in. It makes a difference if the culture and traditions of a group have a long and well-established position in the society in question, or if it is a question of new cultural traditions in which we cannot foresee their future development. As a consequence, claims for specific group rights made by indigenous peoples and old national minorities are often considered more legitimate than claims made by new immigrant groups (Kymlicka, 1995, 2001).

Most studies of multicultural policies agree that there has been a clear trend in western democracies towards multiculturalism and minority rights from the 1970s until the 1990s (Kymlicka, 1995, 2001). After this period, some observers argue that the trend has shifted towards a general backlash and a retreat from multiculturalism (Brubaker, 2001; Joppke, 2004; Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). This retreat includes an emphasis on a more unitary citizenship, based on common values and identity. One expression of the backlash is the rise of nationalist and populist parties, but there is also a more general belief in the failure of multicultural policies and a de-facto abandonment of specific policies in some states. However, Kymlicka (2010) argues that the master narrative portraying a general rise and fall of multiculturalism is misleading and might obscure the real challenges and opportunities of multiculturalism. According to him, much of the debate about the retreat of multiculturalism has mischaracterized the nature of multiculturalism policies in the western democracies, as well as exaggerated the extent to which the policies have been abandoned. He explicitly argues that the abandonment of multiculturalism has mostly occurred in policies relating to immigrant groups, while the fundamental multicultural issues relating to indigenous peoples and national minorities have not been disputed (Kymlicka, 2010: 40). The exact nature of these political developments are the object of debate among political scientists. Among other issues, there is reason to differentiate between changes in political rhetoric and actual policy changes, although the former of course might contribute to the latter.

Minority Rights as Collective or Individual Rights in Finland

Finnish society, as other Nordic societies, is characterized by relatively high socio-economic equality. It is mostly regarded as self-evident that the task of the state is to provide and support equality among all citizens. A universal provision of rights and services constitute a fundamental part of the Nordic welfare state model, as well as the understanding that it is *the state* (rather than the individuals themselves or their communities) that is the provider of welfare, and equality to all its citizens. The challenge facing minority policies in the Nordic countries is therefore not to accept equal rights for all citizens, but how to accept cultural diversity and implement group-specific rights. In accordance with the Nordic welfare state model, minority policies can only be introduced 'from above' by the state itself. Minority policies are therefore part of the public welfare state structures rather than part of civil society. This easily

leaves the minorities wholly dependent on the goodwill of the state and its majority. The institutions and resources on which the minority depend become vulnerable to majority decisions. In this framework, minority rights are easily falsely understood as something that the majority society grants to 'its' minorities, rather than rights that minorities inherently possess.

Kymlicka (1995: 26–33) identifies three different forms of group-differentiated rights: *self-government rights*, *special representation rights* and *polyethnic rights*. All three types of rights can in various ways be found to be implemented in the Finnish case. The country is not a federal state and self-government rights are only implemented in the case of the autonomous region of the Åland Islands, located in the Baltic Sea between Finland and Sweden.

There are attempts in Finland to provide cultural and ethnic minorities with representation rights by the establishment of various political bodies, each with its own history and different types of limited political power. These bodies include the elected Sami Parliament, the Advisory Board for Roma Affairs, the Swedish Assembly of Finland (*Folktinget*) and the National Advisory Board on Ethnic Relations (*ETNO*). The task of these various bodies is usually to support cultural and linguistic activities with the help of small budgets provided by the Finnish government. Furthermore, they can provide policy statements. It can be debated to what extent these various political bodies can make the voice of the minorities heard in Finland. To oversee the legal protection of members of minority groups there is an appointed Ombudsman for Minorities.

'Polyethnic rights' relate to a range of minority policies and to various groups with special needs, although these rights are slightly difficult to identify unambiguously. Kymlicka (1995) refers mainly to immigrant groups in his discussion of these rights. In Finland, the municipalities are the main producers of public services, and many of the services they provide in minority and immigrant languages can be seen as polyethnic rights. However, the services in the national languages (Finnish, Swedish and Sami) are not officially considered as specific *minority* rights. According to the Constitution of Finland, 'the public authorities shall provide for the cultural and societal needs of the Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking populations of the country on an *equal basis*'. Therefore, the national language groups do not enjoy any specific *minority* rights as such, although separate linguistically-divided administrative solutions are very common. For example, there is a specific Swedish-speaking parallel structure in the area of education, although the same education laws and rules apply for both language groups. To apply different laws for the different language groups would, of course, be foreign to the Finnish principles of law and its emphasis on the equality of individuals. Actually, it is difficult to identify to what extent there are legal group-differentiated rights as such in Finland, since the legislation tend to be explicitly based on *individual* rights.

The collective rights for Samis constitute a case in point. The status as an indigenous people has been interpreted as a basis for granting *cultural and linguistic* rights, which has not been considered a difficult political issue in

Finland. Yet, group-specific *economic* rights have been much more difficult to achieve. Land-rights for the Sami and in connection to this the exclusive right to define oneself as ‘Sami’ has been the object of heated debates in Northern Finland. The government of Finland for a long time hesitated to ratify the ILO Convention 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, exactly because of the legal difficulties and political opposition in connection to the implementation of economic rights for the Sami.

Likewise, in relation to the Swedish-speaking Finns, much of the public debate has focused on an opposition to some (real or imagined) specific collective rights of the minority, rather than questioning individual rights. Parallel linguistically divided public services might be perceived by the majority as an unjust ‘privilege’ of the minority. Thus, an opposition to specific group-specific rights for Swedish-speakers exist in public debates, but on the other hand individual cultural rights seem to be generally accepted. A key dilemma is that individual and collective rights are difficult to distinguish from each other, especially in the case of language rights. Is a language an individual resource or a particular collective feature of a group? Clearly, it can be both. Kymlicka (1995: 45–48) argues, with a reference to French-speaking Canada, that language rights can be either individual or collective or both, depending on the situation. The international academic debates indicate that linguistic rights can constitute a key issue for both the realisation of basic human rights and the struggle for minority rights (Kymlicka & Patten, 2003; Pupavac, 2012).

In conclusion, minority rights are complex issues and the best solutions are often the outcome of extensive dialogue and complex political processes (Rex, 1996; Parekh, 2000). However, one question is to what extent politicians are prepared to engage in a dialogue that can find the best solutions, since many politicians might look for easy populist solutions to these complicated challenges.

Minority Rights Disputed: The Case of the True Finns

As already mentioned, many social scientists argue that we since the late-1990s have witnessed a general political backlash against multicultural policies; while Kymlicka argues that the minority rights of old minorities have not been affected by this development. In the following, I will discuss how statements concerning minority rights made by the political party of the True Finns (*Perussuomalaiset*)¹ fit this development. The True Finns won a historic electoral result in the Finnish Parliamentary Election in 2011, increasing their share of the votes from 4 to 19 per cent. The party can be described as nationalist, populist and explicitly EU-critical. The party’s own description of their value base is the following:

¹The English name of the party has varied. In this article, I use the well-known translation ‘The True Finns’ since it was commonly used during and after the Parliamentary Election in 2011. The party itself declared later in 2011 that the official English name is ‘The Finns’.

[The party] is a nationalist-Christian-social party, which does not believe in the right-wing power of money or in the left-wing power of the system. We firstly believe in and trust the human being. All political decisions should be based on humanity, in which a sense of community is fundamental. A sense of community is to a very large extent based on shared values and norms, and these also provide the possibility to develop a society and a nation. Democracy is people's power, and this is not possible without a people. The people and humanity are both primarily based on the sense of a community.¹

As these statements exemplify, the political rhetoric and the discourse provided by the party portray it as the representative of the Finnish people and the Finnish nation, i.e. the true and original Finns that constitute the 'real' majority of the population, a fact that is reflected in the name of the party. In the Parliamentary election in 2011, the party published a political programme consisting of a collection of statements². The party position on specific cultural questions and minority issues is outlined in some parts of this programme. The need for a defence of an abstract 'Finnishness' is explicit:

Finnishness is Finland's gift to the world and the key to success for our society, also in the 21st century. We defend multiculturalism through defending our national identity. For True Finns, patriotism means selflessness. We must treasure the Finnish language. Cultural appropriations must be targeted to reinforcing Finnish identity. Pseudo-artistic postmodernists can find their funding in the free market. The Finnish Broadcasting Company must be Finnish and deliver high quality.

In general, the election programme seems to reflect a concern for the future of Finnish culture, Finnish identity and Finland as an independent country. The nation is under threat and needs to be defended. The threat comes from various societal developments, like globalization, urbanization, the EU, and from a multicultural society.

The type of political statements mentioned above are perhaps not that unusual, and similar ideas can be found among other politicians. However, a more radical and extreme picture of the True Finns party emerges in the public statements made by the members of the parliament elected in 2011. Actually, the party became an umbrella organization for both populist politicians as well as political extremists coming from a variety of nationalist and 'immigration-critical' networks.

¹The quotation is the author's translation from the official version in Finnish available at: <http://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/arvomaailmamme>), accessed 20 September 2011 .

²Fitting for the Finns – The True Finns' Election Programme for the Parliamentary Election 2011 / Summary (<http://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/getfile.php?file=1935>), accessed 4 October 2011.

The most vociferous commentator on minority politics in the party in the new Parliament was the MP Jussi Halla-aho. He has a political history as an independent blogger, and has gained his reputation for testing the limits of free speech, particularly in his anti-immigration, anti-multiculturalism, and anti-Islamist writings. In 2009, he received a court sentence for disturbing religious worship, which propelled his later political career. In his blog he has, among other issues, warned about the danger of a Muslim invasion in Europe. According to Halla-aho, the immigration of Muslims has created a danger for the Western civilization and a need to fight for the survival of Western culture, in which he includes Finnish culture. One example from his writings exemplifies the flavour of this particular genre: ‘Western civilization has not reached the fate to choose between war and peace; it has to choose between war and its own destruction. Multiculturalists do not have a God, but what will [three named politicians] tell their children, when darkness has fallen?’¹ According to this narrative, the culprits for this dangerous threat to Western civilization are the ‘multiculturalists’ who have opened the borders of Europe. These types of writings have made Halla-aho a name in the so called counter-jihad movement in Europe, and he has been a guest writer in the international anti-Muslim web-portal *Gates of Vienna*. Thus, it is not surprising that the Norwegian mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik mentioned the writings of Halla-aho, among many others, in the manifesto he published after his terrorist attacks in Oslo on 22 July 2011. In the debate that followed in Finland, Halla-aho felt a need to explain his position for the Finnish media: ‘For your information, I do not regret anything I have written, and I do not take any responsibility for the act of Breivik, and I will continue along the same line, because bad immigration is bad, and multiculturalism is shit, independent of and regardless of the acts of Breivik.’² The above mentioned quotations have been widely reported by the media in Finland, and the statements made by Halla-aho are well known among the general public. Despite, or perhaps because of, these statements, he gained 15,074 votes in the constituency of Helsinki in the general election in 2011. This suggests that these types of opinions can find considerable support among the general public in Finland. It is difficult to judge to what extent the party of the True Finns actually accept the political opinions of their MP. The party leader Timo Soini has repeatedly declined to take a responsibility for the statements of his MPs³. In any case, the party has accepted Halla-aho as a member, and has provided him with a platform and position from which he can get his voice heard.

There are also examples of explicit and official minority rights statements of the party. It has to be pointed out that the minority statements of the party

¹<http://www.halla-aho.com/scripta/tulevaisuudenkuva.html>, 6 February 2006, accessed 28 September 2011.

²<http://www.iltasanomat.fi/kotimaa/halla-aho-monikulttuurisuus-on-hanurista-breivikin-teostariippumatta/art-1288403638048.html>, 25 July 2011, accessed 28 September 2011.

³For example, this position was made clear by the party leader Timo Soini in an interview in the *BBC World News* television programme ‘HARDtalk’ on 20 February 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/n3csrmlp>, accessed 22 April 2013.

are not limited to immigrant questions. After the general election, the True Finns were encouraged in the media to make clear their position on racism. This led to a proclamation signed by the whole True Finns group of MPs ‘Against Discrimination, Racism and Violence’ on 25 May 2011. The collective statement proclaims that the MPs denounce all forms of racism and discrimination. In the text they stress (this is done in bold letters in the original press release in Finnish¹) the following: They denounce racism against *any* group *regardless* of whether it is a majority or a minority. Furthermore, they denounce all *discrimination or privileges* based on ethnicity, language, culture, religion or similar factors. They also demand that all political and public decision makers and discussants take discrimination and violence equally seriously regardless of whether the victim is a member of *a minority or a majority*. ‘We find univocally, that the authorities have to treat everybody as an individual, not as a representative of an ethnic, cultural or similar group. Nobody should ever, in any situation, be *punished or rewarded* for his background.’ This statement can be seen as a statement against differential treatment and group-specific rights, and thus more generally against minority rights. Indeed, the subsequent comments made by the True Finns MPs made it clear that this was exactly the way it was intended to be understood. Halla-aho, who largely had formulated the text, explained for the media that this was a statement against all forms of differential treatment, including ‘positive discrimination’ and ‘minority quotas’.

In this discourse, among politicians of the True Finns Party, minority rights seem to be regarded as something that diminishes the rights of the majority. This general impression is further strengthened by other actions of the True Finns MPs. In the autumn of 2011, MP Olli Immonen suggested that the office of the Ombudsman for Minorities should be abolished, since according to him its activities had tried to ‘limit the freedom of speech guaranteed by the Constitution of Finland’². In the budget debates in the parliament, the party MPs has among other issues suggested cut backs in the funding of the Swedish Assembly and a renegotiation of the economic relation with the autonomous region of the Åland Islands.

The question remains to what extent the party is able to change Finnish policies. The party did not join the government that was formed after the election in 2011, and the minority policy statements of the party have not received support from other political parties. At the time of writing, the party’s influence on policy has so far been relatively limited. Still, the minority rights rhetoric of the party might play a significant role in the future.

¹<http://www.yle.fi/tvuutiset/uutiset/upics/liitetiedostot/julkilausuma.pdf>, 25 May 2011, accessed 4 October 2011.

²<http://www.kaleva.fi/uutiset/immonen-lakkauttaisi-vahemmistovaltuutetun-toiminnan/915103>, 14 October 2011, accessed 3 November 2011.

Discussion

The opposition to minority rights among members of the populist party of the True Finns have been presented in this article. It is not possible in this article to give a full picture of the opinions of the party, or of its MPs. For example, the MP Halla-aho has given various explanations for his political statements. Still, the point in presenting such public statements in this article is to exemplify the fundamental questioning of minority rights that we can find today in Finnish politics.

In the political rhetoric provided by the True Finns Party, the party portray itself as the representatives of the Finnish people, the Finnish nation, i.e. the true Finns that constitute the real majority of the population. Furthermore, this people and nation are under threat and need to be defended. In this narrative, multiculturalism and minority rights constitute threats to the rights of the majority. In populist politics, minorities do not seem to have any rights of their own; the only thing that counts is majority rule. The general narrative seems to be that rights belong to the majority and not to the minority; members of majorities can claim rights but members of minorities cannot claim rights. If minorities claim cultural rights they might constitute a threat to society, since society according to the party is based on a unitary culture, i.e. 'the shared values and norms' of the people. The only true representative of this people is presumably the True Finns party. A political mobilization for an active defence of the majority is called upon. The logic behind this rhetoric is that it is the majority that is regarded as the discriminated and threatened group in society.

As outlined in the beginning of this article, Kymlicka (2010) argues that the international backlash and retreat from multiculturalism has mainly occurred in relation to the acceptance of ethnic-cultural diversity among immigrant groups. It appears that Kymlicka's assessment is not completely accurate in relation to the minority policy statements of the True Finns party. In this particular case, the statements are not only about policies relating to immigrants, in fact any real or imagined minority who is not considered truly Finnish, or not considered sufficiently representing 'Finnishness', can become the target. The opposition is not limited to specific policies; instead the basic principles of group-specific rights for minorities are disputed. In fact, the 2011 statement of the MPs of the party displays an explicit attack on differential treatment and minority rights. The discourse against group-specific rights seems to be based on an extreme individualistic perspective on society. The MPs 'find univocally, that the authorities have to treat everybody as an individual'.

The populist and individualistic perspective might actually be one reason for the support of the party. In the case of Finland, individual equality is a political goal which finds much support among the general public and a goal that can be incorporated into the idea of the welfare state. In Finnish society, public administration and legal traditions are largely based on a universal and individualistic tradition; in this tradition collective group-differentiated rights easily seem to become a far more controversial and complicated questions than

is the case with individual rights. Public services are usually provided according to universal principles based on traditional individual rights, but some specific group-differentiated rights have also been applied, most clearly in the case of indigenous peoples and old national minorities. As outlined in this article, these (presumed or real) collective group-specific rights are the ones that become the target of the populist party of the True Finns.

In this context, it has to be pointed out that multicultural policies are not necessarily in conflict with an individualistic tradition. Kymlicka (1995) emphasizes that in liberal democratic states there are various ways of finding political solutions that provide minorities with cultural protection and minority rights. Parekh (2000) emphasizes that these solutions can be found through a dialogue. Minority policies cannot be defined by the majority for the minority, but policies have to be defined in a true dialogue involving the groups in question. In a democratic society, it is possible to create forums and institutions where compromises can be found between divergent interests (Rex, 1996). Yet, there is reason to emphasize that the minority also needs the necessary resources to get its voice heard. The alternative is the hegemony of majority rule, which leaves the minorities wholly dependent on the goodwill of the state and its majority. As the rhetoric presented in this article shows, this goodwill is not always present. Furthermore, it might be that the Finnish welfare state model makes minorities even more dependent on the state and its top-down official policy. In societies that are less centralised, minority policies might to a larger extent be embedded in civil society and are not in a similar way dependent on the goodwill of the majority. In Finland, on the contrary, policies are largely implemented by state institutions and with state funding, which makes minorities vulnerable in the case of policy change.

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