

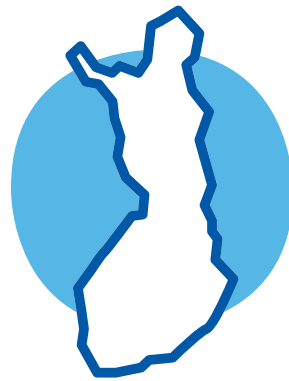


**Maahanmuuttovirasto**  
**Migrationsverket**  
**Finnish Immigration Service**

# Finnish society course



Finnish society





**Finland is located** in Europe on the northern hemisphere of the globe. Finland is one of the Nordic countries. The others are Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland. Finland shares a border with three neighbouring countries: Sweden in the west, Norway in the north and Russia in the east.

**Finland's population** is about 5.5 million and the surface area is around 338,500 square km. The population density in Finland is one of the lowest in Europe. Finland has many forests and lakes: up to 75% of the surface area is forest and 10% water.

**The official languages of Finland** are Finnish, Swedish and Sámi. 4.8 million Finnish people speak Finnish as their mother tongue, 280,000 speak Swedish, and 1,900 speak Sámi. Other large language groups are Russian (79,000) and Estonian speakers (49,000). Everyone in Finland has the right to speak their own language and enjoy their culture.

About 69% of Finnish people belong to the Evangelic-Lutheran church and 1,1% to the Orthodox Church. 1.7% have other religions. About 29% of the population do not belong to any religion. Freedom of religion is respected in Finland, and everyone can follow whichever religion they choose, or none. The right to follow a religion is safeguarded under the Constitution of Finland.

## History

People have lived in Finland for more than 9,000 years. During its history, Finland has been part of Sweden (–1809) and Russia (1809–1917). Finland became an independent country in 1917. There was a civil war in Finland in 1918. In the period following the war, Finland developed as an independent state. Finland's economy developed positively in the 1920s and 1930s.

Finland fought several wars between 1939 and 1945: the Winter War (1939–1940), the Continuation War (1941–1944) and the Lapland War (1944–1945). In all these wars, Finland remained an independent country.

A dramatic change in the structure of society took place in Finland in the 1960s and 1970s. People who had been working on farms in the countryside moved to cities and started working in factories and services, and women started having jobs outside the home. The standard of living improved and consumption increased fast.

Finland became a European Union member in 1995 and started using the Euro as its currency in 2002. Finland still uses the Euro.

## The state

Finland is a republic headed by the President. The President is elected directly by the citizens every 6 years.

The Finnish Parliament, or 'eduskunta', has 200 Members of Parliament. The Members of Parliament are elected by the citizens every 4 years. Parliament passes all laws in Finland and adopts the central government's budget.

Finnish citizens who are 18 or older can vote in elections. Anyone who has the right to vote can become a candidate in elections. While the citizens have a right to vote, they do not have to do so.

# Municipalities

There are slightly over 300 municipalities in Finland at the moment. The numbers of residents in municipalities are quite small. On average, there are around 6,000 residents in a municipality. The municipalities organise services for their residents. Most of them are services that the municipalities have to organise under law, for example the following:

- education and day-care centres
- cultural, youth and library services
- city planning
- land use
- water services and energy production
- waste management
- environmental services
- social and health services, and
- fire



# Cities

70% of people in Finland live in cities. The capital is Helsinki, which has around 650,000 residents. Other large cities are: Espoo, Tampere, Vantaa, Oulu and Turku.

## The law and the authorities

The laws determine people's rights and responsibilities in Finland. The authorities implement the laws and statutes, supervise compliance with them and give instructions.

Public servants are people who work in a public service employment relationship for the state, a municipality or some other employer that uses public power. Public servants of the central government work at ministries and government agencies, and they also include police officers, border guards and customs officials. Examples of public servants in the municipalities are teachers as well as doctors, nurses and practical nurses in social and healthcare.

The citizens have a right to appeal decisions concerning them that the authorities have made. If you think that an authority has done something wrong, you can make a complaint.

## Social security and taxation

Finland is an extensive welfare society and has a social security system that is funded by taxes. Everyone pays taxes on their income and as part of the price of goods they buy. This

helps to fund the service system of society, and people also benefit from the taxes they pay when they use the services. For example, all citizens can see a doctor at a low price, have free basic education, and receive a pension and different family benefits, such as child home care allowance and child benefit.

## Education system

In Finland, children start school in the year in which they turn 7. Before this they have one year of pre-primary teaching. Compulsory education applies to all children who live permanently in Finland. This means that they have to be educated. Compulsory education ends when the child has completed basic education (grades 1 to 9), or 10 years have passed since the child started their compulsory education.

Asylum seeker children have a right to education, but compulsory education does not apply to them. Education is free for the pupils, and everyone gets a free meal at school.

Practically all young people continue their studies after basic education, either at a general upper secondary school or a vocational institution.

## Freedom of speech and participation

No-one can prohibit or stop others from saying or spreading their opinions in Finland. However, freedom of speech comes with a lot of responsibility. No-one is allowed:

- to speak insultingly about another individual's personal characteristics incite violence against another group of people
- use their freedom of speech to justify racist activities.

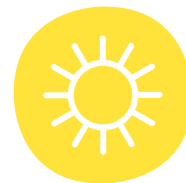
You can influence societal matters in many ways in Finland. The citizens can vote and become candidates in elections. Everyone can organise a protest or participate in a demonstration in Finland. There are also many organisations and trade unions in Finland that you can join.

## Climate and seasons

There are four different seasons in Finland.

- The winter is cold, and it snows in many places.
- In the spring the snow starts to melt, it gets warmer and the nature comes alive.
- The summer is light and warm, but the weather may change often.
- In the autumn the days become shorter and darker, the weather is colder, and nature starts preparing for the winter.

Finland is a long country, and this affects the weather and temperatures. In Southern Finland, the weather can be warm and it feels like spring already in April or May, but in Northern Finland there may still be snow on the ground. The average temperature of the year is around +7 C in the south and + 1 C in the north.



## Finnish festivals

There are many national holidays in Finland, on which schools and many places of work are closed. The opening hours of shops may also be different on these days. The most important holidays are:

- New Year (1 January)
- Easter (in the spring)
- May Day (1 May)
- Midsummer (end of June)
- Independence Day (6 December), and
- Christmas (24–26 December).

## Finnish way of living

Finnish people are often considered quiet and reserved. Young people are different from this traditional idea of Finns. Honesty and being on time are appreciated in Finland. When you go to official appointments and meetings, it is very important to always come exactly at the given time.

Finnish society and life are based on many freedoms, and people can plan and make decisions on their lives and how to live them. For example, there is an extensive freedom of speech and religion in Finland, the freedom to dress as you like and to choose your husband or wife.

The individual is the basis of Finnish society. People are treated as individuals, not just members of a family. However, the family is often important to people. There are many types of families, not only those with two parents and their children. Children are appreciated and they have many rights. Physical punishment of children is forbidden under law.

The sauna is one of the favourite places for Finns, and it is used a lot in all seasons. It is a Finnish way of relaxing.

Nature is also important for Finnish people, and many feel that it is part of our national identity. People think that being in nature improves their well-being and health. People take exercise and relax in nature. Finland has so-called Everyman's rights. This means that everyone in Finland can use nature (for example walk in the forest or pick berries) regardless of who owns the area. However, you must not do damage or disturb anyone when you are using these rights.



## Additional material:

The instruction video "Building the welfare state: the century of Finland and the Virtanen family" provides information on the history of Finland and the development of Finnish society from the early 1900s until present day.

The video approaches the topic by looking at the life of the imaginary Virtanen family. The video is available in plain Finnish and seven other languages: Arabic, English, Farsi, Kurdish, (Sorani), Russian, Somali and Thai.

<http://suomenvuosisata.fi/suomi.html>

The At Home in Finland project has produced videos on Finnish society.

They cover the following topics:

- Taxation and how the welfare society works
- Democracy and participation in society
  - What is the average Finn like?

You can find these videos on Youtube:

<https://www.youtube.com/c/KotonaSuomessa/playlists>

The videos can be watched in the following languages: Finnish, Swedish, English, Arabic, Dari, Kurmanji, Somali, Sorani, Thai, Chinese, French, Estonian, Tigrinya and Russian.



**Maahanmuuttovirasto**  
**Migrationsverket**  
**Finnish Immigration Service**