

FOREIGN SEASONAL FARM WORKERS' STRATEGIES AT THE MARGINS OF THE FINNISH WELFARE STATE: *Informal networks and weak ties*

Abstract

In this article, we analyse foreign seasonal berry and vegetable pickers' strategies as regards securing their living and working conditions in Finland. Farmers are currently dependent on foreign seasonal workers. In spite of the potential gains working in Finland offers to foreign pickers, the risks associated with the work are diverted to the individual employee. The risks are not shared between the employee and the welfare state, which is regarded as a central feature of the Nordic welfare model. In this precarious situation, 'weak ties' become an important source of information and security for the pickers.

Keywords

Temporary migrant workers • weak ties • social protection • farm work • welfare state

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Introduction

In this article, we analyse the strategies of foreign seasonal berry and vegetable pickers to secure living and working conditions at the margins of the Finnish welfare state. Foreign pickers, who work on a temporary basis in Finland, are by and large excluded from the protection of the Finnish welfare state. Historically, picking used to be a summer activity carried out by the natives, who worked on a temporary basis in the farms to earn an extra income. Nowadays, the picking business follows a different logic: pickers are mainly foreigners who come from Russia, but also from other eastern European countries and Estonia (Alijosiute 2005). They work temporarily in Finland with specific visas that set conditions, on the length of their stay, insurance requirements and minimum income except for the EU/EEA nationals, who are covered by the EU policy of freedom of mobility (see Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2013). The visa regulations do not entitle the pickers to the national social insurance provided by the Finnish state and municipalities. Instead, pickers are required to purchase a private insurance to be allowed to work in the country, which covers medical treatment due to accidents and travel (ibid.).

Our main focus is in the analysis of the informal networks that, as our research shows, the pickers rely upon as a strategy to find employment, as a form of social security and as a means for protecting living and working conditions. The aim of the article is to answer *how* the foreign berry pickers gain knowledge about employment, and what their work and social security related strategies are during their stay in Finland. In other words, what formal or informal measures do the pickers rely on in trying to secure their living and working conditions in Finland?

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Our theoretical point of departure is Mark Granovetter's (1985) concept of embeddedness, which stresses that economic relations are embedded in concrete social networks and do not exist in an abstract idealised market. Despite the limitations¹ of Granovetter's theory in general terms (cf. Neer 2005: 52-53; Smelser & Swedberg 2005: 15), it is particularly useful in analysing situations of temporary stay. We argue in Granovetter's terms that social networks and interpersonal weak ties are essential for the pickers to acquire work-related information and secure their stay in Finland. Weak ties, which do not require large commitments according to Granovetter, are essential in the transmission of novel information in social systems such as labour markets. Weak ties, as opposed to strong ties, do not require large time commitments, emotional intensity or intimacy or a history of reciprocal favours (Granovetter 1973). In the context of the Finnish labour market, there has been a shift towards an increasingly competitive capitalism, where the role of the state is to enhance firms' possibilities of being competitive (see Heiskala & Luhtakallio 2006; Kettunen 2008). This is visible in the increased short-term labour migration from abroad; especially in the construction sector and agriculture (see Alho 2013, 2015; von Hertzen-Oosi, Harju, Haake & Aro 2009). Throughout Europe, there has been a re-emergence of a sort of a *gastarbeiter* system. Temporary migrant workers are an economic buffer against the fluctuating demand of labour (cf. Alho 2013; Helander, Holley & Uttana 2016; Jauer *et al.* 2014; Katzenstein 1985).

The Nordic welfare states – among which Finland is typically included – are commonly characterised as universalist, with relatively generous and comprehensive welfare provisions from

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'cradle to grave' (e.g. Ervasti, Fridberg, Hjerm & Ringdal 2008: 5–8). Nevertheless, as already noted, the temporary migrant picker in Finland is by and large outside the welfare state's benefits and risk protection.

Previous research (Helander, Holley & Uttana 2016) has shown that foreign workers' temporary stay affects not only their rights to welfare state protection, but also their motivation of acquiring information about benefits and social security they might be entitled to. The temporary migrant picker works with a picker visa and intends to stay in Finland only a short period of time – usually the harvesting season – when there is the highest demand for farm workers. The short nature of the stay puts earning money first in their list of priorities and, consequently, other aspects of life become less relevant and uninteresting (cf. Piore 1979; Rautiainen et al. 2012).

We begin by describing the working logic of the farm berry industry and the reasons why it has become so dependent on foreign workers. We then introduce the research design, followed by our empirical findings. The concluding section summarises and discusses the key findings.

The Berry and Vegetable Picking Industry: Employers' Dependence on Migrant Workers

Farm berry and vegetable picking is a labour-intensive business, as berries and vegetables have to be picked by hand. Thus, the farms need seasonal workers. There are plenty of examples throughout history of this kind of demand of labour being met by temporary migrants (Weber 1924; Wells 1996; Preibisch 2010: 405). For example, the majority of U.S. farm workers are foreign born (National Agricultural Workers Survey 2005). Employer demands for temporal flexibility required in seasonal work are commonly achieved by recruiting workers from abroad (e.g. Caviedes 2010; Preibisch 2010; Rye & Andrezejewska 2010). In the Finnish context, however, temporary migration from abroad is a relatively recent phenomenon (Sorainen 2007). The public discussion and academic research on temporary labour migration to the rural areas has focused on wild berry picking. Valkonen and Rantanen (2011a; 2011b) have published on the phenomenon of temporary foreign wild berry pickers' work in Finland. However, farm berry picking by temporary migrants – the focus of this article – has not been a subject of academic research in Finland. Farm vegetable and farm berry picking follows a different logic than wild berry picking. Wild berry pickers are private entrepreneurs who pick berries with everyman's right and sell their product to wholesalers (Valkonen & Rantanen 2011a: 21–22; 2011b). In contrast to wild berry pickers, farm pickers, however, are wage earners with a different legal status with regards to work and rights to social security.

The Finnish harvesting season is short and intensive. Even under favourable weather conditions, it lasts no longer than a couple of months. Farm picking is a monotonous, physically demanding, and low-paid job. Furthermore, picking –excluding greenhouses– is conducted outdoors, even in poor weather. As a consequence of the increase in standards of living, Finnish farmers no longer find enough natives for the job (Alijosiute 2005). In this situation, the farmers' strategy has been to recruit workers from abroad (ibid.). According to Rautiainen et al. (2012: 2), Finnish farmers employ approximately 15,000 foreign workers yearly, the majority of whom are employed in seasonal work. This is a considerable number as the total number of 'workers with foreign background' in Finland

was around 140,000 in 2012 (National Audit Office of Finland 2012), and, taking into account that Statistics Finland (2013) calculated that 59,000 foreign workers worked on a temporary basis in Finland in 2012. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs estimated that in 2015 the total amount of berry pickers would reach 14,000 of whom 10,500 would work as farm berry pickers and 3,500 as wild berry pickers (YLE News 7.7.2015). There is no accurate data on the age and gender of the foreign berry pickers in Finland, but according to the European Migration Network, most of the farm pickers originate from Russia and Ukraine.

Picking is lucrative for Russians and workers from other east European nationalities as income levels in their home countries are lower than in Finland. The farm owners we interviewed stressed that hiring foreigners is a necessity for the business. Thus, although the foreign pickers are in a marginal position in the Finnish society and the Finnish welfare state, paradoxically they are of central importance as providers of labour to the berry and vegetable picking industry, which these days depends on non-native seasonal workers from Russia, Ukraine and Estonia (interviews with the farmers). Some of the farm owners underlined that berries have to be sold at a competitive price, especially when Finnish farmers face competition from other countries such as Poland. For example, the competitive advantage of Estonian farm-produced strawberries is explained by the lower costs of labour in Estonia (see Koivisto 2005). Using piece rate as a basis for payment is internationally common in agricultural work when the crop is being picked, because it is easily weighed and measured (Roka 2009). This was also the case in the farms we visited.

In this competitive situation, paying higher earnings in order to attract Finnish workers does not seem to be a viable option as it would raise costs of products in the global market and hence decrease firms' competitiveness.

The media often links the berry business with shady arrangements and exploitation of workers. However, the problems that the media has reported have been mainly related to wild berry picking, and not farm berry and vegetable picking, which we concentrate on. Nevertheless, farm picking has also gained some negative publicity due to problems with pickers' working conditions (Voima 2005/10; Maaseudun tulevaisuus 7.3.2011). It is not our aim here to assess whether this image of the farm picking business is accurate. Instead, we are interested in the strategies of the worker (and the employer) from his or her subjective perspective. The research design has been formulated in order to give a voice to those in the work process: the migrant workers and the farmers. In addition, we have interviewed two government officials (Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Employment and Economy) with expertise in the field, in order to contrast their view with that of the pickers.

Research Design

The empirical part of the study is based on a five-day field work conducted in central Finland in August 2011. We interviewed a total of 28 agricultural workers in seven farms. Most informants worked in berry picking (mainly strawberries but also blueberries and raspberries). However, some pickers worked in vegetable picking and packing (e.g. salad and lettuce) and some also worked in forestry. The majority of the pickers intended to stay no longer than a few months in Finland, but some had already stayed or intended to stay for longer periods, working on various tasks at the farms.

For the sake of clarity, we put them in a single category and will refer to all of them as 'pickers'. The interviews were conducted in a structured fashion. A list of questions and themes were discussed in a predetermined order. Nevertheless, the informants had the possibility to extend the discussion by bringing up topics that they considered important. We were interested in the pickers' strategies of getting access to the farms, their experiences and needs of social protection, and their strategies of managing potential or experienced risks related to seasonal agricultural work.

In addition to interviews with the seasonal workers, the research group also interviewed seven farmers and two representatives of state authorities in order to gain background information, and to contrast the pickers' views with those of the other interested parties. We also conducted a group interview with three officials from The Wood and Allied Workers' Union on their views and experiences of foreign workers in agriculture. Nevertheless, the main focus in the article is on the pickers' strategies. The group consisted of three researchers aided by interpreters (Finnish-Russian-Finnish and Finnish-Estonian-Finnish).

We acquired access to the pickers by contacting farmers who had participated in a rural development project run by the Ruralia Institute of the University of Helsinki. We asked the farmers whether it would be possible to interview some of their foreign workers. With only a few exceptions, the farmers agreed to participate and allowed the research group to visit their farms to conduct the interviews. We interviewed farmers and pickers at different locations in the farms. This way we strived to give the interviewees an opportunity to express themselves freely without being heard by farmers/pickers. The interviewed pickers were not chosen by the farmers: we interviewed all pickers separately one-by-one.

This way of gaining informants may have resulted in a somewhat biased sample, as farms with poor working and living conditions might have been left out. The research material provides, nevertheless, plenty of information regarding the pickers' experiences of seasonal work. Many pickers we interviewed had previous experience from other farms and could consequently comment broadly on temporary farm work.

Most (23) of our informants (excluding seven farmers and two government officials) came from Russia. The informants also included four Estonians and one Ukrainian. Simultaneous interpretation was utilised during the interviews. This complicated the interview situations somewhat. However, this was unavoidable due to our weak/non-existent knowledge in the Russian language. Most of our informants were women (22 of 28), and their age distribution was between approximately 20 and 60 years of age.

Most of the interviews have been transcribed and translated into Finnish. They have been analysed with qualitative content analysis, and the interviewees are considered as 'witnesses and informants' of circumstances and conditions. We guaranteed anonymity to the interviewees. Some of the pickers stressed on the importance of this aspect. We also emphasised that the interviewees did not have to answer our questions if they did not want to. The names of the berry farms are also withheld. A common challenge of research interviews is that the interviewees tend to present their life in a more positive light than it actually is (see Kortteinen 1992: 37-52; Roos 1987: 213-216). However, we believe that this did not happen. The interviewees quite openly told us about the difficulties they had faced, as the following sections will illustrate.

The Process of Gaining Access to Finland

According to the interviewees, the process of accessing the Finnish labour market began with the pickers acquiring information about entry to the farms, visa and insurance requirements (with the exception of Estonians who as EU citizens did not need visas) and familiarising themselves about the working conditions. Their main motivation for coming to work in Finland was economical, i.e. the pickers expected to receive higher wages than in their home country. An additional factor, according to some Russian pickers, was that Finnish employers would treat their employees better than employers in Russia, which the pickers obviously valued. These primary motives for coming to Finland have been documented also in previous research (Rautiainen et al. 2012: 4). Furthermore, some pickers stressed that working in a foreign country provided them with valuable personal experiences. Some of the pickers came in groups, and valued, in addition to the earning opportunities, the social aspect of spending some time together in a foreign country.

For the pickers in the first stage of the migration process, especially before the first stay in Finland, institutional arrangements in relation to firms, organisations, public authorities etc. play a larger role than informal personal networks. However, some pickers also utilised informal networks at this early stage. Many of the Russian pickers relied on private recruitment agencies when coming to work for the first time in Finland. Those who had worked previously in Finland were not dependent on Russian recruitment agencies. They had developed direct connections with the farmers and could arrange to receive an invitation to work at a farm, which facilitated their visa application. Those pickers who had friends or acquaintances working at the farms were able to get access to farm work without agencies. A Russian picker, for instance, had found out about work opportunities at Finnish farms through her daughter's friends. In a similar fashion, an Estonian picker had learned about a work opportunity in the farms from her classmate whose father worked in Finland. This highlights the importance of weak ties in accessing farm work.

Many of the Russian pickers claimed that they had been duped by Russian agencies with false and excessive promises on the amount of work that would be available. One interviewee claimed that she had paid 1,000 US dollars to a recruiting agency only for an access to a farm. According to the pickers, this was a considerable sum in relation to their income. Moreover, the fee only covered travel to Finland, visa and insurance. The pickers with direct or indirect ties to Finnish farms were not dependent on the Russian agencies and preferred not to use their costly and unreliable services. Also previous research (Fanning 2011: 57; Preibisch 2010: 425) has shown that transnationally operating recruitment agencies are not always reliable in their promises regarding pay, accommodation, work hours and safety at work.

Many of the younger pickers had collected useful information about Finnish farms from Russian websites. Learning about the picking industry and how to access it strengthened the pickers' agency and decreased their dependence on one employer. Wild berry pickers share information, through informal channels in Thailand, about their experiences in Finland and provide estimations of potential future earnings, which have been shown to influence the decisions to seek employment in Finland (Rantanen & Valkonen 2011: 18). We witnessed a similar phenomenon in farm picking with pickers who lived in Russia close to the Finnish border. Many of these pickers had connections over the Finnish-Russian border, which they utilised when looking for employment.

In this sense, the pickers are embedded in a transnational social field (cf. Alho 2010; Helander 2010), which either encourages or discourages potential pickers to travel to Finland. The decision whether to travel or not is embedded in former pickers' experiences with the previous season(s). Pickers often rely on information from personal acquaintances about conditions on the farms:

Interviewer: How did you get the idea to come to Finland [for work]?

Picker: My friend works at an NGO [name of NGO withheld] in Finland, and that way I got information that workers are needed in Finland.

A berry farmer we interviewed described the recruitment process:

Farmer: In [name of city withheld], there is a Russian woman who works for the council, who intermediates these pickers. I don't know exactly what is behind the arrangement.

As these interview quotes indicate, weak ties play a role as the pickers gain access to the farms.

The position of the picker is stronger the more knowledge (s)he has about ways of entry into the farms. This information is important to the pickers because the farms differ in terms of pay level, working conditions, accommodation, sanitary conditions and the attitude towards the pickers. As our empirical evidence shows, the information the pickers receive (especially those coming to Finland for the first time) is very limited and unreliable". This goes against the classical and neo-classical economists' idea of markets where participants are well informed of their options, and where their behaviour is minimally affected by social relations. This idea has been criticised by Granovetter (1985: 481), who stresses that economic action is embedded in the 'structure of social relations'. According to our empirical findings, the pickers' process of gaining knowledge of how to enter the picking business, and what to expect at the farms, is embedded in a complex set of social relations, which provide information with varying accuracy.

Dependence on the Employer

Many informants described how the process of work induction at the berry farm had provided them with all the necessary information about conditions and practices. Some expressed gratefulness towards the farmers who took care of many practicalities, such as provision of medication, offering shopping tours to nearby towns and helping with access to health care and issues related to accommodation. The farmers described and explained various work-related issues to the pickers. Previous research (e.g. Fanning 2011: 56) has shown that migrants' lack of local language skills increases her/his dependence on the employer. This was the case also in our study: lacking a common language, the farmers sometimes even drew pictures to communicate with the workers. As one picker explained, 'I was shown what to do and if I didn't understand, the farmers painted pictures'.

The relationship between the farmers and pickers is a patron–client relationship. In these dyadic (two-person) exchange relations, both have duties towards each other, but the relationship is asymmetrical in terms of power and extends further than mere economical transactions (cf. Simmel 1969: 59–61). Patron–client analysis originates from anthropologists, who found it particularly

useful in analysing arrangements in small local communities where interpersonal power relations were salient (Scott 1972). Scott (1972: 92) defines patron–client relationship as a relationship 'in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron) [in our case the farmer] uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) [in our case the picker] who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron'.

The patron–client relationship was strengthened by the fact that many pickers had received invitations from the farmers to come to Finland. On the other hand, this bond between the picker and the farmer made the pickers non-dependent of recruiting agencies.

The information the picker received in aforementioned cases relied heavily on the particular linkage the individual picker had to the farmer. In many cases, a large number of pickers work at the same farm and the farmer does not always have the possibility of providing each individual picker with the same information. In such cases, the relationships among the pickers become crucial as regards receiving information.

Rumours become an important source of information. This kind of informal knowledge may, or may not, be accurate. There were cases where the weak ties protected the picker when s(he) had encountered problems regarding employment:

Picker: We paid 22,500 rubles (around €1 000) in order to get this job. I am in Finland for the first time. When we came here we noticed that there is work only for two weeks, but originally this [Russian] company had promised us work three months [–] This is already the third farm I work at even if all work was supposed to be at one farm. The way of operating of the company is that they look for a farm where there is supposed to be work available, and if there is not, it is not their job to find a new workplace.

Interviewer: So how did you find new workplace?

Picker: We got to know that there was a woman who finds us a new job. We told the others at the farm about [our problem] and they told us that it is worthwhile to contact this woman. We contacted her by phone and I suspect that she lives in Finland.

The close dependence between the employer and employee was also evident in the potential case of health problems:

Interviewer: What do you do if you encounter health problems?

Picker: I ask someone who is close; a few weeks ago I had pain in my eye. I told this to [name of farmer withheld] and (s)he gave me medicines.

In another interview, a picker said that:

Picker: We [pickers] don't know [what to do in case of an emergency], but we ask the employer according to need.

Excluding one case, the pickers we interviewed had signed work contracts, and hence the relationship between the farmer and picker was, for this part, formalised. However, the relationship between these actors entailed many informal negotiable aspects and forms of mutual assistance. The asymmetrical power relation between the farmer and picker was strengthened by the fact that in

all the farms that we visited, the farmers provided accommodation for their pickers. The pickers' dependency on the farmer was further increased by their lack of own means of transportation, which was, in many cases, provided by the farmer. Some pickers were lodged in the same house with a relative of the farmer. In many cases, the farmers took pickers to nearby towns to do shopping. This does not mean that the pickers are in a powerless situation in relation to the farmers; the farmers are dependent on their labour force, which, according to them, is a scarce resource in their sector. Especially at the peak of the harvesting season, it would be costly for the farmers to replace unsatisfied workers who had decided to leave. As information about the conditions on farms travel through the pickers' informal networks, a rational farmer would not risk his/her reputation by breaching norms and regulations of the business. Nevertheless, some of the pickers had encountered problems during their previous visits to Finland as this interview quote indicates:

Picker: First time I didn't like it, but in the second year I ended up working on a very nice farm, and I liked it. During the third year I started working here and it was even better!

Interviewer: Where did you work during the first year and what were the working conditions?

Picker: I worked in [a municipality in Western Finland, name withdrawn]. Accommodation and attitude towards Russians was bad.

Interviewer: What were you doing there?

Picker: I was doing berry picking.

Interviewer: Is it easier to work, if you already know the place?

Picker: Yes, of course.

This interview quote illustrates the local variation among the farms, which makes it difficult for the pickers to anticipate what the conditions will actually be like. This manifests the role of weak ties and informal networks as a channel of information. Signed formal work contracts could be used –at least in principle– in a possible dispute and strengthened the pickers' position towards the farmer. However, we interviewed one Estonian picker who had not signed a contract, but only agreed verbally to the terms and substance of the work. These kinds of arrangements obviously increase the pickers' dependence on the reliability of the employer. All the pickers we interviewed were legally in the country. This is in contrast to the situation in many countries where migrant farm workers are often undocumented migrants. For example in the United States, approximately half of farm workers do not have a legal authorisation to work in the United States (National Agricultural Workers Survey 2005). The legal status of the workers affects the power relations between the employee and employer so that a documented migrant is in a stronger bargaining position than an undocumented vis-à-vis her/his employer.

Peer Support

By 'support', we refer to predominantly informational phenomena, i.e. support in terms of information-sharing about working conditions and work-related circumstances. Support usually involves many

other aspects as well, such as financial support, but in this article, we focus on information and communication. Migrants rarely speak Finnish before coming to Finland for work. During their sojourn, they are unable to develop the necessary language skills to independently navigate in a foreign bureaucracy, which puts a premium on informal networks and weak ties. The Finnish language skills of the pickers were in most cases minimal. Consequently, temporary migrants rely heavily on brokers, informal networks of acquaintances or co-ethnic peer workers. These weak ties are valuable as they include people with sufficient language skills and knowledge about the formal issues, such as visa requirements and financial matters.

The networks include people who are representatives of the employer. The pickers often lack the means to ascertain whether the information is correct. This further strengthens the client–patron relationship between the farmer and the worker. However, false promises and expectations created problems mainly for those working for the first time in Finland. Gaining information and experience helped the pickers distinguish between reliable and non-reliable information, and consequently strengthened their agency.

As an interviewed government official in employment services explained:

Government official: The employer sometimes has a Russian speaking employee who can explain the basics of work-related issues. But whether that information is correct, the pickers are not able to check, but at least they know what the employer refers to.

A picker told that:

Picker: I went to this place where one gets a social security number. We had people with us who assisted us, but we needed personally to be there. Beside me there was a person who took care of practicalities as I don't speak Finnish.

Interviewer: Who was this person?

Picker: I don't remember, but maybe it was the wife of this previously mentioned [name of farmer withheld]

Interviewer: How do you obtain work-related information?

Picker: I ask [name of co-worker withheld]. He is kind of a boss, an experienced worker, at the farm.

Interviewer: What if you need advice during your free time?

Picker: [name of co-worker withheld] helps also with other problems.

As these interview quotes illustrate, it is not always easy for the picker to distinguish the position of the person giving him/her information as the peers, government officials and farmers are all part of the intermingling information and assistance chain that the picker needs. Lack of peer support made the pickers sometimes feel vulnerable:

Interviewer: What did you expect from work in Finland?

Picker: When I came to work in this enterprise abroad I was nervous because no one of my friends had worked at this farm previously, and I had no information.

There were also some cases where the pickers had been dissatisfied with the working conditions and quality of accommodation at the farms they had worked at during previous summers. These cases were not related to the farms we visited, but to the pickers' experiences from previous years in Finland. Furthermore, in one case, the Russian agency who had arranged the trip to Finland had claimed that the farm could offer three months of work. The farmer claimed to be unaware of this promise and in reality, there was only work for two weeks. The pickers were left alone to look for a new farm to work at. In this particular case, peer support proved valuable to the pickers as other pickers at the farm knew a Russian woman who was able to find them employment at a new farm. The pickers contacted this person by telephone, but it remained unclear to them who she actually exactly was. However, the contact these newly arrived pickers had with the established pickers was a typical example of a valuable weak tie in a difficult situation. This was particularly important as there was no possibility for the pickers to rely on welfare state social protection or any other institutional support. Weak ties offered a way of mobility for the pickers.

During their spare time, many pickers were in contact with relatives and friends in their home country via Internet. This was an important social aspect, as the pickers did in most cases not visit their home countries during their stay in Finland. These ties to home countries were examples of strong ties in Granovetter's (1973) terms. Although these ties were socially and emotionally important, they could not function as a strategic tool of support in a problematic situation unlike the weak ties did. This is in accordance with Granovetter's theory (1973), which argues that weak ties provide for more novel information and opportunities than strong ties.

The pickers followed their home country media, but only in some cases, Finnish media, due to their non-existent or inadequate Finnish language skills. Hence, Finnish media did not provide knowledge or information that would have been valuable to the pickers in terms of their employment or living conditions in Finland.

Organisational Support

Employment authorities do not play any significant role in providing information about available jobs in the picking sector. However, the Russian NGO *Ingria* distributes information to Russians regarding work opportunities in Finland. Some pickers had used this information and received farm jobs in Finland. In the agricultural sector, the Finnish state authorities provide instructions about seasonal work. The information, which is aimed both for employers and employees, is available online (see Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2013). Government authorities launched a project (Russia Services) between 2008 and 2010 that informed firms in the region of our field work on issues related to Russia (e.g. employment of Russian workforce). The Wood and Allied Workers' Union has provided the collective agreement for agricultural work online in English (and is in year 2016 working on providing online information in Russian). However, this information provided by the authorities and the trade union is not directed to seasonal workers, and it does not – according to our research material – seem to reach the pickers, as the pickers we interviewed were unaware of this information. In relation to this, our interview with The Wood and Allied Workers' Union officials confirms that the seasonal workers are a difficult group to reach. The union had in the beginning of 2016 around 750 foreign members (of total 35,000), however, none of them is a seasonal worker from abroad. According to the trade union officials, the union provides

services to its members, thus the foreign seasonal workers remain unrepresented.

The authorities handle every visa application individually, and they require particular information from the employers regarding accommodation, food supply and health care when issuing visas (Formin.fi instruction, 1-2). This procedure gives some possibilities for advance control over the agricultural seasonal workers' working and living conditions at the farms. These procedures (and some other regulations) regarding third country seasonal workers will be further judicially institutionalised in the EU (with the exception of UK, Ireland and Denmark) as consequence of EU's Seasonal Workers' Directive (2014/36) in 2016 (see, e.g. Fudge & Hertzberg-Olsson 2014; Peers 2015). In forest berry picking, a procedure of posteriority account is in use, where enterprises submit declarations about the picking season to the embassy after the season has ended (Rantanen & Valkonen 2011: 16). In farm berry picking, this procedure is not used.

Particular NGOs for the Russian population in Finland transmit information to Russia about the need of labour in Finland. However, in practice, temporary workers have to rely on themselves and their informal networks while working in Finland, and the NGOs, trade unions, and authorities do not get involved with their working arrangements or social protection. None of the interviewed pickers had joined a Finnish trade union.

The farmers receive some organisational support from the Finnish Fruit- and Berry Farmers' Association, as regards employment of foreign seasonal workers (source the Association's website). The pickers we interviewed were, however, unaware of the different advisory organisations or procedures, and rely almost entirely on the information provided by their employer and other pickers.

In some cases, the work contract was written in Russian, which decreased language problems for the pickers, as in these cases the workers did not need any external assistance with paperwork. The transnational aspects of the picking employment chain is illustrated by the fact that in some cases the work contracts were signed in Russia, in some cases in Finland. Some pickers said that the Finnish authorities should inform them about work-related issues. One picker argued that this would be reasonable as the pickers pay taxes to Finland.

The informality of the pickers' access to the Finnish labour market and the shady arrangements of Russian agencies were confirmed not only by the pickers but also a government official we interviewed:

Government official: Seasonal workers usually come to Finland outside all formal institutions. The farmers have their own recruiting channels; also Russian agencies operate as intermediaries. I think it is against the Finnish legislation that the Russian agencies demand the seasonal workers pay for getting access to a job. In reality those agencies do not take any responsibility as what happens to the workers in Finland.

These accounts illustrate that the economy of the picking business is deeply embedded in structures of social relations, which is in line with Granovetter's (1985) theory.

Disinformation

Disinformation is prevalent in the institution of seasonal picking work. First of all workers are often given false promises by Russian private recruitment agencies regarding working and living conditions and pay. Pickers traveling first time to Finnish farms cannot always be

certain of where exactly they are going, how much they are going to earn, what are the conditions and how long they are going to stay. Furthermore, the pickers were in many cases not aware of whether they gain right to pension from the taxes they pay in Finland. The nature of the picking industry makes assessing future earnings even more difficult, as the harvest depends on the weather. In some cases, there was contradictory information on whether the pickers are insured or not and what the insurance really covers. Pickers themselves occasionally assume that farmers are obliged to have insurance for their pickers, while farmers, in their turn, assume that pickers have their own insurance. This kind of mutual unawareness about insurance coverage increases the vulnerability of the worker.

According to the Finnish law, pickers are required to have insurance (travelers or accidents) in order to get a visa for seasonal work (see Ministry for Foreign Affairs/Formin.fi 2013, 1). This does not, however, free the employer from having the compulsory worker's compensation insurance.

A judicially complicated situation arises if the picker is not covered by an insurance for the particular job that s(he) is performing. This question is of importance as in some cases the pickers also helped with other jobs, such as packing, gardening and forestry. Agricultural work, is one of the most hazardous occupations (Rautiainen et al. 2012: 2). The pickers expressed doubt about what their compulsory insurance would cover in case of an accident. The information the pickers obtain is sometimes anecdotal, and spread through informal networks. Nevertheless, the informal networks often provide accurate information as previous paragraphs have shown. A government employment official told us that

Government official: They [the pickers] do not know collective agreements. They understand the logic of payment but it has happened that their income is smaller than they have been promised in Russian employment agencies. I once wondered whether the employer [the farmer] is at all aware of how much the pickers have been promised by a Russian agency.

A similar view was expressed by a Russian picker who had come to work on a farm in Finland for the first time several years ago:

Picker: When I came to Finland [for the first time] I did not know there were collective agreements. For us the most important was to get a job and a salary.

Nevertheless, the more experienced pickers who had been more than once in Finland were more successful than the first timers in avoiding the pitfalls of seasonal work in the farms. Despite the challenges, the interviewees were fairly content with the working conditions and earnings. The problems were associated with earlier experiences. Many pickers had returned to work in Finland several times.

Informal Social Security

Due to lack of reliable information, dependence on close networks and absence of supporting organisations, seasonal workers themselves (as a social category) have to rely on their own means to find out about work related circumstances. They need a certain kind of 'street-wiseness' and predictive skills in order to cope with the highly variable conditions they face. This would not be a substantial problem in ordinary circumstances, where home is relatively close to the location of the seasonal work, but this is not the case for many

of the foreign pickers. Some of the pickers we interviewed came from parts of Russia that were several thousand kilometers from the farms. Due to language problems and specific restrictions to the stay in Finland, their situation is characterised by vulnerability. The berry picking visas do not, for example, entitle the pickers to work in any other occupation, which reduces their choice of employers. Neither do pickers become residents in any Finnish municipalities, which means that they are not covered by the residence-based social insurance. Finnish social insurance is –like in other Nordic countries– by large comprehensive and residence-based. However, as our focus is on the subjective experiences of the actors –and not the system as such– we will not give a detailed account of the Finnish social insurance system (for a detailed overview, see e.g., EMN 2014: 1; Solsten & Meditz 1990: 118-132). Instead of residence-based social security, the pickers are insured by a privately obtained insurance in any other non-EU/EEA country of origin, which covers costs for medical treatment. The private insurance is a requirement to get a visa to Finland. However, there was in some cases unawareness among the pickers and the employers regarding what the insurance actually covered. For example, in one case, a picker had returned to Russia when encountering a tooth ache because (s)he and the farmer were unaware of the fact that the insurance would have covered the pickers' medical costs. The following interview quote illustrates the lack of information:

Interviewer: How about health issues, what happens if they [the pickers] become ill?

Employer: That is a huge risk, to become ill in Finland.

Interviewer: What happens in such a situation?

Employer: I took a picker to public sector dentist. That cost [her] 88 euros. After being there twice (s)he said, that is enough I will return to Russia [because of 'high price for treatment'].

Most pickers were uncertain of what exactly to do should they encounter health problems. They would contact their employer for assistance (cf. Helander 2014). The pickers did not know what exactly was covered by the health insurance they were required to have in order to obtain a visa. There were some rumours among the pickers that the insurance had not covered the medical costs.

Nevertheless, it would be an exaggeration to claim that the pickers would be without agency as individuals. In fact, they are in high degree embedded in networks of different actors, among whom their peers and employers are the most important supportive parties that they use as a strategic resource. Thus, the pickers' situation in terms of benefiting from the welfare state does not resemble the situation of residents in Western welfare states, as social security (understood in a broad sense) is in the pickers' case provided by informal social networks.

Interviewer: What would you tell about your experiences to someone in Russia, who contemplates coming here [for work]?

Picker: That one has to rely on your own force. Use common sense.

Interviewer: How?

Picker: One has to think for one self. I don't have much experience.

In this case, the individual's personal strategy refers to informal ways of guaranteeing one's own situation as the person cannot rely upon formal social security.

Conclusion

Finland is an example of a highly coordinated and universalist welfare state. In the best-case scenario, utilisation of foreign seasonal workers offers a win-win situation where both the farmer and the picker gain, and the state receives tax revenues. Labor shortages in farm work can be solved through temporary migration. However, the farm picking business cannot be fully understood from the perspective of neo-classical economic theory, which assumes an idealised market where well-informed participants make decisions of selling and buying labour. The economy of the picking business is embedded, to use Granovetter's term, in informal networks and weak ties. Weak ties and informal networks provide for more valuable information for the pickers than information provided by the state authorities. The picking business is transnational in its nature and the chains of farmers, middle men, and pickers interact to a large extent outside the welfare state institutions. The pickers' connection with Finnish authorities and the social security system is weak or non-existent. Coming to work is a strategic choice motivated by substantially higher wages in Finland than is available in their home countries (in our study mainly Russia, but also Estonia and Ukraine). In addition to the economic motives, some pickers emphasised the social aspects and new experiences of working in a foreign country. Many of the pickers return to Finland year after year for picking. This seemed to be the case especially for those originating from the Russian side of the Karelia province, which shares a border with Finland.

Disinformation concerning the different aspects of working in Finland is common among the new pickers. This view was evident in the interviews with the pickers and the government officials. According to the pickers, the conditions at the farms vary from poor to perfect. The foreign workers social security is externalised from the welfare state to the individual worker; the individual worker bears the risks. The Finnish welfare state does not reach these agricultural workers with its safety network. The picker is also highly dependent on services provided by the farmer, and their relationship can thus be characterised as an asymmetrical patron–client relationship. Many pickers were unaware of how to access health care services and seemed to rely on luck, hoping not to fall ill or have accidents. The Estonians, who

as EU citizens have access to public health care, were an exception. Another problem for some of the pickers had been the Russian agencies who serve as intermediaries, but seem to be unreliable and costly. The problems related to the agencies are internationally a well-documented phenomenon (see, e.g., Agunias 2013; Fanning 2011; Preibisch 2010: 425). Gathering information and being able to use weak ties ameliorated the pickers' situation and social security.

The use of foreign pickers seems to help keep the berry and farm vegetable picking business competitive as it provides the business with workforce in a situation where the native population is not attracted to these physically heavy, monotonous and low-paid jobs. It also provides opportunities for the pickers to raise their standard of living. The pickers we interviewed seemed fairly content with working conditions and accommodation they had at the farms at the time of the interviews. Nevertheless, some had negative experiences of working conditions and accommodation on the farms they had worked at in previous summers.

The logic of relying on foreign low-paid workers who gain little from the Finnish welfare state – despite paying taxes – can be seen as a global competition strategy of the welfare state.

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Notes

1. Granovetter has been e.g. criticised for failing to consider many aspects of economic action, including a link to the macroeconomic level, culture, and politics.

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