

## Monitora 2023: Disturbing Incident at Itäkeskus Swimming Hall



*Kuva: [Daniel Sinoca](#), [Unsplash](#)*

## Liikkukaa ® 2023 Erasmus+ Monitora



## **Case Study 2 Monitora 2023**

This case study is part of a larger research conducted in the EU Erasmus+ Monitora project. The research consists of 20 interviews and 2 case studies in each partner country. The research is coordinated and evaluated by the University of Liège.

The project partners are:

- UISP APS (Italy)
- International Sport and Culture Association - ISCA (Denmark)
- Egyutt Az Interkulturalis Akcioert Alapitvany united Against Racism (Hungary)
- University of Liège (Belgium)
- Liikkukaa Ry - Sports For All (Finland)
- Stop Racism In Sport (Belgium)

Liikkukaa - Sports For All conducts the research in Finland with a team of researchers, sociologists, and organizational consultants. In addition to the general twenty interviews, separate interviews have been conducted with the institutions involved for the case studies. Interviews and case studies have been conducted by Jean-Marc Alingue, Susheela Daniel, Nordic Diversity Trainers, Kirsi Mutshipule, Rasmus Ry, and Christian Thibault.

## **Case Study 2 for Monitora 2023: Disturbing Incident at Itäkeskus Swimming Hall**

### **Background:**

A Representative from the Finnish Swimming Teaching and Lifesaving Federation (FSL) and the University of Jyväskylä, in collaboration with the Finnish National Agency for Education, conducted a nationwide study on swimming skills in 2022 (SUH, 2023).

The study found that a substantial 45% of sixth-grade students lacked adequate swimming skills or had none at all, there are still age groups with insufficient swimming skills, raising concerns about children's safety in water environments. The Finnish Safety and Chemicals Agency (Tukes) also observed the consequences of this issue in its oversight of services. Reports submitted to Tukes indicated that children's inadequate swimming abilities led to serious water-related dangers and accidents.

Tukes and FSL are advocating for heightened attention to be given to assessing the swimming abilities of children and young people, as well as ensuring their safety in aquatic environments. Service providers need to recognize that their facilities may be accessed by customers who lack swimming skills, including slightly older children, and they should be prepared for such scenarios.

It has often been stipulated that swimmers under the age of ten or those unable to swim can only enter the water in the company of a person at least 15 years of age who possesses strong swimming skills. Consequently, the swimming abilities of ten-year-olds are not routinely assessed, especially if they are accompanied by friends. Parents bear the responsibility for their children's safety in aquatic environments, emphasizing the importance of parental vigilance.

Promoting water safety and ensuring that everyone residing in Finland can be secure in aquatic environments are vital, given that Finland's culture and leisure activities heavily revolve around its lakes, seashores, and saunas.

### **What happened:**

In February 2017, the anti-immigrant Suomi "Finland First" movement extended its activities from the streets to a swimming hall in Helsinki. During this incident, a group of Suomi Ensin activists, including a Lahti municipal election candidate, organized a "swimming patrol" at Itäkeskus swimming hall.

The reason for this surveillance, as explained by the right wing activist, was to respond to a Facebook request to investigate disturbances that had reportedly occurred at the swimming hall. During the patrol, the activists reportedly confronted individuals of foreign backgrounds. The activists recorded their experiences during the visit and later shared them on YouTube.

Following this incident, an anonymous individual contacted Etelä-Suomen Sanomat and informed them that they had filed a complaint with the Helsinki police regarding the swimming patrol. The complainant requested an investigation into potential offenses related to public decency, harassment, coercion, and disruption of public order by the participants in the swimming patrol. They argued that the incident had racial, ethnic, and religious elements.

The Helsinki police confirmed that they had received a complaint about the incident. The far right activists dismissed the complaint as insignificant, while the police were keen to observe how the situation would develop. It is worth noting that the Helsinki Sports Department, responsible for managing the Itäkeskus swimming hall, had prior knowledge of the activists' swimming patrol through social media. The on-duty manager was present during the incident, although permission from the staff had not been sought.

### **The outcome:**

The case was largely reported in the media. During interviews with the sports department, the swimming and live-saving federation, the swimming hall staff and the police it occurred that everybody still has a memory of this high-profile case. However, nobody had followed up on the request for police investigation and there was no official record of the case.

## **Related incidents:**

To put the case studies into context and perspective, similar cases were evaluated, and the correlations were significant. They further underline the need for proper monitoring and follow up even on single cases as they might be related to a deep-rooted challenge.

### **Jakomäki Muslim Women Swimming Hour**

**In 2011**, the Jakomäki swimming hall closed down its swimming hours for Muslim women. The decision to discontinue separate swimming hours for Muslim women was made due to negative feedback from other swimmers, according to the head of the sports facility department. Prior the Jakomäki swimming hall offered a designated swimming session on Saturday mornings known as the "immigrants' swimming hour" after a Muslim girls' swimming class. This session also attracted other women.

The head of department stated that the decision to discontinue the separate session was made at a higher level of authority. He emphasized that the timing of the session had been a point of contention. Previously, the swimming hall was not open to the public on Saturdays and had now been opened to give Muslim women the opportunity to learn to swim, which led to debates (YLE, 2011).

### **Blogger Exposes Messages from Suomi Ensin Movement Leader – "Targeted Actions in Collaboration with Alternative Media"**

**This case from 2016** delves into the exposure by a prominent blogger, of a series of messages written by the leader of the "Finland First" anti-immigrant movement. These messages shed light on the organization's strategies and its collaboration with alternative media outlets. The blogger's post unveils messages authored by a key figure within the Suomi Ensin (Finland First) movement. These messages reveal a concerning agenda behind the organization's activities. The movements critical comments about the country and its political leadership underscore the group's nationalist sentiments. According to the messages, the organization's objectives include disrupting, pressuring, and intimidating entities that collaborate with immigrants and their children, encouraging them to reconsider their "liberal projects".

"Finland First" was a Finnish nationalist party that evolved from the "Finland First" anti-immigrant activists group into a political party. The party was known for its street activism and active presence on social media. It fielded candidates in parliamentary, European Parliament, municipal, and regional elections. After the 2023 parliamentary elections, the party was deregistered due to its failure to secure any seats in two consecutive parliamentary elections. In July of the same year, the party filed for bankruptcy and announced the cessation of its activities.

The so-called "targeted demonstrations" aim to "identify individuals of concern and approach them closely." In one instance, the group attempted to confront an individual, highlighting their confrontational approach. In another instance, the leader mentioned an incident where protests

took place during karate courses offered to asylum seekers, suggesting that such actions might have deterred organizations from providing free karate classes to refugees.

The messages reveal that the harassment of individuals and organizations supporting immigrants persisted. Even when an activist sought to intervene during an incident, the leader continued with their provocative rhetoric. Questions arose about the guidelines for addressing hate speech incidents and why facility staff did not intervene.

Alternative media outlets appear to play a significant role in Suomi Ensin's operations. The leader has been featured multiple times on platforms such as MV-lehti, emphasizing the importance of coordinated actions with alternative media. They believe that personalizing and publicly exposing the individuals they target, and then confronting them in person, holds more sway than mere articles or online discourse.

On April 9, 2019, the Helsinki Police Department announced suspicions of incitement against members of the party's parliamentary election campaign, including then-chairman Marco de Wit and another candidate, Kristiina Brandt. The police alleged that campaign advertisements displayed discriminatory content against immigrants and sexual minorities, potentially meeting the criteria for criminal charges.

## **Racism and Verbal Abuse in a Helsinki Swimming Hall**

**In February 2020**, an unfortunate incident of racial harassment occurred at a Helsinki swimming hall, involving the mother of Nasima Razmyar, Helsinki Deputy Mayor for Culture and Leisure. This case highlights the importance of addressing racism and verbal abuse in public spaces (Iltasanomat, 2020).

Nasima Razmyar, Helsinki's Deputy Mayor for Culture and Leisure, took to Twitter to reveal that her mother had become the target of racist verbal abuse while at a local swimming hall. Razmyar initially learned of the incident through a Twitter thread posted by an immigration affairs specialist.

The thread detailed an intervention in a situation where "the mother of a multicultural politician" was subjected to racial hate speech while engaged in water aerobics. The aggressor had allegedly confronted Razmyar's mother with derogatory remarks, accusing her of living in the country through illicitly obtained funds.

Upon coming across the Twitter thread, Razmyar had an inkling that her own mother might be the victim. She promptly confirmed her suspicion through a phone call to her mother, who had chosen not to worry her daughter with the incident. Razmyar expressed gratitude to those who had intervened in the distressing situation, emphasizing the unfortunate prevalence of racism and hate speech in Helsinki. She recognized the need for collective efforts to combat such behavior.

It later was revealed that the aggressor had previously targeted Razmyar's mother as well. Despite her intervention, the individual persisted in their racist outbursts. Efforts to involve the facility's staff met with limited success, as staff members were hesitant to confront the situation directly.

This raised questions about the guidance provided to staff regarding addressing hate speech incidents.

Tarja Loikkanen, Director of Sports in Helsinki, acknowledged that racism and inappropriate conduct were not tolerated in sports facilities. However, she noted that the means to address verbal harassment and racism were somewhat limited. Staff members could, at best, issue verbal warnings regarding such behavior. In extreme cases, customers could be expelled from the premises, or even subjected to a ban. Loikkanen conceded that determining the threshold for taking such actions could be challenging. She highlighted the need for clearer guidelines and training for staff to effectively tackle incidents of this nature.

This at the Helsinki swimming hall further underscores the persistent issue of racism and verbal abuse in public spaces. While steps have been taken to address such behavior, there is a need for improved training and guidance for staff to ensure that hate speech incidents are effectively addressed. This case serves as a poignant reminder of the ongoing struggle to create inclusive and respectful environments for all individuals in public facilities.

### **Filming of immigrant youth in Espoo Swimming Hall**

**In the summer of 2023** an anti-immigrant activist entered the swimming hall in the Helsinki neighbor city of Espoo in order to film immigrant looking children allegedly misbehaving during their time in the facility. The life guard on duty to the man to stop because he felt the man was harassing the children. Since the life guard also appeared to the extreme right activist to have been born to an immigrant family, the life guard now became the target for the filming and verbal abuse. The police was called and came to guide the man out. He was told that no case would be filed against him and that he was free to come back the next day.

All this was filmed and uploaded to Youtube by the anti-immigrant activist. The post had almost 3000 views immediately and the far-right activist was celebrated by his peers on youtube (Youtube, 2023).

### **Tragic Drowning Incident in Helsinki's Jakomäki Sand Pits**

**In late July 2023**, a heart-wrenching incident unfolded in Helsinki as a 10-year-old boy tragically drowned at the Jakomäki sand pits. The young victim belonged to a Finnish Somali family. The life of the 10-year-old was lost at the Jakomäki sand pits in Helsinki. The sorrowful sequence of events began to unravel on Sunday evening when the child failed to return home. Concerned family members promptly contacted emergency services to report the disappearance, leading authorities to initiate a search operation in the vicinity. Ultimately, the boy's belongings were discovered on the shores of the sand pit, prompting the deployment of divers to the scene.

The child drowned at the Jakomäki sand pits on Sunday and was found lifeless just past midnight. There were reportedly other individuals present at the scene during that time.

As of now, no criminal activity is suspected in the case, with the police investigating the incident as a matter of determining the cause of death. Chief Detective Ritva Elomaa emphasized the meticulous examination of the circumstances surrounding the tragedy. Additionally, inquiries into potential liability are underway. The investigation continues with interviews and testimonies from individuals involved.

The pond's edge became a makeshift memorial adorned with candles, flowers, Legos, and toy cars in memory of the young schoolboy. Messages on the candles read "rest in peace" and "good friend." A round stone also anchors a small letter in place. One heartfelt note expressed, "You made me laugh back in preschool. I will always remember you."

The Jakomäki sand pits, located in Northern Helsinki near the Vantaa border, are not official swimming areas, although the establishment of an official swimming spot in the area has been considered at times (Iltalehti, 2023). According to interviews conducted, immigrants are known to prefer swimming in secret and non-official spots in order to avoid racist harassment by other swimmers.

### **Conclusion:**

This case study highlights the exposure of messages from the leader of the Suomi Ensin movement and the concerning agenda behind the organization's actions. It emphasizes the movement's confrontational tactics, involvement with alternative media, and its persistence in targeting individuals and organizations supporting asylum seekers and immigrants. The study underscores the challenges of countering such behavior and the role of alternative media in promoting and amplifying these messages.

It also reflects how proper monitoring and follow up could have led to identifying the dangers of this particular individual and the groups for the safety and well-being of young people in Finland. After all this activity has been going on for over a decade and has arguably effected hundreds of people, including young people and children in Finnish sports, even leading to fatalities. All the necessary information was out there and although authorities have repeatedly expressed their concerns it was neglected to take action.

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