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Should Finland adopt U.S. gun laws? This was the topic of debate between the detainees from Jokela and American university students in December. Photo: Juha Salminen / HS

An Unusual Debate

Five men have been preparing for the debate for months. Now, they face their opponents, who are articulate American university students. The Finnish team is not the most typical: they are prisoners.

A dark-haired American woman is passionately speaking on a computer screen about tyranny. **Weapons are the key against tyranny! Finland's long-standing stability is not a given! Even the strongest democracy is constantly vulnerable!**

Therefore, Finland should make it easier for individuals to acquire firearms—just like in the United States.

“By making firearms more accessible, we’re not creating chaos but ensuring that people can defend themselves against foreign invasions or internal threats,” the woman argues.

Her delivery is persuasive, as it should be, given that this is a debate. The woman is participating remotely from the United States. She studies political science, philosophy, and economics at Suffolk University in Boston.

She and four other Suffolk students are facing a Finnish team of five opponents in the debate.

The Finnish team is seated on the other end of the remote connection in a room that, with its chalkboard and bookshelves, looks like any ordinary classroom—except for the bars on the windows.

The Finnish team consists of remand prisoners participating in the debate from Jokela Prison.

Soon, one of the prisoners will have to respond to the dark-haired woman’s claims about tyranny.

The prisoners smile knowingly. These are precisely the kinds of arguments they’ve prepared for in advance.



The debate required technical preparation to enable the students to participate from the East Coast of the United States.

Photo: Juha Salminen / HS

The setup is absurd: prisoners in a Finnish prison debating against American university students.

How could the prisoners possibly stand a chance?

The topic of debate is whether Finland should adopt the gun laws of the United States. The Finnish team opposes the motion, while the U.S. team supports it.

To prepare for this December Wednesday, the participants have trained for over three months, practicing once a week. They were coached by volunteer trainers from the U.S.-based **National Prison Debate League (NPDL)**.

The NPDL's leaders have been organizing prison debates for nearly 20 years. In the United States, the program offers prisoners a pathway to higher education after their sentences.

The fact that this concept has reached Finland is thanks to **Susanna Fabritius-Haverinen**, a prison education teacher at Spesia Vocational College. She learned about the NPDL during a visit to the U.S. in fall 2023 and soon introduced the idea in Finland: *What if Finnish prisoners could also receive training and debate against American students?* Such an initiative would undoubtedly improve prisoners' self-confidence and public speaking skills.

The first debate held outside the United States took place last spring. The prisoners from Riihimäki, known as *Team Kupoli*, won their debate by a judge's decision of 4–1.

This time, the debate team also has a name: *Jokela Musketeers*.

One of the prisoners admitted that it took him a couple of months to realize that the debate isn't about determining who's right.

The training had to start with the basics. The prisoners didn't know what a debate was, especially one with a strict structure.

They learned how to turn facts into claims, how claims differ from opinions, what constitutes a reliable source, and how to structure a speech cohesively.

One prisoner shared that he only understood after a few months that the goal of the debate isn't to establish who's correct. The winner is the one who argues their position more effectively.

A man in his forties, Leevi, initially wondered why the debate required delving deeper. To him, it seemed enough to simply say, *No, Finland's gun laws are better. Period.*

Over time, he began to see that in a debate, it's crucial to understand why the opposing side thinks the way they do. Only by grasping their reasoning can you effectively dismantle their arguments.

The prisoners don't have access to the internet, so teacher Fabritius-Haverinen has printed out studies and articles for them. The prisoners have been studying these materials both individually and in groups.

The trainers don't speak Finnish, and the prisoners aren't very fluent in English. Therefore, a 2020s solution is in use: artificial intelligence.

An application provides fairly accurate near-real-time subtitles, translating the prisoners' speech into English and the Americans' speech into Finnish.



Susanna Fabritius-Haverinen was introduced to prison debates while visiting her son, who is studying in the United States, in the fall of 2023.

Photo: Juha Salminen / HS



To ensure the debate is as equal as possible, artificial intelligence is used to translate the prisoners' speech into English and the opponents' speech into Finnish.

Photo: Juha Salminen / HS

Each team member has a specific role in the debate. In the Finnish team, the most challenging position likely belongs to Mika, a man in his thirties.

His task is to deliver Finland's longest speech and then respond to the opponents' cross-examination. He doesn't know in advance what the Americans will ask him.

"That's where the biggest risk of freezing up lies. The speeches are easy—they're on paper, so you just read them," Mika says.

Mika explains that he swore he wouldn't attend any more schools after vocational school. But prison life is dull. The prison school and debate training have brought structure to his days.

Leevi, too, says he's always worked with his hands. He dropped out of vocational school in Estonia.

But when he talks about debating, his eyes light up, and his voice brims with enthusiasm. "I'm surprised by how much the brain wants and craves information and development."

Both are confident that debate training will help them in the workplace, in relationships, and in life in general—someday, when they're released from prison.

Both Leevi and Mika are serving long sentences. Mika has been convicted of manslaughter, and Leevi of attempted manslaughter: ten years and five years of imprisonment, respectively.

Neither sentence is final. Mika and Leevi are waiting in Jokela remand prison for their cases to be heard in the court of appeals. (Mika has admitted his guilt, while Leevi hopes his sentence will be overturned.)

Neither Mika, Leevi, nor any of the prisoners are identified by their real names in this article. This measure primarily protects the privacy of their victims and the victims' loved ones.



The prisoners' team not only has a name but also a logo, featuring a skull and five flowers. It was designed by a prisoner who has experience creating tattoos.

Photo: Juha Salminen / HS

A wooden podium has been brought into the prison classroom. One by one, each prisoner steps up to it and begins delivering their arguments against the opposing team.

Mika takes his place. His body trembles, but his voice remains steady.

His speech lasts just over eight minutes. At the start of the training, he didn't believe he could speak for that long. By the end, they even had to cut down the speech's length.

Mika concludes his turn by reminding everyone that Finland has repeatedly been declared the happiest country in the world.

"United States, take Finland as an example."

Immediately after comes the cross-examination. In Finland, the number of gun violence victims is proportionally much lower than in the United States. Mika is asked: *Do these statistics include domestic violence cases?*

"In Finland, firearms are rarely used in domestic violence situations," Mika responds. Concise and to the point—this answer and all others.

He doesn't freeze.



The debate is designed to be as authentic as possible, so each prisoner delivers their speech from the podium.

Photo: Juha Salminen / HS

Maxim steps up to the podium. He addresses the tyranny argument raised by the opposing team.

“In Finland’s peaceful society, the concept of tyranny isn’t even recognized,” Maxim states.

He reads his arguments almost directly from the paper, as do most members of the Finnish team.

“We trust the authorities and see no reason to take the law into our own hands. Doing so would disrupt societal peace and lead to chaos.”

Before Maxim, the opposing team had argued that arming the populace would enable Finland to better respond to a potential Russian invasion.

Maxim counters: Finland has compulsory military service. In the face of a threat, the Defense Forces will protect us. If needed, every Finn has access to a weapon.

“Finland is one of the safest countries in the world. Looser gun laws could undermine this stability and increase tension in society. Thank you.”



The prisoners have prepared for various scenarios. What if the opposing team appeals to self-defense? Or to the economy and the jobs created by the arms industry?

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The debate lasts a little over an hour. During that time, the prisoners appeal to statistics and studies: how the number of school shootings, mass shootings, and gun-related suicides in Finland is only a fraction of those in the United States.

And to emotions: What if your child or spouse died from bullets fired by a legally owned gun?

The American students rely on a classic argument: Guns don’t kill, people do. In a welfare state like Finland, there isn’t as much disadvantage as in the United States. Therefore, looser gun laws wouldn’t have the same effect here.

After a short wait, one of the three judges, John Katsulas, director of debate at Boston College, announces the winner.

Katsulas doesn’t mince words. The Finnish team should have addressed their opponents’ argument that the population here should be armed in case of a Russian invasion.

“That argument was absurd.”

The result: Finland wins by a 2–1 judge vote.

That’s it!

Soon, the Finnish team will receive an actual championship trophy—once Fabritius-Haverinen makes it to the United States and brings it back to Jokela.

But the winners react to the result in a very Finnish manner: with subdued clapping and nods. No one cheers or celebrates.

Perhaps their reaction stems from the fact that the prisoners were fairly confident in their victory. They had done thorough background work. It was easy to form arguments when the statistics supported their position.

Or maybe it was all just for show, Tuomas, one of the prisoners, speculates.

“It feels like we got a small sympathy point here. The prison guys get one win at home. But, man, that other team performed incredibly well.”

“It would have been interesting to be on the other side,” Tuomas says. To argue that Finland needs looser gun laws.

A grin spreads across his face.

“We probably would have won anyway.”



The prisoners say that the training has forged them into a true team. Fists bump together just before the crucial moment. *Photo: Juha Salminen / HS*