

# Sweden's immigrant integration policy: the role of language

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## Abstract

The increase in migration flows in 2010–2011 and 2015–2016 has brought the issue of immigrants' integration in European countries to a qualitatively new level. The integration of immigrants and refugees is one of the central topics in academic and political discourses. This essay presents short analysis of the Swedish language policy towards integration of immigrants and refugees. The importance of this topic is determined by the fact that language is one of the instruments of inclusion in the host society.

**Keywords:** migration, immigrant integration policy, language integration, Sweden, European Union

## Szwedzka polityka integracji imigrantów: rola znajomości języka

### Streszczenie

Wzrost przepływów migracyjnych w latach 2010–2011 i 2015–2016 podniósł kwestię integracji imigrantów w krajach europejskich na jakościowo nowy poziom. Temat integracji imigrantów i uchodźców zajmuje jedno z centralnych miejsc w dyskursie akademickim i politycznym. Niniejszy esej dotyczy szwedzkiej polityki językowej w zakresie integracji imigrantów i uchodźców. O doniosłości tego tematu decyduje fakt, że język jest jednym z ważnych narzędzi integracji w społeczeństwie przyjmującym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** migracja, polityka integracyjna, integracja językowa, Szwecja, Unia Europejska.

The political and economic instability in the Middle East and Northern Africa countries has become one of the main reasons of migrant crisis (or refugee crisis) in Europe. The European Union has never faced such amount of immigrants and refugees crossing its borders before. Moreover, a multi-level decision-making mechanism proved its ineffectiveness in the context the emergency response needed in such situation.

Sweden, as European Union Member State, accepted more than 162 000 refugees in 2015 (Eurostat 2020), second in number only to Germany and Hungary. The European Commission has invoked article 78 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union<sup>1</sup>, which resulted in the adoption of a quota system for the refugee distribution. However, the European Union signed later an agreement with Turkey, according to which migrants illegally crossing the Greek-Turkish border are sent back to Turkey (European Commission 2016). In the end, the number of people having applied for asylum in Sweden in 2016 fell to 27 thousand (Eurostat 2020). According to the Swedish Migration Agency, one in five in the Kingdom has an immigration background (Migrationsverket 2020). That is why the policy of immigrants and refugees integration is one of the most relevant issues.

However, there is no common understanding of the term *integration*. Despite the fact that researchers generally agree that integration implies "joining different parts into one entity", practical interpretations of the term are different (Lacroix 2010: p. 6). The concept of integration, which gained popularity in the 1990s, led to an awareness of the need to develop an integration policy. This term has been used as the official name of the national policy for the adaptation of immigrants, both in countries that had experience working with immigrants (United Kingdom, France, Germany), and in countries that were previously donors, but became recipients due to economic growth (Italy, Spain).

Sweden's immigrant integration policy focuses on seven main areas: faster integration into society, work and entrepreneurship, schools, language skills, anti-discrimination measures, urban development, and shared core values (Andersson, Weinar 2014). The language aspect plays an important role in the integration process, since knowledge of the language not only contributes to rapid cultural adaptation in society, but is also necessary for employment. It is fair to say that "inequalities in terms of access to education, income, central institutions, societal recognition and social contact are significantly, although not exclusively, determined by linguistic competence in the relevant national language" (Esser 2006: p. 1).

The main language integration programme is *Swedish for immigrants (Svenska för invandrare, next – SFI)*. The implementation of this programme is entrusted to municipalities, which in turn depend on state funding. Migrants over 16 are eligible to participate in the programme. Language courses for immigrants and refugees are for free and are held at their place of registration. At the same time, the person is given the opportunity to choose between day and evening courses: day courses last from 15 to 20 hours a week,

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<sup>1</sup> "3. In the event of one or more Member States being confronted by an emergency situation characterised by a sudden inflow of nationals of third countries, the Council, on a proposal from the Commission, may adopt provisional measures for the benefit of the Member State(s) concerned. It shall act after consulting the European Parliament." (TFEU: Part III, Title V, art.78).

and evening courses last about 6 hours a week. The SFI programme creates specialised SFX (*Swedish for professionals – Svenska för yrkesverksutbildade*) classes, where the language training of migrants is related to their work. Statistical data demonstrates that more than 50% of programme participants got a job immediately after completing the course in the period from 2010 to 2017 (Karlsdóttir et al. 2017: p. 31).

SFI courses offer four levels of study: A, B, C, and D. Migrants are divided into levels based on their knowledge and language proficiency. For example, highly educated migrants may start at level C, while students who have only completed primary or secondary school in the origin country may start studying language at level A.

It is worth taking into account the fact that in 2015, due to difficulties in regulating migration flows, the percentage of refugees participating in the SFI programme decreased. A study conducted by Swedish researchers estimates that only 5–10% of refugees started basic language training before November 2016 (Blomqvist et al. 2018: p. 20).

Considering the topic of language training, the question about the language practice of migrants arises. The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (*Tillväxtverket*) has launched pilot projects *Svets och Svenska, Grön i Sala, Ny resurs i Emmaboda* (see: Tillväxtverket 2017), aimed at gaining language skills while working. In addition, the government has launched the fast tracks programme (*Snabbspår*), designed for newly arriving immigrants with work experience and education. This programme combines language training, confirmation of previous education and an internship.

Due to the fact that quite a large number of refugees from Syria are teachers, one of the fast tracks was developed specifically for them. During the course of the track, teachers attend six-month preparatory courses conducted in Arabic and intensive Swedish courses, called the *Short Route (Korta vägen)*.

Swedish law provides for the right of children between 6 and 16 to attend school, including children of immigrants and refugees. Due to increased migration flows in 2015, the Swedish government was forced to focus its efforts on the faster integration of migrant children. According to the National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*), only in 2015, about 71 000 underage migrants arrived in Sweden, 40 000 of which were aged from 16 to 18, and almost 31 000 were children under the age of 12 (see: Skolverket 2016). In addition, the percentage of school children who came from countries with a low standard of living (Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, etc.) increased from 9% in 2008 to 22% in 2015 (Volante et al. 2018: p. 71). Before 2015, school-age children were introduced to Swedish culture and language in preparatory classes, but now they start attending classes together with local residents almost immediately after arrival (Avery 2017: p. 406). Despite the existing right of migrants children to attend classes conducted in their mother tongue, classes for such lessons are created if there are five or more native speakers of the same language (AIDA 2019: p. 67).

Swedish can be taught as a second language in Sweden to newly arrived migrant children, who are continuing or beginning their education in educational institutions. Students who need to take this course are determined by the school director. One of the principles when learning Swedish as a second language is multilingual help in the class-

room (*Studiehandledning*), meaning not only in the development of a new language, but also the development of the mother tongue. Moreover, the study hours can be changed: transferred from one academic discipline to learning Swedish as a second language during the first year of study in Sweden (Bunar 2017).

Summing up everything told above, we can conclude, that language integration of immigrants and refugees is one of the key issues in Sweden. Due to its economic and political development, Sweden remains an attractive country for migration. The legislation adopted in the state is aimed at the study of the Swedish language by both adult migrants and children. There are various language programmes and pilot projects that are aimed to integration of immigrants and refugees into Swedish society as soon as possible,<sup>2</sup> because the level of social tolerance largely depends on the degree of integration.

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<sup>2</sup> More broad analysis of the various aspects of the Sweden's immigrant integration policy – see in the publication: (Butenko 2020).

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