

11.4 Minorities in Sweden

Large-scale immigration has been an important factor in social and economic change in Sweden. The strong welfare state has been an important instrument of economic and social incorporation for immigrants – but the consequences have not always been as intended. Today, this approach is under review and significant changes are taking place.

Until 1945 Sweden was a fairly homogeneous country, with only a small indigenous minority: the Sami or Lapps (about 10 000 people today). From 1945 to 1972, labour migration was encouraged; family reunion and refugee entries continued afterwards. By 2005, Sweden had 1.1 million foreign-born residents – 12.4 per cent of a population of 9 million (see *The Age of Migration*, p. 259). While a quarter of the foreign born in 2005 were from other Scandinavian countries, others came from Former Yugoslavia, the Middle East, Asia and Latin America. Just under half were foreign citizens, while over 600 000 had acquired Swedish citizenship. Swedish-born people with both parents foreign born numbered 338 000. Altogether 1.5 million people (16 per cent of Sweden's population) are immigrants or their children.

The Swedish approach to immigration differed from other European countries: the aim was to include immigrants within the social-democratic model of a full-employment economy and a strong welfare state. Family reunion and easy access to citizenship would contribute to permanent integration. The waiting period for naturalization is two years for Scandinavians and five years for everybody else, while children born to foreign resident parents can obtain Swedish citizenship upon application.

In 1975, Parliament set out an immigrant policy designed to combine *equality* (access to the same living standards as Swedes) with *freedom of choice* (allowing immigrants to decide whether to maintain their own cultural identities or to assume Swedish identity). Special measures included language courses, translator and interpreter services, multi-lingual information services, grants to immigrant organizations and special consultative bodies. Children of immigrants were to receive pre-school and school instruction in their own language. From 1975, foreign residents were allowed to participate in local and regional elections. It was planned to extend

such rights to national elections, but it proved impossible to get the parliamentary majority required for a change in the Constitution. Anti-discrimination laws were introduced in 1986 and updated in 2003.

Yet this inclusive policy could not prevent trends to socio-economic marginalization. Non-Scandinavians were mainly employed as manual workers in manufacturing and services. They found it hard to gain access to white-collar jobs in both public and private sectors. Public housing was open to immigrants, but was allocated in such a way that it led to concentration in certain neighbourhoods. This facilitated the maintenance of languages and cultures, but also increased isolation from the Swedish population. In some city neighbourhoods, non-Europeans make up 75 per cent of the population - among the highest rates of ethnic concentration in Europe.

When Sweden was struck by recession and financial crisis in the early 1990s, economic restructuring tended to eliminate the types of jobs held by immigrants. By 1993 overall unemployment reached 8 per cent, but the rate for foreigners was 21 per cent and for non-Europeans 37 per cent. Economic recovery often meant jobless growth: by 2005, the unemployment rate for foreign men was still 18.5 per cent and for foreign women 14.2 per cent – nearly double the rate for nationals. Many foreigners withdrew from the employed workforce and labour force participation declined. Discouraged jobseekers ended up living off welfare payment, working in the small but expanding informal sector or setting up marginal businesses.

The economic changes coincided with growing public concern. The increase in asylum-seeker entries led to anti-immigrant campaigns by extreme-right groups. Racist violence became quite widespread, including arson and bomb attacks on refugee centres. The government introduced a series of measures to restrict the entry of asylum seekers. In 1992 the inflow - particularly from former Yugoslavia - peaked at 84 000, but had declined to 11 200 by 1992. Violent extremist groups lost support, but Swedish opinion became much more sceptical about multicultural policies.

In 1997, parliament discussed a proposition on ‘Sweden, the future and diversity’, which argued that the previous immigrant policy had led to economic inequality, the isolation of immigrant communities and the emergence of a new social

problem. In 1998, a Swedish Integration Board was set up. The new policy emphasised integration and equal opportunities rather than cultural maintenance. A 'metropolitan policy' was also introduced, to reduce ethnic segregation and to help achieve equal living conditions in cities. The Centre-Right Government elected in 2006 decided to abolish the Integration Board. A range of social services important to immigrants have been abolished or reduced. At the same time the government is planning new measures, with special emphasis on occupational integration and combating workplace discrimination.

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