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Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants

Sweden country profile – second edition

Kerrie Holloway with Diego Faures and Amy Leach
November 2021

Key messages

The proportion of Sweden's population born abroad is one of the highest in Europe. In 2020, 19.7% of Sweden's population were born abroad, compared to the European Union (EU) average of 12.2%. The country is also home to the ninth-largest proportion of refugees per capita globally.

Migration has been high on the political agenda in Sweden, with the traditionally low salience of immigration spiking after the increase of arrivals of Syrian refugees in 2015–2016. The issue has since declined significantly in importance.

Attitudes towards immigration are very positive, with 63% of the population reporting in 2018 that immigrants make Sweden a better place to live. While attitudes became more negative following the increasing numbers of refugees in 2015–2016, this has once again shifted, aligning more closely with pre-2010 trends.

Public narratives on refugees and other migrants have become more negative in the last decade, although this has focused on migrants' perceived propensity to commit crimes and terrorist acts rather than their impact on the labour market.

Swedes are less concerned than most other Europeans about the economic impact of migration, in part due to a long history of relatively open labour market policies.

About this publication

This briefing presents an overview of the key features of migration and asylum policy in Sweden, recent trends in migration patterns, public perceptions and political narratives on refugees and other migrants. This briefing is an update to the first version, which was published in June 2020. It is part of a wider project supported by the IKEA Foundation aimed at supporting public and private investors interested in engaging with migration and displacement.

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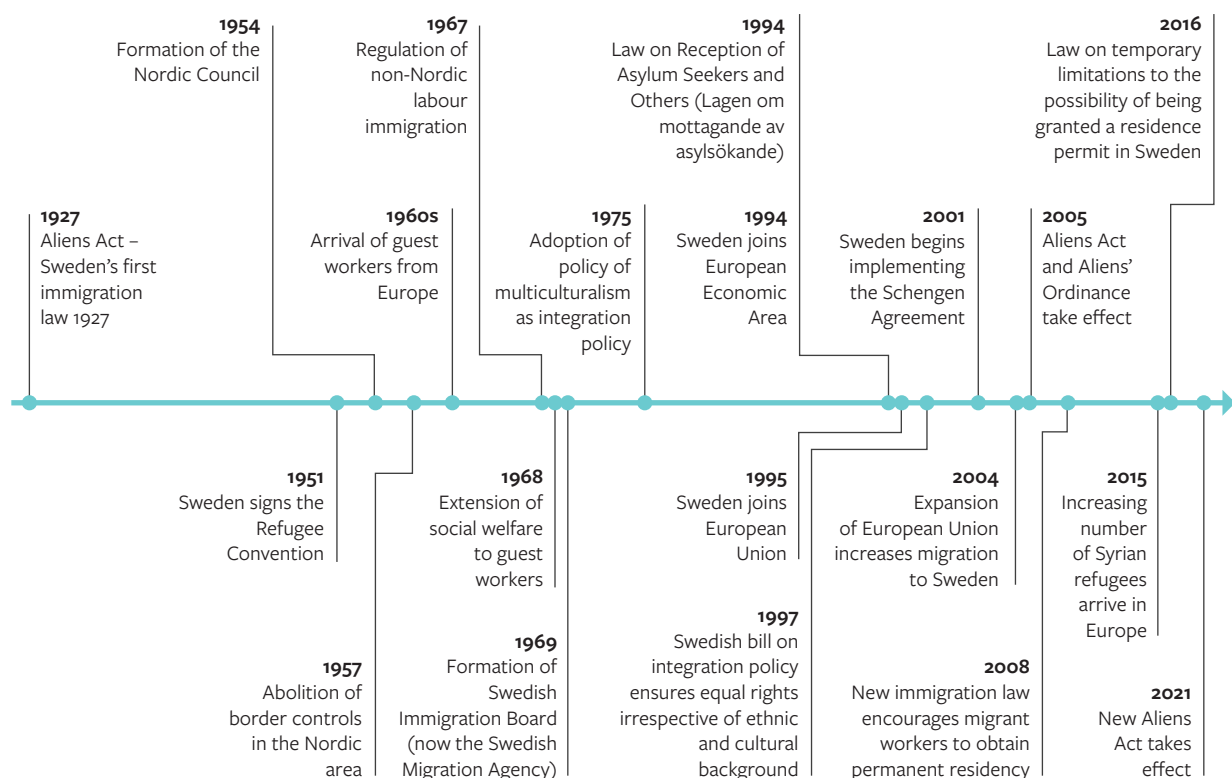
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1 History of immigration in Sweden

Sweden passed its first immigration law in 1927 (see Figure 1). The restrictive Aliens Act sought to protect native-born workers from a perceived threat from migrant labour, and was ‘heavily informed by theories of race and eugenics, to “control immigration of peoples that do not to our benefit allow themselves to meld with our population”’ (Skodo, 2018: n.p.). The post-war era saw a shift towards a more open approach to immigration policy as new migration pathways opened up, including the Common Nordic Labour Market, established in 1954, which removed border controls between Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Sweden and Finland.

Since the 1970s there have been three main categories of immigration to Sweden: family reunification of the foreign-born guest workers who arrived in the 1960s; new arrivals throughout the 2000s linked to EU freedom of movement and wider policy liberalisation; and a progressive expansion in the numbers of asylum-seekers. During the 1970s and 1980s, individuals arrived fleeing political and humanitarian crises in countries including Chile, Ethiopia, Iran, Lebanon, Poland, Turkey and Vietnam; in the 1990s and 2000s, arrivals were predominantly from Iraq and Somalia; and in the 2010s, Syrians comprised the largest group of asylum-seekers (Åslund et al., 2017).

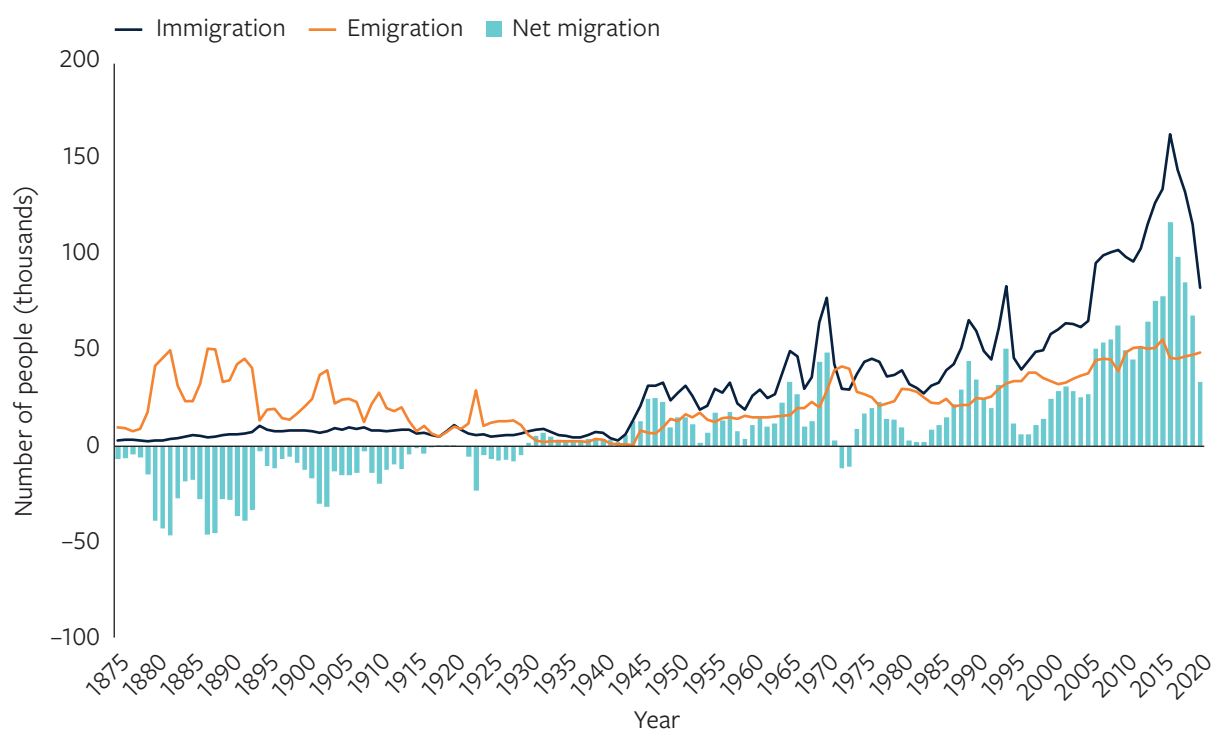
Figure 1 Timeline of Swedish immigration



After the expansion of the EU in May 2004, immigration from Eastern Europe increased as Sweden was one of the few countries in the EU, along with Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK), not to enact transitional arrangements limiting the free movement of citizens from newly admitted states (Parusel, 2015; see Figure 2). In 2008, Sweden passed a liberal immigration law aimed at encouraging migrant workers from both within and outside the EU to permanently settle in the country (Boräng and Cerna, 2019). Today, Sweden has one of the largest proportions of foreign-born populations in Europe: in 2020, 19.7% of Sweden's population were born abroad, compared to the EU average of 12.2% (Statistics Sweden, 2021b; European Commission, 2021).

By 2014 Sweden's main migration agencies and government structures dealing with asylum claims were showing signs of strain, including bottlenecks in the reception system and a shortage of affordable housing. This has forced Sweden to align its immigration policies with the European minimum standard of issuing only temporary residence permits rather than permanent ones in an attempt to reduce the number of people applying for asylum (Parusel, 2016; European Parliament, 2017). These challenges were exacerbated in 2015 when 162,877 more foreign-born individuals – primarily from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq – arrived, the second highest per capita number of arrivals in the EU after Hungary (Parusel, 2016; Skodo, 2018; Pelling, 2019).

Figure 2 Long-term migration trends in Sweden



Source: Statistics Sweden, 2021b

The sudden increase in the number of refugees into Europe in 2015 was a key moment for Sweden, in terms of both policy decisions and public opinion (see ‘Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: what do we know?’). Attempts to curtail permanent immigration through a new law (see ‘Current Swedish immigration system and approach’) worked to decrease immigration numbers from 2016 onwards but did less to reduce the number of immigrants already in the country. Indeed, as of 2018, Sweden was hosting the second-largest population of Syrian and Somali refugees and the third-largest population of Afghans and Eritreans in Europe (UNHCR, 2019). In total, in 2019 Sweden was home to over 250,000 refugees, or 25 for every 1,000 inhabitants – the ninth-largest proportion globally and the second highest in Europe after Malta (UNHCR, 2020; Christophersen, 2021). At the end of 2019, roughly 28,000 asylum-seekers were residing in Sweden (ibid.).

The Covid-19 pandemic has also changed migration patterns in Sweden, with Statistics Sweden (2021a) stating that Sweden’s population increased by only 0.5% in 2020 – the smallest increase in 15 years – and in December, Sweden’s population declined for the first time since January 2000. This shift in migration trends has been attributed to the lowest immigration figure since 2005, higher emigration than 2019 and 10% more deaths in 2020 compared to 2019 (ibid.).

2 Current Swedish immigration system and approach

The main legislation guiding Swedish immigration policy is the 2005 Aliens Act (Utlänningslagen) and the 2006 Aliens Ordinance (Utlänningsförfordningen). The equivalent for asylum procedures is the 1994 Law on reception of asylum seekers and others (Lagen om mottagande av asylsökande) and the 2016 Law on temporary limitations to the possibility of being granted a residence permit in Sweden (Lag om tillfälliga begränsningar av möjligheten att få uppehållstillstånd i Sverige). The first of these, passed in 1994, was more generous than most European regulations, allowing asylum-seekers to enter the labour market as soon as they submitted their application for permanent residence (Parusel, 2016). In contrast the second, passed in 2016 after the mass influx of Syrian refugees, ‘limits opportunities for asylum seekers and their family members to be granted permanent residence permits’ unless economic self-sufficiency is demonstrated (Skodo, 2018: n.p.; see Box 1). It also reduced access to welfare benefits, particularly for those whose asylum applications have been denied or who have been ordered to leave the country and marked ‘an unprecedented move towards tying immigration rights to integration achievements’ (ibid.).

In July 2021, a new Aliens Act came into effect, replacing the 2016 temporary law. Now, all residence permits are temporary by default for all migrants except refugees accepted under the quota system. Most permits are for two years, and they must be extended at least once before a permanent one can be obtained. To get a permanent residence permit, applicants must have lived in Sweden on a temporary permit for at least three years, be able to support themselves financially and ‘live an orderly life’ (Migrationsverket, 2021b).

Since 2015, Swedish government policy on accepting refugees has become more restrictive (Ahmadi et al., 2018), though it remains more liberal than most other European countries (Simonsen, 2019). New restrictions relating to refugees have primarily covered individuals seeking asylum in Sweden as opposed to pathways for third-country resettlement. Refugees who wish to apply for third-country resettlement in Sweden are not affected by the 2016 temporary limitations on asylum-seekers, nor were their quotas drastically reduced (Skodo, 2018).

Processing migration and asylum applications is done by the Migration Agency (Migrationsverket), which is subordinate to, but independent from, the government and parliament in terms of individual decisions. Appeals are handled by the Migration Court (Förvaltningsrätten Migrationsdomstolen). In 2020, the rejection rate for asylum applications in Sweden was 71%, though applicants from Syria were accepted at a rate of 71%, and from Eritrea at a rate of 74%. Other than Turkey, with an acceptance rate of 53%, all other countries had success rates below 35% (Nyman, 2021).

Box 1 Overview of Swedish immigration and asylum policies

Swedish citizenship policy. To become a Swedish citizen, generally an individual must be able to prove their identity; be 18 or older; have a permanent residence permit, right of residence or residence card; have lived in Sweden for a continuous period of five years; and have conducted themselves well while in the country (Migrationsverket, 2021a). Refugees and stateless persons can apply for citizenship after four years (ibid.). Unlike many other countries, there is no language requirement or citizenship test (Simonsen, 2019).

EU migration. EU citizens have the right to work, study and live in Sweden without a residence permit (Migrationsverket, 2021e). EU citizens who have lived in Sweden for five years can apply for permanent residence or Swedish citizenship (Migrationsverket, 2021c). In 2016, Sweden reintroduced border controls with Denmark for the first time since 1953. Though both countries are part of the Nordic passport-free union as well as the Schengen Agreement, the move was an attempt to reduce the number of asylum-seekers travelling overland through Europe to claim asylum in Sweden (Pelling, 2019).

Swedish asylum policy. Victims of persecution or at risk of persecution in their home countries can apply for asylum in Sweden or at the border. Asylum is granted to those who are considered refugees under the 1951 Convention, or who are in need of 'subsidiary protection' due to a risk of being sentenced to death; subjected to corporal punishment, torture or other inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment; or at serious risk due to armed conflict. Following the 2016 restrictions, successful asylum-seekers are given residence permits for 13 months, rather than permanent residence permits (Migrationsverket, 2017).

Refugee resettlement from outside Sweden. Applying for asylum from outside Sweden entails going through the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR)'s refugee resettlement programme and being approved as a quota refugee. Sweden has had a resettlement programme continuously since 1950, with quotas set annually by the government and parliament. Since 2018, the quota for refugee resettlement has been set at 5,000. The 1,401 places that went unfilled in 2020 due to Covid-19 will be rolled over to 2021 (Migrationsverket, 2021d).

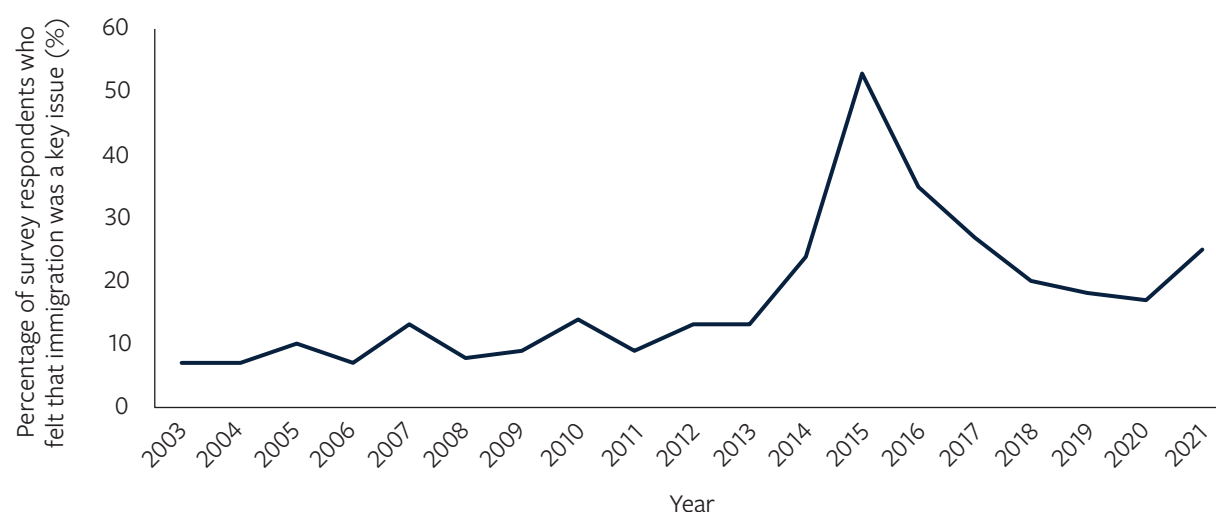
3 Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: what do we know?

Swedish national identity has consistently been expressed as open and tolerant, and associated with core values of human rights, development and peace (Crawley and McMahon, 2016). In 2002 and 2014, during the first and seventh rounds of the European Social Survey, Swedish respondents were the most likely out of the countries surveyed to believe that migration had made the country a better place to live (Heath et al., 2016).

Various polls indicate that the 2015 influx of predominantly Syrian refugees into Europe marked a turning point in attitudes towards immigration. According to the Eurobarometer public opinion survey, in 2009 only 9% of Swedes believed that migration was the most important issue facing their country; by 2015, 53% of people believed this to be true (Eurobarometer, n.d.). Another survey, conducted by Ipsos MORI, showed that in 2013 only one in three surveyed felt there were too many immigrants in the country; by 2017, this had become one in two (Ipsos MORI, 2017).

Yet, the salience of migration as a key issue dropped off almost as quickly as it peaked (see Figure 3). And, although Eurobarometer data for other countries shows a decline in 2020 due to health/ Covid-19 emerging as a key concern, the decrease in Sweden was apparent in 2018, when it fell to just 20%, and 2019, when it fell further to 18% – only 1% higher than 2020 (17%) (Eurobarometer, n.d.).

Figure 3 Salience of immigration as a key issue in Sweden

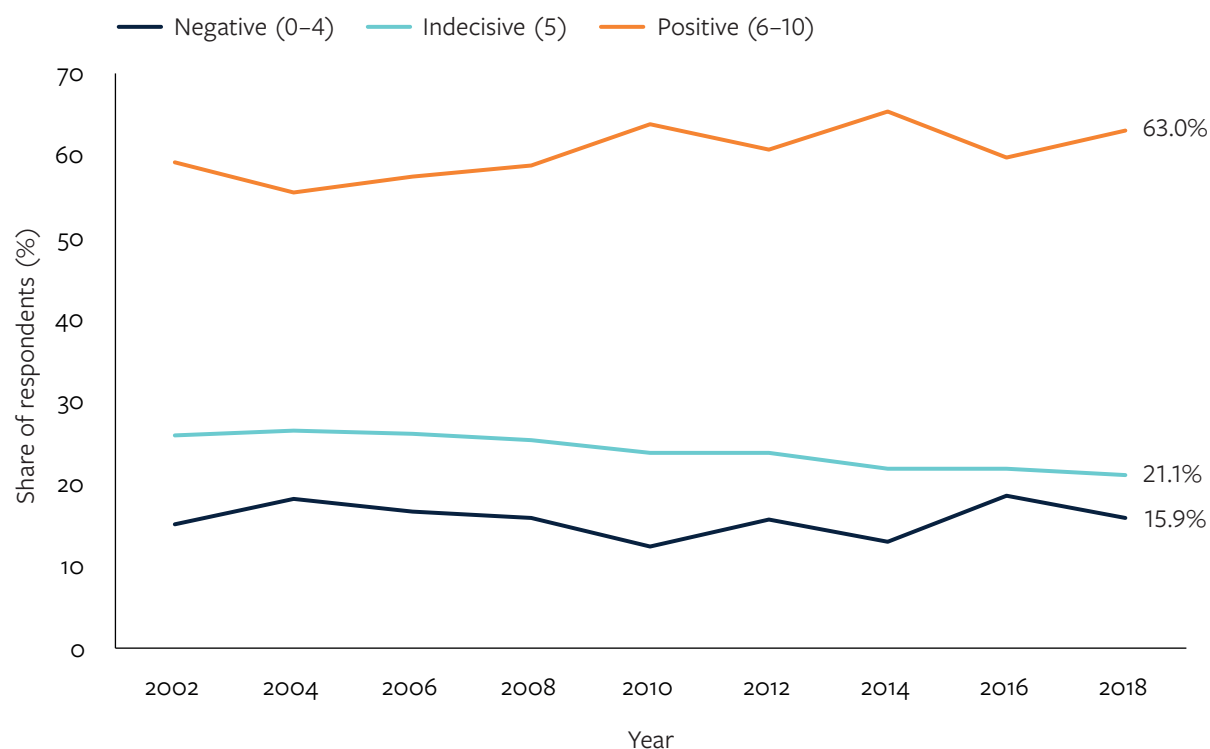


Note: This graphic shows the percentage of people answering ‘immigration’ to the question ‘What do you think are the two most important issues facing Sweden today?’ Data is taken mainly from autumn surveys, though the Eurobarometer surveys were delayed due to Covid-19, with the autumn 2020 survey shifting to winter 2020–2021. Data shown here for 2021 is taken from the latest survey (spring 2021).

Source: Eurobarometer, n.d.

Attitudes towards immigration mirrored this trend – showing an increase in negative attitudes and a decrease in positive attitudes around 2015–2016, before falling and rising again respectively (see Figure 4). The latest survey data available (2018) finds that 63% of respondents reported positive attitudes when asked if immigrants made Sweden a better place to live, with only 16% reporting negatively that immigrants made the country a worse place to live. This chart also shows a decline in the number of people who are indecisive (who answer 5 to the question, ‘On a scale of 0 to 10, do immigrants make Sweden a worse or better place to live’).

Figure 4 Attitudes towards immigration: do immigrants make Sweden a worse or a better place to live?



Note: This data has been extracted from each wave of the European Social Survey. Results are coded from 0 to 10. We have classified survey respondents who scored 0–4 in their answers to the question ‘Do immigrants make Sweden a worse or better place to live?’ as holding ‘negative’ views, those scoring 5 as being ‘indecisive’ and those scoring 6–10 as holding ‘positive’ views.

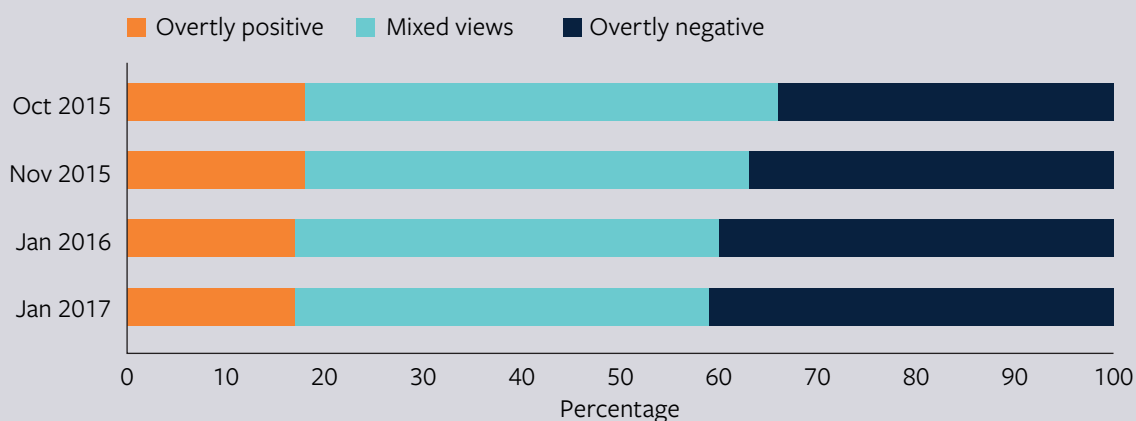
Source: European Social Survey, n.d.

Box 2 Sweden's Diversity Barometer (Mångfaldsbarometern) and population segments

The Diversity Barometer was used by the University of Gävle to measure Swedish people's attitudes towards immigration and ethnic diversity between 2004 and 2014, based on data from the national Society Opinion Media (SOM) Institute surveys. It was created at the University of Uppsala in 2005, but was transferred to the University of Gävle in 2013. Although it was supposed to end in 2014, it was restarted in 2016 following the 2015 influx, with plans to continue every two years (Ahmadi et al., 2018). The most recent Barometer showed the following:

- Younger respondents were more positive towards those with foreign backgrounds.
- Female respondents were more positive than males.
- People with higher levels of education were more positive, with university graduates the most positive towards those with foreign backgrounds.
- Respondents from larger cities were more positive than those from rural areas.
- Respondents who had more contact with foreigners were more positive than those who had less (Ahmadi et al., 2018; Ahmadi et al., 2020).

These tendencies match those found by AudienceNet in 2016, which divided the Swedish population into three segments based on their attitudes towards refugees: overtly positive (18%); mixed views (48%); and overtly negative (34%). Millennials, women, high earners and those who identify as politically progressive were more likely to be in the 'overtly positive' segment, whereas the middle-aged, men, low earners and those identifying as politically conservative were more likely to be in the 'overtly negative' segment (Tent Foundation, 2015). Over the course of the next three surveys undertaken by AudienceNet, the proportions in each category shifted marginally, though consistently, towards being more overtly negative (ibid., 2015; 2016; 2017). This survey has not been repeated, so it is unclear if these segments have shifted again like attitudes towards immigration overall as depicted in Figure 4.



Source: Tent Foundation, 2015; 2016; 2017

According to the Diversity Barometer (Mångfaldsbarometern – see Box 2), before 2015, 77% of respondents thought everyone living in Sweden, whether born there or abroad, should receive equal benefits – a policy that traces its roots to the extension of social welfare to guest workers in 1968 on the same level as the native-born population. In 2016, this had fallen to 55%, though the 2018 Barometer showed a small increase to 61% (Ahmadi and Palm, 2018; Ahmadi et al., 2020). Overall, based on a survey by Ipsos MORI (2021), in 2020 more than half of respondents agreed that Sweden must close its borders to refugees entirely.

In more recent opinion polls, three in four respondents agree that people should be able to take refuge from war or persecution in other countries, including Sweden, though more than half (54%) believed that refugees who come to Sweden would not be able to successfully integrate into Swedish society (Ipsos MORI, 2021). This complexity of views mirrors, in many ways, the increasingly negative political narrative that has been told over the past decade, where Sweden is still viewed as a welcoming country, yet one that is also growing more and more suspicious of migrants and refugees.

4 An increasingly negative narrative

The narrative around refugees and migrants in Sweden has become increasingly negative since the early 2010s. Although it would be inaccurate to say that anti-immigration parties did not exist prior to 2015, they have steadily gained in popularity over the past five years, with the main anti-immigration party, the far-right Sweden Democrats, going from obtaining 1.4% of the vote in the 2002 general election to 12.9% in 2014 (49 seats) and 17.5% in 2018 (62 seats) (European Parliament, 2017). In November 2019, Sweden Democrats topped an opinion poll at 24.2%, making it the country's most popular political party (Ahlander, 2019). More recent polling, however, puts the Social Democrats back in the lead, with 24.1% of the country's support, with the Moderate Party coming second (21.8%) and the Sweden Democrats third (20.5%) (Starn, 2021).

This shift from 1% in 2002 to more than 20% in 2020 shows how migration issues have been successfully politicised by the Sweden Democrats. As migration became a more salient issue in political discourse, Sweden Democrats were able to mobilise people with more xenophobic views, picking up voters for whom migration was their most pressing concern and who had traditionally voted for other political parties (Pelling, 2019). The Sweden Democrats have also succeeded in attracting voters with lower skill levels and less education, who are more likely to compete directly with immigrants for jobs (Robinson and Käppeli, 2018). The arrival of the Sweden Democrats as a major political player has also made other main parties' migration stances more restrictive (Skodo, 2018). In the lead-up to the 2018 election, the centre-left Social Democrats – the party of Prime Minister Stefan Löfven – extended the temporary asylum law of 2016, extended regulations on border controls and banned social security support to those refused asylum (Pelling, 2019).

Although Sweden's politicians and the general public have become increasingly negative towards refugees and migrants, this is not expressed in terms of their being an economic burden or undeserving of benefits, as in other countries (Holloway et al., 2020; 2021). In Sweden, the dominant negative narrative around immigration centres on crime (see Box 3). Swedish respondents were the least likely among other nationalities surveyed to believe that refugees had come to their country for economic reasons (Ipsos MORI, 2017), but Sweden was also one of the only countries where the majority opinion is that immigrants are more likely than other groups to commit crimes and increase the risk of terrorism in their country (Gonzalez-Barrera and Conner, 2019). Over half of those surveyed in 2017 believed that terrorists posing as refugees had entered the country and committed violent and destructive acts (Ipsos MORI, 2017). The deadliest terrorist incident in Sweden's history, when five people were killed and 14 were injured in a truck attack in Stockholm in 2017, was perpetrated by a rejected asylum-seeker. This narrative is also likely linked to well-publicised events elsewhere in Europe, particularly the November 2015 attacks in Paris.

Box 3 In focus: Malmö, a city of immigration

Malmö, just east of the Danish capital Copenhagen across the Øresund Strait, has taken in more migrants and refugees than any other city, per capita, in Sweden. At the end of 2015, up to 2,000 refugees were arriving in the city daily (Povrzanović Frykman and Mäkelä, 2020). As of 2020, 179 nationalities were represented in the city, and one in three of the almost 350,000 residents were born abroad. The largest group of migrants comes from Iraq (11,744), followed by Syria (8,299), Denmark (7,469) and the former Yugoslavia (7,407) (Malmö stad, 2020).

Because of its profile as a diverse and migrant-dense city, Malmö has been used by both the right and the left to argue their position. The right-wing media has emphasised the sharp change that immigration has brought to the city, particularly in terms of crime and violence, and has suggested that some areas, such as Rosengård, are ‘no-go zones’, a claim that has been consistently rejected by the Swedish police (Gozal, 2019). Other headlines describe Malmö as being abandoned to its criminals (Jönsson, 2019). The left, by contrast, promotes the city’s diversity, with headlines such as ‘The six waves of migration that made Malmö’ (Orange, 2019) and initiatives including bus tours of impoverished areas sponsored by the Social Democrats (Overgaard, 2018). At the height of the refugee arrivals into Malmö in 2015, Refugees Welcome to Malmö worked with the government to provide immediate relief (Povrzanović Frykman and Mäkelä, 2020).

While most narratives are negative, there is one aspect where the discussion remains relatively positive: Sweden’s view of the economic impact of refugees and migrants. This may be influenced by two factors. First, its policy of allowing asylum-seekers to enter the labour market while their applications are being processed significantly reduces the number of unemployed asylum-seekers in need of state support compared to countries where they are unable to work until their applications have been approved. With no time limit for application decisions, and waiting times for the entire process, including appeals, exceeding 10 years for some nationalities, this policy is essential. The policy is beneficial both to Sweden, by reducing dependence on the government and increasing skills and competencies in the labour market, and for applicants, through reduced depression and frustration from feeling inactive and unproductive and promoting inclusion in the cultural and social life of their community (Akari, 2019). Tighter restrictions on asylum-seekers after 2015 have not extended to the labour market, and there have been initiatives aimed at facilitating quicker labour market integration, such as allowing newly arrived immigrants to validate their skills in their native tongue in industries such as pharmaceuticals, tourism, healthcare, social care, transport, hospitality, engineering and education.

Second, there is limited competition for the majority of jobs in the highly skilled Swedish labour market, since most migrants and refugees would fill low-skilled positions that require less than an upper-secondary education and which make up only 5% of all jobs (European Parliament, 2017).

Indeed, attitudes in Sweden towards the impact of immigration on the labour market have remained positive. In 2017, Sweden had the lowest percentage of people (21%) among countries surveyed who were worried about immigration's impact on the job market – a figure that had only fluctuated slightly (between 18% and 25%) over the previous six years – though, paradoxically, only 31% of people surveyed in 2017 felt that immigration was good for the economy (Ipsos MORI, 2017).

5 Implications for public and private investors

While showing some positive impacts, efforts to support refugees' and migrants' economic integration have not always resulted in better integration outcomes. The gap in employment between the native-born population and immigrants has been widening since the 1990s (Ministry of Employment, 2016; European Parliament, 2017). Indeed, there is 'a large disparity in employment levels among low-qualified migrants and their native-born counterparts' (European Parliament, 2017). In 2019, the unemployment rate in Sweden was 5%, but 15% for those born outside the country, underlining the need for private sector engagement and investment (Akari, 2019). Increasingly negative attitudes towards migrants may soon manifest in a tougher labour market climate and increased segregation between mainstream and marginalised migrant populations (Ahmadi et al., 2018).

Businesses and investors can help strengthen positive messages around immigration and combat growing negative narratives by providing support for refugees and migrants (see Box 4). Business can play a key role in helping to achieve more social and economic integration and demonstrating how this can be achieved in practice to the 54% who do not think that refugees can successfully integrate into Swedish society (Ipsos MORI, 2021). The following are priorities for effective engagement:

- 1. Focus on Sweden's reputation as a welcoming nation.** Messaging should offer a long-term progressive vision of Sweden as an open, inclusive society, building social cohesion on the basis of diversity and drawing on the country's long history of welcoming refugees.
- 2. Businesses should take advantage of government programmes to hire migrants and refugees and help them to integrate,** building on Sweden's positive views on the economic impact of immigration and the country's liberal employment policies. These policies – fast tracks and Swedish-language courses for immigrants (a free beginner's language course offered through the Adult Education Centre, Vuxenutbildningscentrum) – should be utilised where possible, and supported by skills training to reduce the gap between low- and high-skilled workers and encourage integration.
- 3. Facilitate and build on action at the local level.** Businesses can play an important role in driving action and fostering constructive narratives around migration in Swedish cities with high levels of immigration. Malmö offers an example of dynamic action at the local level. Action at the city level offers a clear entry point for businesses looking to engage, both on spearheading practical initiatives to support refugees and other migrants and messaging that promotes inclusion and diversity.

Box 4 Examples of good business practice

The **Swedish Public Employment Service** (Arbetsförmedlingen) hosts JOBSKILLS.se, ‘a digital platform that helps newcomers and asylum seekers to document their skills and helps employers in Sweden to search for new competences’ (Akari, 2019: 5). The site also offers automatic translation between the asylum-seeker’s language and Swedish and helps with writing CVs.

In 2016, **LinkedIn** launched a new initiative, Welcome Talent, to help refugees in Sweden find internships and jobs. These jobs were marked on the website with #welcometalent so as to be easily discoverable. Companies that have taken advantage of this platform include Spotify, Proffice, 3 and Happyr (Gunnarsson, 2016).

The clothing retailer **H&M**, together with the Swedish Red Cross, is helping unaccompanied minors integrate into Swedish society through activities planned and arranged by the children and volunteers, which will allow them ‘to meet people who are more established in Swedish society, learn the language and how to navigate in their new context’ (H&M Foundation, 2017).

IKEA has donated essential items to refugee organisations, such as beds, mattresses and children’s products. In addition, the company has earmarked money for an IKEA Refugee Support Fund which it hopes will ease the hardships experienced by displaced people. IKEA stores in countries including Sweden, Germany, Norway and Switzerland have started long-term programmes that help refugees gain work experience, develop new skills and learn to integrate with local cultures.

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