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Inclusion versus Selectivity: A Civic Turn in the Swedish Welfare State

Inclusão versus Seletividade: Uma Virada Cívica no Estado de Bem-Estar Social Sueco

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Abstract: The article analyses the transformation of the Swedish welfare state under conditions of intensified migration, focusing on the gradual shift from universalism toward selectivity in migration

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and immigrant integration policies. Drawing on the concepts of welfare chauvinism and the 'civic turn,' the authors argue that contemporary changes in Sweden should not be understood as a simple decline of the welfare state or as the institutionalisation of xenophobic exclusion. Instead, they represent a normative reconfiguration in which social rights are increasingly tied to conditionality, deservingness and demonstrated integration. The article shows that Swedish universalism has never been entirely unconditional, as elements of discipline and differentiation have been embedded in the model since its formation. The crises of the 1970s–1980s and the migration challenges of the 2010s reactivated these tensions. Empirically, the study examines integration policies such as individual introduction plans, educational obligations, language requirements and tightened conditions for residence and citizenship. These instruments illustrate how welfare benefits function less as unconditional rights and more as tools for promoting 'proper' integration. The authors conclude that Sweden is undergoing a shift from universalism based on equal access to universalism based on equal requirements, redefining solidarity as conditional belonging rather than unconditional inclusion.

Keywords: welfare state; migration policy; immigrant integration policy; welfare chauvinism; civic turn.

Resumo: Este artigo analisa a transformação do Estado de bem-estar social sueco em um contexto de migração intensificada, com foco na mudança gradual do universalismo para a seletividade nas políticas de migração e integração de imigrantes. Com base nos conceitos de chauvinismo do bem-estar social e da "virada cívica", os autores argumentam que as

mudanças contemporâneas na Suécia não devem ser entendidas como um simples declínio do Estado de bem-estar social ou como a institucionalização da exclusão xenófoba. Em vez disso, representam uma reconfiguração normativa na qual os direitos sociais estão cada vez mais atrelados à condicionalidade, ao merecimento e à integração comprovada. O artigo demonstra que o universalismo sueco nunca foi totalmente incondicional, visto que elementos de disciplina e diferenciação estão presentes no modelo desde a sua formação. As crises das décadas de 1970 e 1980 e os desafios migratórios da década de 2010 reativaram essas tensões. Empiricamente, o estudo examina políticas de integração como planos individuais de introdução, obrigações educacionais, exigências linguísticas e condições mais rigorosas para residência e cidadania. Esses instrumentos ilustram como os benefícios sociais funcionam menos como direitos incondicionais e mais como ferramentas para promover uma integração "adequada". Os autores concluem que a Suécia está passando por uma transição do universalismo baseado na igualdade de acesso para o universalismo baseado na igualdade de requisitos, redefinindo a solidariedade como pertencimento condicional em vez de inclusão incondicional.

Palavras-chave: Estado de bem-estar social; política migratória; política de integração de imigrantes; chauvinismo do bem-estar social; virada cívica.

Introduction

The architecture of international security is undergoing a profound transformation. Along with it, the directions and intensity of migration flows are also changing. Over the past three decades, Europe has experienced unprecedented

waves of human mobility driven by wars, inequality and cataclysms. These processes have affected not only state borders and foreign policy, but also domestic social institutions that have become quite familiar, primarily the welfare state system.

From an epistemological perspective, these transformations pose a fundamental challenge to social science: they destabilise the categories through which welfare, citizenship and solidarity have traditionally been understood. Migration does not merely impact welfare states as an external variable; it reconfigures the very cognitive and normative frameworks through which social rights are defined, justified and evaluated.

The Nordic countries, which have long served as an unshakeable bastion of social universalism in migration policy, are now demonstrating an increasingly pronounced shift towards selectivity in their policies.[4] Access to social benefits is ever more frequently made conditional upon immigrants' cultural, social and economic adaptation. As a result, the universalist idea of equality among those integrating into society is gradually being replaced by a system that bears the features of a conditional polity.

Researchers describe this shift towards the idea that social support measures must now be 'earned' through active integration efforts as **welfare chauvinism**.[5] Nevertheless, it would be hasty and incorrect to link this trend to the rise of xenophobia or right-wing populism in Europe, as it has more complex structural and institutional foundations.

The article proposes to examine this shift through the lens of the 'civic turn' theory proposed by Sara Goodman[6]

4 BRYANT, 2025, *on-line*; DAHLSTEN; LINDSTRÖM; EKBERG, 2025, *on-line*.

5 FORD; SOBOLEWSKA; KOOTSTRA, 2026.

6 GOODMAN, 2018.

and Christian Joppke.[7] The theory suggests a trend in which social rights are increasingly tied to notions of 'proper' citizenship. Using contemporary Sweden as a case study, the article examines how the universalist model of redistribution is gradually turning into a selective one: access to social benefits is no longer an unconditional right for anyone willing to integrate, but a technology of disciplining and a reward for successful integration and demonstrated loyalty to the host society.

The central question of the article concerns the forms in which the civic turn manifests itself in the modern Swedish welfare state and whether it can indeed be associated with the erosion of the universalist welfare-state model and the exclusion of immigrants and minorities.

The authors proceed from the following assumptions:

First, what we observe in Sweden – as one of the most developed welfare states – is not the decline of the welfare-state idea as such, but an ongoing departure from the universalist logic of redistribution and its reformulation into a particularistic one, that is, the civic turn.

Second, the crisis of the welfare state, which – following other researchers[8] – we associate with the spread of the phenomenon of welfare chauvinism in the Nordic countries, is driven not only by economic challenges such as slowing growth, fiscal pressures and changes in employment structures, but also by an intensifying political logic that demands faster integration, loyalty and compliance with the normative expectations of the host society from immigrants.

7 JOPPKE, 2017.

8 WIGGAN, 2022; HARRIS; RÖMER, 2023.

1. The evolution of the Swedish welfare state

After the Second World War, Swedish social democracy reinforced the principle of universalism in the utopian ideal of *Folkhemmet* ('People's Home'), within which citizens were conceived as members of one family, and the state acted as first among equals (*primus inter pares*), becoming the guarantor of equal opportunities.[9] In the 1950s, universalism emerged as the guiding principle of social policy, where social rights were no longer merely viewed as necessary assistance for the poor and retired workers, but rather as a universal civic good.

The period lasting until the 1970s – and, according to some researchers, spanned an entire century from the 1870s to the 1970s – is rightly considered the golden age of the Swedish economy. During this time, national productivity increased almost seventeenfold, while per capita income approached the levels of the world's leading economies, enabling Sweden to rank fourth globally in terms of prosperity by 1970.[10] However, the period from the end of the Second World War to the mid-1970s is commonly considered as the peak of economic and social growth, when effectively functioning universalist redistribution mechanisms ensured a high level of equality and social mobility for citizens.

In the post-war period, the Swedish welfare state was built around the principles of universalism and solidarity. Its main goal was to ensure social justice. Basic benefits were combined with earnings-related transfers and covered families with children, the working-age population and the elderly. The social services system was designed according

9 ELGENIUS; RYDGREN, 2025.

10 BERGH, 2014, pp. 664-665.

to the principle of supporting people 'from the cradle to the grave'. By the early 1950s, the Swedish model was thus understood not as the elimination of differences between individuals, but as the provision of equal conditions and opportunities for all members of the political community, regardless of their social or economic status.[11]

At its zenith, Swedish universalism was conceptualised through four interrelated dimensions: inclusion, financing, organisation and quality of benefits provided. A fully universal social programme – its ideal type – according to this definition:

(a) covers all citizens on equal terms;

(b) is financed exclusively from public funds;

(c) is managed by a single actor ensuring uniformity of services provided;

(d) offers generous and high-quality social benefits sufficient to remain meaningful to all groups in society, including the most affluent.[12]

In economic terms, the implementation of this project rested on the Keynesian model of regulation that combined active fiscal policy with the maintenance of full employment. In post-war Sweden, as Gøsta Esping-Andersen notes, Keynesianism served as a way of reconciling capitalist productivity with social justice.[13] The state assumed responsibility for sustaining domestic demand through redistribution, while maintaining its adherence to market incentives.

As a slight digression, it is worth noting that at no point in its history has the Nordic model been, or could it have

11 BLOMQVIST; PALME, 2020, p. 116.

12 *Ibid.,* pp. 114-115.

13 ESPING-ANDERSEN, 1990, p. 18.

been, purely egalitarian. It sought to combine universalism with functioning market distribution mechanisms, thereby creating a multi-level system, thereby creating a multi-tiered system in which basic benefits were supplemented by accessible, earnings-related insurance schemes. This arrangement made it possible to integrate the middle classes into the welfare system.[14]

At the same time, the question of which original conception of freedom historically underpinned the Swedish welfare state remains the subject of academic debate. According to Jouni Reinikainen, the key dilemma lies in the clash between two interpretations – liberal and republican.[15] The first, presented in particular in the works of Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh, asserts that Swedish social democracy sought to liberate the individual from social institutions of dependence: the state, the family, the church and private employers.[16] Thus, the benefits provided by the welfare state were conceived as an instrument of civic autonomy rather than a mechanism of state paternalism and coercion.

The second interpretation, which these authors argue against, is presented by Yvonne Hirdman[17] and Bo Rothstein.[18] From their perspective, the Swedish model contained elements of paternalism from the outset, treating citizens as objects of social engineering and moral education (naturally financed by the state). In this reading, the rhetoric of 'liberation' through the provision of benefits functioned more as a discursive strategy than as a genuinely pursued objective.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

15 REINIKAINEN, 2024, pp. 493-494.

16 BERGGREN; TRÄGÅRDH, 2022.

17 HIRDMAN, 2010.

18 ROTHSTEIN, 1998.

Jouni Reinikainen seeks to reconcile these competing interpretations of Swedish universalism by advancing a dialectical conclusion: freedom in the Swedish model was never understood as the mere absence of constraints.[19] Rather, it was conceived as the individual's capacity to be independent within social institutions designed to guide and, in certain ways, structure human action.

Against this background, it is difficult to describe the presumed shift from a universalist to a particularistic logic as linear or strictly unidirectional. The tradition of understanding freedom in the Swedish welfare state is quite contradictory today: the idea of a priori equality and autonomy of individuals sometimes coexists quite organically with practices of civic differentiation and soft state 'nudging' towards certain trajectories of development.

Following the golden decades of high economic growth, inequality in Sweden remained low by virtually any measure.[20] By the late 1970s, however, this still fundamentally Keynesian model began to encounter both internal contradictions and the global economic crisis of the same period. As Andreas Bergh shows, the excessive expansion of the public sector and the growing tax burden undermined the country's economic efficiency and competitiveness.[21] Falling growth rates, the catastrophic oil crisis and rising labour costs led to stagflation, while the state's attempts to maintain employment through spending only exacerbated the budget deficit. The Swedish economy, focused on exports and domestic consumption, found itself trapped in high inflation and low productivity.

19 REINIKAINEN, 2024, pp. 509-510.

20 BERGH, 2014, p. 271.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 276-278.

Moreover, the crisis of the 1970s and 1980s revealed not only economic but also ideological aspects. It eroded confidence in the universalist logic that had underpinned the foundations of the Swedish *Folkhemmet*. Public debate increasingly featured arguments that the state had become excessively large and costly, and that universalism, once a source of economic prosperity, had turned into an outdated anchor. For example, in his address to voters in 1979, Swedish Prime Minister Ola Ullsten acknowledged that the welfare state had reached its limits, noting that 'the golden years are behind us' and that Swedes 'are living beyond their means'.[22] The same idea was echoed by Social Democratic politician Carl Lidbom, who at the same time declared the 'need to be honest' about the economic situation in Sweden: maintaining the welfare state cost Swedes more than half of their income in taxes, and citizens with above-average incomes were forced to pay even more.[23] The growing frequency and prominence of such voices in public debates of the 1970s and 1980s indicate that Sweden had entered a period of forced rethinking of the previously universalist foundations of the welfare state.

At the same time, new state institutions were being formed. They were oriented towards – using Louis Althusser's terminology – the production of values and ideological positions.[24] A prominent example is the active expansion of the ombudsman system responsible for regulating issues related to migration, gender equality, children's rights, the rights of ethnic and sexual minorities, and other groups. Despite their relatively weak legal basis, these structures perform an ideological function: they

22 DOWNIE JR., 1979, *on-line*.

23 *Ibid*.

24 ALTHUSSER, 2006, pp. 95-98.

stimulate public debate, publish materials, organise research and educational programmes, thereby influencing specific policies and contributing to the Swedish state's transition to more selective and categorical programmes.

Since the 1990s, researchers have consistently observed that the state has gradually ceased to function solely as an unconditional guarantor of benefits. While continuing to provide them, it increasingly acts as a regulator and mentor, expecting active engagement from citizens and compliance with the evolving conditions attached to the receipt of those benefits. Unsurprisingly, this shift has inevitably affected the rhetoric surrounding integration and the demands for loyalty from immigrants.

2. Reasons for choosing the Swedish case

In our initial hypotheses, we assumed that Nordic universalism has been gradually drifting towards particularism. However, Paula Blomqvist and Joakim Palme demonstrate that the Swedish model has not only retained its universalist foundation but, on the contrary, has become more complex and multi-layered.[25] Their analysis shows that although universalism has weakened in some respects – particularly in the adequacy of benefits and the nature of their provision – it persists in other dimensions related to inclusion and financing.

In their account, Sweden's social policy since the 1990s appears as a system that still strives to be universal, but no longer has the same entry conditions for all. As noted above, Paula Blomqvist and Joakim Palme suggest that Swedish universalism should be considered through four dimensions:

25 BLOMQVIST; PALME, 2020.

(a) Inclusion: who is formally covered by social programmes and whether access conditions are equal for all citizens;
(b) Financing: what funds (public or private) are used to implement the programme;
(c) Provision: which actors organise and administer services or insurance systems – state, market or voluntary/non-profit organisations;
(d) Benefits: whether social transfers are adequate for all social groups and whether they require supplementation through private arrangements.[26]

While the first two dimensions – inclusion and financing of social programmes – have remained relatively stable in Sweden, the latter two – provision and benefits – have undergone significant change in recent years. The state has organised social services differently, increasingly involving private providers, and the size and quality of payments have gradually ceased to be uniform across the population. Recent research suggests that one of the most ideal models of equality (at least as it appears from the outside) has arrived at a point where the state's commitment to ensuring equal opportunities remains relevant, but its manifestations are becoming increasingly heterogeneous and context-dependent.

It is precisely for this reason that Sweden today represents a unique example of the transformation of the welfare-state idea. What once served as a foundational principle of a modernising society and, for most of the 20th century, seemed to be a solid formula for understanding equality (of opportunity) as inclusion is now acquiring the features of equality as compliance.

26 BLOMQVIST; PALME, 2020, pp. 120-121.

Recent legislative initiatives confirm this trend. Most recently, in January 2025, the Swedish government introduced a bill proposing to raise the requirements for citizenship as early as the summer of 2026. In case the law is validated, the applicants will have to demonstrate stable income, financial self-sufficiency, and successful completion of language and civic knowledge examinations.[27] At the same time, public and government rhetoric increasingly emphasises the need to introduce stringent integration requirements for immigrants.[28]

The choice of Sweden as a case study is epistemologically justified not only by its empirical relevance, but also by its status as a paradigmatic reference point in welfare-state research. Sweden functions as a 'critical case' that allows for the examination of how universalist ideals are rearticulated under pressure, thereby revealing underlying assumptions that often remain implicit in comparative welfare-state theory.

3. Theoretical aspects

The concept of welfare chauvinism is one of the key analytical tools for studying contemporary welfare societies, in which social security issues intersect with migration, identity and right-wing populism. The term 'welfare chauvinism' is generally understood as the belief that the welfare-state services and benefits should be provided primarily (or exclusively) to the native population, while the rights of immigrants, national minorities or 'others' are restricted. The term was first introduced by Jørgen

27 MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, 2025, *on-line*.

28 MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, 2023, *on-line*.

Goul Andersen and Tor Bjørklund to describe structural changes and new cleavages in the party systems of Denmark and Norway at the end of the 20th century, referring to the conviction that social benefits should be reserved for the natives.[29] Herbert Kitschelt and Anthony J. McGann expanded this interpretation, pointing out that welfare chauvinism stems from the assumption that the native population is privileged because of its contribution to the formation and functioning of the welfare state as a system of social benefits and services.[30]

The literature distinguishes between two main dimensions of welfare chauvinism. The first is a broad one, encompassing any policies aimed at preserving or expanding social benefits for the 'native' population while simultaneously restricting access for immigrants. The second is an explicitly ethno-nationalist version, most characteristic of far-right and right-wing populist parties. As Bent Greve notes, the concept is filled with several overlapping components: ideas of deservingness, constructions of 'us' versus 'them,' as well as social and institutional boundaries that determine who is considered part of the national community and who is excluded from it.[31]

To understand the origins and intensification of the trend towards welfare chauvinism, it is essential to examine institutional changes within welfare states alongside broader socio-economic transformations through the prism of globalisation, neoliberalism and migration. Research shows that the restructuring of the state social systems has been accompanied by the growth of highly unstable labour markets, increased competition between social groups and

29 ANDERSEN; BJØRKLUND, 1990, p. 212.

30 KITSCHELT; MCGANN, 1997.

31 GREVE, 2019.

growing segregation based on class, ethnicity and place of residence.[32]

When traditional mechanisms of redistribution and social solidarity come under strain, space opens up for a reconsideration of distributive principles – and it is precisely here that welfare chauvinism gains traction. At the same time, empirical studies emphasise that citizens' solidarity with immigrants correlates with their perception of economic threat or cultural pressure; thus, people with a high subjective economic or cultural threat demonstrate more pronounced attitudes of welfare chauvinism.[33] In addition, the structure of benefits and access to them through welfare state institutions influences the potential for welfare chauvinism. For example, in countries with a universalist (Nordic) model, welfare chauvinism manifests itself less through the outright abolition of benefits than through the tightening of access conditions and the strengthening of exclusionary criteria.[34]

In this context, welfare chauvinism cannot be understood as a purely cultural phenomenon: it combines economic, institutional and identity dimensions. It emerges at the intersection of (1) the redistributive logic of the welfare state, (2) social stratification and competition in labour markets, (3) migration processes, and (4) parties' electoral strategies.

Research shows that welfare chauvinism exists in various forms and degrees, a fact that is crucial for theoretical analysis. Marcel Lubbers and Verena Seibel distinguish between hard and soft forms of welfare chauvinism: the hard form entails the complete exclusion of immigrants from

32 KESKINEN; NOROCEL; JØRGENSEN, 2016.

33 KROS; COENDERS, 2019.

34 HJORTH, 2016.

welfare systems, while the soft form allows access under certain conditions (e.g., participation in the labour market, long-term residence or language proficiency).[35] Romana Careja, Christian Elmelund-Præstekær, Michael Baggesen Klitgaard and Erik Gahner Larsen introduce the concepts of direct and indirect welfare chauvinism: direct welfare chauvinism involves legislation that explicitly excludes groups from social benefits on ethnic grounds, whereas indirect welfare chauvinism refers to formally neutral policies whose implementation or conditions disproportionately disadvantage immigrants or minorities.[36] Benjamin Leruth, Peter Taylor-Gooby and Adrienn Győry propose even more detailed typologies, distinguishing between temporary, selective, functional, cultural and unconditional forms.[37] Such variability shows that welfare chauvinism is not a monolithic phenomenon: its manifestations depend on the national welfare-state, institutional arrangements and historical trajectories.

At the same time, contemporary practice increasingly reflects a selective logic that distinguishes between 'desirable' and 'undesirable' immigrants. In rhetoric, this is expressed in the opposition between those who 'deserve' and those who 'do not deserve' welfare. Public debates explicitly address the 'usefulness' of immigrants to the nation and for the welfare system it finances, while citizens evaluate newcomers as more or less 'costly' or 'welfare-contributive.' In this sense, welfare chauvinism can be understood as a manifestation of 'intergroup competition' over the limited welfare-state resources. Importantly, the level of solidarity tends to be higher toward political refugees than toward economic

35 LUBBERS; SEIBEL, 2022.

36 CAREJA *et al.*, 2016.

37 LERUTH; TAYLOR-GOOBY; GYŐRY, 2024.

immigrants, as the latter are often perceived as having migrated more 'voluntarily' and therefore 'less deserving' of support. Economic immigrants are thus often considered more frequently held responsible for unemployment and seen as less worthy of assistance, whereas refugee status mitigates perceptions of individual responsibility.[38] Migration and immigrant integration issues are therefore closely intertwined with the logic of the welfare state: while increased ethnic diversity does not necessarily undermine solidarity automatically, when combined with economic instability and institutional insecurity, it can stimulate the spread of welfare chauvinism.

Welfare chauvinism has become an important component of the strategies of far-right and right-wing populist parties. It allows them to combine popular socio-economic policies (support for state intervention and social protection) with nationalist and xenophobic messages. Many social democratic parties, previously oriented towards a universalist model and internationalism, are also forced to respond to this agenda by adapting their own positions.[39] First, far-right and right-wing populist parties appeal to the indigenous working class, positioning themselves as defenders of 'us' against 'them,' who, in their opinion, should not be granted equal access in the social protection system. Second, they propose restrictive measures such as language, history and cultural requirements, length of residence, mandatory employment, etc. These measures function as forms of welfare chauvinism in which 'deservingness' becomes the key filter for access to benefits. Strategically, this allows parties to strengthen their electoral base by demonstrating concern for socially vulnerable groups (native

38 EICK; LERUTH, 2024.

39 BUTENKO; CHEKMAZOV, 2025; CAREJA; HARRIS, 2022.

citizens) while simultaneously identifying immigrants as a burden on the welfare systems. As shown by Koen Abts, Emmanuel Dalle Mulle, Stijn van Kessel and Elie Michel, such parties frequently deploy the logic of 'we pay – they benefit,' reinforcing attitudes about 'undeserving' people.[40] In general, welfare chauvinism functions as a political strategy that allows far-right and right-wing populists to address both economic anxieties and cultural identity fears, combining them within the framework of 'protecting their own welfare state.'

From a theoretical point of view, welfare chauvinism has several significant consequences. First, it narrows the boundaries of solidarity, turning the universalism of social rights into an exclusive regime 'for its own people.' This undermines the principles of the welfare state based on the idea of equal rights and social integration. Second, it deepens socio-political cleavages: between native citizens and immigrants, workers and forced contributors, the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving.' As Bent Greve notes, rising inequality – especially in countries with high levels of redistribution – can create a ground for welfare chauvinism.[41]

In addition, the institutional consequences include tightening conditions for access to benefits, reducing universal guarantees, increasing segregation and declining social solidarity. In the political dimension, this can mean increased support for populist parties, declining trust in mainstream parties and increased political polarisation.[42]

Finally, from a practical point of view, welfare chauvinism raises questions about the effectiveness and legitimacy of the welfare state in the era of globalisation

40 ABTS *et al.*, 2021, pp. 21-40.

41 GREVE, 2019.

42 VADLAMANNATI, 2020.

and increasing migration flows. If a significant part of the population begins to believe that the system is unfair, excludes or benefits 'non-natives', this may weaken the basic empathetic foundation of social policy.

Thus, welfare chauvinism is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon at the intersection of social policy, migration, identity and electoral strategy. It reflects both institutional changes within welfare states and cultural and identity tensions generated by migration and economic instability. Distinguishing between broad (universalist to 'natives') and ethno-nationalist (restrictive to 'outsiders') dimensions allows us to accurately describe the variability of its manifestations. In a context where parties and policymakers adapt to the challenges of globalisation, welfare chauvinism has become a significant element of contemporary social policy and political culture.

4. Swedish case study

After the Second World War, Sweden gradually transformed from a country of emigration to a country of immigration. Initially, the migration inflows were provided by labour immigrants from other European countries. But since the 1980s, refugees from Africa, the Middle East and South-Eastern Europe have become the main source of immigration.[43] Against this backdrop, Sweden developed one of the most permissive models of migration and integration policies in Europe, grounded in the principle of equal opportunities and guaranteed access to social rights for all, including newly arrived immigrants.

In the 1970s, Swedish policy was based on multiculturalism. The state not only provided social support,

43 STATISTISKA CENTRALBYRÅN, 2022, *on-line*.

but also encouraged the preservation of ethnic and cultural identities, including the right to education in one's native language. Researchers characterised this model as 'radical multiculturalism': immigrants were granted broad freedoms to choose between cultural adaptation and preservation of their own traditions.[44]

By the mid-1980s, however, a conceptual shift towards a universalist approach had begun. Policymakers increasingly viewed extensive support for ethnocultural diversity as a potential obstacle to rapid labour-market integration and effective access to social benefits.[45] Integration policy was thus reframed as a tool for ensuring equal opportunities through participation in shared social institutions, rather than as a mechanism for preserving cultural differences.

The turning point came with the 2015–2016 European migration crisis, when the number of asylum seekers in Sweden rose from 54,000 in 2013 to 162,000 in 2015, excluding undocumented immigrants.[46] In response to the unprecedented inflow, the Swedish Social Democrats proposed a 'breathing space' (*andrum*), citing the lack of a fair distribution of responsibility among EU member states.[47] Moreover, the Social Democrats initiated restrictions on the right to family reunification, the issuance of only temporary residence permits and the introduction of border controls at the Danish border. This period marked the beginning of a 'civil turn' in the Swedish migration and integration policies.

The contemporary Swedish model does not rely on mandatory integration programmes. Instead, its central element is individual introduction plans, typically designed

44 WESTIN; DINGU-KYRKLUND, 2003, p. 106.

45 ADOLFSSON, 2021, p. 6.

46 MIGRATIONSVERKET, 2025, *on-line.*

47 REGERINGSKANSLIET, 2015, *on-line.*

for a two-year period and tailored to the immigrant's education and professional experience. Compliance with the plan is not mandatory for all categories of foreign citizens, but it is required for those receiving state benefits or international protection. In this way, state economic support becomes a tool for integration: access to financial assistance and housing is conditional upon compliance with established requirements.

In 2018, Sweden introduced the so-called educational obligation (*Utbildningsplikt*), targeting low-skilled immigrants who are required to improve their educational qualifications in order to enter the labour market.[48] Failure to comply may result in refusal of employment opportunities and withdrawal of economic support. This mechanism reflects a shift from passive assistance toward active employment policy, where education is framed as a condition for social inclusion.

For highly skilled immigrants, the logic is reversed. They are offered short specialised courses and language programmes designed to facilitate rapid entry into the labour market. Employers who hire such applicants can receive financial support from the state.[49]

In 2016, Sweden launched the *Snabbspår* (Fast Tracks) programme for professionals with proven qualifications – doctors, lawyers, teachers, electricians and other specialists in high demand. The programme combines three elements: language training, diploma validation and practical work experience.[50] The results were largely positive: nearly half of the participants found employment within a year of completing the programme.[51] The Fast Tracks' initiative

48 REGERINGSKANSLIET, 2016, *on-line.*

49 ECRI, 2018, *on-line.*

50 ARBETSFÖRMEDLINGEN, 2025, *on-line.*

51 ARBETSFÖRMEDLINGEN, 2017, *on-line.*

was later restructured into a distance-learning format, *Uppdragsutbildningar för akademiker*. Participation is now limited to individuals who already speak Swedish and hold a higher education degree, while the range of eligible professions has been narrowed – reflecting stricter criteria and a broader trend toward selectivity.

Language proficiency remains a key factor in employment, which explains the central role of the Swedish for Immigrants programme (*Svenska för invandrare*, SFI). SFI is free of charge, administered by municipalities and available to all individuals over the age of 16. Courses are offered during the day or in the evening, allowing participants to combine studies with job or childcare responsibilities.

SFI consists of four levels: A, B, C and D. Highly skilled immigrants may begin at high levels, and specialised SFX tracks are available for professionals, where language instruction is integrated with sector-specific terminology. According to official statistics, more than half of SFI graduates find employment immediately after completing the programme – one of the highest rates in the EU.[52]

Although SFI does not include separate courses on history or culture, it incorporates an introduction to Swedish social norms and institutions. Since 2020, the culture module has been expanded to 100 hours. Moreover, the programme has become more individualised, allowing participants to choose the pace, format and supplementary online materials.[53] While this increases flexibility, it also places greater responsibility on individuals for their own learning outcomes. In 2024, a new restriction was introduced: SFI must be completed within three years, after which any repetition of the course must be self-financed.[54]

52 NORDENS VÄLFÄRDSCENTER, 2017, *on-line*.

53 ÖBRINK HOBZOVÁ, 2021, pp. 91-92.

54 AFTONBLADET, 2024, *on-line*.

Until the 2015–2016 European migration crisis, Sweden's migration and integration policies remained among the most liberal in Europe. Restrictions were rare and generally mild, often justified by budgetary considerations rather than security or integration concerns. Family reunification with immediate relatives was granted without stringent conditions, and the already-resident sponsor was not required to demonstrate financial self-sufficiency.

After 2016, however, significant changes were introduced. Permanent residence permits for asylum seekers were replaced with temporary ones. Only convention refugees who applied within three months retained their right to family reunification, while the individuals with subsidiary protection temporarily lost this right. A maintenance requirement was introduced, obliging already-resident sponsors to demonstrate the ability to support themselves and their family members financially.[55] An application process fee was also imposed. Although these measures were justified as necessary to reduce the burden on the welfare system, they came to symbolise the institutionalisation of a restrictive approach to immigration.

These temporary measures were extended several times, but the legislation was later partially relaxed. Today, both refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection are again eligible for family reunification, although they still have to justify the necessity of reunification. Despite the tightening of the rules, Sweden continues to approve a significant proportion of applications. In 2022, 34,589 of the 39,286 applications were approved, and the average processing time remains shorter than in many other EU member states.[56]

55 REGERINGSKANSLIET, 2015, *on-line*.

56 MIGRATIONSVERKET, 2023, *on-line*.

Traditionally, Sweden has viewed citizenship as a tool for further integration rather than a reward that must be earned. The main requirement for naturalisation remains a five-year residence with a permanent residence permit. There are currently no mandatory tests in language, history or culture, although political debate on the issue has intensified. Public opinion surveys indicate that the majority of citizens support the introduction of a language requirement.[57]

In 2023, the government and several parties proposed introducing an A2-level language proficiency test by 2025 as a condition for obtaining both citizenship and permanent residence. The introduction of an exam on basic civic and historical knowledge is also being discussed. These initiatives reflect the emergence of a civic turn – a shift from citizenship as an automatic right to citizenship as a privilege that requires demonstrating a contribution to the host society.

A criminal record does not disqualify an applicant from naturalisation, but it does extend the required waiting period.[58] Financial discipline – such as the payment of taxes, fines, alimony – is also taken into account by migration authorities, underscoring an emphasis on responsibility and participation in public life.

Overall, the evolution of the Swedish approach demonstrates a shift from the radical multiculturalism of the 1970s toward a more pragmatic form of universalism that places greater responsibility on immigrants themselves for their integration. The state continues to guarantee access to education, language training and social rights, but increasingly demands participation in individual plans, skills development, and gradual labour-market entry in return.

In the aftermath of the European migration crisis, the emphasis shifted from granting broad rights toward

57 BEVELANDER *et al.*, 2019, *on-line*.

58 MILANI *et al*. 2021, p. 763.

a system based on mutual obligations. Access to benefits, housing, training programmes or family reunification is now conditional upon meeting specific requirements. This reflects a broader trend toward a civic turn, in which integration becomes not only a right but also a duty, and the social contract requires proof of economic independence, language skills and social inclusion.

Despite the tightening of restrictions, Sweden remains one of the most open countries in Europe. It continues to ensure access to education for immigrant children, support highly skilled professionals and approve the majority of family reunification applications. Nevertheless, the direction of policy has clearly shifted: social rights are not disappearing, but are increasingly tied to active engagement in integration. The emerging logic emphasises that welfare is not only protection, but also a system of mutual obligations.

Conclusion

This article has examined the transformation of the Swedish welfare state under conditions of intensified migration flows. Drawing on theoretical approaches to welfare chauvinism and the concept of a civic turn, the authors have shown that the changes observed in Sweden cannot be reduced either to the dismantling of the universalist model or to the straightforward institutionalization of ethno-nationalist exclusion. Rather, they reflect a more complex and internally contradictory reconfiguration of social policy principles, in which universalism loses its unconditional character and is increasingly combined with logics of selectivity and deservingness.

The historical analysis demonstrates that Swedish universalism has never been static or unambiguous. From

the early stages of welfare-state formation, it incorporated elements of discipline, paternalism and differentiation, which were temporarily 'smoothed out' in the postwar period by sustained economic growth and broad political consensus. The crises of the 1970s–1980s, followed by the migration challenges of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, reactivated the internal tensions of this model and created conditions for rethinking the relationship between social rights, citizenship and loyalty.

An examination of the contemporary Swedish case shows that elements of the civic turn are most clearly manifested in the institutional design of immigrant integration policy: through individualised introduction plans, educational obligations, language requirements and the gradual tightening of conditions for access to permanent residence and citizenship. Social benefits have not been abolished, but increasingly function as instruments for promoting 'proper' integration rather than as unconditional rights. This shift allows us to speak of a shift from universalism as equality of access to universalism as equality of requirements, in which inclusion in the system depends on demonstrated activity and conformity to the state's normative expectations.

Accordingly, the central conclusion of the article is that the Swedish welfare state is experiencing not decline, but a normative transformation – from a logic of inclusion to a logic of conditional belonging. In this context, welfare chauvinism appears less as an expression of xenophobic sentiment than as an institutional mechanism for redefining the boundaries of solidarity under conditions of social and demographic uncertainty. At an epistemological level, the analysis demonstrates the limits of dichotomous frameworks that oppose universalism to exclusion or solidarity to chauvinism. Instead, it reveals how welfare-

state transformations operate through gradual redefinitions of meaning, in which inclusion is preserved formally while being substantively reconditioned.

Future research should, first, pursue comparative analyses of the Scandinavian countries in order to identify variation in the forms and trajectories of the civic turn within similar institutional settings. Second, there is a need for empirical studies of how migrants themselves perceive the new integration requirements and how these affect their long-term trajectories of social mobility. Finally, particular attention should be paid to the question of the extent to which selective universalism can maintain legitimacy and reproduce social solidarity in an era of continuing global mobility.

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