

# Resettlement in the ‘new’ Sweden: Potential consequences of the 2022 introduction of integration criteria in the quota refugee programme

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## Introduction

The September 2022 general elections resulted in the establishment of a liberal–right coalition minority government in Sweden. This has brought about significant changes to Sweden’s immigration policy, including their resettlement programme.

Sweden is one of the few European countries that has had a continuous resettlement programme for more than 70 years (Krasniqi and Suter 2015). Specific traits of the Swedish resettlement programme are its comparatively high resettlement quota and an explicit focus on the most vulnerable refugees, as well as the absence of integration prospects as criteria when selecting individuals for resettlement (Brekke et al. 2021). However, this changed in autumn 2022, when the new government coalition took power. The Tidö Agreement, which spells out the new government’s policy priorities, introduced significant policy changes in the general area of migration, from a relatively liberal towards a more restrictive migration policy. The government has referred to the policy changes as a ‘paradigm shift’; with the policy’s prioritisation of individual integration and return, opponents are concerned that it will lead to a further erosion of the right to asylum and to the increased marginalisation of immigrants.

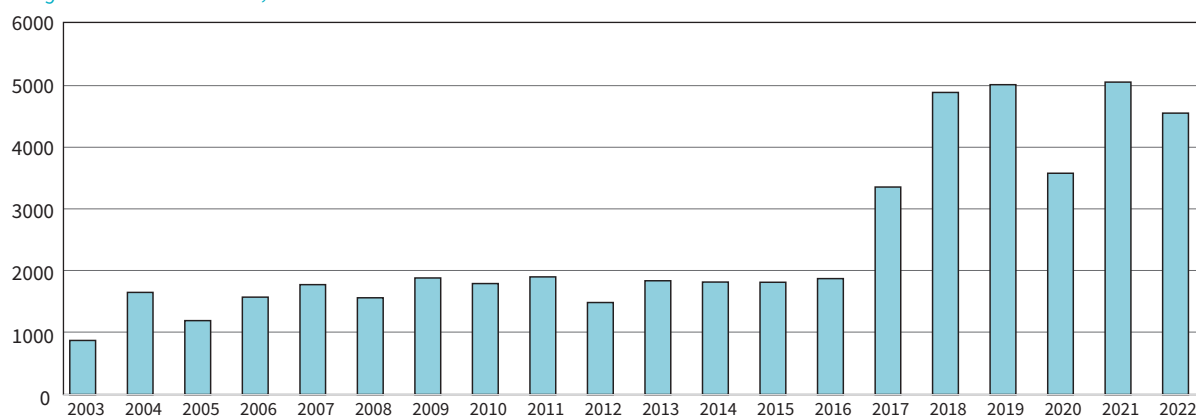
With regards to the resettlement programme, the Tidö Agreement stipulates three immediate policy changes. First, Sweden’s resettlement quota will be reduced to 900 individuals per year, in contrast to 5,000 annually between 2017 and 2022. Second, women, girls and LGBTQI+ people are to be prioritised; as the government subsequently clarified, two thirds of all places will be allocated to these groups. The existing emergency transfers has shrunk to 50 places and will be mainly reserved for people who are of specific importance to Sweden, such as those who have served the Swedish Armed Forces abroad or were involved in opposition activities. Third, criteria for integration prospects will be introduced in the selection process. The Agreement does not specifically define these prospects, but states that the Migration Agency will demand that the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) preselects cases ‘based on criteria that provide a

well-founded forecast for good integration in Swedish society and in relation to Swedish values’ (Liberalerna 2022:35). The government later specified that the Migration Agency shall assess individuals’ ‘enterprise skills, education, work experience and individual values that are significant for integration into the Swedish society’ (Swedish Migration Agency 2023). Such an assessment is to be done before candidates for resettlement are provided with information regarding what is expected of them in Sweden. The Migration Agency has previously expressed concerns about the fuzziness of the terms ‘enterprise’ and ‘values’ and pointed at the subsequent difficulty of measuring them. Migration Minister Maria Malmer Stenergard agrees on the difficulty of mea-

### The political landscape as of September 2022

The Swedish general election in September 2022 did not result in a clear majority for a single party within a bloc. Therefore, the Moderates (M), Liberals (L) and Christian Democrats (KD) decided to rely on the populist Sweden Democrats’ (SD) support in Parliament in order to form a coalition minority government. SD’s most salient political issue is the limitation of immigration. In exchange, SD required a detailed list of joint policy goals. The result was the 63-page long Tidö Agreement, which covers a wide range of policy areas such as healthcare, crime prevention, education, state finances and migration. While oppositional parties have described the Agreement as pure SD politics, especially in the field of immigration, other political commentators have pointed out that the populist and anti-immigration party did not fully push through their politics and thus the Agreement can be seen as a compromise. It is noteworthy that the restrictive turn in Swedish immigration policy started in 2015, initiated by the Social Democrat/ Green party coalition government following the large number of asylum claimants during the same year. Restrictions included the issuing of temporary instead of permanent residence permits for refugees and restrictions on family reunification.

Refugees resettled to Sweden, arrivals 2003-2022. Source: UNHCR 2023.



surement, but states that '(i)t is an impression that one gives during the interviews, that one expresses a clear will to become a part of the Swedish society and that one is willing to make an effort' (Sveriges Radio 2023). The Migration Agency's task is thus to select refugees based on 'an overall assessment' of their integration potential (Swedish Migration Agency 2023).

This brief addresses the new Swedish government's policy goals regarding resettlement. Although the policy changes have not been implemented in practice at the time of this writing (August 2023), it is reasonable to assume that experiences from other countries can offer a glimpse into how the introduction of integration prospects as a criterion in Swedish policy may impact the country's resettlement practices. This brief thus offers an overview of the integration prospects introduced by other resettlement countries and discusses possible consequences of the Swedish resettlement system.

### Background: The Swedish resettlement programme until 2022

Sweden's history of resettlement dates back to the establishment of the UNHCR and its resettlement initiative in 1950. Among the European countries, Sweden has long had the largest established programme quota of resettled refugees. This quota was increased significantly in the aftermath of the 2015 European migrant crisis: from 1,900 prior to 2016 to 5,000 annually between 2018 and 2022. The selection criteria were purely humanitarian and based on the UNHCR's definition and practice of prioritizing vulnerability. The annual quota consisted of a number of places reserved for 'emergency' transfers which included among others people who had been subjected to direct threats of deportation or execution, who had serious and acute medical problems or children at risk of forced marriage. The selection and transfer to Sweden usually took place within a few days. Between 2018 and 2022, Sweden offered between 500 and 900 emergency transfers per year.

Sources: Böhm et al 2021; Bevelander et al. 2009; Swedish Migration Agency 2022

### Refugee resettlement

Refugee resettlement is the organised transfer of refugees from a country with limited reception capacity (typically in the Global South) to another country with greater reception capacity (typically in the Global North). Next to local integration and repatriation, resettlement is one of the three durable solutions for international refugee protection. Unlike asylum, however, there is no international legal obligation for states to participate in resettlement programmes, making it possible for receiving states to influence both the size of the resettlement quota and who is selected. Historically, the United States, Australia and Canada have been major receiving countries, whereas European countries have typically had smaller quotas, if any (see Krasniqi and Suter 2015 for an overview).

Resettlement is usually organised by the UNHCR, which preselects and presents possible cases to state authorities, which in turn make the final decision as to who is resettled. In 2022, the UNHCR reported a total of 108.4 million forcibly displaced people. Among them, 1.5 million were identified as needing

resettlement, and 114,300 were resettled (every 13th person). Of all forcibly displaced people, 67% (23.3 million) have lived in protracted refugee situations, and many have been displaced for several decades, often in camps (UNHCR 2022). Possibilities for education, work and enterprise differ significantly between different refugee camps. Many camps maintain access to some kind of education, and the national and local authorities sometimes tolerate some level of enterprise; however, opportunities to engage in legal work are bleak across the camps. Beneficiaries of resettlement tend to have on average a slower labour market integration than other immigrants (see Suter and Magnusson 2015). Explanations for this are manifold and include (a) the extended duration many refugees spend in the camps (which is detrimental to their educational and vocational skills), (b) trauma and (c) physical and mental health issues, but also (d) the dispersal policies after resettlement and (e) the characteristics of the labour market in the municipalities in which the refugees are placed after resettlement (see Philmore et al. 2022)

### Integration prospects: A controversial criterion

The UNHCR advocates for resettlement to be an exclusively humanitarian endeavour, and preselects potential resettlement cases according to different vulnerability criteria, including 'women and girls at risk, survivors of violence and/or torture, children at risk, and refugees with legal and physical protection needs or medical needs' (UNHCR, 2020:6). The organisation is clear that resettlement should be for the benefit of the 'most vulnerable' and deems the consideration of any other individual characteristics – such as age, language abilities, education, religion or nationality – to be discriminatory (Sveriges Radio 2023).

Nevertheless, and despite widespread criticism from refugee rights advocacy organisations, the most common approach to selection among resettling states considers vulnerability along with the additional criteria of national security (including a screening by law enforcement authorities) and integration prospects (Hashimoto 2018). The term 'integration prospects' has different meanings in different contexts: In policy documents, it often refers to either the potential to access the labour market or to culturally adapt – or a combination of both.

### Integration prospects as selection criteria – an overview

Integration criteria can be divided into several sub-categories. It may include cultural integration prospects, such as the willingness or presumed ability to accept the resettling country's norms, values and customs. Many states include questions relating to gender and sexual norms in their assessments (Welfens and Bekyol 2021). Integration prospects can also relate to the potential to access the labour market, which is often assessed through level of education or vocational training. Language skills can also be taken into consideration, which may be relevant to both labour market and cultural integration (Böhm et al. 2021). Furthermore, younger age is often considered beneficial in regards to integration, for both cultural adaptation and labour market integration. Certain countries also favourably consider family ties or other social connections. Finally, while integration prospects are often considered per individual, they are sometimes also applied on a collective level. In these cases, the prospects of a certain nationality, religion or ethnicity are considered, often based on the characteristics of earlier resettled groups (Brekke et al. 2021).

Importantly, integration criteria can be both explicit and implicit. While explicit criteria are spelled out by the government in formal guidelines, in policy documents or law, implicit criteria are often the outcome of everyday bureaucratic procedures in the receiving country. Examples include feedback on the integration outcomes of specific nationalities; municipalities that cannot provide housing for larger families (i.e., more than four people); and municipalities' (in)capacity to deal with costly and complicated health issues (Brekke et al, 2021). Selection officers in several countries also show a preference for a 'balanced' selection, to secure the resettlement programme's existence in the long run. This is achieved by ensuring that the selected quota consists of individuals with both stronger and weaker integration potential. Importantly, such a 'balanced' approach – including the use of implicit selection criteria relating to integration – has been practised by many countries, including those that have not included explicit integration criteria in their policies (Brekke et al. 2021). However, while most countries do apply integration criteria in one way or another, policy evaluations are scarce, and the existing evaluations are inconclusive concerning the criteria's effect on actual integration outcomes (Philmore et al. 2022).

## Zooming in on Norway and Denmark

Norway and Denmark are similar to Sweden, both in size and political development. In the past 20 years, both countries have had influential right-wing parties that managed to secure significant influence over the field of immigration, and both have made use of several explicit selection criteria in their resettlement programme. Since 2002, Norway has applied different explicit integration criteria, one of which was education and vocational training of relevance for Norwegian labour market. This criterion was abandoned after several years as, in practice, few of the refugees who the UNHCR deemed 'most vulnerable' met this criterion (Brekke et al. 2021). Families – which constituted up to 95% of the respective annual quota – were exempted from this criterion. Currently, Norway employs a cultural integration criterion relating to sharing mainstream Norwegian norms and values or expressing the willingness to do so. During the screening process, applicants are asked about their socio-cultural values, including their upbringing and gender equality, set in relation to Norwegian legislation. Refugees who express contrasting views can be rejected on the grounds of 'unwanted behaviour and attitudes' (Brekke et al. 2021:44). Between 2005 and 2014, Denmark had a selection criterion in place to prioritise individuals with 'language qualifications, education and training, work experience, family situation, network, age and motivation' conducive to integration (Long and Olsson 2007:10). As Kohl's (2015) study of a Danish selection mission<sup>1</sup> shows, the introduction of such an integration prospect led to a process in which the selection officers' biases, prejudices and ideas about refugees had substantial weight. The decisions were usually made on a family basis, where some members' weaknesses (for example, illiteracy) could be balanced out by other members' strengths (for example, good behaviour or displaying activity rather than passivity). To mitigate individual biases, the selection officers jointly discussed the cases (Kohl 2015).

<sup>1</sup> Some resettlement countries, like the Nordics, organize selection missions where they conduct direct interviews with refugees in order to consider their resettlement case.

## What is ahead for the Swedish resettlement system?

In autumn 2023, the Migration Agency will embark on the first selection missions of the year and will, for the first time, implement the new selection criteria. While its outcome is yet to be known, a few assumptions can be highlighted, based on the experiences of other comparable resettling states as well as previous studies in the field.

The Swedish selection officers are tasked with selecting individuals not only according to their level of vulnerability but also according to four different indicators of their integration potential: 'enterprise skills, education, work experience and individual values that are significant for integration into the Swedish society' (Swedish Migration Agency 2023). It is noteworthy that several of these indicators are likely to present particular obstacles to refugees in protracted refugee situations. In the past, Sweden has resettled individuals (for example from Somalia and Myanmar) who have spent up to 20 years in camps, with some having been born there (Suter and Magnusson 2015). Their access to education has been sparse and possibilities for legal work non-existent. This constitutes a situation that, for people in similar situations, may result in lower qualification rates for resettlement to Sweden under the new selection criteria. However, irrespective of the length and situation of their displacement, individuals are likely to score differently on the respective indicators and, hence, the selection officers will have to agree on how to weigh them against each other. As such, whether educational level can outweigh individual values or whether enterprise can trump education are questions that must be addressed. Given Norway's difficulties with reconciling their prioritising of education and vocational training with the UNHCR's prioritising of the most vulnerable, it is likely that Sweden will experience the same. This would then shift the two other criteria (enterprise and values) into the spotlight. Their fuzziness, however, will place significant demands on selection missions to find a procedure to mitigate individual biases and establish a comparable assessment process across all cases – to safeguard equal treatment for all refugees in this process.

The Migration Agency's task to conduct 'an overall assessment' of integration prospects, however, indicates that a high or low score on one or two indicators will not automatically be decisive for an individual's fate. Moreover, it gives reason to state the uncertainty as to whether the consequences of



the policy changes will be as drastic in practice as they are on paper. While the size and the gender composition of the annual quota will doubtlessly imply a sharp change from previous practice, it therefore remains an open question as to whether the introduction of integration prospects as a criterion will have an equally drastic effect on the selection process in practice as it has on paper. It may be

argued that the policy changes are not primarily motivated by a concern for refugees' integration, but are rather a signal to the majority population that migration policy has toughened. Whatever the intention, the reality is that the policy field of resettlement is no longer protected from the various kinds of restrictions that other migration policy fields have experienced in the past decade.

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### The project

This brief was developed within the Fafo-organised project "The Future of Resettlement: Vulnerability Revisited", financed by the Norwegian Research Council. The project investigates changes in resettlement policies, particularly in relation to the concept of «vulnerability,» and how these influence the selection process for refugees in resettlement programs.

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### Fafo

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