

Evidence from Sweden: How local governments shape migration policies

While migration policies are typically set by national governments, local governments play a key role in managing the settlement of migrants and their integration into society. Based on an analysis of Swedish migration policy in the aftermath of the 2015-16 migration crisis, Jon Nyhlén and Gustav Lidén shed light on the significance of the local level of government for migration policy.

Migration policies in European national states changed radically as a consequence of the dramatic increase in immigration to the continent in 2015 and 2016. The scale of this wave of immigration to Europe and the exodus from affected countries had not been witnessed since the Second World War.

Sweden, along with a few other member countries of the European Union, ended up in the global limelight as one of the recognised final host countries. The disproportionality in the reception of immigrants across European countries was also replicated in Sweden with unequal reception across the Swedish municipalities. While some municipalities saw population growth of more than 4% in one year, simply due to the admission of immigrants, others more or less refrained from receiving anyone at all.

Furthermore, the responsibility of the receiving municipalities does not end at this point. After arrival, the subsequent phase involves helping individuals through the process of becoming integrated and established in their new societies. The dramatic events of the migration crisis also changed countries' migration policies. Swedish migration policy was no exception. Substantial amendments were hastily made to a policy field in which already tense state-local relations struggled to manage coordination, responsibilities, and funding.

Against this backdrop, there is a clear need to study the consequences for local societies of the associated changes in policy. This is the subject of a [new book](#) we have published. Our interest in these issues stretches back at least a decade. What started with our being interested in the reception of immigrants in Swedish municipalities in 2011 has developed into dealing with the consequences of rule changes, with particular focus on the local level of government.

Over the years, we have been able to follow the increasing importance of and interest in the Swedish local level, both in research and from the political system. Government and international actors, decision-makers, and researchers are now more aware than ever of the importance of the subnational level.

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Our perspective is that local migration policy involves two different but related types of policies. We adhere to Tomas Hammar and colleagues' [classical distinction](#) between policies that *regulate and distribute the admission of immigrants into local societies* and policies that *regulate the social integration of immigrants in their new local communities*. We refer to the first example as *local immigration policy* and the second as *local integration policy*.

We employ a mixed-methods approach that draws from various data and that addresses the studied phenomenon from different angles that enable comparisons over time and across municipalities. Our examination of the two policy areas builds on different types of data, involving analyses of the constitution of both types of policy in Sweden's 290 municipalities as well as three in-depth case studies. The selected cases represent two *extreme cases* and one *typical case*. While the first two represent how differences in local immigration policy were maximised, the latter appears to be unaffected by policy change.

When it comes to local immigration policy, we find evidence that policy outputs vary significantly according to demographic, economic, and political factors. Our case studies supplement such a picture by identifying that solidarity and instrumental considerations, based on the local circumstances, are given weight in the design of policy. Relating the scope of immigrant reception to the population size of municipalities consistently shows that smaller municipalities often with a more challenging labour market situation are the greatest receivers of immigrants.

The fact that a liberal policy has evolved into a standard solution for local governments with a diminishing and ageing population risks other important aspects not being given enough attention. This is something that led Sweden to implement the Settlement Act, which aimed to address the uneven distribution of immigrants in the municipalities by repealing the possibility for municipalities to decide whether to receive immigrants or not. In terms of shaping local integration policy, we find that variation exists across municipalities. We observed that municipalities invest differently in their local integration policies. This involves variation in the scope and direction.

Furthermore, increasing activity was evident in municipalities after the migrant crisis. The way in which policies were designed was clearly linked to how immigrant admission was perceived. When immigrants were welcomed for demographic or economic purposes, the local integration policy was designed based on perceiving immigration as a permanent phenomenon. By contrast, when local immigration policy was restrictive and mainly argued as being the result of housing limitations, local integration policy was shaped by viewing immigrants as a temporary phenomenon and there was a reluctance to provide specific support.

Our study of the local level of government in Sweden has started the process of filling the void of previous empirical research. This is enabled by the joint analysis of both local immigration and integration policy, covered through a wide set of rich empirical data addressed in a mixed methods fashion. The comparative nature of this study has enabled us to reach theoretical conclusions that will either add to, modify, or even break with prior knowledge within the field. We hope that we have brought new insights and valuable knowledge to the field of local migration policy.

For more information, see the authors' new book, [Local Migration Policy: Governance Structures and Policy Output in Swedish Municipalities](#) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Julius Jansson](#) on [Unsplash](#)
