

Who Gets to Belong? Reclaiming Integration as a Democratic Project

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Abstract *Who gets to belong, and on what terms? This article conceptualises integration as a contested political process through which democratic societies negotiate membership, belonging, and the relationship between cultural identity and equal citizenship. Drawing on our book Migration and the Politics of Integration, we examine the tension between the nation as a cultural community (ethnos) and as a political community of citizens (demos). We show how civic integrationism increasingly makes membership conditional upon cultural, economic, and behavioural conformity, shifting inclusion from rights towards conditional belonging. At the same time, struggles over belonging unfold through mainstream political institutions and sub-political forms of contestation and mobilisation. By bringing these dynamics together, the article argues for a relational perspective that moves beyond migrant adaptation to examine how inclusion and exclusion are mutually constituted through interactions among migrants, citizens, institutions, and political actors.*

INTRODUCTION

Integration is often framed primarily as a question of how migrants are incorporated into national societies, both in policy and academic debates. This article argues instead that integration is one of the central political questions of contemporary democratic societies because it raises a more fundamental question: who gets to belong, on what terms, and with what consequences for society as a whole? Integration concerns not only how newcomers become part of society, but also how societies define membership, negotiate belonging, and sustain social cohesion under conditions of increasing ethno-cultural diversity. Seen in this broader perspective, contemporary debates on integration return to a classical sociological question: how do societies hold together amid differentiation and social change? For thinkers such as Auguste Comte, Émile Durkheim, and Talcott Parsons, this was a foundational problem of sociology. Today, it has acquired renewed urgency as growing inequalities,

political polarisation, and democratic erosion challenge the conditions of living together.¹

Drawing on our newly published book, *Migration and the Politics of Integration*,² this article approaches integration not primarily as a policy domain but as a contested political process through which states, political actors, institutions, and citizens negotiate the boundaries of belonging and membership. It develops three interconnected arguments. First, public and political debates over integration reveal a persistent tension between ethnos and demos: between understandings of membership rooted in cultural belonging and those grounded in equal citizenship. Second, contemporary civic integrationism has increasingly transformed membership from a right into a conditional status, subject to cultural, economic, and behavioural requirements. Third, struggles over belonging are produced not only through state policies and formal political institutions, but also through everyday forms of political antagonism and sub-political contestation. Together, these arguments shift the focus from the incorporation of migrants to the broader processes through which membership and belonging are defined, negotiated, and contested.

These questions have become particularly salient in contemporary Europe, where politics of migration and integration are unfolding in an increasingly polarised and fragmented political context. The rise of right-wing populism has intensified exclusionary understandings of national belonging and sharpened distinctions between those perceived as legitimate members of the national community and those cast as outsiders.

Neoliberal restructuring has contributed to growing inequalities, insecurity, and social fragmentation, reshaping the material conditions under which belonging and social cohesion are negotiated. Within this context, migrants are increasingly constructed as economically necessary yet socially and politically undesirable. At the same time, European migration governance has increasingly shifted from integration towards return, remigration, deterrence, and intensified migration control. We argue that this shift makes the question of integration more, rather than less, important: precisely when integration is being politically displaced, it deserves renewed scholarly and political attention as a question of how European societies define membership, sustain cohesion, and negotiate belonging under conditions of diversity and inequality. Contemporary transformations make the sociological problem of social integration particularly acute, as digital technologies, global mobility, economic restructuring, algorithmically mediated public spheres, and political polarisation reshape social relations and weaken established forms of solidarity.³ Classical sociology has long linked periods of rapid social transformation to crises of social integration.⁴ The challenge, therefore, is not simply how migrants become integrated into receiving societies, but how increasingly heterogeneous societies can sustain democratic coexistence, social cohesion, and shared forms of belonging.⁵ Over the past two decades, European states have increasingly adopted civic integrationism as a mode of governing the incorporation of migrants and defining the conditions of membership.⁶ Civic integrationism refers to policies that make migrants' successful integration contingent upon individual responsibilities and demonstrable knowledge, skills, values, or forms of cultural and behavioural conformity. Although presented as a liberal framework for promoting participation and social cohesion, it has expanded the conditions attached to residence, family reunification, and citizenship, strengthened the individualisation of responsibility

for integration, and increasingly intertwined integration policy with immigration control.

Yet the politics of integration cannot be understood solely through policy frameworks and state institutions. The boundaries of belonging are equally produced, negotiated, and contested through everyday social and political practices.⁷ We argue that these processes unfold within a broader transformation of democratic politics in which parliamentary institutions are increasingly challenged by what may be termed *ultra-politics*—a mode of politics, inspired by Schmittian friend-enemy distinctions, that reframes migration, diversity, and cultural difference as existential threats requiring exceptional measures rather than democratic deliberation.⁸ At the same time, following Ulrich Beck, forms of sub-politics emerge beyond formal political institutions, as both migrant-origin and majority populations develop new practices of recognition, solidarity, participation, and collective action in response to social uncertainty, inequality, and institutional disaffection.⁹ The politics of integration is therefore shaped by the dynamic interplay between these opposing tendencies: the expansion of ultra-political logics that seek to harden boundaries of belonging and the proliferation of sub-political practices that seek to renegotiate them.

THE POLITICS OF INTEGRATION: BETWEEN ETHNOS AND DEMOS

The tension between *ethnos* and *demos* provides a useful lens for understanding the politics of integration. Rather than representing mutually exclusive models of nationhood, these ideal types coexist within liberal democracies, where commitments to equal citizenship are shaped by historically rooted understandings of collective identity and belonging.¹⁰ Integration policies are one of the principal arenas in which this tension is negotiated. They do more than facilitate migrants' incorporation into existing societies: they help define the terms on which membership is granted, the obligations attached to it, and the forms of cultural difference recognised as legitimate. The

politics of integration thus reveals a persistent tension between membership as equal citizenship and membership as cultural belonging—a tension that becomes particularly consequential when states seek to transform integration from a social process into a set of conditions that migrants must fulfil.¹¹

This tension has become increasingly visible in contemporary Europe, where migration has intensified political debates about citizenship, belonging, and national identity. While democratic principles define membership in terms of equal citizenship, political discourse often invokes cultural narratives about who truly belongs to the nation.

The contemporary resurgence of nativist politics has further intensified this tension. In populist discourse, ‘the people’ is frequently constructed not as an inclusive body of citizens, but as an authentic and homogeneous community whose identity is portrayed as threatened by both external and internal outsiders.¹² In this context, *ethnos* increasingly takes precedence over *demos*, as political membership becomes associated with cultural belonging rather than equal citizenship.

Contemporary integration policies give institutional form to this tension. While justified as instruments of inclusion within the *demos*, they also define the cultural, moral, and behavioural conditions of membership. Civic integrationism makes this particularly explicit by attaching language, civic knowledge, values, thereby making membership increasingly conditional. This dynamic is further reinforced when integration policy become intertwined with immigration control and the securitisation of migration.

CIVIC INTEGRATIONISM AND CONDITIONAL MEMBERSHIP

Civic integrationism has become a dominant approach to integration policy in contemporary Europe. Rather than treating equal citizenship as the starting point of membership, civic integration policies increasingly make access to rights, secure residence, and citizenship conditional upon individual responsibilities, adaptation, and

demonstrated commitment to the receiving society.¹³ In this sense, civic integrationism institutionalises the tension between *demos* and *ethnos* by attaching increasing conditions to legal and political membership. These conditions are generally expressed in civic rather than explicitly ethnic terms. Yet apparently universal requirements can create new boundaries of belonging by distinguishing between those considered capable of becoming full members and those whose membership remains conditional.

One defining feature of civic integrationism is therefore the expansion of conditionality. Access to residence, family reunification, and citizenship is increasingly contingent upon cultural, economic, and penal requirements. Language tests, civic knowledge examinations, citizenship ceremonies, declarations of loyalty, and economic self-sufficiency requirements have become common features of European integration regimes. While often presented as neutral instruments for promoting participation, these measures also define the cultural, moral, and behavioural characteristics expected of legitimate members of the political community. Citizenship tests, for example, may extend beyond practical knowledge to encompass national values, gender equality, secularism, and social norms.¹⁴ Similarly, stricter conduct requirements connect legal membership to moral assessments of deservingness, while the growing convergence of criminal justice and migration governance—captured by Stumpff’s concept of *crimmigration*—makes permanent residence and citizenship increasingly conditional legal statuses.¹⁵

A second defining feature is the individualisation of responsibility for integration. Rather than understanding integration as a reciprocal process shaped by institutions, social structures, and relations between groups, civic integrationism increasingly locates responsibility for both successful and failed integration within individual migrants. This reflects a broader neoliberal transformation in which social problems are interpreted through the language of personal

responsibility and individual choice. Migrants are expected to invest continuously in their integration through language acquisition, labour market participation, cultural adaptation, and economic independence. As a consequence, rights increasingly become rewards for demonstrated integration rather than conditions that facilitate inclusion. When integration is framed primarily as an individual achievement, structural barriers—including discrimination, labour market segmentation, spatial segregation, and unequal access to resources—become less visible. These expectations are also applied asymmetrically: migrants are required to demonstrate commitment to national values and social norms, while the assumptions and practices of established members of society remain largely unquestioned. Civic integration thus evaluates newcomers against an idealised model of citizenship that citizens themselves are rarely expected to fulfil.¹⁶

A third development over the past two decades has been the growing convergence of integration policy and immigration control. Integration requirements increasingly function not only as instruments for facilitating inclusion after arrival, but also as mechanisms for regulating entry, residence, family reunification, and access to citizenship. Pre-entry language requirements and civic tests illustrate how integration has become a criterion for selecting migrants even before migration takes place.¹⁷ Integration discourse is thereby intertwined with broader judgements about migrants' economic productivity, cultural compatibility, and overall desirability.¹⁸ The result is a form of conditional membership in which access to rights remains dependent upon continued compliance with integration requirements. This reinforces what De Genova describes as *deportability*:¹⁹ not simply the possibility of deportation itself, but a broader condition of legal insecurity in which migrants remain permanently exposed to exclusion.

Taken together, these developments show how civic integrationism extends beyond promoting participation. It redefines the terms of political

membership by making inclusion increasingly conditional upon cultural conformity, economic productivity, and behavioural compliance. Civic integrationism thus reflects the broader politics of integration through which the boundaries of belonging are continuously negotiated.

ULTRA-POLITICS AND SUB-POLITICS: COMPETING RESPONSES TO THE CRISIS OF BELONGING

Finally, the transformation of integration policy cannot be understood independently of broader struggles over identity, security, and belonging. While civic integrationism represents an institutional attempt to regulate membership, contemporary debates on migration are also shaped by political and social responses that develop beyond formal policy frameworks. Since the beginning of the 21st century, these debates have increasingly been framed through narratives of crisis and insecurity, particularly in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks and with the rise of right-wing populism. Migrants—and, in particular, people represented or racialised as Muslim—have consequently been portrayed not simply as newcomers requiring integration, but as potential threats to national identity, cultural cohesion, and social order. This has intensified struggles over the boundaries of political and social membership. The following section examines two competing responses to this crisis: ultra-political forms of antagonism that redraw these boundaries through exclusion and confrontation, and sub-political responses through which actors contest them beyond conventional political institutions.

This polarised political climate has increasingly shifted migration debates away from social justice, human rights, and economic necessity towards the language of threat, security, and civilisational defense. This is characteristic of ultra-politics: a mode of politics rooted in Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction, in which complex social and political issues are recast as existential struggles between 'us' and 'them'.²⁰ Migration is consequently no longer understood primarily as a multidimensional social process shaped by economic, demographic,

and humanitarian forces. Instead, diversity itself is portrayed as an existential threat to an imagined homogeneous national community. Conspiracy narratives such as the “Great Replacement”²¹ and “Eurabia”²² exemplify this logic by depicting demographic change as a deliberate project to erode national identity and cultural cohesion.

This logic also transforms the meaning of ‘the people’. Rather than referring to the democratic demos—the political community of equal citizens—populist narratives construct ‘the people’ as a culturally homogeneous community whose identity must be protected from internal and external outsiders. Contemporary nativism thus reinforces an *ethnos*-based understanding of belonging, in which political membership becomes increasingly associated with cultural authenticity rather than equal citizenship.²³

Yet the politics of integration is not produced only from above. The same conditions of exclusion and insecurity can generate responses from below, as individuals and communities develop forms of solidarity, belonging, and mutual support outside established political institutions. Ulrich Beck’s concept of sub-politics helps capture these forms of engagement, in which people seek to influence the conditions of their lives and challenge existing boundaries through everyday practices and collective action beyond conventional political channels.

Among migrant-origin populations, such responses may involve religious networks, ethnic solidarities, or alternative spaces of recognition, often emerging in response to experiences of exclusion, discrimination, alienation, or institutional neglect.²⁴ Such forms of collective belonging can provide protection against discrimination, surveillance, and social exclusion, while enabling individuals to challenge dominant expectations of assimilation. Their emergence may also reflect institutional failures to provide equal recognition and meaningful inclusion.

Among sections of majority populations experiencing economic insecurity, political marginalisation, or perceived cultural displacement,

sub-politics may instead take exclusionary forms. Feelings of loss and resentment can be transformed into nationalist or nativist mobilisation, with migration becoming a symbol of broader anxieties associated with economic restructuring, declining social protections, and diminished political influence. Both migrant-origin and majority populations may thus respond to insecurity by constructing alternative forms of solidarity and belonging.²⁵

The crucial difference lies not in the existence of collective identities themselves, but in how they are politically articulated. Some forms of sub-politics seek recognition through expanded forms of solidarity and inclusion, while others construct belonging through exclusionary boundaries. The interaction between ultra-politics and sub-politics therefore reveals integration as more than a question of policy implementation. It is a broader struggle over how societies respond to insecurity, define communities, and organise belonging around democratic inclusion or exclusionary visions of collective identity.

RETHINKING INTEGRATION: FROM ADAPTATION TO RELATIONAL BELONGING

The analysis above suggests that integration should not be understood primarily as a policy field concerned with incorporating migrants into pre-existing national communities. Instead, we approach integration as a relational and political process in which both migrants and receiving societies shape the conditions of membership and belonging. The central question is therefore not simply how migrants adapt to society, but how societies define, negotiate, and transform the conditions under which different groups are recognised as legitimate members of the political community. This perspective directs attention to the interactions between migrants and receiving societies; as well as to the institutional rules and wider power relations through which inclusion, exclusion, and belonging are produced.

Integration is fundamentally a relational process. It does not describe a linear movement of

individuals from the margins into an established centre, but an ongoing negotiation of social boundaries between different groups. Drawing on Barth's understanding of ethnic boundaries, the key issue is not cultural difference itself, but the social and political processes through which differences are produced, interpreted, and transformed into hierarchies of belonging.²⁶

This perspective challenges approaches that locate integration problems primarily within migrant communities. Perceived 'integration failures' may reflect not a lack of adaptation or participation, but institutional and structural conditions that limit access to rights, recognition, and opportunities. Discrimination, labour market inequalities, spatial segregation, and political exclusion all shape the possibilities of belonging. Integration, therefore, cannot be reduced to individual effort but must be understood in relation to the social environments and power relations within which individuals live.

A critical perspective on integration does not, however, mean that the concept should simply be set aside. Scholarship has rightly shown that integration policies can reproduce unequal power relations by treating migrants as problems to be managed and by making inclusion conditional on conformity to dominant norms.²⁷ Yet these critiques do not make the question of integration irrelevant. Struggles over integration remain important arenas in which societies negotiate justice, recognition, belonging, and political membership. Rather than abandoning the concept, we argue for rethinking it as a relational and democratic process in which the terms of inclusion are shaped not only by migrants' actions, but also by institutions, political actors, and the wider society.

We therefore propose reclaiming integration as a relational and democratic project. Rather than asking whether migrants have successfully integrated, we should examine how migrants, institutions, political actors, and wider society shape the conditions of inclusion and exclusion, and how membership in the political community is negotiated and recognised. Integration, in this

sense, concerns not only migrants but also the capacity of democratic societies to accommodate difference while ensuring equal rights and opportunities for participation. This shifts the focus of integration research from migrants' adaptation to the social, institutional, and political conditions through which inclusion, exclusion, and belonging are produced.

This approach also moves beyond purely cultural explanations of contemporary conflicts surrounding migration. Many tensions associated with integration are shaped not simply by differences between cultural groups, but by wider inequalities arising from economic restructuring, political marginalisation, and unequal access to resources. As Laz ri argues, experiences of minority status are shaped not only by cultural difference but also by shared experiences of vulnerability, insecurity, and social neglect.²⁸ Conflicts over belonging must therefore be understood in relation to the social and material inequalities through which boundaries between groups are experienced and maintained.

Seen in this light, the politics of integration is inseparable from broader questions of redistribution, political recognition, and social solidarity. The challenge is not merely how societies accommodate diversity, but how they address the conditions that generate insecurity, unequal opportunities, and hierarchical forms of belonging. This requires attention not only to migration policies and citizenship regimes, but also to workplaces, neighbourhoods, schools, and civic spaces where people experience inclusion and exclusion and negotiate belonging in everyday life.

Ultimately, we understand integration neither as assimilation into a predefined national identity nor as the managerial governance of cultural diversity, but as an ongoing democratic process through which societies negotiate membership, solidarity, and equal citizenship amid mobility, technological transformation, socioeconomic inequality, and political uncertainty.

The future of integration depends on the capacity of democratic societies to reconcile cultural

diversity, equal citizenship, and social solidarity. At a time when top-down ultra-political narratives deepen social divisions and privilege exclusion over democratic deliberation, integration must be reclaimed as a democratic practice that strengthens social bonds and sustains pluralistic forms of membership.

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