

Introduction to the Special Section: Conceptualisations and Dynamics of Integration in the Context of Migration and Diversity

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of integration occupies a paradoxical position in migration research. While it is one of the most contested concepts, it is also one of the most researched and measured ones.¹ This special section of CIMR takes this particular position as its starting point. It brings together contributions that examine integration from different theoretical, methodological, and empirical perspectives, revealing the tensions, and challenging the assumptions that continue to shape debates on immigrant integration and belonging.

THE CONCEPT OF INTEGRATION—AN OVERVIEW

In academic research, integration has often been conceptualized in terms of an individual's level of integration. To assess this, scholars have developed a range of widely used indicators that are both measurable and regarded as relatively objective, including employment status, language proficiency, housing conditions, and health outcomes.² These indicators enable researchers to track changes over time and compare levels of integration across different groups and contexts. They also provide policymakers with a basis for designing targeted interventions in areas where integration is perceived to be lagging, or for specific population groups, such as foreign-born women, who are considered to require additional support.

In recent years, however, this approach has come under increasing scrutiny. One line of criticism concerns the uncritical adoption of policy categories

and concepts as analytical tools, thereby reproducing the assumptions embedded in policy discourse.³ Another criticism targets the heavy reliance on quantifiable indicators. Scholars have argued that an exclusive focus on measurable outcomes risks reinforcing racialized, gendered, and postcolonial hierarchies, while simultaneously promoting a deficit-oriented understanding of migrants by emphasizing what they lack rather than recognizing their capabilities, resources, and contributions.⁴ For instance, indicators such as employment rates and overqualification may be better understood as outcomes of structural inequalities and labour market discrimination than as measures of migrants' individual integration capacities.⁵ Furthermore, studies focusing on minority-majority categorisations and perspectives⁶ or on the conceptualisation of superdiversity⁷ have recognised the increasing complexity of diversity in society, reflecting historical developments of migration and socio-political modes of inclusion that bear important implications for our understanding and conceptualisation of integration.

In fact, the notion of 'integration' is often criticised, with some scholars arguing that it is conceptually vague, and that it lacks theoretical rigor.⁸ Suggestions have been made for replacing 'integration' with other concepts—such as 'inclusion', 'incorporation'—or other concepts that capture power relations in our societies, include the

lived experiences of migrants, foreground the importance of place and translocal connections, or move away from the sole focus on immigrants to a focus on societal relations in general.⁹ These accounts of contemporary societies embrace the complexity of difference along ethnic and racial, but also gender, class, religion and ability lines, making the understanding of what integration is or what it ought to be increasingly complex.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS IN THIS SPECIAL SECTION

The eight contributions in this special section propose new theoretical approaches to integration and advance existing scholarly debates by contributing new empirical evidence.

Opening this section, **Stefan Manser-Egli**, in *"Integration for Migrants, Democracy for Citizens: Why Integration Is Beyond Redemption"*, argues that integrationism—understood as the expectation that immigrants must adapt to a presumed set of shared societal values and norms—constitutes an obstacle to liberal democracy. On the one hand, it excludes significant segments of the population from full democratic participation and citizenship; on the other, it depoliticizes and obscures the plurality of values, identities, and forms of political contestation that already characterize contemporary societies. Emphasizing that modern societies neither are nor should be communities united by a single set of values, Manser-Egli advances the case for a post-integrationist democracy, one that invites all residents to participate in the ongoing negotiation and interpretation of constitutional values.

Karin Borevi and Ayhan Kaya continue the focus on democracy and belonging. Their article, *"Who Gets to Belong? Reclaiming Integration as a Democratic Project,"* conceptualizes integration as a contested political process through which democratic societies negotiate membership, belonging, and the relationship between cultural identity and equal citizenship. The authors show how integrationism shifts inclusion/integration away from rights-based citizenship toward forms of conditional belonging. At the same time, struggles over belonging unfold

both within mainstream political institutions and through more informal or sub-political forms of contestation and mobilization. Bringing these dynamics together, Borevi and Kaya advocate for a relational perspective that moves beyond a narrow focus on migrant adaptation and instead examines how inclusion and exclusion are mutually constituted through interactions among migrants, citizens, institutions, and political actors.

Maja Povrzanović Frykman similarly challenges conventional understandings of integration by introducing the perspective of postmigration. In her article, *"When Do Migration-Related Differences (Not) Matter? The Perspective of Postmigration"*, she argues that migration-related plurality should be understood not as external to society, but as constitutive of it. This shifts attention away from migrants' adaptation toward questions of acceptance, participation, and equal opportunities for *all* members of society. Drawing on research presented in the book *Academia and Cultural Production in Sweden: Postmigrant Trajectories, Alliances, and Negotiations*, Povrzanović Frykman illustrates the analytical value of this perspective through an examination of the use of Swedish and English in highly internationalised academic settings. Practices of collegial support and translanguaging reveal shifting linguistic positionings that cannot be reduced to a migrant-native binary. The article shows how migration-related differences acquire, lose, or regain significance in particular situations, and how participation is continuously negotiated across these differences.

The question of who belongs, central to Borevi and Kaya's contribution, takes a concrete form in the contribution by **Maja Cederberg, Oksana Shmulyar Gréen, and Ylva Wallinder**. Their article, *"Am I a Migrant? Experiences of Return Migration and (Re)integration in Sweden"*, considers the case of Swedish nationals returning to Sweden after spending extended periods abroad, and shows that formal membership in the country does not necessarily translate into a smooth process of (re)integration and belonging. The authors show

that returnees frequently experience a mismatch between expectations of a smooth and uncomplicated return and the realities they encounter in areas such as employment, education, social networks, and cultural belonging. Their analysis demonstrates that return migration and reintegration are neither automatic nor straightforward processes, thereby challenging assumptions that returnees enjoy an unproblematic insider status by virtue of their citizenship and prior ties to the country.

Margareta Popoola, too, challenges assumptions taken for granted about determinants of integration. Her article, *"Spatial Proximity, Social Mixing, and Social Integration: Opportunities, Constraints, and Preconditions"* (in Swedish), engages with the political debate that emerged during the 2026 Swedish election campaign, particularly among the Social Democrats, the Moderate Party, and the Sweden Democrats, concerning residential segregation and the role of spatial proximity in fostering ethnic and social integration. Drawing on research on neighbourhood change, gentrification, social mixing, social networks, and trust, the article critically examines the relationship between spatial proximity and social relations. The review shows that while a heterogeneous population composition can create opportunities for intergroup contact, spatial proximity alone does not necessarily generate social integration, trust, or social cohesion. Rather, the relationship between physical closeness and meaningful social interaction is contingent upon a range of social and structural factors. The article concludes that effective efforts to reduce segregation must move beyond residential mixing alone and also address the economic, social, and institutional conditions that shape people's opportunities to interact and develop lasting social relationships.

Lola Ruzikulova's article expands on Popoola's emphasis on the relational nature of integration, moving from the latter's group level to individual one. In her contribution, *"In Sweden, We Are Uzbeks, in Uzbekistan, We Are Swedes": Selective Integration among Migrant Women from Uzbekistan in Sweden"*,

Ruzikulova examines how women migrants from Uzbekistan negotiate ethnocultural identity, gender roles, and belonging within the Swedish sociocultural context. Drawing on the understanding that identity is relational, situational, and context-dependent, Ruzikulova demonstrates that integration is neither linear nor all-encompassing. Instead, the women engage in processes of selective integration, adopting, adapting, and maintaining elements of both, their country of origin and Swedish society. Their experiences illustrate how belonging is actively negotiated across multiple social and cultural contexts, resulting in hybrid forms of identification that challenge conventional understandings of integration as a one-way process of adaptation.

Shaden Sabouni's contribution too reveals the complexities of integration, and the limitations of our existing tools to capture them. Her article, *"Beyond Indicators: Emotional Labour and the Lived Dynamics of Refugee Integration in Germany"*, shows how the visible indicators through which integration is conventionally assessed, such as language acquisition, labour market participation, vocational training, and compliance with institutional expectations, obscures the emotional labour that accompanies the efforts to integrate, and importantly, the efforts to sustain said integration. Her respondents, Syrian refugees residing in Germany, describe managing frustration, performing motivation and gratitude, controlling their visibility, and sustaining self-worth in their social integrations, from language courses, to job-centre meetings, workplace encounters, and everyday social interactions. Importantly, Sabouni's research reveals how observable, measurable markers of integration are insufficient for assessing the wellbeing of her respondents. Because integration is a lived and relational process shaped by evaluation, conditional recognition, and unequal social relations, refugees must continually perform this emotional labour even after they meet the formal thresholds for integration (e.g., employment, language acquisition). They must show gratitude,

hide frustration, conceal disappointment and demonstrate deservedness and belonging.

Finally, **Katarina Mozetič** too makes the invisible visible, by exposing the unseen benefits of refugee remote work beyond its indication of labour market integration. Her article, *"Online Work Kept Me Alive': Psychosocial Value of Remote Work among Protection Holders from Ukraine"*, starts from the widely recognized importance of employment for refugees' integration. Shifting attention from local labour market participation to remote forms of work, the article examines the psychosocial significance of remote employment for the wellbeing of refugees. Drawing on research with Ukrainian protection holders in Sweden, Mozetič shows that remote work can—under certain conditions—represent an important source of wellbeing by providing a sense of purpose, maintaining social and professional ties and creating opportunities for meaningful activity during displacement. Mozetič therefore calls on policymakers and practitioners working in the field of refugee integration to recognize the value of remote work as a possible pathway to more self-determined, dignified and meaningful livelihoods after displacement.

Both Sabouni's and Mozetič's contributions show how our reliance on measurable, observable indicators obscure the hidden costs, and in Mozetič's case, the hidden benefits, of integration. These indicators register what refugees achieve formally, while obscuring what this achievement demands from them or gives them in return.

Beyond this Special Section, the General Section of this issue offers a selection of further articles for readers to discover.

¹ See, for example, the Migrant Integration Policy index (MIPEX), the Immigration Policy Lab Index (IPL), or the Immigrant Inclusion Index (IMIX).

² See, for example, OECD & European Commission (2023). *Indicators of immigrant integration 2023: Settling in*. OECD Publishing; Naseh, M., Lee, J., Zeng, Y., Nabunya, P., Alvarez, V., & Safi, M. (2024).

Understanding economic integration in immigrant and refugee populations: A scoping review of concepts and metrics in the United States. *Economies*, 12(7), 167.

³ Dahinden, J. (2016). A plea for the 'de-migranticization' of research on migration and integration. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39(13), 2207–2225.

⁴ For example, Schinkel, W. (2018). Against "immigrant integration": For an end to neocolonial knowledge production. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 6(31), 1–17; Korteweg, A. C. (2017). The failures of "immigrant integration": The gendered racialized production of non-belonging. *Migration Studies* 5(3): 428–444, 434.

⁵ Ager, A., & Strang, A. (2008). Understanding integration: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21(2), 166–191; OECD & European Commission (2023).

⁶ Lazëri, M., & Coenders, M. (2023). Dutch national identity in a majority-minority context: When the dominant group becomes a local minority. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(9), 2129–2153.

⁷ Vertovec, S. (2007). Super-diversity and its implications. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30(6), 1024–1054.

⁸ See, for example, Suter, B., & Åkesson, L. (2020). Introduction. In B. Suter and L. Åkesson (Eds.). *Contemporary European Emigration: Situating Integration in New Destinations*. Routledge.

⁹ Klarenbeek, L. (2024). Relational integration: from integrating migrants to integrating social relations. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 50(1), 233–256.