

Chapter 1. The Context of Polish immigration and integration in Iceland

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Introduction

In terms of national background and religious affiliations, the population of Iceland remained relatively homogeneous until around the last decade of the 20th century. This quickly changed, however, as growing numbers of people streamed into Iceland to work and study during the 1990s and wildly prosperous early 21st century. The vast majority of these people came from other European countries, particularly Poland, with only a small percentage hailing from lands outside Europe and/or seeking family reunification or asylum. This sudden influx of cultural diversity and relatively cheap labour created a dynamic context for critically and reflexively examining Icelandic society and national identity. In this chapter I will, therefore, shed light on the factors and historical circumstances that specifically gave rise to increased migration, while also addressing how language politics impacted the way Poles and other immigrants were subsequently received and integrated into Icelandic society.

Background and population distribution

With a population of 318.500 inhabitants, Iceland is one of the smallest nation states in Europe (Statistics Iceland 2011). It was first fully recognized as a sovereign state when Denmark signed the Act of Union, effective of 1 December 1918. This agreement, valid for 25 years, allowed the Icelandic people to take control of their land's foreign affairs while remaining in a personal union with the Kingdom of Denmark. When the Act of Union expired, a constitutional referendum was held in

Iceland to determine whether or not to terminate the union with Denmark and establish a republic. Iceland formally became a republic on 17 June 1944, and its first president was elected by the Icelandic Alþingi on the republic's inauguration day.

WWII spurred economic growth in the new island nation, and this prosperity continued throughout the post-war years, fueled by Marshall Aid and the industrialization of the Icelandic fishing industry. Industrialization meant that the widely dispersed fishing communities were quickly assimilated into the national economy, and infrastructural development became a top priority around the country (Bærenholdt 1994; Skaptadóttir, Mørkøre & Riabova 2001). Nevertheless, urbanization soon followed and today 37% of Iceland's people live in the capital city of Reykjavík. If the neighboring communities of Kópavogur, Hafnarfjörður, Garðabær, Seltjarnarnes and Mosfellsbær are included in the equation, then approximately 60% of Iceland's population lives in Reykjavík and its suburbs (Statistics Iceland 2011). With the exception of the towns of Reykjanesbær in the south and Akureyri in the north, the rest of the population is distributed among small villages spread along the coast or in rural farming areas.

National identity

The Icelandic language was a very important element in defining Icelandic nationality, as was the case in Norway and the Faroe Islands during their national romantic struggles for independence from Denmark. The Icelandic language was, and continues to be, one of the most important Icelandic national symbols, and language is perceived as connecting Icelanders to both their history and their land (Skaptadóttir 2008; Hálfðánarson 2001; Þórarinsdóttir 2005).

The fishing and whaling industries have also played a key role in the formation of Icelandic national consciousness and are largely responsible for Iceland's initial modernization and continued growth. The nationalistic character of these industries has been extremely evident time and time again as Icelanders have fought to secure and extend their fishing rights in the North Atlantic (1950-1970), as well as passionately advocate whaling despite opposition from the international community (Guðmundsson 1995; Brydon 1996).

Icelanders often identify themselves as a proud fishing nation of fiercely independent people living in harsh natural surroundings within a democratic society characterized by equal access to education and health care. Gender equality is also frequently considered a distinguishing hallmark of Icelandic society, a virtue that has its roots in the Icelandic history (made famous by the epic sagas), which can be traced all the way back to the early settlers of the 9th century. There are, however, some important contradictions at play in the national identity politics associated with the fisheries: at the same time when the industry has fortified the country's economy and guaranteed prosperity, fish processing work and life in fishing communities has been treated with contempt (Skaptadóttir 2000). Not surprisingly, language politics also colors Icelandic people's perception of immigrants.

The 1990s

Prior to the 1990s, the majority of fish factory employees had come from the respective villages where the factories were located. Still, seasonal labour from other parts of Iceland or abroad was common, and seasonal workers often lived in special housing provided by the company. At that time, many of the foreign seasonal workers were young women traveling and working in order to broaden their horizons before going to college or settling down in their home countries; this group was primarily comprised of people from other Nordic countries as well as countries as far away as South Africa, New Zealand and Australia (Skaptadóttir 2004). In other words, the presence of foreign labour had not been an entirely new phenomenon in small Icelandic fishing villages, but when Poles began arriving on the scene in the 1990s the numbers and composition of the labour force in Icelandic fishing villages changed significantly.

In the 1990s, Iceland experienced vast socio-economic transformations as a result of a combination of systematic deregulations, privatization of fishing quotas, and membership in the European Economic Area. Around this time, Icelandic people (women in particular) began leaving the villages in ever-greater numbers to pursue careers and degrees unrelated to the fishing industry. This new generation of Icelandic women preferred service sector jobs in fields such as nursing, pedagogy and elementary education, and elderly care. Their departure from fish processing work,

coupled with the changing Icelandic economy, created a great demand for a new and larger work force (Skaptadóttir and Proppé 2005). Since fish processing has traditionally been women's work, the labour shortage was initially localized within the fishing industry and the majority of immigrants were female. By 1996, 70% of all new work permits granted to foreign workers in Iceland were issued to firms hiring workers for the fishing industry. Many of the women who migrated to fill these positions in the Icelandic labour market came from Poland, and they helped recruit other female relatives and friends to follow in their footsteps (Skaptadóttir and Wojtynska 2008).

The number of immigrants¹ accounted for approximately 2% of Iceland's population in 1996 and a large percentage of these immigrants came from other Nordic countries²; immigrants from Asia accounted for only 15% of the immigrant population at that time. A little over a decade later, the number of immigrants had skyrocketed, and they comprised 8.1% of Iceland's population in 2008. The majority, or 68%, came from Europe while the number of Nordic immigrants had decreased to 7%³. Although the number of Asians had grown, they still remained only about 15% of all immigrants in Iceland (Garðarsdóttir, Hauksson and Tryggvadóttir 2009).

The percentage of immigrants increased markedly after May 2006, when people from the new member states of the European Union (approved during the 2004 enlargement) no longer needed to secure work permits before coming to Iceland. Aside from a large number of Poles, immigrants from countries such as Portugal and Lithuania arrived in increasing numbers as well. In 2007 alone, the number of Poles in Iceland rose from 3221 to 5996, and 73% of these Polish citizens were men. Several massive construction projects, among them a large power plant and an aluminum smelter, explain the conspicuous rise in male immigrants in 2006, 2007, and 2008. In 2007, at the height of the Icelandic economy's frenzied years of expansion, the Directorate of Labour reported that 9% of people in the Icelandic work force had foreign citizenship (Vinnumálastofnun 2007).

¹ Defined as people born abroad with both parents born abroad.

² 30% of Icelandic immigrants were from other Nordic countries.

³ Meaning 7% of all immigrants.

During this time, it also became increasingly difficult for non-Europeans to get permission to work in Iceland.

After 2006, immigrants became a more visible part of the Icelandic society but they were not always looked upon favorably. Their numbers increased rapidly, and they were no longer confined to factories or construction sites, working among other foreigners. Immigrants were increasingly seen in service sector jobs as shop cashiers or bus drivers, and here they frequently came into contact with native Icelanders. A chorus of negative voices gradually emerged, and seemed most critical of the Polish immigrants. Icelanders habitually complained about the immigrants' general lack of initiative to learn Icelandic, despite the fact that there was a serious lack of Icelandic courses and language material available to immigrants, and most immigrants had recently arrived to the country. After a few incidences of highly publicized criminal activity involving Polish and Lithuanian citizens, the positive images of good, hard-working Poles morphed into discourses that stigmatized Polish and Lithuanian men as criminals (Ólafsson 2008; Ólafsson and Zielińska 2010). A study conducted in 2007/08 showed, however, that Icelanders in several municipalities outside of Reykjavík did not feel that immigrants were *stealing* Icelandic jobs. Icelandic participants in the study's focus group came from three municipalities that were heavily populated with immigrants, but those immigrants' labour was acknowledged as necessary and welcome. The people in the focus group complained instead about immigrants' unwillingness to learn Icelandic (Harðardóttir, Loftsdóttir and Skaptadóttir 2007).

The collapse of Iceland's financial infrastructure and economy adversely affected immigrants, since many of them were hired to work in fish factories or construction projects that were abruptly forced to cut back or shut down. In May 2010, 16.8% of Iceland's unemployed were foreign citizens. Approximately 90% of these unemployed immigrants come from Europe and 60% of the unemployed Europeans in Iceland are from Poland (Skaptadóttir and Ólafsdóttir 2010). Those immigrants working in service sector jobs revolving around health care have suffered least, but are nevertheless facing the possibility of layoffs and/or pay cuts. Another unfortunate result of the economic crisis is the state's inability to adequately fund agencies and organizations that work directly with immigrants to address their issues and circumstances.

Stigmas also arose out of the popular misconception that immigrants were only staying in Iceland temporarily. It was assumed that the foreign labour force would pack their bags and return to their respective countries of origin once they lost their jobs. However, like their Icelandic counterparts, foreign workers are entitled to unemployment benefits; in most cases, these benefits pay a higher wage than immigrants would receive in their home countries (Wojtyńska and Zielińska 2010). So, although there has been a noticeable rise in foreign citizens' outmigration this past year, foreigners have continued to move to Iceland after the economic crisis albeit in much lower numbers (Garðarsdóttir and Bjarnason 2010).

Integration

Between 1990 and 2010, the Icelandic state and its municipalities gave alarmingly little attention to the growing size of Iceland's foreign born population, let alone other immigrant issues. The national government did not draft any such policy to address immigrant issues until 2007, and by that time some municipalities had already formulated their own. The city of Reykjavik, for example, approved its multicultural policy in 2001 (Mannréttindaskrifstofa Reykjavíkurborgar 2009). The state's official stance on multiculturalism in Iceland emphasized equal opportunities for immigrants and promoted their active participation in as many areas of society as possible (Félagsmálaráðuneytið 2007, p. 2; Skaptadóttir and Ólafsdóttir 2010). Although the Multicultural and Information Center of Iceland⁴ has an important role, it also has a tenuous budget dictating the scope of its activities from year to year. It is located in Isafjarðarbær in the North West part of Iceland, and thus the majority of immigrants who live in and near the capital are served by phone and Internet. Various individuals, volunteer organizations and unions have taken on the responsibility of assisting people who move to Iceland. The Intercultural Centre⁵, Red Cross and the trade unions have been given varying degrees of municipal support for their efforts to assist immigrants.

⁴ The Icelandic Multicultural & Information Center functions under the Ministry of Welfare.

⁵ The Intercultural Center's activities were shut down in 2010.

Some municipalities have also taken the initiative to provide helpful and accessible information to newly arrived migrants, while trade unions have played a larger role. All workers in Iceland, both in private corporations and public institutions, are automatically members of certain unions when they enter the labour market. The confederation of labour unions provides information about labour laws and regulations in English, Polish, Thai, Portuguese and Lithuanian on their homepage. The labour unions have been instrumental in providing information to foreign workers, fighting against social dumping, and securing language instruction and unemployment benefits. Language courses are not provided by the state or municipalities although they have occasionally provided some support in the form of facilities or partial funding. Despite this lack of government support, union members have been able to get some portion of language instruction costs refunded through their respective unions; after the rise in unemployment, language courses have even been offered to the unemployed free of charge (Skaptadóttir and Ólafsdóttir 2010).

In debates concerning immigrant integration, immigrants' language skills and their rights within the Icelandic labour market have been emphasized. When foreigners increasingly began to work in stores in 2006, their inadequate knowledge of Icelandic became a hot topic and even a matter of indignation. In that context, questions concerning what it *meant* to be Icelandic and how important it is to *speak* Icelandic were raised.

As part of the national construction of Icelandic identity, the standardization of Icelandic was followed by strict language policies purifying the language first of Danish words and later, in the 20th century, of English influences. The government has reacted to perceived threats to the language by implementing a protectionist language policy. From 1951 to 1996, having an Icelandic name was a prerequisite to gaining Icelandic citizenship. It is important to keep this in mind, as well as the fact that Icelanders have not been used to multicultural backgrounds extending beyond the borders of Scandinavia. Consequently, there are two common views regarding the Icelandic language and its acquisition. The first emphasizes the language and speaker as a guardian of national history, culture and symbol of national unification. The second view emphasizes the practical side of the language as key to communication

and participation in the Icelandic society. These two views can be found in the government's first ever policy on immigrant integration. The 2007 document states:

It is the policy of the Icelandic government – approved by the entire nation – to protect the Icelandic language. It is the shared property of the Icelandic nation and contains its history, culture and self-awareness. It is also a tool for social interaction and a key to participation in the nation's life. Powerful support of Icelandic language education for immigrants serves the dual purpose of speeding up their integration into society and strengthening the position of the Icelandic language (Félagsmálaráðuneytið 2007, p. 6).

The distinction between these two roles of the Icelandic language is not clear when it comes to the expectations Icelanders have toward immigrants' learning of the Icelandic language. Is it a key to membership in an exclusionary group or is it a tool for participation in society? (Ólafsson and Zielińska 2010; Skaptadóttir and Ólafsdóttir 2010)

Organizations and individuals fighting for immigrants' rights have emphasized giving people a chance to learn Icelandic, and the trade unions have faithfully sponsored their members' participation in Icelandic instruction. In order to be able to apply for a permanent work permit, Poles and other nationalities from outside of the European Union have had to take 150 hours of Icelandic language instruction; this rule still applies to those coming from outside of the European Union. In some cases, immigrants attended the beginner courses for the second time in order to fulfill the 150 hours required to be able to apply for a permanent work permit; this has often been necessary as a result of the fact that the availability of advanced Icelandic courses is often limited in many of the small, rural villages where immigrants are employed. On the other hand, immigrants who come to Iceland to work as unskilled labour cannot attend any such courses until they have fully entered the Icelandic labour market. Lack of teachers, teaching material and finances was always an issue of concern during the economic boom, and it continues to be even more so during Iceland's recession. Since schools have to depend on grants and fees from year to year, they are not able to make long term plans and thus it has not been possible to employ language instructors on a permanent basis. Furthermore, many of the language instructors are

not certified to teach Icelandic as a second language (Skaptadóttir and Ólafsdóttir 2010).

Discussion

Iceland was for a long time a relatively homogeneous society with a small percentage of the population born abroad, which went through great transformation after WW II, then a newly independent nation state. Fisheries played an important role in its economy and identity. Language was an important element in the independence struggle and continues to play a large role in national identity. To a large degree, migrants who have arrived in the last two decades have been viewed as “workers” by the Icelandic society. In light of this, it is not surprising that unions championed immigrants and their rights while the state showed little interest. The slow reaction of the state seems to indicate that Poles and other migrants were not viewed as part of the Icelandic society though their labour was crucial to Iceland’s economic growth. The state has, until recently, made a minimal effort to “integrate” immigrants, prepare them for societal participation, or help them obtain citizenship. Consequently, we are left with the contradiction that Icelanders complain about immigrants’ language skills and lack of willingness to learn Icelandic, while at the same time immigrants are not always given the right kinds of opportunities to learn Icelandic and integrate. This is particularly telling in terms of the symbolic and cultural fetishism of the Icelandic language and the role it plays in people’s perceptions of immigrants. The state has emphasized language as a key part of society and culture, yet allotted very few resources to help immigrants acquire the language. There was a conspicuous “lack of funding” for language instruction at a time when the fisheries and other booming industries required foreign workers to come to Iceland and help build up the Icelandic economy. Immigrants were helping to fuel the independence of the proud fishing nation with their labour, and supporting the symbolic aspect of Iceland’s identity which fisheries are, but this required them to be working in places and situations where they were not so easily integrated, and the immigrants got blamed for this when they became a visible part of the Icelandic society.

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