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# 11. INTEGRATION AND ADAPTATION

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*One process that helps keep increasingly diverse societies together is integration. But what is it exactly? In this chapter, you will get acquainted with different understandings of integration. You will also find out what hinders integration and why it doesn't always occur straight away, and you will also get a little idea of the integration policy in Estonia.*

Integration seems to be everywhere today: today's schools practice integrated learning or tasks that involve, for example, studying both music and mathematics at the same time; kitchen appliances can often be integrated into kitchen cabinets so that on an external inspection it's not clear which door could hide the dishwasher or refrigerator. In the case of societies, too, there is growing talk of integration and cohesion at a social, cultural, economic and any other level. In essence, integration means striving for cohesion. Societal integration therefore means that different people and different groups have contacts and connections that create a sense of a common and whole society. Integration does not necessarily result in a society where everyone is friends, rather a society in which all groups participate more equally in different areas and no one is completely cut off: for example, so that no-one is excluded from the labour market, political or social life, or cultural experiences, due to their age, gender, origin, place of residence or social class. Certainly, integration does not remove the boundaries or inequalities of social groups – young people remain young and the old are old, the rich are richer and the poor are poorer. However, regardless of income, age or origin people should perceive themselves as full members of society and be able to participate in various areas of social life accordingly.

Integration can be a spontaneous and even an inevitable process. It occurs on a daily basis. Unless completely separate parallel societies have emerged within one society, different people will inevitably meet in a shop, at the hairdresser's, at school or workplace, and somehow a common language must be found. And not just literally. However, integration is also something that various policies try to encourage or accelerate.

## Different views on integration

Integration can also be understood differently. It certainly isn't a neutral word: for some, it is associated with something very good, for others it is negative. Why? Because integration is always somewhat connected to power relations. Does integration mean that I have to learn your language, or does it mean that you have to learn mine? Who says how to dress and behave at school or work, for example? And do we get a day off when it is my holiday or yours? Also, perceptions of integration have changed a lot over time.

### Assimilationism

In the middle of the 20th century, an assimilative view of integration emerged in the United States as well as in the Soviet Union, for example. In essence, assimilation means dissolving into a larger whole, i.e., taking over a so-called common identity, customs and language of the host state. The United

States has long been described as a melting pot of nations, where people from different backgrounds and cultures arrive, but out of the [melting pot](#) emerge Americans with the same language, culture and values. The Brezhnev-era Soviet Union tried to do the same: to introduce a common language of administration (Russian) in all the republics of the Union and to create a real *homo Sovieticus* (the "Soviet man") in terms of values. But for Estonians, a minority on the large scale of the Soviet Union, it did not seem like a positive project of building a common identity, but rather as Russification. And in some places, such a policy of merging led to the strengthening of ethnic identities and the desire of minorities to stand out.

[In classical approaches to assimilation](#) (for example, in the 1964 book *Assimilation in America* by the American sociologist Milton M. Gordon), it was important to overcome cultural differences in the first phase. It was assumed that once a person had mastered the language and culture, he/she could begin to assimilate in all other fields of life as well: he/she would participate in the labour market, move in the social hierarchy and get ready to enter into a mixed marriage. Of course, such assimilation is difficult at first, because not all differences can be eliminated. For example, if you have different skin colour or speak the language with an accent, you will still have to endure certain prejudices and even discrimination, but this will probably reduce over time.

Assimilation has been criticised quite a lot because, although there is talk of creating a common identity, it often refers to the identity of the dominant group, which also establishes the group's privileged position, such as in the labour market and elsewhere. Largely counterbalanced by assimilation, a multicultural view of society emerged, approaching integration from the position of minority culture. Criticism of assimilation is summed up nicely by a [caricature](#), where a monkey, an elephant, a fish and other animals have to take an exam: climb a tree. Of course, the monkey succeeds without any effort, but the penguin or fish will probably fail the exam even if they do nothing but practice. One could say that the creator of this caricature is an advocate of multiculturalism, who draws attention to the shortcomings of assimilation: seemingly equal treatment still creates hierarchy and inequality in society.

## **Multiculturalism**

But what is the positive programme of multiculturalism? In essence, multiculturalism means that everyone has the right to be as they are: to speak their language, to practice their culture, to wear appropriate clothing or religious symbols, but most importantly, to value the right of others to do the same.

But the multicultural approach has also been highly criticised, and rightly so. By focusing on the differences, the commonalities tend to be left out of the picture. When each ethnic group communicates in its language and cultivates its culture, there are no experiences that integrate different groups of society. Rather, tribalistic instincts emerge and thus people become clustered in parallel societies. For example, how have so-called immigrant districts emerged in the Nordic countries? It is not just the result of natural economic processes, but a fully conscious [policy](#) pursued in the 1970s. At the time, it was thought that it's a very good idea for immigrants from one region to live together and create their own community because that way they could support each other, practice their "exotic" culture and avoid cultural conflicts with locals.

In part, there is some truth in that – communities function based on ethnic capital, which means that group membership ensures that other members of the group are willing to help you cope. But it was overlooked that such encapsulation could instead exacerbate cultural conflicts because, in a broader

sense, different groups still remain economically unequal, for example. The fact that one member of a minority group helps another member of a minority group to find accommodation and employs him/her as a dishwasher does not mean that they do not sense inequality compared to a member of the dominant group who has an opportunity to rise to a much higher position. So even if an elephant can travel long distances in the savannah and a fish can swim, the winner will still be the monkey because he is the only one who can climb to where the bananas are.

### **Interculturalism**

Therefore, in many regions we are moving in the third and even the fourth direction, and we call this Interculturalism and neo-assimilation. According to the intercultural approach, the basic precondition for integration is that people form networks and interact with others across group boundaries. Gordon Allport has formulated [the contact hypothesis](#), which claims that contact between people from the majority group and the minority group reduces prejudices. And not just for this one minority group, but for minorities in general. Subsequent studies have shown that contact alone does not necessarily bring about immediate change, as the content and duration of contact is also important. The overcoming prejudices is also significantly influenced by context: for example, the strength of ethnic or origin-based confrontations in society at large, whether immigration or minority issues are currently highly politicised, or is the background more neutral. Therefore, certain prejudices may persist regardless of contacts and a fairly cohesive society, but as a result of contacts, empathy will certainly develop over time, and minority standpoints begin to get more acknowledgement in the broader society.

In conclusion, interculturalists believe that the precondition for integration is creating opportunities to interact with each other – be it a common school network, even if children learn in different languages, leisure opportunities, services or something else. Therefore, integration is driven by companies with a multicultural workforce, or school-age children, who not only integrate themselves but also their parents into intercultural networks.

In Estonia, too, the focus of several integration plans has been on increasing contacts between the Russian-speaking and Estonian-speaking populations. Many publicly funded [cultural and sports projects](#) have served this purpose. However, in the Danish capital, Copenhagen, a large-scale housing project has been launched to build new community centres, such as libraries and sports facilities, especially in former immigrant districts, and at the same time, affordable housing is added for people of different origin to diversify the communities. This creates the preconditions for contacts between groups, which can help integrate society more.

### **Neo-assimilationism**

However, there is a perception that when criticising assimilation, we are ignoring a valid point. A certain common language and civic culture are still necessary for deepening contacts and reducing inequalities. But it is also understood that this civic culture must not be cultivated unilaterally, from a dominant group perspective, or as a top down state project; it must be comfortable for everyone to engage there. This is the mindset of neo-assimilation: a kind of compromise between multiculturalism and assimilationism.

The principle of neo-assimilation is this: as little should be prescribed regarding integration as possible but at the same time as much as necessary. The goals are no longer as ambitious as those of designing a Soviet man or creating a melting pot. Instead, the aim is to agree on the minimum that different groups in society, whatever their distinction, should certainly do in the same way, but otherwise everyone has the right to live their lives exactly as they wish. For example, there should be a common language which everyone commands at least on a basic level to get by with everyday activities; and that all residents respect the country's constitutional order and regard it important to abide by its laws. But in which language they communicate in their free time or what religion they practice is everyone's free choice.

The neo-assimilation approach is also quite popular in Estonia. The majority of integration policy measures focus on supporting language learning and adapting new immigrants to the local administrative environment. On the one hand, language acquisition is one of the most demanding integration measures for people with another mother tongue (which is why it is understandable why the state tries to support it in many ways), but on the other hand, it is also one of the most effective preconditions for people to forge cross-cultural contacts in the society. However, language skills also provide more equal opportunities in the labour market as [integration monitoring studies](#) suggest. Adaptation support, which helps newcomers cope with local matters and introduces the basic legal and behavioural norms specific to Estonia, does not require much effort from the immigrant but it creates a basic minimum for the society to function harmoniously.

True, even this minimum common ground is often difficult to agree on. What is the necessary minimum and who do these rules resemble more? The whole process is made even more difficult by identity politics surrounding ethnic relations. From time to time, there are representatives of both majority and minority groups who say that finding common ground or allowing differences is somehow dangerous for them. Some say that wearing a burqa humiliates women, others say that banning the burqa embarrasses them and yet others ask that if burqas are banned, why can people still expose crosses around their necks? Some say that the future career opportunities of children attending a Russian-language school are compromised because they don't learn Estonian. Others say that sending Russian-speaking children to an Estonian-language school threatens their career opportunities because their academic success in other subjects is poorer. However, yet others say that Russian-speaking children in Estonian-language schools threaten the academic success of Estonian-speaking children instead.

There is an old Estonian saying that fear has big eyes. And, of course, we are not the only ones who have realised this fact. The Japanese, for example, say that fear blows the wind into the sails.

And fear does not help integration at all. The Spaniards have a proverb that fear and love never eat from the same plate.

But fears can be overcome. Cameroonians have a saying that if a panther knew how much he was feared, he would do much more harm. Consequently, is it possible to overcome this fear?

## Discussion points

- Discuss how the views of multiculturalists and assimilationists on integration differ. What would a society following a fully assimilationist doctrine be like? What are its pros and cons? But what is a completely multicultural country like? What are the pros and cons of this way of life?
- Try to create an integration policy for your society. Formulate an integration problem in your home area or in Estonia as a whole and discuss how it could be solved.

## Further reading

A more thorough approach to integration in Estonian can be found in Chapter 15 "Rahvusriik ja mitmekultuurilisus" of the university textbook *Poliitika ja valitsemise alused* (editors Leif Kalev and Anu Toots).

Estonian integration plans are available on the website of the Ministry of Culture: <https://www.kul.ee/kultuuriline-mitmekesisus-ja-loimumine/strateegilised-dokumendid/sidusa-eeesti-arengukava-2021-2030>.

One important gateway to integration services in Estonia is the Integration Foundation: <https://integratsioon.ee/>.



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