



Þjóðmálastofnun Háskóla Íslands

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**Immigration and the economic crisis:
The case of Iceland**

Please note: First preliminary results from an ongoing project

REASSESS, Strand 5 Work Shop
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Introduction

This paper examines if the economic crisis has set its mark on the discourse on immigration in Iceland. The paper examines the discourses in printed and television media and in the Parliament from the onset of the crisis in beginning of October 2008 until May 2009. Furthermore the paper compares the political declarations of all major political parties running for Parliament in 2007 and 2009.

With the membership of the EEA (*European Economic Area*) in 1994 the number of immigrants moving to Iceland went up considerably and the issue on immigration has been prominent in the public media and political discourse over the last years. In 2007 the Icelandic government issued its first ever-multicultural policy on integration. The policy reflected an attempt to embrace the reality of immigration; that immigrants had increased considerably and had not just come to work but to settle down. The policy emphasized equal opportunities for immigrants to participate and integrate into the larger society and the right to maintain their cultural heritage.

With the onset of an economic crisis in October 2008 there has been a change in the situation for many immigrants as the weakening of the Icelandic krona has forced many to move from Iceland. In March the unemployment rate was 9.5%. In total 14.546 were unemployed there of 2.146 foreign citizens (15%) (*Vinnumálastofnun*, e.d.). The unemployment figure is expected to continue to rise and great cuts in public expenditure are expected, during years to come. There are clear signs of increased worries among inhabitants in Iceland of their personal situation as following Table 1 shows.

Table 1. Iceland 2007 and 2008: How do you think that your situation will be next year?

| | Worse | Same | Better |
|------|-------|------|--------|
| 2008 | 67% | 29% | 4% |
| 2007 | 10% | 62% | 28% |

(Capacent Gallup, 2009)

While some immigrants have moved back to their countries of origin, others are staying and sharing the burdens of the crisis with the inhabitants of Icelandic origin. There are examples of how economic hardship can influence people's values and attitudes towards less support to immigration (E.g. Jonsson and Petersen, n.d.). Such worries have also been discussed recently in Icelandic media: "In these times we have to be on guard for rising prejudism against immigrants. When jobs were easy to get some said, just wait until we have rising unemployment, then we will have a different reality. It will be interesting to see in what direction attitudes towards immigration will go" (Ólafsdóttir, 2009). Thus this paper explores if and then how economic crisis has set its mark on the discourse on immigration in Iceland.

First we provide a short overview on the relatively short story of immigration in Iceland and the legal and the institutional framework of immigration. Secondly the paper examines three different discourses in the Icelandic Parliament, *Alþingi*; the printed Media and in the Political declaration of all major political parties in Iceland. All parliamentary documents mentioning immigrants, refugees or related issues from the beginning of October to end of April were collected and analyzed in search for themes in the debates. Similarly all printed Media was examined for the same period. Thirdly all policy declaration of the major political parties participating in the parliamentary elections in 2007 and 2009 were collected and compared. Finally the main findings are discussed.

This project is a part of an ongoing project within the Center of Excellence in welfare research *Þjóðmálstofnun*, supported by the Icelandic Research Fund (Rannís, the Icelandic centre for research). Special thanks to Heiða Björk Vigfúsdóttir, who has collected all data for the project.

The history of immigration in Iceland

The change from a culturally homogenous society to a multicultural society is a recent phenomenon in Iceland. Icelandic immigration policy remained strict until the year 1994 when Iceland came a member of the EEA and it hence became much easier for citizens of the EU countries to come to Iceland to work. In the 1970's and 1980's immigrants constituted for less than 1.5% of the overall population. Those migrating to Iceland during the 1970's and 1980's were mostly migrants from countries like Australia and Poland who came to work in the fish industry. The number of immigrants had risen to 2% in 1996 and since that time there has been a steady increase in immigrants to Iceland. With the membership of the E8 countries in the EEA immigration increased drastically and by early 2008 immigrants constituted for about 8.6% of the population of Iceland. This proportion is similar to that of Norway and Denmark (*Hagtíðindi*, 2009:1).

Table 2. Population in Iceland by origin 1st of January 1996-2008

| | 1996 | 2001 | 2006 | 2008 |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Total | 267.809 | 283.361 | 299.891 | 313.376 |
| No foreign background | 95.0 | 92.9 | 90.2 | 87.4 |
| Immigrants and 2nd generation immigrants | 2.0 | 3.6 | 5.6 | 8.1 |
| Other foreign background | 2.8 | 3.3 | 3.8 | 4.0 |
| -Born in Iceland on parent born abroad | 2.1 | 2.4 | 2.8 | 3.0 |
| -Born abroad, one parent born abroad | 0.8 | 0.9 | 1.0 | 1.1 |

(*Hagtíðindi*, 2009:1)

Immigrants in Iceland can be grouped into three groups: migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. The largest group is migrants. These people have come to Iceland primarily for economic reasons. Then there are refugees but Iceland has altogether sponsored 510 quota refugees since the year of 1956. Refugees thus constitute for a very small number of the immigrant population in Iceland. Asylum

seekers are even a smaller group and up to this day about 603 persons have sought asylum status in Iceland and about 54 persons have been granted asylum, one with the status of a refugee and 53 were granted residency on humanitarian grounds. Immigrants from countries in the European Union are the largest group in Iceland where poles are by far the largest group. Among citizens from countries outside the European Union citizens from the Philippines and Thailand together constitute for the largest group as Table 3 shows.

Table 3. Immigrants by country of birth, Iceland 2008

| | n | % |
|------------------------------|--------|------|
| Nordic countries | 1834 | 7.3 |
| -Thereof Denmark | 752 | 3.9 |
| United Kingdom | 532 | 2.1 |
| Lithuania | 1240 | 4.9 |
| Portugal | 868 | 3.4 |
| Poland | 9082 | 35.9 |
| Former Yugoslavian countries | 1173 | 4.6 |
| Germany | 1191 | 4.7 |
| Other countries in Europe | 3158 | 12.5 |
| United States | 679 | 4.9 |
| Other countries in America | 858 | 1.8 |
| Africa | 668 | 3.3 |
| Philippines | 1252 | 8.4 |
| China | 475 | 1.8 |
| Thailand | 837 | 3.4 |
| Other countries in Asia | 1296 | 5.1 |
| Oceania | 116 | 0.5 |
| Unspecified | 6 | - |
| Total | 25.265 | - |

(Hagtíðindi, 2009:1)

In comparison to the neighboring countries the number of children among immigrants is low in Iceland as is the number of second-generation children (*Hagtíðindi, 2009:1*). Immigrants aged 20-40 are the largest age group and this perhaps is evident of the strong relationship between labor market demands and immigrant policy in Iceland.

Table 4. Immigrants and second-generation immigrants by age, Iceland 2008

| 2008 | Immigrants (n) | % | Second generation immigrants (n) | % |
|---------------|-------------------|-----|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Total | 25.265 | 100 | 1558 | 101 |
| 0-9 years | 793 | 3 | 1213 | 78 |
| 10-19 years | 1348 | 5 | 134 | 9 |
| 20-29 years | 7012 | 28 | 49 | 3 |
| 30-39 years | 7335 | 29 | 40 | 3 |
| 40-49 years | 4873 | 19 | 48 | 3 |
| 49-50 years | 2512 | 10 | 44 | 3 |
| 60 plus years | 1157 | 6 | 30 | 2 |

(Hagtíðindi, 2009:1)

The number of immigrant children and second-generation children has not changed since 1996 and this fact reflects the short history of immigration in Iceland. The Icelandic authorities have historically viewed immigrants as a source of labor and as a way of solving labor shortage. For example when Iceland became a member of the EEA in 1994 Iceland kept the right to control the flow of immigration in relation so as to protect the labor market (Gylfason, 2005). The exercising of this right is represented in the working permit. Working permits in Iceland are tied to the employer rather than the worker, which make immigrants more vulnerable to unemployment in times of economic hardship. Ingimundarson (2004) points out that the tendency towards hostile immigrant policy is also tied to cultural ideas of nationalism and national identity. An example is the fact that during the period of 1951 to mid 1960's the Icelandic government held on to an unofficial policy in connection with the treaty made in 1951 with the U.S. for a military base which called for a ban on the stationing of black military men in Iceland (op. cit).

In most countries today immigration laws and multicultural policies represent the public view on immigration. The public view is generally conservative when it comes to immigrants and Iceland has not been an exception. Gallup Iceland has collected information on regular basis on peoples view towards immigrants and refugees. By asking the question: Do you find the regulations that allow foreigners to move to Iceland too tight, just right or too wide, on different points in time. It is

possible to detect a pattern in general attitudes. Today just about 18% Icelanders think regulations on immigration is too strong whereas 37% think the regulations are just right. Around 45% of Icelanders think that regulations on immigration are too wide. The number of people stating that they think the regulations are too wide was lower in 2004 compared to 2000, but is the highest in 2008, as shown in table 5 below.

Table 5. Opinions on regulations allowing foreigners to move to Iceland, 2000-2009

| | 2000 | 2004 | 2008 |
|----------------------|------|------|------|
| Rules are to wide | 33 | 28 | 45 |
| Rules are just right | 56 | 54 | 37 |
| Rules are to tight | 11 | 18 | 18 |

(Capacent Gallup, 2008)

The survey was conducted just before the onset of the economic crisis and thus it is not possible to make the comparison with opinions after the crisis.

In Act on foreigners (no. 96/2002) was enacted in 2002 replacing an older and outdated version dating from 1965, the Act on the surveillance of foreigners no. 45. The new act was meant to clarify matters on the legal right and status of foreigners. Amendments were made to the act in 2003 and 2004 where restrictions were tightened in regards to work and residency permits, including those relating to family reunification. An Act on employment rights of foreigners (no. 97) was enacted in 2002. In august 2008 amendments were made to the act on foreigners and the act on employment rights when requirements for work and residency permits were further changed, including an extension to the restriction to the free movement of citizens from Rumania and Bulgaria and where requirements for work and residency permits for citizens outside of the EU were tightened. The amendments made in 2008 might be interpreted as an attempt to reduce the flow of unskilled labor and make more room for skilled labor as well as it tightened restrictions for citizens outside of the European Union.

The policy on multiculturalism and integration: Government Policy on the Integration of Immigrants

In January 2007 the Icelandic government issued its first ever policy on multiculturalism and integration. The policy is in large part a response to societal changes that have occurred within few years in the time of an economic boom, which resulted in large flows in 2004 to 2008 of immigrants to Iceland, especially from Poland and to some extent from Lithuania.

The increase in the numbers of immigrants called for a policy on integration as immigrants were not only coming to work short time but were in some numbers settling down and some with families. This policy represents a turning point in Icelandic immigration history. The high influx of immigrants from 2004 to 2008 is due to large-scale industrial projects, which called for industrial labor from abroad. So despite a tendency towards a strict immigration policy there seemed to have been a certain flexibility on the behalf of the Icelandic authorities in this period to allow for migrants in significant numbers as a response to the demands of the labor market (*Economic survey of Iceland 2005: the role of structural policies*, n.d.).

In the policy document it states: “The goal of the Government of Iceland for a policy on immigrant issues is to ensure that all residents of Iceland enjoy equal opportunities and are active participants in society in as many fields as possible” (*Government Policy on the Integration of Immigrants*, n.d., p. 1). It is argued that valuing the contribution of immigrants in the labor market is not enough since immigrants generally have the intention of living in Iceland with their families for longer or shorter periods (op. cit). Thus, it is argued that “Society as a whole needs to be able to react to new and altered circumstances on the labor market and in the school system, the health care services and other welfare services provided by the state and municipalities” (op. cit., p. 1).

However it is also emphasized that the key to the society is the Icelandic language and when the minister of Social Affairs introduced the policy he said:

Special emphasis is put on the preservation of the Icelandic language. It is important to make this clear. The Icelandic language is shared by the whole nation and preserves its history, culture and sense of self. It is also an instrument for social communication. Knowledge of Icelandic is the key to

Icelandic society and can be the deceive factor regarding immigrant's integration into society (Stefánsson, e.d.).

The policy document describes in a document on 22 pages different policy goals regarding Icelandic language education for adults; dissemination and collection of information; employment issues and employment participation; education issues; health care services; the role of the municipalities and issues regarding the disabled. In short the policy aims at ensuring that immigrants receive all necessary information on their rights to enjoy welfare services and that there are measures taken to create realistic opportunities for immigrants to learn to speak Icelandic. It is emphasized that it is the responsibility of welfare institutions to provide services with the different needs of their clients in mind. The policy goal on health care provides a good example of the tone in the document:

Health care employees shall be knowledgeable about different cultures insofar as this can be important with respect to immigrants who need health care services. The fundamental ideology of health care services is based on approaching individuals on their own terms. A health worker's knowledge of the religion and cultural heritage of different groups who seek health care services facilitates the approach, monitoring, treatment and care of patients. Such knowledge serves to increase understanding, co-operation and trust between people and encourages better communications and results (*Government Policy on the Integration of Immigrants*, n.d., p. 19).

Furthermore the policy emphasizes the role of public institutions in encouraging the participation of immigrants in society and in activities that can lead to faster integration. An example of such practices is the emphasis that the municipalities ensure the participation of children and adolescents of foreign origin in organized sports and leisure activities (op. cit., p. 21). A number of municipalities have done a great deal in this regard with the introduction of the "leisure card." Reykjavik city is among the municipalities that have launched such program. In Reykjavik leisure card is issued to each child. The card supplies families with children for up to 50.000 krona per child 6-18 years to utilize in a year to pay for leisure and sports activities (Reykjavíkurborg, n.d.).

The Government policy on the integration of immigrants was followed by an extensive action document put together by the Ministry of Social Affairs and enacted by Parliament in May 2008. This document is a comprehensive set of projects that

shall be undertaken and completed within two years (Þingskjal 1226, 2007-2008). Immigration issues were a part of the parliamentary agenda much of the year 2007 and in 2008 with the passing of the proposal for the action document for the integration of immigrants in late may 2008.

The action plan is a comprehensive document outlining numerous projects that shall be undertaken by the Icelandic government to ensure successful integration and equal rights and opportunities for immigrants. The document states that the progress of the projects shall be revalued in two years to come and the document renewed. The list of projects includes among others, the making of a comprehensive and extensive bill on immigration affairs; projects in employment; education; health and social services. Each project entails a description of the project and outlines who is responsible for the processing of the project, for supervising it and the time limits as well as a cost estimate. In the introduction in the document it states:

The development over the last few years indicate in no doubt that Iceland is a part of the international community and that both the labor market and social life has undergone drastic changes towards a multicultural society. The effects this has had on economic prosperity and growth are un-debatable (Þingskjal 1226, 2007-2008),

Furthermore it states "Iceland has every opportunity to lead other countries in being successful in integrating its immigrants, immigrants that are already living here and immigrants that will be forthcoming" (op. cit.). The document was passed without no opposition in parliament just before summer break in 2008.

Elections: Declarations of the political parties in 2007 and 2009

One of the methods applied in this project in order to measure possible changes in attitudes and emphasis on issues regarding immigrants was to compare the electoral declarations of the five Icelandic political parties, running in the elections for parliament (*Alþingi*) in both 2007 and 2009. As is clear from the introduction the economical situation has shifted dramatically during the period: From a booming economy with high demand for labor to one of the deepest economical crisis among

rich nations in recent times, with more than 10% unemployment. The question posed here is simply how did the political parties address issues related to welfare and immigrants in their declarations at both points in time.

The Progressive Party

The Progressive Party is a Centre Party. In 2009 the party congress concluded in length about various issues in relation to immigrants and refugees. It stated in line with the government policy on the integration of immigrants that all shall have equal rights, that integration was important and that the Icelandic language was the key to the society. The party congress (document) further stated: Special emphasis has to be placed on the importance of equal rights of all regardless of origin or race during the coming years due to the economical situation. In addition to these goals there is an emphasis on Iceland contributing to the global society by welcoming refugees in accordance with its international agreements. These goals are explained further in 12 points all suggesting an increase in services and rights for immigrants (*Framsóknarflokkurinn, flokksþing 2009, n.d.*). The policy is almost identical with the policy in 2007, only minor details have been changed (*Framsóknarflokkurinn 2007, n.d.*).

The Independence Party

The Independence Party is a party right of the centre and in 2007 the policy declaration was quite extensive. The IP emphasized the welfare of immigrant children and that all immigrants would be ensured opportunities to become full members of society. Furthermore the declaration emphasized services and education in the Icelandic language (*Ályktanir Landsfundar 2007, e.d.*). The policy declaration from 2009 states that the party wants to create a welcoming environment to ensure that immigrants have equal opportunities to other members of the society, both in social and legal terms. It is pointed out how important it is to prevent immigrants from becoming a marginal social group within society by strategic actions, education and information, where the government policy shall place a key role. The IP stresses the importance of the role of private initiatives regarding services for immigrants and warns against a state takeover by in the form of state institutions. Furthermore the IP

wants to ensure that foreigners are not discriminated against on the basis of language skills (*Ályktanir Landsfundar 2009*, e.d.).

The Left Green Alliance

In their political declaration for the elections in 2007, the party did discuss issues on immigration in 894 words. The LGA stated that all should be equal before law and have same rights and duties and that it was important to regard the issues of immigrants as part of all politics. The party emphasized the mutual assimilation of immigrants and Icelandic society. Furthermore there was an emphasis on municipalities developing multicultural policies in co-operation with immigrants. The policy then discusses in several chapters important goals that the LGA wants to accomplish. There are chapters on democracy and human rights; welfare- and health services; labor market, recognition of education of immigrants; educational issues and Icelandic education. Among the goals is the goal to abolish the 24-year spouse rule from the law on immigrants as well as the 65-year rule in relation to family reunification. Furthermore the rule that children of immigrants who reach 18 years of age must provide their own proof of financial support should be abolished. LGV also wanted to ensure the rights of immigrants who divorced Icelandic spouses (*Ályktun landsfundar 2007*, n.d.). Thus the policies did not only stress that there be an increase in services to immigrants but also that the legislation be amended to enhance the legal rights of immigrants.

In the policy declaration for the parliamentary elections in the year 2009 the design of the document has been changed. Instead of a list of goals or points there are chapters on 31 issues. The restoration of the economy and the labor market are the main issues in the document but other issues like environmental issues and the Iceland's policy towards Palestine is addressed. There is not a single sentence on immigration, immigrants or multicultural society (*Ályktanir samþykktar á Landsfundi Vinstrihreyfingarinnar – græns framboðs Reykjavík, 20-22 March 2009*, n.d.).

The Social Democratic Alliance

In 2007 the SDA did discuss issues on Human Rights in one chapter, called Human

rights in Action (*Mannréttindi í verki*). Of 17 goals 7 addressed directly immigrants and their circumstances. There is an emphasis on improvement in the reception of foreigners that have moved to the country and that these are supported in order to become active citizens, while at the same time being able to maintain their cultural heritage. Furthermore the conditions for immigrants in the labor market should be improved, laws in regards to work permits changed, educational qualification of immigrants be recognized and Icelandic language education for immigrants improved. It was also specially emphasized that children of immigrants should have the same opportunities and services “as Icelandic children” (*Samfylkingin – Landsfundarályktun 2007*, n.d.). Finally a centre for immigration issues should be established where immigrants would be able to get all information, advice and counseling on permits and social rights.

In the 2009 policy declaration there is one sentence about education that stresses that all shall have same opportunities to education regardless of origin, class or residence (*Stjórn málaályktun Samfylkingarinnar 2009*, n.d.).

Furthermore in a more detailed policy document on the policies on the economy, labor-market and the welfare system a following statement mention immigrants under the headline “Equal rights to labor market participation”:

Active welfare policy also enables both breadwinners to have equal opportunities to participate in the labor market, including a strong family policy and day care services for children. This is not at least important for the growing number of immigrants and this is an important part of the mutual assimilation of immigrants and the Icelandic society, which among other things will prevent various problems that otherwise might arise (*Leiðir jafnaðarmanna í efnahags- atvinnu- og velferðarmálum 2009*, n.d.).

This formulation is not very clear, especially in regards to what is being meant by problems but this kind of argumentation, that problems will arise if the policies do not come into force, was absent in the documents from 2007.

The Liberal party

On several occasions members and representatives of the liberal party have in public debate raised questions about the “free flow” of immigrants and questioned if society was ready to provide the necessary conditions for new inhabitants. On these occasions such questions have been heavily criticized and the party has been

accused for being racist and prejudice. In the declaration from 2007 it states that the party appreciates the important contribution of foreigners in Icelandic society in the past and that it is the duty of the society to provide support and help to foreigners in order to enable them to integrate into Icelandic society, e.g. with learning Icelandic language. Furthermore the party emphasizes that the rights of migrant workers be ensured in every way in the labor market. However, it states here that the party stresses the importance of Iceland exercising their right to restrict the movement of free labor of citizens from states within the EEA and as such immigration be controlled (*Stjórn málayfirlýsing landsfundar 2007*, e.d.).

Furthermore it is pointed out that the party has warned about the consequences of free flow of labor force from the “new” E8 countries into the Icelandic labor market and that the government has neglected to make any policies on the issue of immigrants. However at the same time the LP emphasizes that all new citizens integrate and learn the culture and the language (op. cit.). In another document where the policy is introduced in a “handbook” it states that all shall enjoy equal human rights, regardless of gender, religion, views, nationality, age, race, sexuality, color, class and family. There is also a special chapter on immigrants and refugees where the importance of skills in the Icelandic language is emphasized in order to enable the full participation of all in Icelandic society. It is also stressed that immigrants from other countries will “create more tolerance and broadmindedness in the nation and contribute to the nation being able to compete on a global level.” Finally it is emphasized that Iceland shall take on responsibility for refugee issues.

(*Málefnahandbók Frjálslynda flokksins 2007*, n.d.).

In the 2009 declaration the issue of immigrants is addressed in few sentences stating: “Authorities shall supervise the entrance of migrant workers into the labor market and ensure that rights to employment and conditions within the workplace be respected.” (*Stjórn málayfirlýsing Samþykkt á Landsþingi Frjálslynda flokksins 13. – 14. mars 2009*, n.d.). The importance of immigrants assimilating to Icelandic society, culture and learning the Icelandic language is also stressed (op. cit.)

In sum

Two parties out of five do maintain quite similar goals in their declarations, the Progressive Party on the centre and the Independence Party right of the centre. The Progressive Party stresses the importance of the policies on immigrants due to the

changes in the economy. Three Parties, have in 2009 much fewer policies on immigrants than in 2007: The Liberal Party, The Left Green Alliance and the Social Democratic Alliance. Actually, the Left Green Alliance does not mention immigrants at all in 2009 and beside from a general statement on human rights for all, the Social Democratic Alliance warns that if not both breadwinners are active in labor market, problems may arise, especially among immigrants. Despite the lack of emphasis on the issue among the parties left of the centre, one should not interpret this as change in policies of the parties in question. But this can at least been claimed to be an interesting sign of priorities in politics and should be observed closer in the aftermath of the economic collapse.

In light of this these results, the parliamentary elections of 2009 are of obvious interests, see table 6.

Table 6. Results of the parliament election in April 2009

| | % Of votes |
|--|------------|
| The Alliance of Citizens | 7.2 |
| (A new party – rooted in the cutlery revolution) | |
| The Liberal Party | 2.2 |
| The Independence Party | 23.7 |
| The Left Green Alliance | 21.7 |
| The Progressive Party | 14.8 |
| The Social Democratic Alliance | 29.8 |

From the parliamentary election results it is worth noting that the voters did not give any support to the party that hereto has been the only party known to be hostile to immigrant issues: the liberal party. This party lost all their seats in parliament in the elections and this means that no party/or parties that are conservative or hostile in their immigration policy are present in parliament.

The parliamentary discourse on immigrants

Economic crisis hit Iceland a few weeks after parliament was set in the autumn and immigration issues have not been high on the parliamentary agenda after the crisis. The government and parliament have focused their efforts on dealing with the economic crisis including the fall of the krona, rising unemployment and the increase in debts of families and households. What kind of actions the government should be undertaking in order to restore balance in the economy, the effect the crisis may have on social groups most vulnerable, these have been the main issues of deliberation and discussion in the parliament after the crisis.. A few times immigrants, especially immigrant children, are referred to in parliamentary discussions as a vulnerable social group along with the disabled and the elderly (*Alþingistiðindi*, 2008-9).

In December 2008 the parliamentary committee of social affairs put forward a proposal for an amendment of the three legal acts on foreigners, the legal act on the free employment and residency right of persons from the European Economic Area no. 47/1993, the act on employment rights of foreigners no. 97/2002 and the act on foreigners no. 96/2002. The amendment was introduced to parliament by the then minister of social affairs, Johanna Sigurdardottir from the Social Democratic Alliance and the amendment concerned extending the restriction of free labor movement of persons from EEA member states Rumania and Bulgaria from 2009 to 2012. The proponents of the amendment argued that in light of the economic crisis, which had had a negative effect on the Icelandic labor market, it was necessary to restrict access to the labor market from abroad. The issue debated by opponents of the amendment concerned why efforts to deal with rising unemployment would be threatened should Iceland allow for the free labor movement of citizens from Romania and Bulgaria; was it likely that this access would pose a threat to the Icelandic labor market and halt government efforts in reducing the effect of the economic crisis (*Alþingistiðindi* 2008-2009).

In the prime minister's speech on the proposing of the amendment, she stated that the economic crisis was having a negative effect on the labor market and that it would be absolutely necessary for the Icelandic government to exercise their right to

extend the restriction on free movement for citizens from Rumania and Bulgaria; it was an act that had to be done for security reasons so as to protect the Icelandic labor market. The prime minister spoke about forecasts of unemployment rise in Iceland, from 1% to 8 % in a few weeks time and that Iceland could not afford to open its borders to citizens of Romania and Bulgaria. The only opposition to the amendment came from the Left Green Alliance. Representatives from this party raised the issue as to why free movement of citizens from Rumania and Bulgaria were deemed a likely threat to a weak labor market since a weak labor market would not be an attractive option for someone looking for employment. Representatives of the Left Green Alliance pointed to the fact that two other European countries, Sweden and Finland, had opted not to exercise their right to extend the restriction on citizens from Romania and Bulgaria and that unemployment in these countries was though not low. Why could Iceland not follow their lead and thus perhaps lead other countries to do the same? The Liberal Party supported the amendment but a representative of that party argued that perhaps a restriction should also be applied to citizens of the E8 countries although Iceland had let go of the restrictions for these citizens in 2006. The argument was that citizens from these countries would also constitute a threat to the Icelandic labor market although they had indeed been a welcomed source of labor for Iceland when the labor market needed labor from abroad during the economic boom.

The proposal for an amendment on the acts on foreigners was passed in December 2008 with the statement that should economic conditions get better then the Icelandic government would let go off these restrictions.

Apart from this, the issue on whether the economic crisis has set its mark on the parliamentary discourse on immigration is not evident from our examination on the deliberation and debates on issues pertaining to immigrants. There are also no clear signs that the government intends to halt the process of some of the projects that are undergo and listed in the action document for the integration of immigrants. A representative of the immigration committee and the ministry of education confirms that most of the projects are being undertaken and well on their way (Guðrún Ögmundsdóttir, interview in April 2008). The key issue will of course be weather continued funding for the projects will be guaranteed as cuts will being made in the public sector.

The discourse on immigrants in the media

How does the mass media represent immigrants in the light of the economic crisis? What are the underlying assumptions and views of immigrants/immigration? Are there any indications of a change in views on immigrants in the public view after the economic crisis? We analyzed newspapers and a few television news reports during the period of September 2008 till mid April 2009. We looked at representations pertaining to the three groups of immigrants in Iceland: migrant workers and families, refugees and asylum seekers.

Issues pertaining to asylum seekers in Iceland by far dominate the media discourse on immigration during this period. There were frequent political protests of asylum seekers during this period where asylum seekers were protesting their treatment of the Icelandic authorities and their living conditions. Some went on hunger strikes. A police raid to the residence of asylum seekers in September 2008 where the police confiscated private funds of asylum seekers received much attention in the media. In an interview defending the raid Haukur Gudmundsson, the director of the immigration office said:

Asylum seekers are encouraged to apply for temporary work permits so that they can work while they are awaiting decisions on their applications for asylum. But it is not well when persons, who are not really refugees, view their situation as a matter of a free hotel and send their wages back home to their relatives, in some instances to Europe (*Fréttablaðið*, 30.sept p. 12)

This view that asylum seekers are not “real” refugees is to some extent also represented in the way the media covered this case but there was also a tone of sympathy. There are a number of interviews with asylum seekers where they tell their personal stories. The minister of justice who took her time to meet personally with a few asylum seekers and their supporters and some decisions by the immigration office was overturned. The economic crisis is not mentioned in any of the news reports or interviews with asylum seekers and perhaps this reflects to some extent the general view that issues pertaining to asylum seekers is less an economic issue as it is a political issue and an issue of human rights.

The few reports and interviews with refugees during this period highlight this view in particular. The few representations of refugees in the media during this period are stories of newly arrived refugees where their lives are cast in a romantic light in comparison to a life back home rife with war violence and tragedies. The tone in all the stories is how well the refugees are settling in Iceland. They are often shown in their daily life, learning Icelandic and participating in Icelandic traditions. There is not one mention of the economic crisis in the coverage on refugees.

Migrant workers are almost always discussed in the context of the economic crisis. On October 9th 2008, three days after the prime minister televised live speech where he announced that Iceland was in deep economic crisis the Daily paper reported:

Enormous amount of poles and other immigrants are now leaving Iceland due to the onset of an economic crisis, the downfall of the krona and uncertainty of the economic future of the nation. Salaries have fallen to half of what they were due to the low exchange rate for the krona. Flights to Poland with Icelandair have increased considerably. It is likely that in the weeks to follow the number of immigrants leaving Iceland will increase (Daily paper, 2009 9. Oct. p. 6)

The image of immigrants fleeing Iceland in flocks was very much the theme in the news after the economic crisis. Stories reported large number of immigrants selling their apartments, where some immigrants were claimed to be returning apartment and car keys to the banks in despair and news told of large number of immigrants standing in lines for free groceries at a local family agency. The employment agency of Iceland reported statistics on unemployment with regular intervals where the statistics showed larger proportion of immigrants than Icelanders among the unemployed. The national radio reported on 31. desember 2008 that in mid 2009 migrant workers would be about half of what they were in 2008 (national radio, noon news, 31. des 08).

But the news also told stories of migrants who “regardless of the economic crisis do not plan on leaving Iceland”, some of which had settled here with their families and children. The national television reported in December 2008 that “many foreigners” planned on staying in Iceland regardless of worsening economic conditions as employment prospects did not look good elsewhere in Europe (Evening

news, 15. desember 08, National TV). There were some reports forecasting that non EU citizens would be hit especially hard by the worsening employment prospects due to the fact that work permits for non EU citizens do not give right to unemployment benefits and it would also be near impossible for them to extend their work permits should they find new jobs (*Bylgjan*, 9. March 2009, noon news).

There is hardly any coverage of immigrant families with children. The only instance concerns a news report reporting on a document by a task force within the Ministry of Social Affairs named "the Welfare Watch". This task force was launched shortly after the onset of the economic crisis and had the role of investigating the impact unemployment was having on families with children. The task force published a document and in the document it states that it deems it necessary for the Icelandic authorities to keep an eye on the welfare of children in disadvantaged social groups, especially children in immigrant families and children in stepparent families (national radio, evening news, 1. april).

On 14th of March, the Human rights office of Iceland launched an advertisement campaign called, "Thank You." The campaign was a part of the European week against racism. The goal of the campaign was to raise people's awareness of the positive impact that multiculturalism was having on Icelandic society. The campaign consisted of "thank you " posters in various languages placed on buses, in bus stops and was also launched in newspapers, radio and television. The thank you poster consists of a text in various languages where immigrants are thanked for enriching the social life and culture of Iceland and are thanked for participating in the building of a rich and multicultural society (Thank You campaign of the Human Rights Office of Iceland and the AUGA advertising company n.d.).

In the introduction to the campaign the Human Rights Office stated:

Recently, in connection with the worsening of the economy and rising unemployment, there have been signs of increasing prejudism and negative attitudes toward immigrants on the labor market. We wanted to launch this campaign in an effort to eradicate prejudism and negative attitudes toward immigrants (Thank You campaign of the Human Rights Office of Iceland and the AUGA advertising company n.d.).

There are a few interviews in the media with representatives of organizations that work with immigrants where fears of worsening attitudes towards immigrants due to rising unemployment are expressed. Our examination of the content of the media indicates that the underlying ideas of immigrants are generally positive. There seems to be a concern for the welfare of immigrants but at the same time a general perception of immigrants as people who came here to work only. The image of the immigrant as a labor force rather than as persons who have settled in Iceland is thus very strong in the media.

An example of a positive coverage of immigrants in the media is a project that took place for a period of one year from February 2008-2009 under the name *Diaries of new Icelanders*. In a weekly column in the Newspaper *Fréttablaðið* immigrants told personal stories of their daily lives in Iceland, reflected on their live back home and their daily experiences.

Discussion and conclusion

Is it possible to observe changes in political and media discourses on immigration during the aftermath of the economic crisis in Iceland?

The policy declarations of the parties provide data on policies before and after the crisis. Firstly and maybe most importantly: The only party that can be claimed to have voiced immigrant hostile policies, the Liberal Party was abolished in the parliamentary elections on 25th of April 2009. The LP received only 2.2% of the votes and no seats in Alþingi. Secondly, the parties on centre (PP) and right of the centre (IP) do address in their policies the need for policy measures to ensure the rights of immigrants and their participation in society. This is in sharp contrast to the policy declarations of the two parties left of the centre, The Left Green Alliance does not address the issue as such and the Social Democratic Alliance just mentions it. These parties won the election and are now negotiating the grounds for next government, which, is almost certain to become a coalition of these two. How may the fact that the immigration issue is not addressed by the LGA and SDA be interpreted? Even though the literature predicts that parties do usually promise more than they deliver in their declarations, we suggest at this point in time that we

should not read too much into this fact and we think that even in this particular case this is the other way around that the parties in question are likely to deliver more than they promise. The reason being that these parties have neither in Parliament nor in other contexts, showed signs that they tend to depart from their previous policies in 2007. Thus the white paper of the becoming government will provide more date on the issue.

The amendment concerned extending the restriction of free labor movement of persons from EEA member states Rumania and Bulgaria from 2009 to 2012 accepted in Alþingi in December is a sign of more restricted immigration policy and in the debates fears of the influences of the economic crisis were not absent.

The discussion in the media turned out to differ quite a lot in regards to immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. The conditions and treatment of the Icelandic authorities of asylum seekers gained increased attention in the media during this period. Protesting asylum seekers, even on hunger strikes gained much attention. It is not usual in Icelandic media that single cases gain so much attention but during the period in question a case of a 19 year old asylum seeker in particular did. The economic crisis is not mentioned in any of the coverage on asylum seekers and we suggest that this reflects to some extent the general view that issues pertaining to asylum seekers is perceived less an economic issue as it is a political issue and an issue of human rights. Furthermore, we conclude that the reports on refugees during the period support this also. There is no mention of the economic crisis on the coverage on refugees and the tone in all the stories on refugees is how well refugees are settling in Iceland.

However we find that the economic hardship is coloring all news coverage on migrants, which is not surprising given that immigration is perceived mainly as a labor market issue. Until October there was still a demand for foreign labor in Iceland. Thus it is not surprising that after the economic crisis the media has covered news about immigrants fleeing Iceland and this was certainly an important theme in the media during the immediate period after the crisis. Furthermore on regular basis the employment agency reported the numbers of unemployed immigrants compared to Icelanders. At the same time there were stories of migrants who “regardless of the economic crisis do not plan on leaving Iceland”, some of which had settled here with

their families and children. But there was hardly any coverage of the lives of these immigrant families with children. Nevertheless a governmental task force “the welfare watch” has put a large emphasis on the welfare of immigrant children and their families. But yet the media covered nothing on the impact the economic crisis on the daily lives of these families.

The debate in media has not been negative towards immigrants - the news are told in a neutral tone and there are also two cases of organized positive coverage which seem to have been meant to counteract any development of negativity towards immigrants, the *Thank you* advertisement campaign and the diaries of new Icelanders, both with the intent to eradicate prejudism and negative attitudes towards immigrants.

Finally as pointed out on the title page of this paper, these are just the very first, tentative results. We know that the question is not yet answered and our exploration of this issue has brought about more questions than answers. Also, the time frame is too narrow; there is a need for additional data from the period before the crisis both from Media and Parliament. Furthermore the discourses that we have investigated are all in the public sphere and might not at all catch the *zeitgeist* in the Icelandic society towards immigration. Thus, there might be an increase in hostility and negative views towards both working and unemployed immigrants, even though these are not represented in the data collected here. Thus, additional data on attitudes is also of importance.

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