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Welfare to Be Earned?

A Discourse Analysis of Entitlement, Deservingness and Recognition in
Sweden's Proposed Qualification Requirements for Social Benefits

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Abstract

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This thesis analyses how welfare, entitlement and welfare subjects are discursively constructed in the policy process surrounding the proposed qualification requirements for social insurance benefits and financial assistance, as part of the Swedish social benefit reform, 'bidragsreformen'. Drawing on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, the study examines the governmental committee directive Dir. 2023:149 (Socialdepartementet, 2023) and the Swedish Government Official Report SOU 2025:53, with selected consultation responses used to illustrate contestation within the policy process. The analysis shows that welfare is constructed less as a universal social right tied to residence or need, and more as a conditional resource that must be earned, qualified for and protected. Migration, weak labour market attachment, social exclusion and long-term welfare dependency are framed as interconnected problems, while qualification requirements are presented as a necessary solution. The reform is legitimised through economic arguments about sustainability and incentives, moral and political arguments about work and reciprocity, legal arguments about compatibility with national and supranational law, as well as research-based arguments. The analysis further shows how third-country nationals, particularly those who are unemployed or low-skilled, are positioned as conditional welfare subjects. Interpreted through Axel Honneth's theory of recognition and the concept of welfare chauvinism, the reform can be understood as part of a broader transformation in which welfare access becomes increasingly tied to work, contribution, legal status and formal membership.

Keywords: welfare state transformation; discourse analysis; welfare chauvinism; recognition; social rights; migration; Sweden

Popular Science Summary

This thesis examines how welfare is discussed in the policy process surrounding 'bidragsreformen', the new proposed Swedish social benefit reform. The focus is on one part of the reform: the proposed qualification requirements for social insurance benefits and financial assistance. These requirements concern who should have access to certain welfare benefits, under what conditions, and after how long. Sweden has historically been associated with a relatively universal welfare state, where social protection has been broadly connected to residence, work and social citizenship. In recent years, however, welfare, migration and integration have become increasingly politicised. The reform analysed in this thesis is presented by the Swedish Government as a way to reduce welfare dependency, strengthen incentives to work and protect the legitimacy of the welfare system. The thesis uses discourse analysis, mainly based on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model. This means that the study examines not only what the policy documents say, but also how they say it, what assumptions they rely on, and how the language used connects to broader social and political changes. The main material consists of the governmental committee directive Dir. 2023:149 (Socialdepartementet, 2023) and the Swedish Government Official Report SOU 2025:53. The analysis shows that welfare is increasingly constructed as something that must be earned through residence, work, contribution and 'individual effort'. Welfare generosity is presented as a potential problem because it is said to risk creating dependency, weakening work incentives and attracting migration. In this way, access to welfare becomes connected to behaviour, responsibility and belonging. The thesis also shows that different groups are constructed differently in the reform discourse. Third-country nationals, especially those who are unemployed or low-skilled, are positioned as a group whose access to welfare needs to be delayed or restricted. Economically active and highly skilled migrants are represented more positively, since they are expected to contribute to the welfare state. Using Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, the thesis argues that these constructions matter not only materially, but also socially. Access to welfare is not only about income; it is also about being recognised as a full member of society. The thesis concludes that 'bidragsreformen' reflects a broader transformation of the Swedish welfare state, where welfare is increasingly constructed as conditional, earned and tied to contribution.

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1 Introduction

Contemporary welfare states are increasingly shaped by political struggles over borders, belonging and social rights. Across Europe, questions of migration, welfare entitlement and national solidarity have become central to political debate. These debates concern not only how welfare should be financed or administered, but also who is recognised as belonging to the welfare community, who is constructed as deserving of support, and under what conditions social rights should be granted (Mandelc, 2026; Visconti, 2024).

In this broader European context, migration has increasingly become a symbolic and political site through which anxieties about welfare sustainability, national cohesion, security and democratic order are articulated. Mandelc (2026) argues that migration often functions less as a demographic variable than as a discursive resource through which democratic boundaries are redefined. Concepts such as citizenship, solidarity and equality are not necessarily rejected but reinterpreted in more conditional and culturally bounded terms. This makes welfare politics a central arena in which questions of inclusion and exclusion are negotiated.

The welfare state is therefore not only a redistributive institution, but also a political and moral project. Historically, Nordic welfare states have been connected to ideals of equality, democracy and national community. Kettunen (2022) shows how the Nordic welfare model was built around ideas of social compromise, solidarity and virtuous circles between equality, economic development and democracy. At the same time, more recent transformations have increasingly connected welfare to competitiveness, security and the management of cross-border mobility. In this context, the question of who is included in welfare becomes closely tied to how the national community itself is imagined.

This tension is particularly important in the Nordic context, where universal welfare arrangements have historically coexisted with state control over residence and mobility. Tervonen (2022) describes Nordic welfare states as marked by a contradiction between residence-based universalism and the unequal access to welfare and social rights experienced by migrants and non-citizens. Similarly, Borevi (2014) argues that the Swedish model of immigrant integration has historically rested on the idea that access to equal social rights is a condition for integration and belonging, rather than a reward granted after integration has already been achieved. The Swedish welfare state has historically been associated with universalism, broad

social rights and a strong public responsibility for social protection (Blomqvist & Palme, 2020). In this model, welfare has functioned not only as a safety net against individual risks, but also as a central institution of social citizenship, equality and democratic legitimacy (Borevi, 2014; Kettunen, 2022).

However, questions concerning the boundaries of welfare entitlement have become increasingly politicised in relation to migration, integration and labour market participation. Against this background, the Swedish Government's proposed social benefit reform, 'bidragsreformen', provides a relevant case for analysing how welfare, entitlement and membership are currently being redefined. The reform raises questions that go beyond the technical design of social insurance benefits and financial assistance. It concerns the relationship between work, residence, citizenship, contribution and access to social protection. This thesis therefore examines 'bidragsreformen' as a discourse through which welfare subjects are constructed and the boundaries of welfare membership are negotiated.

1.1 Background and Research Problem

Sweden is commonly described as a social democratic or universalist welfare state, built around broad public responsibility and relatively inclusive social rights. The Swedish model has combined residence-based benefits with earnings-related benefits for those participating in the labour market, making both residence and work important bases for social protection (Ahlén & Palme, 2020). In this sense, access to welfare has historically been tied less to nationality as such, and more to residence, work and membership in the social protection system.

At the same time, Swedish welfare universalism should not be understood as static or absolute. Blomqvist and Palme (2020) argue that universalism is multidimensional, involving inclusion, financing, provision and benefit adequacy. From this perspective, Swedish welfare has remained relatively universal in some respects, while becoming less universal in others, particularly through changes in provision and declining benefit adequacy in parts of social insurance (Blomqvist & Palme, 2020). This is especially relevant for the present thesis, since the proposed qualification requirements concern the dimension of inclusion: who is included in welfare, under what conditions, and on what basis.

The question of welfare inclusion becomes particularly significant in relation to migration. While Sweden has often been described as having a comparatively inclusive welfare

and integration regime, previous research shows that welfare states are also nationally bounded institutions that distinguish between insiders and outsiders. Tervonen (2022) argues that Nordic welfare states have historically combined strict regulation of entry and residence with relatively generous welfare arrangements for recognised residents, producing a tension between residence-based universalism and migrants' unequal access to welfare and social rights. He further describes recent Nordic developments as involving a shift toward stricter and more selective migration policies, as well as growing hierarchisation and fragmentation of social rights (Tervonen, 2022).

Welfare states are therefore not only institutional arrangements, but also political and discursive projects. Kettunen (2022) argues that nationalism was integral to the formation of welfare states, as welfare institutions helped shape national identities, solidarities and ideas of citizenship and democracy. In the Nordic context, welfare was historically connected to ideas of social equality, democracy and national community, but more recent transformations have also reoriented welfare states through the logics of competitiveness, security and national adaptation to globalisation (Kettunen, 2022).

The broader Swedish political context has also changed significantly over the years, and in particular since 2015. According to the Swedish Migration Agency, around a quarter of a million asylum seekers came to Sweden during 2014–2015, which led to temporary border controls and stricter migration legislation. After the tightening of the law in 2016, temporary residence permits became the norm, replacing the permanent residence permits that had previously typically been granted to people receiving protection in Sweden. The number of asylum seekers subsequently fell sharply, and the composition of migration shifted increasingly toward labour migration and students (Migrationsverket, 2023).

This restrictive development has continued in the current political context. The Government, supported by the Sweden Democrats through the Tidö Agreement¹, presents migration and integration as one of its central priority areas. The Government states that extensive immigration has placed major strains on Swedish society, that integration problems affect several policy areas, and that Swedish communities are held together by the Swedish language, self-sufficiency, citizenship-related rights and duties, and respect for Swedish rules,

¹ The Tidö Agreement ('Tidöavtalet') refers to the cooperation agreement between the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats, the Liberals and the Sweden Democrats after the 2022 election. It forms the basis for cooperation between the minority Government and the Sweden Democrats in the Riksdag (Regeringskansliet, 2022).

norms and values. It further states that people who settle in Sweden have a responsibility to become part of society through their own efforts, while society should offer opportunities for integration (Regeringskansliet 2022, 2025a).

A related development concerns the growing importance of activation and workfare-oriented welfare policy. In the Swedish context, this is closely connected to ‘arbetslinjen’ – ‘the work principle’ – according to which welfare, social insurance and integration have long been tied to labour market participation and self-sufficiency. Borevi (2014) argues that the Swedish rights-based integration model has always had a corresponding emphasis on individual obligations, particularly the expectation of self-sufficiency, and that Swedish social insurance has been closely linked to labour market participation. Tervonen (2022) places this in a broader Nordic context, arguing that welfare restructuring and stricter migration control have coincided with welfare retrenchment, legal differentiation and an increasing emphasis on workfare schemes. In this thesis, workfare is therefore understood as a policy logic in which access to welfare is increasingly connected to activity, work incentives and behavioural requirements, rather than only to need or residence.

These broader tensions are visible in the Swedish Government’s proposed social benefit reform, commonly referred to as ‘bidragsreformen’. The broader political context is important because ‘bidragsreformen’ is presented not only as a welfare policy reform, but as part of a wider effort to address social exclusion, strengthen self-sufficiency and clarify the conditions for belonging in Swedish society. The Government presents the reform as a way to break welfare dependency, strengthen Sweden and make it more worthwhile to work (Regeringskansliet, 2025b). The reform should therefore be understood within a policy landscape where migration, integration, welfare dependency, labour market participation and social order are increasingly connected in political discourse.

According to the Government (Regeringskansliet, 2025b), the reform consists of three main parts: a benefit cap, qualification requirements for certain social insurance benefits and financial assistance, and an activity requirement for people receiving financial assistance but considered able to work. A temporary work bonus is also proposed for those moving from financial assistance into employment. This thesis does not analyse ‘bidragsreformen’ as a whole. Instead, it focuses specifically on the proposed qualification requirements for social insurance benefits and financial assistance. This part of the reform is particularly relevant because it

concerns the boundaries of welfare entitlement and the relationship between welfare, residence, citizenship and labour market participation. In October 2023, the Government appointed a committee to review how newly arrived persons and non-citizens already living in Sweden should qualify for social insurance benefits and financial assistance. According to the governmental committee directive, Dir. 2023:149 (Socialdepartementet, 2023), the model should reduce pull factors connected to social insurance benefits and financial assistance and increase incentives for work.

The resulting Swedish Government Official Report, *Kvalificering till socialförsäkring och ekonomiskt bistånd för vissa grupper* [Qualification for Social Insurance and Financial Assistance for Certain Groups] (SOU 2025:53), proposes a model for qualification to certain residence-based social insurance benefits and financial assistance. The proposal concerning financial assistance means that a person who is not, or should not be treated equally to, a Swedish citizen must have had legal residence in Sweden for five years without interruption in order to qualify, although emergency assistance may still be granted in acute situations. The Government has also presented a proposition concerning qualification to social insurance, proposing a five-year residence requirement within a fifteen-year framework, with the possibility of fulfilling the requirement through residence combined with work income, and with proposed entry into force on 1 January 2027 (Regeringskansliet, 2025b, 2026).

The proposed qualification requirements raise important sociological questions about welfare, entitlement and belonging. They concern not only how social benefits should be administered, but also how welfare subjects are constructed and differentiated. The reform discourse distinguishes between citizens, non-citizens, EU/EEA citizens, Nordic citizens and third-country nationals, and connects access to welfare to legal residence, labour market participation and contribution. In this way, the reform becomes a relevant case for analysing how social rights are discursively constructed in a context where welfare, migration and integration are increasingly politicised.

Recent research on Swedish integration discourse further shows that inclusion is often connected to labour market participation, self-responsibility and the construction of the ‘good citizen’. Bauer et al. (2023), for example, show how Swedish civic orientation for newly arrived migrants constructs social inclusion through labour market participation and proper conduct, while migrant women are positioned as a particular target group for activation and intervention

(Bauer et al., 2023). This is relevant for the present thesis because ‘bidragsreformen’ similarly places work, self-sufficiency and individual effort at the centre of welfare entitlement.

Against this background, this thesis analyses ‘bidragsreformen’ not only as a technical policy proposal, but as a discourse through which welfare, entitlement and welfare subjects are constructed. The focus is on how the reform is represented as necessary, how it is legitimised, and how distinctions between different groups are made meaningful. By analysing the reform through Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, the thesis examines how textual representations are connected to discursive practices in the policy process and to broader social practices concerning welfare state transformation, conditionality and social membership.

1.2 Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this master’s thesis is to analyse how welfare, entitlement and welfare subjects are discursively constructed in the policy process surrounding the proposed qualification requirements for social insurance benefits and financial assistance, as part of the new Swedish social benefit reform ‘bidragsreformen’. Drawing on Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, the thesis examines how this part of the reform is represented, legitimised and contested, and how these constructions can be understood in relation to broader changes in the Swedish welfare state. By doing so, the thesis contributes to research on welfare state transformation, welfare conditionality and the discursive construction of social rights in relation to migration and membership. In the light of this, the following overarching research question and sub-questions have been formulated:

- How are welfare, entitlement and welfare subjects discursively constructed in the policy process surrounding the proposed qualification requirements in ‘bidragsreformen’?
 - How are the problem, solution and legitimisation of the proposed qualification requirements constructed in the reform discourse?
 - How are distinctions between citizens, non-citizens and different welfare subjects constructed, legitimised and contested?

- How can these constructions be understood in relation to broader transformations of the Swedish welfare state, particularly concerning conditionality, deservingness, recognition and welfare membership?

1.3 Thesis Outline

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 presents the previous research relevant to the study, focusing on welfare state transformation, migration and welfare membership, as well as welfare chauvinism, and discourse analytical research on welfare policy reform. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework, with particular attention to Honneth's theory of recognition and welfare chauvinism. Chapter 4 presents the methodology, including the critical realist approach, Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, the empirical material and the analytical process. Chapter 5 contains the analysis, structured around the problem representation, the proposed solution, legitimisation strategies, and the constructions, contradictions and consequences of the reform discourse. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by summarising the main findings, discussing their broader implications, reflecting on limitations, and suggesting areas for future research.

2 Previous Research

This chapter reviews previous research relevant to the study of how welfare is constructed in the discourse surrounding the qualification requirements in ‘bidragsreformen’. The thesis is situated at the intersection of research on Swedish welfare state change, migration and integration, and discourse analytical studies of welfare policy reform. The purpose of the chapter is not to provide a full overview of these fields, but to identify the main debates and findings that motivate the present study.

2.1 Welfare State Change and Conditionality

Sweden is commonly associated with the social democratic welfare state model, characterized by broad public responsibility, extensive social rights and relatively universal access to welfare benefits and services. However, previous research has shown that the Swedish welfare state has undergone important changes in recent decades. These changes do not amount to a simple abandonment of universalism, but rather to a more complex process in which some universal features remain while other dimensions of welfare have become more conditional, stratified or market oriented.

Blomqvist and Palme (2020) argue that universalism should be understood as a multidimensional concept, consisting of inclusion, financing, provision and benefit adequacy. From this perspective, Swedish welfare policy remains relatively universal in terms of formal inclusion and public financing, while more substantial changes can be identified in relation to provision and adequacy. Increased private provision, occupational insurance and declining replacement rates in parts of social insurance indicate that universalism may be weakened even where formal access remains broad (Blomqvist & Palme, 2020). This is relevant for the present thesis because ‘bidragsreformen’ concerns precisely the boundaries of welfare inclusion: who is entitled to social protection, under what conditions, and with what level of support. Burström (2015) similarly describes the Swedish welfare state as formally intact in many respects, while also emphasizing marketization, privatization and reduced generosity in parts of the welfare system. Groups that depend more heavily on benefits and transfers have become particularly vulnerable as income inequality has grown and income protection has weakened (Burström,

2015). Welfare state change can therefore be understood not only as institutional restructuring, but also as a shift in the practical value of social citizenship.

These developments are connected to broader trends toward activation and individual responsibility. Contemporary welfare policy increasingly links entitlement to labour market participation, employability and self-sufficiency. Rather than framing welfare primarily as protection against social risk, activation-oriented reforms tend to construct welfare as a tool for shaping behaviour and encouraging work (Burman et al., 2017). This is central to the present thesis, as the discourse surrounding ‘bidragsreformen’ repeatedly connects welfare entitlement to work incentives, contribution and ‘individual effort’. Previous research therefore suggests that Swedish welfare change should not be understood simply as a shift from universalism to neoliberalism. Rather, it involves a more complex reconfiguration in which universal principles remain important, while access to welfare is increasingly differentiated and tied to contribution, work and conditionality.

2.2 Migration, Integration and Welfare Membership

A second relevant body of research concerns the relationship between migration, integration and welfare membership. Sweden has often been described as an exceptional case in Europe because of its historically generous welfare state, relatively inclusive citizenship policies and formal commitment to multiculturalism. However, research has also problematized this image by showing how Swedish inclusion has often been conditional, hierarchical and shaped by constructions of difference. Borevi (2014) argues that Swedish integration policy has historically differed from several other European countries by avoiding strong requirements that directly link integration achievements to access to fundamental rights. Compared to Denmark, Sweden has traditionally maintained a policy logic in which integration is understood as dependent on equal and universal access to basic rights (Borevi, 2014). This makes ‘bidragsreformen’ particularly relevant to study, since it appears to move closer to a model where welfare rights are conditioned by residence, work and legal status.

At the same time, Swedish inclusion has never been entirely unconditional. Eastmond (2011) argues that Swedish integration policy contains a paradox: while grounded in egalitarian ambitions, it has often constructed difference as something to be corrected or normalized. Equality has, in this sense, sometimes been associated with sameness and conformity. Similarly,

Dahlstedt and Neergaard (2016) argue that the Swedish welfare and migration regimes have been shaped by a tension between solidarity and subordination. Swedish multiculturalism has been formally inclusionary, while also organizing migrants as ‘others’ in relation to a dominant Swedish norm. They further show that formal citizenship and substantive citizenship may differ, particularly when racialized migrants face unequal access to employment, welfare institutions and political influence (Dahlstedt & Neergaard, 2016).

Discourse analytical research has also shown how integration policy constructs migrants as particular kinds of subjects. Bauer et al. (2023), in their study of Swedish civic orientation for newly arrived migrants, show how inclusion is framed through an opposition between the ‘good citizen’ and a migrant target population in need of guidance. Inclusion is constructed as dependent on labour market participation and correct behaviour, while migrant women are positioned as particularly in need of intervention (Bauer et al., 2023). This is relevant for the present thesis because ‘bidragsreformen’ similarly constructs inclusion through work, self-sufficiency and individual effort.

The literature on welfare chauvinism further shows that welfare access is increasingly debated through distinctions between citizens and non-citizens. Bell et al. (2023) find that strict forms of welfare chauvinism are rare in Sweden, Norway and Finland, but that more moderate forms are widespread, particularly the view that immigrants should obtain citizenship before being granted equal access to social benefits. This indicates that Nordic welfare politics may increasingly involve conditional forms of inclusion rather than direct exclusion. Together, this research shows that welfare membership is not only a legal or administrative issue. It is also constructed through discourses of belonging, integration, normality, contribution and deservingness. These studies therefore provide an important basis for analysing how non-citizens and third-country nationals are constructed as welfare subjects in ‘bidragsreformen’.

Visconti’s (2024) concept of the ‘Europeanisation of deservingness’ is also relevant for understanding contemporary debates about migrants’ access to welfare. Based on survey data from five EU countries in 1992 and 2016, Visconti argues that unconditional transnational solidarity with all legally resident foreigners has weakened, while EU identity appears to have become a more important criterion for welfare deservingness. In this sense, the boundary of solidarity may not simply be drawn between nationals and foreigners, but increasingly between EU citizens and non-EU citizens. This is relevant for the present thesis because the proposed

qualification requirements in ‘bidragsreformen’ formally concern people taking up residence in Sweden, but in practice distinguish strongly between EU/EEA citizens and third-country nationals through the interaction between national welfare reform and supranational legal frameworks.

A related strand of research concerns the so-called welfare magnet hypothesis, which refers to the assumption that generous welfare states may attract migrants by functioning as a pull factor. This hypothesis is politically important because it is often used to justify restrictions on migrants’ access to welfare benefits. Some research does provide support for the hypothesis. Agersnap et al. (2020), for example, study reforms to an immigrant welfare scheme in Denmark and find that a substantial reduction in benefits for non-EU immigrants reduced net immigration flows, particularly among those arriving through asylum and family migration. However, the authors also stress that their findings concern migrants’ choice of destination country, conditional on migration, rather than the decision to migrate as such. The broader research field is therefore more contested than a simple welfare magnet argument suggests. Ferwerda et al. (2023), although studying intracountry residential decisions, find limited evidence that immigrants systematically move to areas with higher benefits in Switzerland, while Müller (2025) argues that the effect of welfare spending on migration flows largely disappears when broader structural factors are considered. Qualitative research further complicates the hypothesis by showing that welfare considerations are embedded in wider life-course decisions concerning work, family, healthcare, education and long-term security, rather than being reducible to immediate access to social benefits (Andrejuk et al., 2021).

Taken together, this research suggests that welfare generosity may matter in some contexts, but that migration decisions cannot be explained by benefit levels alone. This is relevant for the present thesis because the proposed qualification requirements in ‘bidragsreformen’ are partly legitimised through the idea that access to social benefits may function as a pull factor, while previous research suggests a more complex and contested relationship between welfare generosity and migration.

2.3 Discourse, Legitimation and the Present Study

A third strand of research concerns the role of discourse in welfare policy reform. This literature is central to the present thesis because the research question does not only concern what the

reform proposes, but how the reform is discursively made meaningful, legitimate and necessary. Schmidt (2002) argues that discourse can contribute to welfare reform by reshaping how actors understand their interests, values and policy possibilities. She distinguishes between coordinative discourse, which operates among policy actors and elites, and communicative discourse, which is directed more broadly toward the public. In this perspective, discourse does not simply accompany policy change; it can help make reform possible by framing certain changes as necessary, legitimate or desirable (Schmidt, 2002).

Empirical research has shown how welfare retrenchment may be legitimised through crisis narratives. Nyby et al. (2017), in their study of Finnish family benefit reform, show how cutbacks were framed as necessary responses to economic constraints, while also drawing on broader neoliberal discourses of austerity and welfare state restructuring. Bandelow and Hornung (2019) similarly emphasize the importance of policy narratives and meta-narratives in making reforms appear coherent and necessary. However, discourse alone does not automatically produce reform. Hagelund and Bryngelson (2013), comparing sickness insurance reforms in Sweden and Norway, show that the effectiveness of reform discourse depends on the institutional and political context in which it is articulated.

Other studies emphasize that welfare discourse not only legitimises policy change but also constructs the subjects who are governed by it. Burman et al. (2017) argue that contemporary welfare policy discourse often constructs individuals as active, responsible and self-regulating subjects. This resonates with broader tendencies toward responsabilisation and activation, where citizens are expected to adapt to labour market demands and manage their own welfare risks. This body of research shows that welfare reform is not merely a technical or administrative process. It is also a process of meaning-making in which problems, target groups, solutions and moral obligations are constructed. Policy discourse can frame welfare restrictions as necessary, responsible and evidence-based, while backgrounding alternative interpretations.

Previous research therefore provides several important insights for this thesis. It shows that Swedish universalism has become more complex and uneven, that migration and integration policy are shaped by tensions between inclusion and conditional belonging, and that welfare reforms are legitimised through discourse. At the same time, much existing research focuses either on broad welfare state transformation, public attitudes toward welfare and immigration, or party-political positions on welfare inclusion. Fewer studies examine how these developments

are articulated in concrete policy documents through which reform proposals are formulated, justified and contested. The present thesis addresses this gap by analysing a part of 'bidragsreformen' as a discourse in which welfare, entitlement and (non-)citizenship are constructed through policy texts. By applying Fairclough's discourse analytical framework, the study provides a close analysis of how welfare is represented as a problem, how conditional access is legitimised, and how different welfare subjects are positioned within the reform process.

3 Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach and research design of the thesis. It begins by presenting the broader methodological positioning of the study, before introducing discourse analysis and Fairclough's three-dimensional model as the analytical framework. The chapter then presents the empirical material, the process of corpus selection, and the analytical procedure used in the coding and interpretation of the documents. Finally, it discusses reflexivity, limitations, and ethical issues related to the study.

3.1 Methodological Approach

This thesis is based on a qualitative research design, as its aim is to understand how welfare is discursively constructed in the policy process surrounding the qualification requirements in 'bidragsreformen'. The focus is therefore not on measuring the effects of the reform, but on analysing how meanings, problem representations, subject positions and legitimations are produced through language. This is in line with an interpretive approach to social research, where the purpose is to examine meaning-making rather than to establish objective or causal explanations in a positivist sense (della Porta & Keating, 2008).

The methodological positioning of this thesis is informed by critical realist assumptions, following Fairclough (2005), which is moderately socially constructivist but essentially rejects the tendency for the study of policy reform to be reduced to the study of discourse. Critical realism assumes that a real social world exists independently of our knowledge of it, while also recognising that the social world is socially constructed and dependent on human action (Fairclough, 2005). This means that discourse is not treated as the whole of social reality, but as one important dimension through which social structures, institutions and power relations are represented, reproduced and contested. Epistemologically, the thesis therefore does not claim to access reality in a neutral or final way, but analyses how particular meanings of welfare, entitlement and welfare subjects are constructed in the reform discourse. This position allows the study to examine discourse as socially constitutive without overstating its effects or denying the importance of material and institutional conditions.

3.2 Documentary Research and Empirical Material

The empirical material consists of policy documents produced in relation to ‘bidragsreformen’. Documentary research is particularly suitable for this study because the research object is a policy process that is largely articulated through official documents. Documents constitute pre-generated data, meaning that they exist independently of the researcher and were not produced for the purpose of this study (Tight, 2019, pp. 8–9). Such material is therefore useful for analysing institutional meaning-making, as policy documents both reflect and participate in the construction of social and political realities. Documentary research also has practical and ethical advantages. It provides access to rich empirical material without requiring direct interaction with research participants, and it avoids some of the ethical challenges associated with interviews or observation (Tight, 2019, pp. 13–14). In this thesis, the documents are not treated as neutral sources of information, but as texts that actively participate in constructing problems, solutions and categories of welfare entitlement. The main empirical material consists of:

- *En ny modell för kvalificering till socialförsäkring och ekonomiskt bistånd för nyanlända och icke-medborgare* [A New Model for Qualifying for Social Insurance and Financial Assistance for Newcomers and Non-citizens] (Dir. 2023:149), the governmental committee directive from Socialdepartementet (2023) that defines the task of the Swedish Government Official Report;
- *Kvalificering till socialförsäkring och ekonomiskt bistånd för vissa grupper* [Qualification for Social Insurance and Financial Assistance for Certain Groups] (SOU 2025:53), the Swedish Government Official Report proposing a model for qualification to social insurance benefits and financial assistance;
- selected consultation responses (‘remissvar’) submitted in response to SOU 2025:53.

The governmental committee directive and the Swedish Government Official Report constitute the core material of the analysis. These documents will hereafter be referred to as ‘the directive’ and ‘the report’ respectively. They were selected because they are central documents in the formal reform process: the directive formulates the political ambition and problem definition, while the report translates this ambition into legal, administrative and policy proposals. Together, they provide insight into how the reform is constructed at different stages of the policy process.

The consultation responses are used more selectively. They are not analysed as a full corpus in the same depth as the directive and the report but are included to illustrate how alternative or counter-discourses emerge within the reform process. In particular, they are used to show how municipalities, civil society actors and public authorities contest or complicate the assumptions and consequences presented in the report. Within Fairclough's framework, the consultation responses are understood as part of the discursive practice surrounding the reform. They show how policy discourse is not produced by one actor alone, but emerges through interaction between directive, expert inquiry, public authorities, municipalities and civil society actors. The consultation responses therefore make visible competing interpretations of the reform's consequences and legitimacy.

Initially, the empirical scope also included government press releases and other public communication published on the Government's website. During the familiarisation and early coding process, however, the material was narrowed. The directive and the report proved sufficiently rich for the main analysis, while the consultation responses were included selectively to account for contestation within the policy process. Government press releases are therefore used mainly as contextual material in the background chapter rather than as part of the main analytical corpus.

3.3 Analytical Framework: Fairclough's Three-dimensional Model of Discourse Analysis

Having outlined the broader methodological orientation of the thesis, the following section presents the analytical framework used to operationalise this approach. The thesis draws on the three-dimensional model of discourse analysis as presented by Norman Fairclough in his book *Discourse and Social Change* (1992), which came to be the basis of his contribution to the tradition of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2003). Fairclough views discourse analysis as a drawing together of language analysis and social theory, which is based upon a combination of a social-theoretical understanding of discourse and the more 'text-and-interaction' understanding of discourse that is most prominent in linguistically oriented discourse analysis. The three-dimensional model Fairclough puts forward analyses discourse on three interconnected levels, where every instance of discourse – or discursive 'event' – is viewed

as: 1) a piece of text, 2) an instance of discursive practice, and 3) an instance of social practice. The focal point of the 'text' dimension is language analysis of texts. The 'discursive practice' dimension analyses how text is produced, distributed, and consumed. Which types of discourses or other texts are drawn upon, and how these are combined, is also analysed through this dimension. The 'social practice' dimension situates discourse or the discursive 'events' within organisational and institutional circumstances, and analyses how that shapes the nature of the discursive practice. The constitutive or constructive effects of discourse, that are prominent in social-theoretical understandings of discourse, are also analysed through this dimension (Fairclough, 1992).

The three-dimensional model of analysis can also be categorised into a three-level procedure, that further explains the tying together of the three dimensions of discourse. The part of the procedure concerned with analysis of the textual dimension can be labelled 'description', while the parts that are concerned with analysis of discursive and social practice can be labelled 'interpretation' and 'explanation' respectively. Explanation is however a type of interpretation, and description is never completely free from interpretation. When one as an analyst (or as any reader of a text) reads a text, interpretation is inevitable, all the time – there is no such thing as 'pure description', we are always interpreting. Fairclough speaks of two levels of interpretation. Firstly, one may try to make sense of the characteristics of texts by viewing them as elements of discourse or discursive practice; as fragments of the processes of text production and hints of text interpretation ('Interpretation' in *Figure 1*). This occurs at the textual level as well as the level of discursive practice in the model. Secondly, one may try to make sense of the characteristics of texts alongside one's interpretation of the text production and interpretation. To do this one must view both as embedded aspects inside a broader social practice ('Explanation' in *Figure 1*). This occurs at the level of discursive practice as well as the level of social practice in the model (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 71, 198–199).

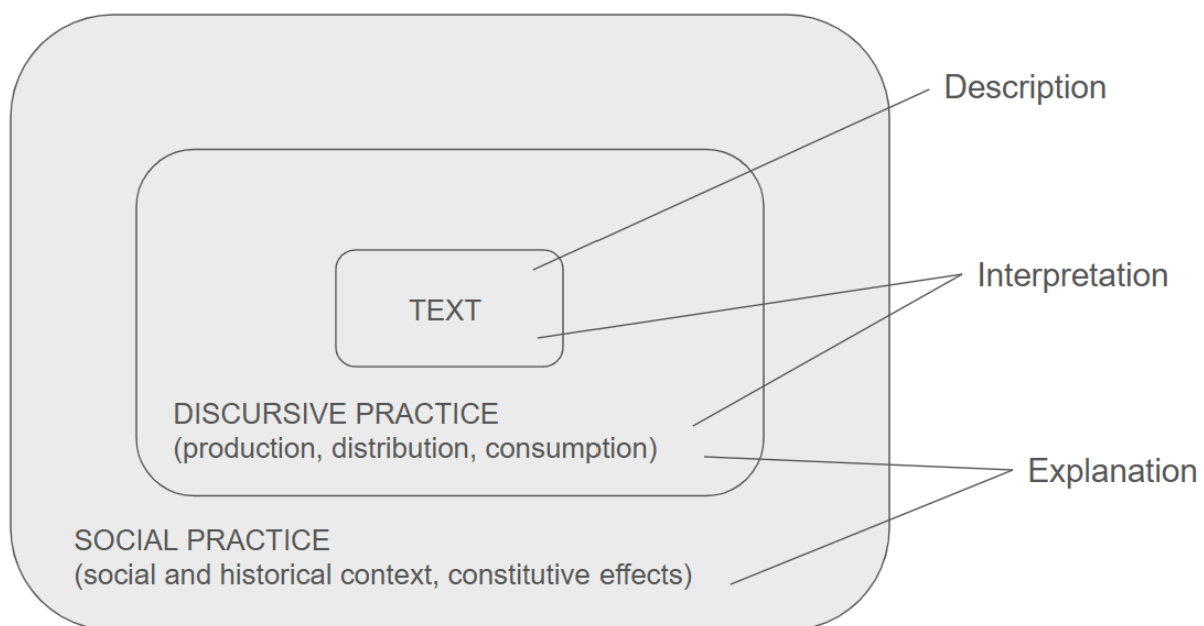


Figure 1. Three-dimensional conception of discourse, based on Fairclough (1992).

In this analytical framework, the definition of ‘discourse’ is of the narrower kind, in relation to how the term is most commonly used in the social sciences. The focus is upon language and particularly language *use*, as a form of *social practice* (i.e., not an individual activity). There are two major implications of this definition of discourse; that discourse is a mode of action as well as a mode of representation, and that the relationship between discourse and social structure is dialectical, in that they are mutually constitutive. Discourse and social structure simultaneously shape, define, and produce each other – they are both a condition for, and an effect of, the other (Fairclough, 1992, Chapter 3). Furthermore, three aspects of the constitutive or constructive effects of discourse can be distinguished, although the constructive nature of discourse should not be overstated, nor should it be overlooked, according to Fairclough. Discourse contributes to the construction of what is commonly referred to as social ‘subjects’, ‘subject positions’, ‘social identities’ or types of ‘self’. Discourse also contributes to the construction of social relationships, as well as the construction of systems of knowledge and beliefs. While discursive practice is (partly) constitutive in the sense of *reproducing* society, it is also (partly) constitutive in the sense of *transforming* society (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 64–65).

Fairclough emphasises the need to avoid two theoretical pitfalls: overstating the constitutive power of discourse and, conversely, overstating the social determination of discourse. On the one hand, discourse should not be understood as creating social reality independently of material and institutional structures. On the other hand, it should not be treated as a passive reflection of those structures. Instead, Fairclough conceptualises discourse as both socially shaped and socially constitutive. This balanced understanding is central to his three-dimensional model, which allows discourse to be analysed as a product of social relations while simultaneously recognising its role in the reproduction and transformation of power and ideology. To avoid the risk of overemphasising the social determination of discourse as well as the aspect of social construction in discourse, the relationship between discourse and social structure needs to be seen as dialectical (Fairclough, 1992, Chapter 3). Below, analysis of discourse through the three dimensions (text – discursive practice – social practice) will be presented more in depth, before a concluding discussion of the fruitfulness of this analytical framework for the study of discursive and social change.

3.3.1 Text

In this three-dimensional model, the text dimension refers to the analysis of the formal properties of discourse in instances of language use. Texts may be written or spoken, and they constitute the empirical basis for discourse analysis. At this level, the focus is on linguistic features such as vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and textual structure. Vocabulary refers to patterns of word choice, such as choices of specific terms and categorisations. Grammar concerns how actions and relationships are constructed in sentences. Cohesion relates to the linguistic means by which different parts of a text are connected, contributing to its internal coherence. Finally, text structure addresses the overall organisation of the text, including how arguments are arranged and developed. Fairclough emphasises that these features are not merely technical aspects of language, they are socially meaningful. Choices of wording, for example, can reflect particular ways of representing reality, while grammatical structures may conceal or highlight agency and responsibility (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 75–78). Similarly, modality – another linguistic feature of interest in analysis at the textual level – can express varying degrees of certainty, authority, or obligation, thereby positioning both speakers (or writers) and audiences in specific ways (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 158–159).

Textual analysis also attends to the presence of intertextual elements, such as quotation or reported speech, which signal how a text draws upon and incorporates other texts and discourses (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 101–103). In this sense, the text dimension provides important clues about how discursive practices operate, which will be further discussed below. Importantly, the analysis of texts is not an end-analysis in itself. Rather, it serves as an entry point for understanding broader social processes. By examining the linguistic features of texts, it becomes possible to identify how discourse contributes to the construction of social identities, relations, and systems of knowledge.

3.3.2 Discursive practice

Analysis in the dimension of discursive practice in the three-dimensional model of Fairclough is centred upon the concept of intertextuality. Intertextuality can be further conceptualised into two different kinds of intertextuality: ‘manifest’ intertextuality and ‘interdiscursivity’. The first refers to instances where other texts are explicitly present in a text, and the second refers to how a text is constituted from a configuration of types of texts or discourses; the mixing and articulation of diverse genres, discourse types, and styles within a single text or discursive event (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 9–10; Fairclough, 2003, p. 218). While intertextuality is concerned with explicit presence of other texts, interdiscursivity is concerned with the broader, structural mixing of different kinds of conventions.

Both subcategories of intertextuality are however concerned with a text or discursive event drawing upon such prior events, in different ways, and can tell us something of the production, consumption and interpretation of said text. Consider, for example, the following statement by Foucault, whom Fairclough draws upon in many ways: “there can be no statement that in one way or another does not reactualize others” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 101). Texts, or however one chooses to label it – texts, discursive events, statements, or pieces of communication – are inherently intertextual in that they are to a varying degree constituted by other texts or drawings upon broader discourse.

3.3.3 Social practice

There are various types of social practice, such as economic, cultural, political or ideological practice – where discourse may be involved in each of these, while none of them are reducible to discourse. Most relevant to this analytical framework presented by Fairclough is, however,

discourse as a mode of political and ideological practice. As a political practice, discourse creates, maintains and transforms power relations as well as the different groups involved in these relations. As an ideological practice, discourse constitutes, maintains and transforms meanings of the world from different positions in power relations. These two social practices are dependent on each other, as the meanings produced in power relations are ideology, which is a dimension of the exercise of and struggle over power that is discourse as a political practice. Hence, political practice is the superior, or ‘superordinate’, category, while the two are inherently tied together. However, certain types of discourse are not inherently political and/or ideological in terms of values, in Fairclough’s analytical framework. Rather, his view is that discourse may become ideologically or politically ‘invested’ – in what way is context dependent and varies from different social domains and institutional settings (Fairclough, 1992, Chapter 3).

In the dimension of social practice, analysis according to Fairclough’s model is centred upon the concepts of ideological and political practice and, in particular, hegemony – which he refers to as a ‘mode of domination’, on the basis of forming alliances, incorporating subordinate groups and generating consent. Basically, the concept of hegemony means dominance through consent, where certain meanings and ideologies become ‘common sense’. These hegemonies, that are present in particular organisations and/or institutions – and at the level of society – are produced and reproduced but never fixed. They are challenged, questioned, and transformed in discourse (Fairclough, 1992). Fairclough incorporates Gramsci’s concept of hegemony as a framework for conceptualising and analysing ideological and political dimensions in discursive practice, which is viewed as a particular form of social practice. As mentioned above, analysis in the dimension of discursive practice centres upon processes of how a piece of text is produced, distributed and consumed. These are social processes for which reference to certain social (economic, political, ideological, institutional) circumstances where discourse is produced is necessary (Fairclough, 1992, Chapter 3). In other words, the dimensions are not in contrast to each other but inherently tied together in the make-up of discourse.

3.3.4 Discursive Change and Social Change

The aim of Fairclough’s three-dimensional model is to provide a framework for analysing processes of social change through discourse. To serve this purpose, the approach must – in Fairclough’s view – meet four key requirements: it should enable *multidimensional*,

multifunctional, *historical*, and *critical* analysis. First, the model is multidimensional in that it connects different levels of analysis. It allows the researcher to examine both the internal features of texts and their relationship to broader social practices, thereby linking discursive events to wider social processes. Second, the approach is multifunctional because it treats discourse as simultaneously shaping knowledge, social relations, and social identities. Changes in discourse practices are therefore understood as having effects across these different dimensions, which need to be analysed in relation to one another. Third, the model incorporates a historical perspective. Fairclough emphasises that discourse analysis should not only focus on how individual texts are constructed, but also on how discursive practices develop over time. This includes the analysis of ‘orders of discourse’, that is, the structured configurations of discursive practices within institutions or across society more broadly. Finally, the approach is critical in that it seeks to uncover underlying power relations and often implicit connections between discourse and social structures. Discursive change is not viewed as a linear or purely top-down process; rather, it involves ongoing struggle, where dominant meanings may be resisted, negotiated, or reinterpreted by different social actors (Fairclough, 1992).

The three-dimensional analytical framework is fruitful for analysing the relationship between discursive change and social change mainly due to the attention to, and combination of, the concepts of intertextuality and hegemony. The relation of a certain discursive event to hegemonies and hegemonic struggles (e.g., is the discursive event taking these hegemonic practices or relations as a given or is it questioning or disputing them?) determines or influences which prior texts as well as broader discourses are drawn upon, explicitly and implicitly, in the discursive event (Fairclough, 1992, p. 10). The intertextuality of a text reflects and contributes to hegemonic relations. By selectively drawing upon particular discourses while marginalising others, texts participate in the reproduction or transformation of dominant ideological formations. One might say that intertextuality is the site where hegemony becomes visible (through a text or a discursive event). Because intertextuality reveals how discourses are combined, contested, and rearticulated, it provides an analytical entry point into hegemonic struggle. Fairclough’s three-dimensional model is therefore particularly fruitful for the study of social and discursive change, as it enables the linking of textual features to broader transformations in power and ideology, mainly through intertextuality (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 102–103).

3.4 Analytical Procedure and Coding Process

Building on the analytical framework outlined above, the coding process focused mainly on textual features, as well as discursive practices and links to broader social practices. The analytical process began with an initial reading of a wider range of documents related to ‘bidragsreformen’. This first stage was exploratory and primarily served to gain contextual understanding of the reform process and to identify relevant empirical material. At this stage, the report (SOU 2025:53) emerged as especially central, as it contains the most extensive formulation of the reform’s problem representation, proposed solution, legal reasoning, research overview and assessment of consequences.

After the empirical corpus was narrowed, the directive and the report were imported into the NVivo software and coded manually. NVivo was used as a tool for organising the material, but the coding itself was interpretive and researcher driven. The coding process combined broad thematic coding with more detailed textual coding. The initial coding included broad analytical categories such as:

- problem representation;
- solution;
- legitimation;
- contradicting legitimation;
- constructions of welfare;
- constructions of citizens and non-citizens;
- consequences of the reform;
- normative language;
- agency;
- modality.

These broad codes were developed in relation to the research questions and to Fairclough’s framework. They made it possible to organise the material around the main analytical questions: how the reform constructs welfare as a problem, how it proposes to solve this problem, how the solution is legitimised, and what kinds of welfare subjects are constructed through the discourse.

A second part of the coding process focused on recurring vocabulary. Searches were conducted for key terms that appeared central to the reform discourse, including ‘medborgare’ /

‘medborgarskap’ (citizen / citizenship), ‘arbetslinjen’ (the work principle), ‘tilldragningsfaktorer’ (pull factors), ‘incitament’ (incentives), ‘utanförskap’ (social exclusion), and ‘bidragsberoende’ (welfare dependency). These searches were not used as quantitative evidence in themselves, but as a way of identifying where and how particular concepts were used across the documents. For example, searches for ‘medborgare’ and ‘medborgar-’ in the report generated many hits, indicating that citizenship and membership were important organising categories in the report. The analytical question was therefore not simply how often these terms appeared, but how the documents spoke about citizens, non-citizens and entitlement. In this way, keyword searches functioned as entry points into a more qualitative analysis of meaning.

The textual analysis also focused on modality and agency. Modality was analysed through expressions of necessity, certainty and possibility, such as formulations equivalent to ‘shall’, ‘must’, ‘may’ or ‘risk’. This was important for examining how the reform was constructed as necessary, reasonable or inevitable. Agency was analysed by asking who is presented as responsible for social exclusion, welfare dependency and integration, and whether responsibility is made explicit or obscured through passive and impersonal formulations.

Finally, the coding was gradually reorganised into the analytical structure of the thesis: problem, solution, legitimation, and constructions/contradictions/consequences. This structure reflects both the empirical pattern of the documents and the logic of policy discourse, where a problem is constructed, a solution is proposed, and the solution is justified.

3.4.1 Translations

Since the empirical material is written in Swedish while this thesis is written in English, translation forms an important part of the analytical process. This is particularly significant in the tradition of discourse analysis – especially in the textually oriented approach of Fairclough – where the analysis depends on close attention to wording, modality, categorisation and meaning. The translations used in the thesis are my own unless otherwise stated. As a native Swedish speaker, I have translated quotations and key concepts with attention to both literal meaning and discursive function. Translation is therefore treated not as a neutral technical step, but as an interpretive part of the research process. Where Swedish terms carry specific political or institutional meanings that are not fully captured by an English equivalent, the original term is included in brackets, for example ‘the work principle’ (‘arbetslinjen’), ‘welfare dependency’

(‘bidragsberoende’), and ‘pull factors’ (‘tilldragningsfaktorer’). This approach aims to preserve the nuance of the Swedish material while making the analysis accessible to an English-language reader.

3.5 Reflexivity and Researcher Position

Because discourse analysis is interpretive, reflexivity is an important part of the research process. The researcher is not a neutral instrument who simply extracts meaning from documents, but participates in constructing the analysis through theoretical choices, coding decisions and interpretation. Reflexivity therefore concerns both the knowledge produced by the study and the process through which that knowledge is generated and should be viewed as a reflection of the researcher’s location in time and social space (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Clark et al., 2021, p. 367).

My own position may influence how I approach the material. As a native Swedish speaker and a Swedish citizen, I am familiar with the welfare state context and with many of the concepts used in the reform discourse. I also have an academic background in welfare policy and sociology, as well as work experience within the Swedish welfare sector. These experiences provide contextual knowledge that can support the analysis, but they may also shape what I notice, question or interpret as significant. My political orientation may also influence my interest in the topic and my sensitivity to questions of inequality, welfare rights and social exclusion. Rather than claiming complete neutrality, the thesis aims for reflexive transparency. This means being explicit about the interpretive nature of the research, grounding analytical claims in textual evidence, and remaining attentive to alternative interpretations. The inclusion of consultation responses also contributes to this by showing that the reform discourse is contested and that different actors construct the reform in different ways.

3.6 Trustworthiness and Limitations

The aim of the study is not statistical generalisation, but analytical depth. Trustworthiness is therefore pursued through transparency, systematic coding and close engagement with the empirical material. The coding process was documented through NVivo nodes and analytical

notes, and the analysis is supported by examples from the documents. This allows the reader to follow how the interpretations are grounded in the material.

At the same time, the study has limitations. First, the analysis focuses primarily on official policy documents and selected consultation responses. It does not examine how the reform is received by the wider public, how media actors frame it, or how affected individuals experience it. Second, the consultation responses are used selectively rather than analysed as a complete corpus. This means that the analysis cannot claim to represent the entire consultation process but rather uses selected responses to illustrate contestation and counter-discourses. Third, the analysis focuses on discourse and does not measure the actual social or economic effects of the reform. These limitations are however consistent with the aim of the thesis. The purpose is not to evaluate the reform's outcomes, but to analyse how welfare, entitlement and non-citizenship are constructed in the reform discourse. The study therefore contributes to understanding the meaning-making processes through which welfare reform is articulated and legitimised.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Since this thesis is based on discourse analysis of publicly available policy documents, it does not involve direct interaction with research participants or the collection of personal data. The ethical issues connected to data access, consent and storage are therefore limited compared to interview-based or ethnographic research. Nevertheless, ethical considerations remain important, particularly because the thesis deals with politically sensitive questions concerning welfare, migration, citizenship and social rights.

A central ethical consideration concerns how the documents and the groups represented in them are interpreted and described. Terms such as 'non-citizens', 'third-country nationals', 'welfare dependency' and 'social exclusion' are not treated as neutral categories, but as part of the discourse being analysed. This is important to avoid reproducing potentially stigmatizing representations uncritically. The aim is therefore to analyse how such categories are constructed and used in the reform discourse, rather than to adopt them as self-evident descriptions of social groups.

Reflexivity is also an important ethical consideration in this study. As Guillemin and Gillam (2004) argue, reflexivity involves ongoing critical reflection on how the researcher's

position, assumptions and choices shape the research process. My own position, including my familiarity with the Swedish welfare state and my academic interest in questions of welfare, inequality and social rights, has influenced the choice of topic and analytical focus. Rather than claiming neutrality, the thesis aims for transparency by making the methodological choices, coding process and interpretive steps as explicit as possible.

A further ethical concern is the risk of selective interpretation. In qualitative discourse analysis, the researcher necessarily makes interpretive choices about what is analytically significant. This creates a risk of confirmation bias, where evidence that supports the researcher's expectations is given more attention than contradictory or ambiguous material (Bos, 2020, p. 254). To address this, the analysis includes not only dominant patterns in the directive and the report, but also tensions, contradictions and selected consultation responses that challenge the reform's assumptions. In this way, the thesis seeks to present a nuanced analysis that acknowledges both dominant framings and competing interpretations.

Finally, the study aims to ensure research quality through transparency and systematicity. The use of NVivo supported the organisation of the material and made it possible to document coding choices, while close textual analysis ensured that interpretations remained grounded in the empirical material. Following the emphasis on transparency and careful handling of qualitative data in *Bryman's Social Research Methods* (Clark et al., 2021, pp. 362–364), the thesis seeks to make clear how the empirical material was selected, coded and interpreted.

4 Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical perspectives used to interpret the findings of the analysis. While Fairclough's three-dimensional discourse analysis provides the analytical framework for examining how welfare, entitlement and (non-)citizenship are constructed in the reform discourse, the theories discussed in this chapter help situate these constructions in relation to broader questions of recognition, belonging and welfare boundaries. Honneth's theory of recognition is used to analyse the social and moral implications of differentiated welfare entitlement, particularly in relation to rights, solidarity and misrecognition. The concept of welfare chauvinism is then used to understand how welfare access may be linked to national membership, contribution and deservingness. Together, these perspectives provide tools for interpreting not only how the reform discourse is structured, but also what its constructions of welfare and welfare subjects may imply.

4.1 Honneth's Recognition Theory: Rights, Solidarity and Misrecognition

To complement the discourse analytical framework of Fairclough, this thesis draws on Axel Honneth's theory of recognition (Honneth, 1995/1992). Honneth's theory is useful for analysing how welfare entitlement is not only a question of material redistribution, but also of social membership, status and self-relation. In the context of this thesis, recognition theory helps illuminate what is at stake when certain groups are constructed as only conditionally entitled to welfare benefits.

Honneth's central argument is that individual identity and self-realisation depend on intersubjective recognition. Subjects develop a positive relation to themselves through being recognised by others in socially established relations. Recognition is therefore not merely psychological, but also social and institutional (Honneth, 1995/1992). For Honneth, struggles over recognition are central to social conflicts because experiences of disrespect reveal denied or incomplete forms of social membership (Honneth, 1995/1992, pp. 92–94). Honneth distinguishes between three spheres of recognition: love, rights and solidarity (Honneth, 1995/1992, Chapter 5). Recognition through love refers to primary relationships of care and emotional support, which enable basic self-confidence (Honneth, 1995/1992, p. 95). Recognition through rights

refers to being acknowledged as a morally responsible person and a legal subject entitled to equal rights, which forms the basis of self-respect (Honneth, 1995/1992, pp. 118–119). Recognition through solidarity refers to social esteem, where individuals are valued for their qualities, capacities and contributions within a shared social horizon, enabling self-esteem (Honneth, 1995/1992, p. 121).

In this thesis, the spheres of rights and solidarity are most relevant. Welfare benefits can be understood as institutional expressions of legal recognition, since they concern who is treated as entitled to social protection. Solidarity is also central because the reform discourse constructs certain forms of contribution – particularly paid work, tax contribution and self-sufficiency – as socially valuable. Conversely, welfare dependency, unemployment or lack of qualification may be associated with deficient contribution, which affects how different welfare subjects are positioned.

Honneth also theorises misrecognition through corresponding forms of disrespect (Honneth, 1995/1992, Chapter 6). In the sphere of rights, disrespect occurs when individuals or groups are denied the status of full rights-bearing subjects. In the sphere of solidarity, disrespect occurs when individuals' ways of life, capacities or contributions are devalued. Such forms of misrecognition are not only symbolic, but may affect individuals' self-respect, self-esteem and sense of belonging (Honneth, 1995/1992, pp. 133–134). Recognition theory is therefore useful for analysing 'bidragsreformen' because the reform discourse differentiates welfare entitlement according to citizenship, residence, legal status and labour market participation. This may be interpreted as a weakening of legal recognition for certain non-citizens, insofar as access to social protection becomes conditional rather than equal. Furthermore, when welfare deservingness is tied to work and contribution, those unable to meet such expectations risk being positioned as less socially valuable.

In this thesis, Honneth's theory is not used to make claims about the subjective experiences of the individuals affected by the reform, since the empirical material does not include interviews or other first-hand accounts. Rather, recognition theory is used as an analytical and normative lens for interpreting the implications of the reform discourse. It helps analyse how constructions of welfare entitlement may shape relations between the state and non-citizens, between different groups in society, and between individuals and their own status as recognised members of the social order.

4.2 Welfare Chauvinism, Deservingness and Conditional Belonging

The thesis also draws on the concept of welfare chauvinism to analyse how welfare entitlement is linked to national belonging, citizenship and contribution. Welfare chauvinism broadly refers to the idea that access to welfare should be prioritised for the national in-group, while migrants or non-citizens should either be excluded or granted more limited access (Afonso & Negash, 2024; Bell et al., 2023). In this thesis, the concept is not used to suggest that ‘bidragsreformen’ represents a complete exclusion of migrants from welfare. Rather, it is used to analyse how welfare access is differentiated and conditionalized through categories such as citizenship, residence, legal status and labor market participation.

A central point in recent research is that welfare chauvinism can take both strict and moderate forms. Strict welfare chauvinism implies direct exclusion of migrants from welfare benefits, while more moderate forms involve making equal access dependent on conditions such as citizenship, length of residence or contribution (Bell et al., 2023). Bell et al. (2023) show that strict welfare chauvinism is relatively rare in Sweden (and Norway and Finland) but that more moderate forms are widespread. In particular, they find substantial support for the idea that immigrants should obtain citizenship before being granted equal access to social benefits. This distinction is important for the present thesis, since the reform discourse does not simply construct non-citizens as entirely excluded from welfare, but as subjects who must qualify for access over time.

Welfare chauvinism is closely connected to deservingness. Welfare access is not only regulated through formal legal categories, but also through moral distinctions between those who are constructed as deserving and undeserving. In the reform discourse, deservingness is linked not only to national membership, but also to work, self-sufficiency and ‘individual effort’. This means that welfare entitlement is framed as something that should follow from contribution rather than need alone. Such a logic resonates with what Abts et al. (2020) call welfare producerism, where welfare rights are tied to activity, responsibility, reciprocity and productivity. From this perspective, migrants may be constructed as less deserving not only because they are positioned as outsiders, but because they are represented as insufficiently contributing to the welfare system. This distinction is useful for analysing ‘bidragsreformen’, because the reform combines several criteria of belonging and entitlement. Citizenship and residence establish a boundary between members and non-members, while labour market participation and income

establish a boundary between contributing and non-contributing subjects. The reform discourse therefore does not rely solely on national exclusion, but also on a contribution-based moral logic. Welfare is constructed as something to be earned through time, work and establishment, rather than as an unconditional social right.

At the same time, the concept of welfare chauvinism has limitations. Carmel and Sojka (2020) argue that concepts such as welfare chauvinism and deservingness may be too broad or too binary to capture the complexity of migrant social rights. They propose the concept of ‘rationales of belonging’ to describe the different logics through which migrants’ access to rights is governed. These include temporal-territorial, labourist, welfareist and ethno-cultural rationales. This is useful for the present thesis because the reform does not simply distinguish between citizens and non-citizens. It also differentiates between groups of non-citizens according to residence time, labour market position, legal status and benefit category.

In this thesis, welfare chauvinism is therefore used as a sensitising concept rather than as a fixed label. It helps identify how the reform discourse constructs welfare as something that must be protected for those who belong, contribute or qualify, while positioning certain non-citizens – particularly third-country nationals – as conditional welfare subjects. Combined with Honneth’s theory of recognition, the concept also makes it possible to analyse how differentiated welfare access affects not only material entitlement, but also recognition, status and belonging. Where welfare chauvinism draws attention to the boundary-making logic of the reform, Honneth’s theory helps analyse what such boundaries may mean for individuals’ recognition as rights-bearing and socially valued members of society.

5 Analysis

This chapter analyses how welfare is discursively constructed in the policy process surrounding the proposed social benefit reform, ‘bidragsreformen’. Drawing on Fairclough’s (1992) three-dimensional framework, the analysis focuses on how the reform is framed as a response to a specific societal problem, how welfare and entitlement are represented, and how the reform is legitimized through economic, moral, and legal arguments. Particular attention is paid to recurring vocabulary, modality, and representations of social actors, as these textual features provide insight into the underlying assumptions and ideological orientations of the reform discourse. The analytical chapter is organized as follows: 1. The Problem, 2. The Solution, 3. The Legitimation, and 4. Constructions, Contradictions and Consequences.

5.1 The Problem

A central feature of both the directive (Socialdepartementet, 2023) and in turn the report (SOU 2025:53) that is based upon it, is that the reform, at the level of text, is motivated through a problem representation in which welfare is framed as contributing to social exclusion and long-term welfare dependency. In the directive, large-scale migration to Sweden over time is explicitly described as having created ‘significant integration problems’, which are associated with ‘exclusion’ and ‘long-term welfare dependency’ (Socialdepartementet, 2023, p. 2). The directive also frames the problem in terms of a lack of sufficient incentives to work and become self-sufficient for those who receive various forms of compensation and benefits, which then leads to this heightened risk of long-term welfare dependency and social exclusion (Socialdepartementet, 2023, p. 3).

Welfare benefits are further described as potential ‘pull-factors’, explicitly stating that the Government considers access to social protection, in the form of social insurance benefits and financial assistance, to influence migration patterns and therefore constituting a policy risk (Socialdepartementet, 2023, p. 6). This framing establishes welfare not primarily as a social right, but as a mechanism that may generate undesirable ‘incentives’ (‘incitament’) and outcomes. In this case, these undesirable incentives are a lack of incentives to work, instead becoming dependent on welfare long-term, and thereby being a liability rather than an asset to the welfare state. The problem is further framed as a universal and generous welfare system

(concerning the residence-based social insurance benefits) risks eroding the legitimacy of said system (Socialdepartementet, 2023, p. 6). Agency is often individualized, as exclusion is linked to weak ‘incentives’ for newcomers to work rather than to structural barriers.

The problem representation that emerges at the level of text is one caused by integration and a much too generous social benefit system. The solution is in turn constructed as a reform conditioning welfare upon qualification, primarily through time spent in Sweden and through labour market participation. Access to social insurance benefits and economic assistance is framed as something that must be earned through establishment, self-sufficiency, and contribution, rather than something granted automatically through residence. In this way, welfare is discursively redefined from a universal right to a conditional resource, justified through references to strengthened work incentives, reduced risk of welfare dependency, and the need to protect the legitimacy and sustainability of the welfare system. This resonates with previous research on welfare state change and activation, which shows how contemporary welfare reforms increasingly connect entitlement to labour market participation, self-sufficiency and individual responsibility rather than need alone (Burman et al., 2017; Blomqvist & Palme, 2020).

Both the directive and the report emphasize that the welfare state builds on the assumption that ‘those who can work, shall work’ (Socialdepartementet, 2023, p. 3; SOU 2025:53, p. 137). This is expressed through repeated references to ‘the work principle’ (‘arbetslinjen’) as a foundational principle, framing work not only as an economic necessity but as a moral obligation. Welfare thus becomes linked to contribution and self-sufficiency, and social benefits are framed as something that must be ‘qualified for’ through time, labour, or integration.

The problem representation is further textually depicted as tied to a particular group of people; people that to a higher extent are, or have a higher risk of, facing social exclusion and long-term welfare dependency. This group is people from third countries, so called third-country nationals (‘tredjelandssmedborgare’), who are circled as the group targeted by the reform in the directive. To illustrate, the following is stated in the research overview in the report:

Many people who immigrate to Sweden from third countries have a weak position in the labour market with low employment and difficulties in achieving self-sufficiency. At the same time, research results from Sweden and other countries show that higher levels of

compensation in social insurance and financial assistance lead to more people taking part in the benefits while fewer people work. (SOU 2025:53, p. 16)

Through this particular formulation, the two issues – of the weak footing of third-country nationals in the labour market and higher benefit levels leading to lower labour market participation – are somewhat merged into one; indicating that it is, solely or mainly, because of the higher benefit levels the group in question have a weak footing in the labour market.

At the level of discursive practice (Fairclough, 1992), this formulation in the report performs an important discursive move by placing two claims side by side: that third-country nationals have weak labour market attachment, and that higher benefit levels reduce labour market participation. Through this juxtaposition, welfare generosity is implicitly positioned as a key explanatory factor behind unemployment and exclusion, while alternative structural explanations – such as labour market discrimination, credential recognition, or segmentation – remain in the background. In this way, the problem is individualized and behaviouralized; exclusion is framed as an outcome of incentives rather than of structural conditions.

This problem representation is, at the level of discursive practice (Fairclough, 1992), not only articulated through political statements in the directive, but is also reproduced and strengthened through the institutional genre of the report. While the directive formulates the issue in explicitly normative terms, the report (re)frames the same assumptions through a lens of expertise, research, and legal-administrative reasoning. This contributes to presenting the problem definition as evidence-based and politically neutral, even though it follows the political framing established in the directive. The research overview and frequent references to statistics, international examples, and legal obligations in the report function intertextually (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 9–10; Fairclough, 2003, p. 218) as a means of legitimation. By drawing on external sources and expert authority, the discourse constructs the problem as objectively grounded, rather than as a contested political interpretation, which will be discussed further under 6.3 *The Legitimation*.

The repeated emphasis on third-country nationals ('tredjelandssmedborgare') is furthermore not merely descriptive, but functions as a boundary-making category. It constructs the issues of welfare dependency and exclusion as primarily associated with a specific population outside the EU and outside Swedish citizenship. This contributes to a distinction

between insiders and outsiders of the welfare state, where welfare entitlement is increasingly framed as conditional upon national membership and contribution. This boundary-making can be understood in relation to welfare chauvinism, particularly in its more moderate form where migrants are not fully excluded from welfare, but where equal access is made conditional upon residence, citizenship or contribution (Bell et al., 2023).

The problem framing is also strengthened through modality (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 158–159), as mentioned above. Terms such as ‘risking’ (‘riskerar’), ‘need to’ or ‘have to’ (‘måste’), and ‘crucial’ (‘avgörande’), contribute to constructing the reform as a necessary response to a pressing societal challenge rather than one political option among others. In this way, the discourse reduces the space for disagreement and frames welfare restriction as inevitable. For example, the directive states the following:

The Swedish welfare system is fundamentally based on the principle that those who can work, shall work. It is neither economically nor socially sustainable for people who can work not to do so. It is therefore important that people of working age who come to Sweden start working as soon as possible. This way, individuals can both support themselves and contribute to the welfare state. This is crucial to maintaining the legitimacy of the welfare system. (Socialdepartementet, 2023, p. 3).

At the level of social practice (Fairclough, 1992), this problem representation reflects a broader transformation in Swedish welfare discourse in which welfare is increasingly framed as a system vulnerable to misuse and dependency, rather than primarily as a universal mechanism of social protection. The emphasis on incentives, qualification, and legitimacy suggests a shift toward conditionality and deservingness-based welfare, where social rights become increasingly tied to work and formal membership. This indicates a movement away from a universalist welfare imaginary and toward a more selective and disciplinary welfare state logic.

More specifically, the problem representation presupposes a governing logic in which social policy is understood as shaping individual behaviour through incentives. Welfare is treated not only as a redistributive mechanism but as a policy instrument that may influence labour market participation and migration decisions. In this framing, social benefits are implicitly positioned as capable of producing either integration or exclusion depending on how access is

regulated. This construction of the problem is also embedded in a broader institutional setting where social policy reform is developed through governmental steering and expert inquiry. The directive defines the objectives and limitations of the investigation, while the report operationalizes these political goals through legal reasoning, economic assessments, and administrative models. As such, the reform discourse emerges through a structured policy process where the state both defines the problem and produces the knowledge needed to justify and implement its solution. Consequently, the welfare problem is simultaneously framed as a question of social policy design, and as a matter of regulating membership and entitlement. This makes citizenship and legal status central categories through which welfare, responsibility, and belonging are organized in the reform discourse.

5.2 The Solution

Based on the problem representation outlined above, the directive and the report construct the reform as necessary, though they do so in somewhat different ways. In the directive, it is explicitly stated that they appoint to the committee of the report to investigate whether Swedish citizenship can be used as qualifications grounds for the social benefits the reform concerns; that is the political ambition. Through this explicit ambition, citizenship becomes a key organizing concept in the reform discourse, where entitlement is increasingly discussed through the lens of formal membership.

This is further developed by the recurring notion of ‘individual effort’ (‘egen ansträngning’), meaning that as you work, pay taxes and have permanent and legal residence in Sweden, you can qualify faster for social benefits (Socialdepartementet, 2023, p. 7; SOU 2025:53, p. 141), which is a key element of the reform. In addition to the boundary-making features that were previously discussed when it comes to the framing of third-country nationals as the problematic group, the notion of ‘individual effort’ in regard to ‘non-citizens’ also indicates a shift of responsibility from the public to the individual. Much like the framing of welfare generosity as a key explanatory factor behind unemployment and exclusion, the ‘problem’ itself and the responsibility to ‘fix’ the problem is put on the individual.

This individualisation of responsibility and emphasis on ‘individual effort’ is accompanied by a shift towards more comprehensive activation policies, which becomes the clearest through the activity requirement (‘aktivitetskravet’) for financial assistance, that is also

part of the reform, although not in the main scope of this thesis. The notion of ‘individual effort’ is for example mentioned in the directive in the following way:

The starting point for the analysis regarding social insurance shall be that qualification for residence-based social insurance benefits shall be gradual and based on one's own effort and not solely on residence. The opportunity to qualify shall occur as one works, pays taxes and has permanent and legal residence in Sweden. (Socialdepartementet, 2023, p. 7)

At the textual level (Fairclough, 1992), welfare is connected to individual efforts and that welfare is an opportunity that can be earned. It frames welfare as a reward and lack of work is implicitly framed as lack of effort, again individualizing responsibility. The usage of the word ‘shall’ (‘ska’ in Swedish, which translates to ‘shall’ or ‘must’ and expresses necessity or obligation) in relation to this is significant in terms of modality (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 158–159), which is of importance in the framework of Fairclough. Modality indicates the necessity, possibility or certainty of something, and by the usage of ‘shall’ in this particular way, ‘individual effort’ is framed as a moral term. This notion is significant because it frames labour market participation not only as an economic activity but as a moral indicator of (welfare) deservingness. By constructing work as an expression of individual effort, the discourse implicitly frames welfare receipt without work as the absence of effort, thereby legitimizing restrictions as fair and reasonable. The recurring use of terms such as ‘qualification’ (‘kvalificering’) and ‘gradual qualification’ (‘successiv kvalificering’) also frames welfare restriction as a matter of procedure and gradual inclusion rather than exclusion. Such vocabulary contributes to presenting the reform as technical and rational, thereby reducing the appearance of conflict or political contestation. This construction aligns with what Abts et al. (2020) describe as a producerist welfare logic, where entitlement is morally connected to activity, reciprocity and contribution. In the present material, this logic is not only applied to welfare recipients in general, but specifically to non-citizens whose access to welfare is made dependent on demonstrating establishment and contribution.

This is consistent with an activation-oriented logic, a crucial part of ‘workfare’ (Borevi, 2014; Tervonen, 2022), where welfare policy is framed as a tool to govern behaviour by shaping

incentives rather than as a collective responsibility to guarantee social protection. This brings us back to ‘the work principle’ (‘arbetslinjen’), that is repeatedly discussed in the directive and the report. ‘The work principle’ is not only mobilized as a solution but also embedded in the construction of the problem itself. The problem is framed as a lack of work incentives and as a mismatch between benefits and labour market participation, meaning that the diagnosis of the problem is already based on an activation-oriented understanding of welfare. This introduces an explicit behavioural logic into welfare entitlement, where individuals are expected to demonstrate effort and contribution in order to gain access to social protection. Such framing constructs welfare not only as support but also as an incentive structure designed to steer individuals toward labour market participation, which (alongside making Sweden less attractive to immigrate to) is the core political ambition.

While the directive explicitly raises citizenship as a possible qualification criterion, the report ultimately shifts the reform logic toward residence-based qualification. The report does conclude that using citizenship as grounds for qualification can be done for financial assistance, but they do not recommend it for the social insurance benefits (SOU 2025:53, pp. 133–138). Their reasoning here is mostly based on their assessment that it would not have the effect (of strengthening the incentives to quickly find work and earn a living, and to reduce the pull factors for migrants) that is expressed in the directive. The reason, as stated in the report, is that the groups that are to be treated equally to Swedish citizens according to the EU-regulated principle of equal treatment, are many more than the ones that would have to be treated equally to Swedish citizens in the case of financial assistance. Therefore, alongside pointing to issues of legal certainty and a higher administrative burden for the responsible authorities, they conclude that a qualification requirement based on Swedish citizenship would not have the desired effects as it would not disqualify a large enough group of people. In other words, it would not affect the group of people that the Government has circled out in the directive, i.e. third-country nationals that are not highly skilled workers.

This can also be understood in relation to what Visconti (2024) describes as the Europeanisation of deservingness. The reform does not simply construct deservingness through Swedish citizenship alone. Rather, EU/EEA and Nordic citizens are positioned differently from third-country nationals because supranational coordination rules limit the extent to which their welfare access can be restricted. In practice, this means that the boundary of welfare entitlement

is not only national, but also European. The reform discourse therefore constructs third-country nationals as the primary group whose access to welfare must be qualified, delayed and regulated, while EU/EEA mobility is treated as legally and politically different. This illustrates how welfare deservingness is shaped through overlapping national and supranational membership categories.

What the report instead proposes, is a solution where the qualification requirements are based on time of legal residence in Sweden, which will make it harder for some groups to qualify than for others, rather than Swedish citizenship. The proposed solution consists of a gradual qualification model where access to residence-based benefits is introduced step-by-step over time, with labour market participation accelerating qualification. Full access to social insurance benefits, without acceleration, would be after five years of (legal and permanent) residence in Sweden:

We propose that anyone who settles in Sweden should be insured for residence-based benefits for a period of five years, before the benefits covered by qualifying conditions may be provided (the residence condition). The residence condition must be fulfilled within a period of fifteen years from the date of application for benefits. (SOU 2025:53, p. 18)

In this model, welfare is no longer constructed as immediately accessible upon residence, but as a system that is progressively unlocked through continued legal residence and economic contribution. From a recognition perspective (Honneth, 1995/1992), this means that entitlement is not granted as an expression of equal membership but is made conditional upon a gradual process of proving attachment to the state and labour market. At the level of discursive practice (Fairclough, 1992), an important feature of the report is that it recontextualises the political ambition expressed in the directive into a legally feasible and administratively manageable model. Whereas the directive foregrounds citizenship as a potential boundary for welfare entitlement, the report translates this boundary-making ambition into the seemingly more neutral category of legal residence time. This translation is supported through the report's reliance on legal reasoning, administrative feasibility, and economic incentive arguments, which together frame the reform as a technical adjustment rather than a political restriction. This does not remove the differentiating effects of the reform, but it reframes them in technical and

legal-administrative terms. The solution is constructed as a model that simultaneously restricts access and claims to promote integration.

At the level of social practice (Fairclough, 1992), the proposed solution reflects a governance approach in which welfare access is regulated through legal categorisations, eligibility requirements, and administrative verification. Entitlement becomes dependent on measurable criteria such as residence duration, legal status, and labour market participation. In this way, the reform constructs welfare as a tool of policy steering, where social protection is linked to integration and contribution and requires increased capacity for authorities to assess residence history, income, and eligibility status.

5.3 The Legitimation

The reform is legitimized through several interrelated strategies in both documents, but mainly through the report which in itself functions as legitimation solely through its genre. As an official document, the report is presented as expert-driven and evidence-based, which lends authority to its framing of the problem and its proposed solutions. The genre thereby contributes to constructing the reform as rational and objective, rather than as a contested political project. The reform is further justified economically through arguments about sustainability and incentives. Welfare dependency is presented as both socially and economically ‘unsustainable’ (‘ohållbart’) and benefit access is framed as shaping individuals’ motivation to work. The reform is also morally legitimized through the work principle (‘arbetslinjen’), formulated as a normative statement: “... those who can work, shall work” (Socialdepartementet, 2023, p. 3). Furthermore, the report repeatedly anchors the reform within legal constraints by emphasizing that it does not violate Swedish law, EU law or international obligations, thereby framing the reform not simply as a political choice but as a technically regulated balancing act (SOU 2025:53, pp. 73–132). Together, these forms of legitimation contribute to naturalising the reform as both necessary and reasonable. This corresponds with previous research showing how welfare reforms are often legitimised through combinations of economic necessity, moral responsibility and institutional authority, where discourse helps make contested reforms appear reasonable or inevitable (Schmidt, 2002; Nyby et al., 2017; Bandelow & Hornung, 2019).

At the textual level (Fairclough, 1992), terms such as ‘unsustainable’ (‘ohållbart’), ‘kostnader’, (‘costs’) and ‘incentives’ (‘incitament’) frame welfare reform as an issue of

economic rationality. Welfare dependency is constructed not merely as a social concern but as a threat to the sustainability and legitimacy of the welfare system. Through this vocabulary, the reform is positioned as a necessary measure to safeguard the long-term viability of public finances and institutional trust. A further aspect of the economic legitimization of the reform concerns how differentiated entitlement is justified as reasonable and fair. The reform discourse repeatedly distinguishes between citizens and non-citizens, presenting qualification requirements as a necessary means of protecting the welfare system and ensuring legitimacy. This distinction is not only economically justified, but also morally framed as fair. At the level of discursive practice (Fairclough, 1992), this economic framing draws on a broader policy discourse in which welfare is evaluated in terms of cost-efficiency and incentive effects. The reform is thus embedded within an economic rationality that prioritizes measurable outcomes and labour market participation.

In terms of moral legitimization, ‘the work principle’ functions as somewhat of a moral anchor in the reform discourse. By presenting labour market participation as an obligation rather than an option, the reform appeals to widely shared norms of reciprocity and contribution. Welfare is thereby framed as legitimate when tied to effort, and more so framed as questionable when detached from work. Moral legitimization is also constructed through an implicit deservingness logic, where welfare entitlement is framed as morally acceptable when it follows from contribution and effort. In this way, the reform discourse draws on a normative distinction between those who are perceived as contributing to the welfare state and those who are perceived as benefiting without having earned such access. This is reinforced through the emphasis on ‘individual effort’ and through repeated formulations that frame qualification as reasonable. Welfare is in this way not only constructed as a legal entitlement or an economic resource, but also as something that must be morally justified through work, integration, and long-term establishment. This moral framing is also strengthened through modality (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 158–159). The repeated use of high-obligation expressions, such as ‘shall’ or ‘must’ (‘ska’), constructs work not merely as a desirable outcome, but as an expectation or a duty. Through such formulations, labour market participation is naturalised as the normal pathway to welfare entitlement, and deviation from this norm becomes implicitly framed as problematic.

The frequent emphasis on the ‘legitimacy’ of the welfare system further contributes to moral legitimization. Legitimacy is implicitly tied to the idea that welfare must be perceived as fair

in order to be sustainable. In this sense, restricting access is not framed as a punishing or disciplinary measure, but as one necessary to preserve public trust and ensure that the system continues to be supported by those who finance it. Such framing positions welfare reform as a defence of fairness and social cohesion rather than as a reduction of rights. Furthermore, ‘integration’ is constructed as a normative expectation rather than a structural process. The reform discourse frames integration as something individuals are responsible for achieving through work and establishment. In this way, integration becomes moralised: inclusion is tied to compliance with expectations of self-sufficiency, while continued welfare receipt becomes associated with failure to integrate. Overall, moral legitimisation rests on a reciprocity logic, where welfare is framed as something that should follow from contribution rather than precede it. This is also where welfare chauvinism and producerism overlap: access is restricted not only according to formal membership, but also according to assumptions about who contributes, who deserves, and who can legitimately claim support.

In terms of legal legitimisation, the report repeatedly refers to the EU principle of equal treatment and to international obligations in order to delimit the scope of possible reforms and to situate the reform at hand within a legal context. By foregrounding these legal constraints, the report constructs the reform not as an unrestricted political project, but as a carefully calibrated adjustment within binding supranational frameworks. The report repeatedly confirms that the reform, even if it was to be based upon citizenship as well as the chosen model on the basis of residence, does not violate supranational laws and regulations such as the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Disability Convention, the European Convention, nor the Council of Europe's Social Charter. As mentioned above, they have other reasons for proposing a model based on time of residence, other than legal limitations. The report also points to the fact that the reform is not in violation of the Swedish Constitution (also known as Sweden's fundamental laws, ‘Svensk grundlag’), with special attention paid to the Instrument of Government (‘Regeringsformen’) which sets out the most fundamental principles of Swedish democracy (SOU 2025:53, p. 114).

Their reasoning here is explicitly based on the fact that while most of these regulations prohibit direct discrimination, indirect discrimination is not prohibited. It will be easier to fulfil the residence requirement to access the benefits for Swedish citizens, as well as EU/EEA citizens as they can credit time of residence in other EU/EEA countries to their time of residence in

Sweden. It will however be harder to fulfil the requirement for third-country nationals, which per their own definition is indirect discrimination: “A Member State may also have national rules that apply equally to both its own citizens and foreign citizens, but which are easier for the Member State's own citizens to comply with. This is called indirect discrimination.” (SOU 2025:53, p. 92). Direct discrimination, on the other hand, refers to discrimination based on nationality, for example if national law has rules that only grant benefits to the Member State's own nationals. Direct discrimination regarding social benefits is only acceptable in a few cases (SOU 2025:53, p. 91). This partly explains why the report moves away from an explicitly citizenship-based model and instead proposes a formally nationality-neutral, residence-based model – despite acknowledging that such a model will affect groups differently.

The report goes on to state that indirect discrimination can be accepted if it pursues a legitimate aim and does not go beyond what is necessary to achieve that aim, referring to the principle of proportionality (SOU 2025:53, p. 92). The measure must be based on objective reasons which are independent of the nationality of the persons concerned. Here, they point to two cases from the Court of Justice of the European Union to further anchor the legal legitimization of the reform. These two cases, that they refer to as ‘legitimate aims’, concerns ensuring that the beneficiary has a genuine connection with the Member State and ensuring a certain degree of social integration before certain social benefits are granted.

The report also concludes that while for example discrimination of persons based on disability is prohibited by law, differential effects on persons with disabilities are treated as legally permissible as long as the differentiation is not based on disability as such. To illustrate, the report states that:

The essence of the non-discrimination principle under the Convention is, in our view, that discrimination may not be made against persons with disabilities on the grounds of the disability itself. A regulatory framework that, for other reasons, treats persons differently in terms of access to social security benefits and financial assistance is not in conflict with the Convention, since the difference is not due to the disability. (SOU 2025:53, p. 124)

The report also states that “The right to personal assistance is not affected for people with disabilities. However, those who have difficulty working due to illness or disability may not be able to qualify for residence-based social security benefits more quickly through work.” (SOU 2025:53, p. 28), which further illustrates how indirect discrimination is built into the reform.

This legal anchoring contributes to presenting the final proposal as balanced and responsible, even though – or specifically because – it departs from the original political ambition expressed in the directive. This is in itself a result of the legitimization process, where it was deemed as illegitimate or unfeasible to implement a reform of welfare qualification explicitly based on requirements of citizenship, effectively reframing the reform proposal as a legitimate and feasible one, instead based on (a higher requirement of time of) residence.

In addition to economic, moral, and legal arguments, the reform is legitimized through references to research and statistical data concerning migration and labour market participation (SOU 2025:53, pp. 16, 47–71). The report draws on quantitative studies that suggest a relationship between benefit levels and labour market participation, thereby supporting the incentive-based rationale of the reform. This reliance on quantitative research contributes to constructing the reform as evidence-based and objective. However, the way the research is presented, and especially what research they have chosen to present, in the report, can be interpreted as a selective mobilisation of research. The research field concerning the so-called ‘welfare magnet hypothesis’ (as aforementioned in *Chapter 2. Previous Research*) is quite contested (Agersnap et al., 2020; Andrejuk et al., 2021; Ferwerda et al., 2023; Müller, 2025). The welfare magnet hypothesis refers to the assumption that generous welfare states attract migrants, and that high benefit levels therefore function as a pull factor. In the report, this assumption is treated as an empirically supported relationship and is used to justify restrictions in access to welfare benefits as a means of reducing immigration and increasing labour market participation. In this way, welfare is constructed not primarily as social protection but as a behavioural mechanism that shapes both migration patterns and individual incentives.

However, the broader research field on the migration-welfare nexus is more contested than the report’s presentation suggests. Ferwerda et al. (2023), analysing Swiss administrative data, find limited evidence that immigrants systematically move to areas with higher benefits. Similarly, Müller (2025) finds that welfare spending effects on migration flows largely disappear once broader structural factors are controlled for. Qualitative research also complicates the

welfare magnet framing by showing that welfare considerations are embedded in wider life-course decisions concerning work, family, healthcare and long-term security rather than reducible to immediate access to benefits (Andrejuk et al. 2021). These studies suggest that welfare generosity alone is not a straightforward explanation for migration decisions.

Still, the report predominantly foregrounds studies that support the welfare magnet hypothesis, while alternative interpretations receive less attention. In this way, the reform discourse selectively mobilizes academic knowledge to reinforce its underlying assumptions. At the same time, the prominence of quantitative, econometric research and statistical data further aligns the reform with a technocratic knowledge discourse in which policy questions are framed as matters of measurable and somewhat causal effects rather than normative political choices.

Part of the legitimization process that emerges in both the report and the directive also includes references to the Tidö Agreement ('Tidöavtalet'), as well as, in the report, some references to previous reports. The Tidö Agreement is mentioned when the purpose of the reform is anchored in the ambition to reduce pull factors associated with social insurance benefits and financial assistance (SOU 2025:53, p. 41; Socialdepartementet, 2023, p. 6). This reference functions as a form of political legitimization. Rather than justifying the reform solely through law, research or economic calculation, the reference situates the reform within an already established political agreement and presents the proposed qualification requirements as part of a broader governmental program. At the level of discursive practice (Fairclough, 1992), this can be understood as an intertextual move (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 9–10; Fairclough, 2003, p. 218): the reform documents draw authority from another political text, thereby linking the technical policy process to the political mandate established through the Tidö Agreement. In this way, the reform is legitimised not only as administratively and legally feasible, but also as the implementation of a prior political commitment.

Taken together, these economic, moral, legal, political and research-based forms of legitimization contribute to presenting the reform as necessary, proportionate, and evidence-based. By combining appeals to sustainability, reciprocity, legality, and research, the discourse reduces the visibility of ideological contestation and frames the reform as a rational response to objective conditions.

5.4 Constructions, Contradictions and Consequences

This section examines how the reform discourse constructs welfare and welfare subjects, and how these constructions generate tensions and contradictions within the reform narrative. Building on Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model, the analysis focuses on how consequences are acknowledged and managed at the textual level, how competing perspectives emerge through the consultation process at the level of discursive practice, and how the reform reshapes relations of responsibility and belonging at the level of social practice. Particular attention is paid to constructions of (non-)citizens (in particular third-country nationals) and deservingness, as well as the potential implications of the reform for recognition, social inclusion, and inequality.

5.4.1 Contradictions and Consequences: Managing Harm and Redistributing Responsibility

While the reform is largely framed as strengthening incentives and reducing dependency, the report also acknowledges potentially severe consequences. It notes that increased economic vulnerability may lead to worsened health, overcrowding, and homelessness. Such passages introduce a tension in the discourse, where welfare restriction is justified as promoting integration and sustainability, yet simultaneously recognized as producing hardship. The reform is constructed as a tool for inclusion through work, while simultaneously acknowledging that it may deepen exclusion through increased poverty and insecurity. These acknowledgements, however, are often framed as secondary effects that can be mitigated through follow-up measures, which allows the main logic of the reform to remain intact.

At the textual level (Fairclough, 1992), these negative consequences are frequently framed through cautious modality and depersonalised formulations, which reduces the degree of responsibility attributed to political decision-making. Hardship is presented as a possible side effect rather than a direct outcome of the reform logic. In this way, the discourse acknowledges social risks while simultaneously containing them, allowing the overarching narrative of incentive strengthening and sustainability to remain dominant. The report foresees that the qualification conditions they propose will reduce immigration to Sweden of people from third countries who do not come here to work by around 5–10 percent. Employment in the group

affected by the qualification conditions is expected to increase by around 8–20 percentage points. They do, at the same time, acknowledge that “Among those who neither will be eligible for social insurance benefits nor for financial assistance, more will likely work illegally and commit crimes to make ends meet.” (SOU 2025:53, p. 24). Furthermore, they state that integration is expected to be affected both positively and negatively: “Increased employment improves economic integration, while increased crime worsens social and cultural integration. The integration policy goal of better educational outcomes among people with a foreign background will also be more difficult to achieve.” (SOU 2025:53, p. 24).

This formulation constructs the reform as a matter of policy trade-offs, where negative outcomes are framed as unfortunate but acceptable costs of achieving increased employment and reduced immigration. Hardship is thus not positioned as a reason to reconsider the reform, but as an effect that can be weighed against its expected benefits. At the same time, the report’s acknowledgement that excluded individuals may resort to illegal work or crime contributes to reinforcing the construction of the targeted group as socially risky. Rather than foregrounding crime as a consequence of exclusion from welfare, the formulation risks positioning the excluded subjects themselves as threats to social order. Notably, the causal link between reduced access to welfare and increased crime is stated with high certainty, while the role of the reform in producing this outcome remains backgrounded through impersonal phrasing and probabilistic modality, such as ‘will likely’ (‘kommer sannolikt’).

At the level of discursive practice (Fairclough, 1992), such passages can be understood as a form of contradiction management. By explicitly acknowledging negative consequences, the report presents itself as balanced and evidence-based, which strengthens its authority as an expert document. However, these acknowledgements do not challenge the underlying logic of the reform; rather, they are incorporated into the narrative as secondary effects that do not outweigh the anticipated gains in labour market participation. This balancing logic becomes particularly visible in the consultation responses, where several actors place greater emphasis on poverty, child welfare, and long-term exclusion, thereby contesting the proportionality and reasonability of the reform.

The report also acknowledges that their proposals will affect the balance between civil society and the public sector, as the reform will lead to more people in Sweden being left without their own means of support, while they will be unable to receive any public support other than

possible assistance in an emergency situation. This will likely increase the demand for efforts from voluntary and charitable organisations. Such organisations will then have an increased need for resources in the form of unpaid work, donations, public and state support. Other than the balance between civil society and the public sector being affected by the reform, the balance within the public sector will also be affected. According to the report (SOU 2025:53), the reform will lead to the state saving money while resulting in higher costs for Swedish municipalities. This is largely because of reduced payments of child allowance, parental allowance and housing allowance for state authorities, while the municipalities instead face increased administrative costs and increased payments of financial assistance.

This acknowledgement reveals an important displacement of responsibility embedded in the reform discourse. While the reform is justified as strengthening incentives and sustainability at the national level, the report simultaneously anticipates that the social consequences will be absorbed or handled by other actors. Responsibility for welfare provision is thereby redistributed downward (from the state to municipalities) and outward (from the public sector to civil society organisations). At the textual level (Fairclough, 1992), this shift is framed in relatively neutral administrative terms, where increased reliance on charities and unpaid voluntary work is presented as a practical consequence rather than as a normative problem. In this way, the discourse contributes to normalising a reorganisation of welfare provision in which gaps created through restricted entitlements are expected to be compensated through local governance and informal support structures, albeit recognizing that these actors hence may need more state support in terms of funding.

From the perspective of Honneth's (1995/1992) theory of recognition, this shift is significant because it implies a movement from institutionalised recognition through rights toward increased reliance on voluntary support. In Honneth's terms, social rights are important for self-respect because they position individuals as rights-bearing members of a moral and legal community. When support is displaced from rights-based entitlement to emergency assistance or charitable support, the individual is positioned less as an equal claimant and more as a recipient of discretionary help. This may have implications for both social inclusion and self-respect, as welfare becomes less predictable and less anchored in citizenship-like membership. In this sense, the reform risks producing a form of partial membership: affected individuals are physically and legally present in society but are not fully recognised as members of the welfare community.

They are included as subjects of regulation and responsibility but excluded from full entitlement and institutional support.

Moreover, the report's emphasis on state savings alongside increased municipal costs illustrates that the reform redistributes not only access to welfare but also financial responsibility within the public sector. While sustainability is constructed as a central justification for reform, the projected consequences indicate that costs and administrative burdens are likely to be shifted rather than eliminated. This redistribution of responsibility, alongside other consequences of the reform, is also reflected in the consultation responses, where several consultation bodies contest the reform's assumptions and instead foreground its social costs, administrative burdens, and exclusionary consequences. Several Swedish municipalities submitted consultation responses, and most of them reject ('avstyrker') the proposals in their entirety. Rather than challenging the incentive logic on purely ideological grounds, the municipalities primarily frame their critique in terms of anticipated practical and social consequences (see for example Karlstads kommun, 2025; Alvesta kommun, 2025; Arvika kommun, 2025; Eskilstuna kommun, 2025; Göteborgs stad, 2025). Across the responses, the reform is constructed as likely to increase vulnerability among already disadvantaged groups, particularly children and women, while simultaneously placing greater responsibility on municipal social services. Concerns are repeatedly raised about risks of heightened poverty, worsening mental health, substance abuse, homelessness, undeclared work and crime, as well as the possibility that more people will end up in long-term precariousness rather than in employment.

At the level of discursive practice (Fairclough, 1992), these responses introduce a counter-discourse that reframes the reform not as a necessary sustainability measure, but as a policy shift that externalises costs and risks onto municipalities and civil society. The municipalities also question the report's assessment of economic consequences, arguing that the proposal underestimates both administrative burdens and long-term costs for local welfare provision. Göteborgs stad (2025), for example, highlights a specific contradiction concerning assistance compensation. While the report proposes that assistance compensation should be included among the benefits subject to qualification requirements, corresponding changes are not introduced in the Act concerning Support and Service for Persons with Certain Functional Impairments (1993:387) ('Lagen om stöd och service till vissa funktionshindrade (LSS)'). As a result, municipalities may remain responsible for granting and implementing personal assistance

under ‘LSS’ even in cases where individuals are not eligible for state-funded assistance compensation. The municipality therefore argues that the reform risks shifting significant financial responsibility from the state to local authorities. Although the report suggests that municipalities could be compensated through general government grants, Göteborgs stad points out that the proposal lacks clarity regarding calculation principles and long-term adjustment mechanisms, thereby raising concerns about legal and financial predictability.

Civil society actors, such as Sveriges Stadsmissioner, explicitly reject the proposed qualification model on the grounds that it risks increasing economic and social inequalities, undermines core principles of the Swedish welfare model, and lacks sufficient analysis of the consequences for vulnerable groups, including children (Sveriges Stadsmissioner, 2025). Similar rights-based criticism is articulated by the Swedish Institute for Human Rights (Institutet för mänskliga rättigheter), which emphasises that the proposal risks undermining economic and social rights and that the report does not sufficiently assess the reform’s compatibility with Sweden’s human rights obligations (Institutet för mänskliga rättigheter, 2025). Administrative bodies such as the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (Försäkringskassan) also foreground implementation challenges and administrative burdens, pointing to the need for legal clarity and adequate preparation in order to ensure predictability and legal certainty (Försäkringskassan, 2025). In contrast, some employer oriented actors welcome elements of the proposal that facilitate quicker qualification for economically active migrants, but raise concerns about the design of specific requirements, such as income thresholds which may exclude individuals even in relatively skilled occupations (Arbetsgivarverket, 2025; Företagarna, 2025).

Taken together, these responses illustrate that the reform discourse is not unified but contested. While the report frames the proposal as a balanced and evidence-based adjustment, many consultation bodies instead foreground risks of increased vulnerability, administrative strain, and weakened rights protections. In this way, the consultation process makes visible a counter-discourse that challenges the report’s framing of restriction as proportionate, necessary, and socially sustainable.

5.4.2 Constructions of Welfare and Welfare Subjects: Deservingness and Recognition

Through the problem representation and proposed solution, the directive constructs an implicit distinction between desirable and undesirable welfare subjects. The undesirable subject is the unemployed or low-skilled third-country national who is associated with welfare dependency, weak labour market attachment and cost to the welfare system. In contrast, the desirable subject is economically active, self-sufficient and preferably either a Swedish citizen or a highly skilled migrant whose presence is constructed as beneficial because it contributes to tax revenue and labour supply. Through these representations, the reform discourse constructs distinct subject positions. The ‘non-citizen’ is not treated as a neutral legal category but discursively divided into legitimate and illegitimate welfare subjects. Those positioned as economically active and self-sufficient are constructed as desirable and contributing, whereas those who are unemployed or low-skilled are constructed as economically burdensome and potentially welfare dependent. This reflects welfare chauvinism in a moderate rather than strict sense. The reform does not construct migrants as completely excluded from welfare, but it constructs equal access as something that must be delayed, qualified for and earned. Welfare access is thereby tied to both national belonging and demonstrated contribution, which combines welfare chauvinist boundary-making with a producerist logic of deservingness.

Interpreted through Honneth’s (1995/1992) theory of recognition, the reform can be seen as affecting recognition in the sphere of rights. Since access to welfare benefits functions as an institutional expression of membership and entitlement, restricting access for non-citizens implies a weakened form of legal recognition, where certain groups are positioned as only partially entitled members of society. The reform discourse also has implications for recognition in the sphere of solidarity, as it constructs social esteem in relation to labour market contribution. Individuals are recognized as valuable members of society primarily through paid work, while those unable to work are discursively positioned as burdens or risks. In this way, contribution becomes a moral basis for belonging.

Furthermore, women are significantly worse off from the introduction of the social benefit reform, in particular unemployed or unskilled women from third countries, compared to men. The report states that the reform is expected to affect gender equality as it entails a greater loss of both social security benefits and financial assistance among women than among men.

Women's disposable income is thus expected to decrease more than men's. Experience from a similar reform in Denmark also indicates that it is primarily men who will work more as a result of the reform. The report also explicitly states that “Economic vulnerability is expected to increase significantly among women who come to Sweden from third countries.” (SOU 2025:53, p. 28). It is also pointed out that foreign born women have a lower rate of employment compared to women born in Sweden – the same goes for men, but the difference is bigger among women (SOU 2025:53, p. 57).

This is seemingly somewhat contradictory to the purpose and ambition of the reform in terms of increasing employment and decreasing welfare dependency. The report's acknowledgement that women are expected to experience increased economic vulnerability highlights a tension between the stated objective of promoting integration through work and the projected outcome of deepened inequality for a group already identified as having lower employment rates. In this sense, the reform discourse simultaneously frames employment as the primary pathway to inclusion, while recognizing that the proposed measures may reproduce or intensify gendered patterns of exclusion.

At the textual level (Fairclough, 1992), this consequence is framed as a foreseeable effect rather than as a central policy problem. The report does not treat the predicted increase in economic vulnerability among women as a reason to reconsider the reform logic, but rather as a side effect that is reported and accounted for. At the level of discursive practice (Fairclough, 1992), this functions as a form of contradiction management: by explicitly acknowledging negative outcomes, the report positions itself as balanced and evidence-based, while still maintaining the legitimacy of the reform as a whole. This also illustrates how the reform presupposes an ideal welfare subject whose integration can be achieved through rapid labour market entry. Since the reform's qualification logic privileges those able to increase their employment, the anticipated gendered effects indicate that the model is unevenly aligned with different groups' actual labour market positions. In practice, this means that the reform disproportionately rewards those who are already closer to stable employment, as their ability to meet the qualification requirements is greater. This creates a tension with the protective function of welfare, since those with the greatest need for support may also be those least able to qualify quickly.

Interpreted through Honneth's (1995/1992) theory of recognition, this can be understood as misrecognition in the sphere of rights insofar as access to social protection becomes unevenly distributed according to legal status, gender and labour market position. It may also be interpreted as misrecognition (Honneth, 1995/1992, Chapter 6) in the sphere of solidarity, as the reform's underlying contribution logic privileges certain forms of social participation (primarily paid labour), while leaving other forms of contribution less visible and less valued. Importantly, the report's own assessment suggests that this gendered vulnerability is particularly pronounced among third-country nationals, meaning that gender and migration status intersect in how the consequences of the reform are distributed – making unskilled and/or unemployed women, especially mothers, from third countries the worst off from the reform.

6 Discussion

This final chapter summarizes the main findings of the analysis and discusses their broader implications. The chapter first returns to the research questions by outlining how welfare, entitlement and welfare subjects are constructed in the reform discourse. It then discusses the findings in relation to previous research and the theoretical perspectives of recognition and welfare chauvinism, with particular attention to what the reform may indicate about changing understandings of welfare, belonging and social rights in Sweden. Finally, the chapter reflects on the limitations of the study and suggests directions for future research.

6.1 Summary of the Findings

This thesis has analysed how welfare is discursively constructed in the policy process surrounding ‘bidragsreformen’, focusing primarily on the directive, Dir. 2023:149 (Socialdepartementet, 2023), and the report, SOU 2025:53. The analysis shows that welfare is constructed not primarily as a universal social right, but as a conditional resource that must be protected from overuse, dependency and undesirable incentives. The problem representation links migration, weak labour market attachment, social exclusion and long-term welfare dependency, while positioning welfare generosity as a possible cause of these problems. The proposed solution is therefore constructed as a qualification model, where access to social insurance benefits and financial assistance is made dependent on legal residence, labour market participation and ‘individual effort’.

The analysis further shows that the reform is legitimized through several interrelated strategies. Economically, it is justified through references to sustainability, costs and incentives. Morally, it is legitimized through the work principle and a reciprocity-based logic in which those who can work are expected to work. Legally, the report frames the proposal as compatible with Swedish law, EU law and international obligations. The report also mobilizes research and statistics to construct the reform as evidence-based, although the analysis suggests that research concerning the welfare magnet hypothesis is used selectively. Together, these forms of legitimation contribute to presenting the reform as necessary, proportionate and rational.

Finally, the analysis shows that the reform discourse produces important constructions of welfare subjects. Third-country nationals, particularly those who are unemployed or low-skilled,

are positioned as a group whose access to welfare must be regulated to protect the system. In contrast, economically active and highly skilled migrants are constructed as more desirable because they are expected to contribute rather than depend on welfare. This produces a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate welfare subjects. Through Honneth's (1995/1992) theory of recognition, the reform can be interpreted as weakening recognition in the sphere of rights, since access to social protection becomes conditional rather than equal, and in the sphere of solidarity, since social value is tied primarily to paid work and contribution.

6.2 Final Discussion

Taken together, the findings suggest that 'bidragsreformen' should be understood as part of a broader transformation in how welfare is imagined and governed in Sweden. Welfare is not simply constructed as a universal right tied to residence or need, but increasingly as a conditional resource that must be protected, earned and justified. The prominence of concepts such as qualification, incentives, individual effort, citizenship and legal residence indicates a shift toward a more selective welfare logic, where social protection is linked to contribution, labour market participation and formal membership. This corresponds with previous research showing that Swedish universalism has not disappeared, but has become more complex and uneven, particularly in relation to benefit adequacy, conditionality and differentiated access (Blomqvist & Palme, 2020; Burström, 2015).

A further tension, which goes beyond the immediate analysis but is relevant for interpreting the reform, concerns the relationship between welfare restriction and future welfare needs. A central paradox is that the reform constructs welfare access as something that should be restricted for groups positioned as insufficiently established or insufficiently contributing, while Sweden simultaneously faces long-term challenges related to demographic aging and labour shortages in welfare services. If the welfare state depends on labour, contribution and care work, then a reform that risks increasing exclusion among groups already positioned at the margins of the labour market may appear contradictory. Rather than simply strengthening the welfare state, the reform may contribute to narrowing the category of those who are recognised as legitimate participants in it.

This does not mean that 'the work principle' ('arbetslinjen') is inherently problematic. In the Swedish welfare state tradition, high employment has historically been central to financing

universal welfare and promoting social inclusion, while simultaneously providing meaningfulness in different ways. What is significant in this reform discourse, however, is how the work principle is mobilised as a boundary-making and disciplinary principle. Work is not only framed as a route to inclusion, but as a condition for recognition and entitlement. The problem is therefore not the emphasis on work in itself, but the way work becomes a moral test through which some groups are constructed as deserving and others as conditional or suspect welfare subjects.

In this sense, the reform discourse also reflects elements of welfare chauvinism. It does not simply exclude migrants from welfare but constructs equal access as something that must be delayed, qualified for and earned. This corresponds to a moderate form of welfare chauvinism (Bell et al., 2023), where welfare is protected for those who are understood to belong or contribute, while outsiders are included only conditionally. The reform also combines this boundary-making with a producerist logic (Abts et al., 2020), where entitlement is tied to activity, responsibility and reciprocity. This suggests that the reform is not only economically motivated, but politically and ideologically invested in a particular moral understanding of welfare, work and belonging.

The findings also suggest that the reform does not only reflect a national form of welfare chauvinism, but also a more Europeanised hierarchy of welfare deservingness. As Visconti (2024) argues, welfare deservingness in Europe may increasingly be structured around a distinction between EU citizens and non-EU citizens, rather than only between nationals and foreigners. This is visible in 'bidragsreformen', where EU/EEA and Nordic citizens are largely treated as legally protected categories, while third-country nationals become the main group whose access to welfare can be restricted. The reform therefore illustrates how national welfare boundaries are shaped by supranational legal orders, producing a layered model of belonging in which some non-citizens are closer to full welfare membership than others.

Following Fairclough (1992, p. 10), this can be understood as a hegemonic struggle over the meaning of welfare. The reform discourse does not merely describe welfare problems; it actively contributes to redefining welfare as an incentive structure, a mechanism of integration and a boundary of membership. In doing so, it draws on and reproduces broader ideological formations in which welfare generosity is problematised, work is moralised, and access to social rights is made conditional upon contribution and legal status. The discourse is therefore

politically and ideologically invested, even when it is presented through the technical and expert genre of a report.

Honneth's (1995/1992) theory of recognition helps clarify why this matters. If social rights are understood as institutional expressions of recognition, then differentiated welfare access affects more than material income. It also affects whether individuals are recognised as full members of the moral and legal community. The reform risks producing a form of partial membership, where certain non-citizens are present in society and subject to its obligations but not fully recognised as members of the welfare community. This is particularly visible in relation to third-country nationals, especially women, who are identified in the report as groups likely to experience increased economic vulnerability. The findings therefore raise questions about the protective function of welfare. A welfare model that increasingly rewards those already closest to employment risks becoming less responsive to those in greatest need of support. In this sense, the reform discourse shifts the emphasis from welfare as protection against vulnerability toward welfare as a reward for employability, contribution and formal establishment.

At the same time, it is important not to treat 'bidragsreformen', and in particular the qualification model for social insurance benefits and financial assistance, as an isolated or entirely new development. The ideas mobilised in the reform discourse have longer roots in Swedish welfare politics. The work principle, activation policies and the emphasis on self-sufficiency have been central to Swedish welfare policy for a long time. What appears significant in this reform, however, is the way these ideas are combined with a stronger boundary-making logic around migration, citizenship and formal membership. In this sense, the reform can be understood as part of a longer transformation rather than as a sudden break. The moral expectation that people should work has become increasingly explicit in policy discourse, but in 'bidragsreformen' this expectation is connected not only to employment policy, but also to the regulation of welfare entitlement and belonging.

This also points to a broader political movement in Swedish welfare politics. Earlier neoliberal welfare reforms have often been associated with marketisation, incentives, activation and individual responsibility. These elements are also present in the reform discourse analysed here. However, they are combined with a more conservative and welfare-chauvinist logic in which access to welfare is tied to national belonging, legal status and contribution. The reform is therefore not only an example of economic policy concerned with costs and labour market

incentives, but also of cultural and moral politics. It defines the kind of subject who is imagined as belonging to the welfare community: active, self-sufficient, legally established and economically contributing.

The Tidö Agreement is important in this regard because it functions as a political turning point for this shift. In the analysis, references to the Tidö Agreement were interpreted as a form of political legitimation, anchoring the reform in an already established governmental program. In the final discussion, this can be understood more broadly as part of a political reorientation in which migration, welfare dependency, integration and social order are increasingly linked. The proposed qualification requirements are therefore not only technical adjustments to the welfare system, but part of a wider political project in which access to welfare is made conditional upon demonstrated integration, work and formal belonging.

6.3 Reflections, Limitations and Future Research

This thesis has focused on the policy discourse surrounding the proposed qualification requirements in ‘bidragsreformen’, primarily through the governmental committee directive Dir. 2023:149 and the Swedish Government Official Report SOU 2025:53. This delimitation has made it possible to conduct a close discourse analysis of the central policy documents, but it also means that the study does not capture the full policy process or all arenas where the reform is discussed and contested. Consultation responses have been used selectively, and the thesis does not analyse parliamentary debate, media coverage, party-political communication or civil society campaigns in depth. The study is also limited in that it analyses discourse rather than implementation or material effects. It can therefore show how welfare, entitlement and welfare subjects are constructed, but not how the reform will affect individuals, municipalities or welfare institutions in practice.

These limitations point to several possible directions for future research. One important continuation would be to examine how the reform is communicated across different political and public arenas. A broader discourse analytical study could compare the technical and legal-administrative language of the report with Government press releases, parliamentary debates, election rhetoric and media representations. Such a study could investigate whether the reform is framed differently depending on genre and audience, for example as an economic

necessity, an integration measure, a crime-prevention strategy, a question of fairness, or a way of protecting the welfare state.

A second direction for future research would be to analyse the consultation responses more systematically. In this thesis, selected responses are used to show that counter-discourses emerge within the reform process. A fuller study could examine how different actors – such as municipalities, civil society organisations, government agencies, trade unions, employer organisations and human rights institutions – construct the reform and its consequences. This could provide deeper knowledge about how welfare reforms are contested within Swedish policymaking, and how different institutional actors negotiate tensions between legal feasibility, economic responsibility, administrative capacity, social rights and social consequences.

Future research could also examine the implementation of the qualification requirements when the reform enters into force. Such research could study how authorities interpret the new rules, how municipalities handle increased responsibility, and how social workers experience the practical and ethical consequences of conditional access to welfare. This would be particularly relevant because the report itself acknowledges that the reform may increase economic vulnerability among certain groups. Research on implementation could therefore contribute with important knowledge about how policy constructions of entitlement are translated into administrative practice.

Another important direction would be research focusing on the experiences of those affected by the reform. While this thesis analyses how welfare subjects are constructed in policy discourse, future studies could examine how people targeted by qualification requirements understand and navigate conditional access to social protection in everyday life. Such research could be particularly important in relation to third-country nationals, women, families with children and persons with disabilities. From the perspective of recognition theory, this would make it possible to study not only material consequences, but also how conditional welfare access affects self-respect, social inclusion and the experience of belonging.

Finally, the thesis opens up for comparative research. Since debates about welfare access, migration, deservingness and contribution are visible across the Nordic countries and Europe more broadly, future research could compare the Swedish reform discourse with similar developments in Denmark, Norway or Finland. Such a comparison could examine whether Sweden is moving closer to a wider Nordic or European pattern of conditional welfare inclusion,

or whether the Swedish case still differs because of its historically strong universalist welfare tradition. This would make it possible to further explore whether ‘bidragsreformen’ represents a specifically Swedish development or part of a broader transformation of welfare membership in contemporary Europe.

6.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis shows that the proposed qualification requirements in ‘bidragsreformen’ construct welfare as a conditional resource tied to work, residence, contribution and formal membership. Welfare is not represented primarily as an automatic social right connected to residence or need, but as something that must be earned, qualified for and justified. Through this discourse, non-citizens – particularly third-country nationals – are positioned as conditional welfare subjects whose access to social protection must be regulated to protect the legitimacy and sustainability of the welfare state.

The reform therefore illustrates how contemporary welfare politics is not only about redistribution, costs or administrative design. It is also about recognition, belonging and the boundaries of social membership. By linking welfare entitlement to individual effort, labour market participation and legal status, the reform discourse contributes to a redefinition of welfare from collective protection toward conditional inclusion. This does not mean that Swedish universalism has disappeared, but it suggests that its boundaries are being renegotiated. The thesis therefore shows how welfare state transformation can take place not only through institutional change, but also through discourse: through changing ideas about who welfare is for, what it should do, and what individuals must prove in order to be recognised as entitled members of the welfare community.

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