



# The Role of Communication in Sport Integration

## The Case Study of the Somalia National Bandy Team in Sweden<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract:

The study examines what role communication has played in the integration of Somalis into Swedish society by looking at sport as a tool for successful integration. It also explores how both the local and international image of the Somalia National Bandy Team has changed in light of communication about them in the media. I argue that communication has enabled the team to be able to garner financial support, attract international attention and overcome initial prejudice towards Somalis in Sweden. The research adopts a qualitative research approach and is based on the document content analysis of media articles, interviews and questionnaires with bandy players and Borlänge officials, and the documentary film *Trevligt Folk*. It contends that it can be successful to integrate migrants into a society with the help of sport, and that not only the image of sportspeople but of the general migrant community may improve, as illustrated by the case study of the Somalia National Bandy Team in Sweden.

### Keywords:

Somalia National Bandy Team; Sweden; communication; integration; sport.

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## Introduction

International migration can be considered an essential feature of today's globalizing world, and as such it is one of the most pressing matters for the international community. A number of European countries have been working towards creating favorable conditions facilitating the adaptation of migrants into their society, with Sweden being one of the most successful in this regard. For example, the Scandinavians were ranked the eighth most friendly country for immigrants in 2021 based on a variety of factors including income, education, wealth and work-life balance (Golden Capitalist, 2021). This finding coincides with the results of the 2020 Gallup's Migrant Acceptance Index, placing Sweden the eighth most accepting country for migrants. The survey, in which the Scandinavian nation scored 7.92 out of 9, interviewed respondents in 145 countries, asking them how they would evaluate having migrants as fellow citizens, neighbors and family members (Esipova, Ray and Tsabutashvili, 2020).

Migration in Sweden is not a new phenomenon, and traces its history back a very long time. Since the 1850s, the country has been characterized by different waves of immigration and emigration. The most significant outflow, known as "the great emigration", occurred between the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and the interwar period, when approximately 1.5 million people moved from the country. It peaked in 1887, when over 50.000 Swedes fled chiefly to the Americas and Australia (Statistics Sweden, 2013). There were various reasons that contributed to the emigration of Swedes, such as poverty, political constraints and religious persecution among others. As a result of the country's open door policy, the number of asylum seekers increased at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with migrants arriving from Africa (Eritrea, Somalia), Asia (Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey) and South America. The process reached its peak in 2015, when more than 160.000 people applied for asylum in Sweden (Swedish Institute, 2022). Following that, mainly due to the fact that the country's migration policy was modified, the number of applications started to decrease gradually. However, it can be seen that Somalia remains in the Top 10 countries with 443 applications for asylum in 2020. (Migrationsverket, 2021).

While integrating migrants into a society is definitely challenging, it also provides a host of benefits to the receiving country, including the improvement of its international image as a welfare state. With the intent of maintaining this status, many initiatives have been put forward to assist migrants wishing to integrate into Swedish society. Sport, for instance, is becoming a tool for integration as it may have the potential to overcome ethnical obstacles. Although I am aware that research has been done linking the integration of migrants to sport (Hertting and Karlefors, 2013; Smith, Spaaij and McDonald, 2018), I would like to analyze a more specific topic, namely the role of communication in the integration of Somalis into Swedish society through the case study of the Somalia National Bandy Team in Sweden.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The connection between sport and communication has been stressed by one of the Somali bandy players, Mohamed Mire, who reasoned that sport is able to create common communication channels between Somalia and Sweden, and thus they can lead to the improvement of relationship between the countries. It includes showing the film *Trevligt Folk* to the Somali president and the general population as well as organizing workshops and promoting bandy in Somalia (Mire, 2019).



The research adopts a qualitative research approach and is based on the analysis of media articles, interviews and questionnaires with bandy players and officials in Borlänge, and the 2015 documentary film *Trevligt Folk* (translated as ‘Nice people’ in English). While the former can help us answer the question if and how communication can be used to change the image of migrants in a rather fact-based manner, the latter illustrates the Somali integration process, and the opinion and views of the players, management and locals in a more emotional way. The article is destined to enrich the growing literature on communication and sport integration in the Somali-Swedish context and this research is important, since there appears to be underestimation from the side of the Swedish government in terms of the power of sport as a potentially successful platform for integration.

### ***The History of the Somalia National Bandy Team***

Based on the 2015 data of the United Nations Population Division, Sweden houses one of the largest Somali diasporas globally, as the Scandinavian country was ranked ninth in the world and second in Europe with about 60.000 migrants (Connor and Krogstad, 2016). Since then this number has increased even further, contributing to the fact that there were more than 70.000 Somali people residing in Sweden in 2021 (Statista Research Department, 2022). The reasons for fleeing Somalia are multifaceted, but escaping from prolonged conflict, al-Shabaab terrorism, poverty as well as famines caused by droughts and floods can all be listed here (European Commission, 2022).

Sweden has 290 municipalities and about 3.200 Somalis live in Borlänge, a former industrial city with a population of 52.254 (Statistics Sweden, 2021). It means that every sixteenth person is a Somali in the municipality, and although Borlänge has witnessed an increase in IT, retail and education in recent years (Uplift, 2022), migrants’ integration into society coupled with the concerns of native Swedes posed a serious challenge to the town. Instead of social exclusion, however, business consultant and entrepreneur Patrik Andersson came up with the idea of integrating Somalis with the help of sport, hoping it would also pave the way for reducing unemployment and establishing new forums for communication between migrants and locals (Rolander, 2013).

Andersson was trying to find something capable of bringing people of different nationalities together. Sport is believed to have a unifying power and given football’s popularity among the Somalis, setting up FC Swesom, a municipality-founded football club in Borlänge, seemed to be the obvious choice. Nevertheless, the Swedish entrepreneur thought getting Somalis to play a local game would be a much better option, since if they proved successful, it would improve the international reputation of Sweden as a welfare state and spur integration and social change. And that is how the choice fell on bandy (Majendie, 2014).

While Sweden is undoubtedly most famous for football, bandy (together with the quite similar ice hockey) is a sport that is commonly played during the long winter months. Although

it is truly popular in the Scandinavian countries and Russia, it is far from being widely known. Bandy is a team sport played with eleven players on ice, which equals the size of a football pitch. It combines the elements of field- and ice hockey as well as football but instead of a puck, the players are working towards getting an orange ball into the net (Brodala, 2018). To the question 'Why bandy?' Andersson replied: "Because it is the most Swedish of all games. We want to use it as an example to demonstrate that skin colour doesn't matter. The important thing is that we live together and play together" (Zaytsev, 2014).

The Somalia National Bandy Team is the first of its kind, because no other African country is represented in the winter sport (O'Connor, 2013). It is hard to imagine Somalis – who are completely unaccustomed to winter weathers and freezing temperatures (Kiss, Besenyő and Resperger, 2014, pp. 14-17) – skating on ice competitively, but their ascent to both local and international fame might be the consequence of this implausibility. Their story has been compared to the Jamaica national bobsleigh team that participated in the 1988 Winter Olympic Games, and based on the film made of their debut the team was called 'Cool Runnings 2.0' (Shearlaw, 2016). Communication proved to be key in getting financial support, positioning the team in international limelight and battling early prejudice towards Somalis in Sweden, thus the study will analyze these elements separately.

### ***The role of communication in garnering financial support***

After the idea about creating a bandy team consisting exclusively of Somali people was lauded by his friends, Andersson began looking for financial support. With the help of Mursal Ismail, later chairman and politician with Somali and Swedish origins, and Hans Grandin, one of the managers of the local bandy team, the business consultant lobbied the initiative to Jan-Olof Lundberg, the person responsible for integration at Borlänge Municipality. The early general reaction of the project is mirrored by Andersson's comment: "People on the street said I was crazy, the manager said I was crazy, the people of Somalia asked if I was crazy, the national Bandy organization too" (Majendie, 2014). The initial shock, however, wore off and the city hall assured the entrepreneur that it would provide financial support to the Somalia National Bandy Team. It would be a mistake to think it was adequate on its own, since municipality funding was insignificant, covering only a part of marketing costs (Grandin, 2019).

Nonetheless, equipment, training and transport costs had to be covered if the team wanted to play international bandy. Besides the support acquired from the city hall, Andersson needed to get as many local and international sponsors as possible to invest in the Somalia National Bandy Team. The business consultant managed to win over Billy Tang, owner of two local restaurants in Borlänge, Golden Palace and *Engelska Puben* (translated as 'The English Pub' in English). He wished to be involved in the project on the basis of being a migrant himself and strived to set an example to Swedish people about immigrants contributing to society positively (Ewaldsson, 2019). Tang's honest, albeit sometimes very direct approach seemed to stun Andersson on several occasions. For instance, he is depicted as an impulsive person who



gets angry when the Somalis' shirts arrive and the logo of his restaurant is not placed where it has been promised (Hammar, Wikingsson, Af Klintberg and Helgeson, 2015).

Andersson was also determined to try his luck at the Federation of International Bandy (FIB), primarily because they had common interests. While his aim was obviously to obtain possible support for the team, the federation wanted to popularize the sport as only the inclusion of additional countries may result in bandy to be officially played at the Olympics. When the idea of Somalis competing in bandy was first presented to him, FIB's secretary-general Bo Nyman thought it was 'a bit too fantastic', but he eventually agreed to help secure some funding for them. He even traveled to Montenegro in the summer of 2013 to get the Somalia National Bandy Team participating in the 2014 World Bandy Championships of Irkutsk in Russia (Rolander, 2013). To commemorate the event, the band Apocalyps even wrote a song called 'Gul gul gul Somalia' (which can be translated to "have success and win") as a motivation tool for the team.

One cannot help but discover that the Swedish government itself did not provide financial support to the team, and the idea of getting the Somalis play bandy in Siberia was funded on a municipal level supplemented by private investments. Although it is not impossible, it is quite rare for the government to support specific projects (Lundberg, 2019). Based on that, it could be argued that Sweden is yet to exploit the full potential of sport as an integration tool.<sup>4</sup> However, it is important to point out that the government does not disregard sport as the annual investment in it amounted to SEK 2.25 billion (with an additional SEK 1.5 billion due to COVID-19) in 2020, which is over 364 million euros (Norberg, 2021). The fact that the Somalia National Bandy Team did not receive funds from the government can be justified by having no government agency responsible for the sport policy of the entire Scandinavian county (Stenling and Sam, 2017).

### *The role of communication in attracting international attention*

Andersson was aware that it was necessary to attract international attention if the team was to qualify for the 2014 Bandy World Championship. With the purpose of securing financial support, the entrepreneur tried to build media hype around the Somalia National Bandy Team. It turned out to be successful, since media sources both locally and internationally contacted him to ask for interviews and write about the integration project. As illustrated in the film, Andersson was absolutely delighted, saying that the "CNN has been in touch. The BBC and Al-Jazeera have been in touch. And Wall Street Journal and Channel 4. Dutch media and newspapers have been here. Aftonbladet, Expressen, SVT and TV4, too. A Spanish radio

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<sup>4</sup> In the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Swedish government launched two specific projects to integrate children and young adults with migrant backgrounds into society with the help of sport. They are called *Handslaget* (translated as 'Handshake' in English) and *Idrottslyftet* (translated as 'Sport promotion' in English).

channel and, let's see... Who else? The Web of course" (Hammar, Wikingsson, Af Klintberg and Helgeson, 2015).

A number of articles (Brodala, 2018; Julin, 2015; Majendie, 2014; O'Connor, 2013; Palme, 2014; Ramm, 2013; Rolander, 2013; Shearlaw, 2016; Zaytsev, 2014) have been written about the unique story of Somalis skating on ice, and according to Anwar Hared, one of the bandy players, they convey the same message, namely the potential of sport to bring people of various backgrounds together, bridging cultural differences and filling the void created by a lack of understanding about Somali migration into Sweden (Hared, 2019). Indeed, the Somalia National Bandy Team was primarily set up to facilitate integration and gain local acceptance, which is mirrored in international media sources too. While Andersson simply remarked "integration in sport was a good way to work" (Majendie, 2014), Mursal Ismail deemed it crucial "for Somalis to show themselves doing good things for their host country" (Shearlaw, 2016).

The power of media and the role of communication are clearly visible in how the image of bandy players has changed over time. From being on the brink of Swedish society, they have become "stars" and the people of Borlänge know who they are" (Lundberg, 2019). The Somalia National Bandy Team has gained international fame and has set an example for successful sport integration. People of different cultures go to their matches, rooting for the team<sup>5</sup> and Somalis also enjoy the support of online communities. One of the players said they have lots of fans sending them "messages on social media [with the following texts:] "we are proud of you", "continue to train", "continue to compete"" (Hared, 2019). They definitely do so, since the players are aware that by improving their results they can remain in the international limelight.

Positive development took place not only on the international level, but locally too. Two of the most significant ones are the team becoming a role model for the migrants of the next generation<sup>6</sup> and the changing attitudes of Swedes towards Somalis after the 2014 Bandy World Championship. While the former can be beneficial in terms of providing opportunities for the successful sport integration of migrants, the latter is even more important as it illustrates the ability of Swedish society to change. It is a two-way process because on the one hand it requires Swedes to be able to reflect on their culture, but on the other hand migrants need to expand their knowledge on how society where they live functions. Realizing they could not fit in as Somalis, they redefined their role and got into it as Somalia bandy players, which led to local acceptance. While sport is undoubtedly a key to integration, it is not sufficient in itself. It has to be coupled with effective communication; otherwise opportunities may not be seized, since "if you do not turn [the key] the door does not open (Hared, 2019).

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<sup>5</sup> There is a scene in *Trevligt Folk* when Russians are cheering for the Somali bandy players shouting "So-ma-li, So-ma-li!" (Hammar, Wikingsson, Af Klintberg and Helgeson, 2015). People of various backgrounds come to their matches to support the Somali team and encourage them to always look ahead (Mire, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> One of the players said that kids often visit their matches and compliment them or express their desire to play bandy competitively in the future (Hared, 2019).



### *The role of communication in overcoming initial prejudice*

After the Somalis proved at the 2014 World Championship they could actually play bandy (which was growingly considered a national interest in Sweden), the locals started to be more welcoming towards them and “people in Borlänge seem[ed] to stand up for the team” (Grandin, 2019). However, it was not always the case. At the beginning of the documentary, several residents are interviewed to find out what the general opinion is about the bandy project. While the majority of people believe sport integration is a way forward, they do not have a high opinion of the Somalis, who seemingly do not want to be integrated, adjust and find a job. Conversations with Borlänge citizens revealed that they mostly had a negative image of the migrants, thinking all they were interested in was “throwing stones and causing havoc” or “hang[ing] around and steal[ing] bikes” (Hammar, Wikingsson, Af Klintberg and Helgeson, 2015).

While the film would like to emphasize that these prejudices were far from being true and that residents should have nuanced their views of the Somalis, locals can also be somewhat understood. They had been experiencing an increasing number of foreigners of entirely different backgrounds, which had increased tensions throughout Sweden. Although they used to be deferential, they have become tired of and also a bit scared of the continuous tides of refugees. This mentality is mirrored by one of the respondents, who said “[t]here is too much black...Sometimes it feels like we’re being replaced. It’s gone too far” (Hammar, Wikingsson, Af Klintberg and Helgeson, 2015). To counteract these prejudices, Mursal Ismail stressed that it was crucial for the Somalis to achieve some results in order to make the local community proud of them and earn their trust. He pointed out that if they failed to do that, they would remain only a burden.

According to Daqa Niamkey, a member of the Somali Olympic Committee, the bandy project is a great initiative as it provides “an opportunity to change the image of the country” (Somalia Bandy, 2013). The question, however, arises if it has to be altered so that refugees’ integration into society is facilitated or because Swedes have a negative image of Somalis on the whole, which is basically synonymous with racial prejudice (Palme, 2014). At the end of 2013, there was even a cultural debate in Sweden, exploring whether migrants’ integration must be attached to their positively contributing to society or the latter has a responsibility at all times to accept refugees even if they cost money to the country in the long run (Dagens Nyheter, 2013).

Among the OECD countries, Sweden is characterized by one of the biggest differences in the employment of natives and migrants (OECD and European Union, 2015) and Somalis can be victims of arson attacks or receive death threats (Shearlaw, 2016). In 2012, almost a third of the Somali community living in Forserum, Sweden was forced to leave as a result of having been physically and mentally abused<sup>7</sup> (The Local Sweden, 2012). Racial discrimination was also present in Borlänge as recounted by Damayanthi Lundin, a mother with a migrant background.

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<sup>7</sup> They were occasionally beaten up or insulted verbally and the windows of their houses were smashed as well.



She told the story of taking her kids to swimming practice, when a native Swede walked up to them and “threw sand at [her] boys” (Hammar, Wikingsson, Af Klintberg and Helgeson, 2015). Based on this, it can be reasoned that Sweden must put an end to structural racism before attempting to integrate migrants into society.

Despite initial prejudice and the negative remarks of Borlänge residents at the beginning of the documentary, citizens’ approach markedly changed after the Somali National Bandy Team had qualified to represent the city internationally. Interestingly, locals appeared to be more welcoming towards not only the players, but other Somalis too. This clear example of sport integration shows that the team could manage to come up to expectations and inch a bit closer to Swedes, but it also illustrates that a society has the potential to change for the better. Unfortunately, the people who expressed criticism about the migrants are not interviewed again at the end of the film but in one of the concluding scenes we can see the city square crowded with Swedes and Somalis celebrating the success of the team together. Greeting and cheering the players upon arrival in Borlänge definitely made them feel more at home, which can be considered a prerequisite for their integration into the city (Ewaldsson, 2019).

## Conclusion

Sport can prevent social discrimination (Peterson, 2004) and is an excellent way to create integration into a society. This thought may have been on Patrik Andersson’s mind when he came up with the idea of Somalis playing bandy, a sport which was incredibly popular in Sweden, but rather absurd and far from Somalis, who were not used to winter weathers and freezing temperatures and had never stood on ice before. Regardless, the integration project proved fruitful, which required the combination of garnering financial support, attracting media attention and probably most importantly, for Borlänge to overcome prejudice towards Somalis. Although each of these elements have been analyzed separately, it is important to see them in complexity and to emphasize that they have been present simultaneously in the Somali-Swedish setting.

It might be surprising that the international media was all of a sudden flooded with articles about bandy, a quite marginal sport outside the Scandinavian countries and Russia. However, if we take a step back and dive a bit deeper we may realize that the story about these Somalis is really heartwarming and its popularity is due to its uniqueness and depiction of people striving to accomplish their goal against all odds (Palme, 2014). On top of that, this objective had to be something extraordinary if – besides attracting international attention – they were to gain financial support and get as many sponsors as possible to their side. The Somalia National Bandy Team never hoped to emerge victorious in the 2014 World Championship; however, they still won, becoming the first African country ever represented in bandy.



It should not be forgotten that the true aim of Andersson's project was to integrate the Somalis into Swedish society, which is reflected in the message of *Trevligt Folk* too. It is about an open and tolerant society, where native Swedes and migrants create common meeting places that are beneficial for all the involved parties (Ewaldsson, 2019). The film fits very well into the line of documentaries, as it intends to create change, form opinion and inform audiences about societal and social problems. In the end, the Swedish initiative was a real success, because the bandy players have become role models of people of various backgrounds and are now supported both locally and internationally. Thus the film illustrates that Sweden is a country where Somalis are able to thrive while preserving their national identity.

It seems that before the bandy project began, Somali migrants had been treated in a rather negative and biased way, and were only seen as 'outsiders' and 'burdens' in Sweden. However, after their national bandy team was created and they qualified for the 2014 World Championship, the image of Somalis started to improve, which contributed positively to both the players' and other Somalis' integration into Borlänge. Despite the fact some of the locals expressed initial prejudice towards Somalis in Sweden; the majority of the population was supportive and welcoming from the very beginning (Shearlaw, 2016). Based on the studied media articles, interviews and the documentary, it can be concluded that Sweden was able to change for the better and to set a positive example to the world about the successful reception and integration of migrants.

### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

### ***Notes on Contributor***

Gabor Sinko is a researcher at the Doctoral School for Safety and Security Sciences and Africa Research Institute at the University of Óbuda in Hungary. His research interests include African terrorist organizations and intelligence services, suicide terrorism in the Middle East, U.S. foreign policy and Cold War propaganda. He obtained his Bachelor's degree in International Relations and Organization (Degree with Honors) at the University of Pannonia in Hungary and completed his Master's degree in International Studies (Top of the Class Diploma) at Aarhus University, Denmark. He currently lives and studies in Budapest, Hungary.

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