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Could immigration become popular among voters? Interview with Alexander Kustov

The above question is salient in many countries, including Poland, where immigration has become politicised and has lost a lot of support since the 2015 parliamentary election, when it was first introduced by the right as a campaign topic. In this issue of CMR Spotlight, Karolina Łukasiewicz interviews Alexander Kustov, who focuses on public opinion regarding migration worldwide, and recently visited the CMR to talk about his new book ["In Our Interest: How Democracies Can Make Immigration Popular"](#) (2025, Columbia University Press). Link to the lecture:

["In Our Interest. How Democracies can make Immigration Popular" Lecture by Alexander Kustov](#)



Alexander Kustov at the Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw, @dpszczolkowska



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Karolina Łukasiewicz: In your book “In Our Interest: How Democracies Can Make Immigration Popular”, you argue that national interest, understood in accordance with citizens’ perception of what benefits their country, is a primary driver of immigration preferences. You also argue that it outweighs factors like self-interest or racial prejudice for many. This argument sounds surprising for migration scholarship. How do you understand the national interest, and what policies are perceived as benefiting a country?

Alexander Kustov: I primarily focus on people's perceptions of their economic interests, such as economic growth and prosperity, because these are easier to quantify, measure, and think about. However, one of the reasons why Poland was able to accept so many Ukrainian refugees with very little pushback was people's perceptions of their national interests, understood in terms of national security. Russia is a geopolitical enemy, and many people opposed Russia by accepting the Ukrainians.

Are you saying that Poland would be a good example of non-economic national interests?

We see that in the U.S., too. We accepted a lot of refugees from many different war-torn countries. That was in the interest of the foreign policy of the United States. I couldn't

focus on that in the book, but people can also have cultural interests of their country in mind. Some of those, when taken to an extreme, can be viewed as a form of prejudice. But what I've observed in a lot of research, including the work of my colleagues, is that people generally want immigration that allows for full integration. Most people don't expect immigrants to completely assimilate or abandon their home languages. Instead, they want migrants to be able to function effectively in society. From some perspective, it is also in the interests of the migrants themselves. If they don't speak the language of the host country, they will struggle to find employment. So, when considering cultural integration, many of the aspirations voters have in terms of national interests are quite reasonable and achievable for most potential immigrants.

In the context of growing income inequalities and polarization, what is the shared economic or social interest?

There seems to be a significant trade-off between growth and redistribution, which has been a topic of discussion among many economists and social scientists. I only focus on specific aspects of this issue. For instance, in the experiments I conducted for my book, I used conjoint analysis, where participants evaluated different policies based on their impact on economic growth in various jurisdictions—whether local, national, or

global. These experiments emphasized GDP figures, but I have not deeply explored how people would respond to changes in equality. Some argue that immigration can increase inequality because it may disproportionately benefit business owners. I believe this complicates the narrative but does not alter the fundamental fact that most people are primarily concerned about the situation in their own country rather than broader group dynamics.

This observation is supported by a substantial body of literature on social identity concerns. When forming their policy preferences, individuals often prioritize how they believe policies will affect their country over their personal material interests. There are several reasons for that, but in the case of immigration, it's not clear how a certain policy change would impact your personal interest. For instance, I don't know how the changes the Trump administration is making will affect my career prospects as a professor. There is this one interesting paper ([Malhotra et al., 2013](#)) written by a couple of colleagues, where they did a targeted survey of tech employees in Silicon Valley. People who are highly educated and cosmopolitan, and you would expect them to be pro-immigration, were asked about their stances on H-1b visas that bring tech workers from India and China. Guess what? They opposed those policies, exactly due to this kind of self-interest concern, but this would be rare in the general population.

Immigration can benefit the overall GDP but harm a specific population. You write about it in your book when summarizing the impact of unskilled migration on blue-collar jobs in the US and people who are harmed by that.

I don't see conclusive evidence that low-skilled immigration has to be particularly harmful to blue-collar workers. If anything, it might have a more detrimental effect on existing migrants who are more easily substituted. Immigration has both benefits and drawbacks, and it largely depends on how low-skilled immigration policies are structured. For example, targeted visas for clear labor shortages can be effective, whereas ad hoc approaches, like those seen in some European countries, can lead to complications, such as managing asylum seekers who arrive at the border. A notable example in the US is the immigration of immediate relatives, like foreign spouses. Even strong opponents of immigration acknowledge that American citizens should have the right to invite their spouses, and many are unaware of the lengthy and costly process involved. While inviting spouses and children is generally accepted, chain migration involving distant relatives raises controversy. Overall, simplifying these processes could be beneficial.

How do you understand and measure the popularity of immigration?

This is a great question that many overlook. Research shows that survey wording can

influence responses. For instance, Pew Research asked if diversity makes us stronger, leading many to say yes. However, when examining those responses in detail, many who agreed still wanted to decrease immigration. This highlights the importance of how questions are framed. My book focuses on promoting durable support for more open immigration policies, defined as accepting at least 1% of the foreign population per year. Some countries, such as Canada and Australia, still follow this, while the US and UK typically accept around 0.3% annually.

How do you understand support for immigration? Why do you look at support for increased immigration, instead of support for immigration levels as they are?

The context of immigration is crucial; asking whether to increase or decrease it yields different answers depending on the country. For example, the prospect of increasing immigration in Canada, where it's common, contrasts sharply with Japan, which still has very little migration. It's also important to consider absolute preferences for immigration policies rather than just relative questions of more or less. Though harder to gauge, some surveys, like those from the Cato Institute in the US, show that a significant percentage of people believe immigration should not be restricted at all. Some people might also say that there should be zero immigration. That would be a very different thing compared to saying that immigration should be decreased. So, just

asking people whether they want to increase or decrease immigration limits our understanding of what they actually want.

Immigration has become a major topic of public debate in Poland. It was introduced by the right-wing Law and Justice party into the public and political agenda during the 2015 parliamentary campaign, framed as a threat to the nation. As a result, Poles surveyed about whether the country should be accepting refugees (not if Poland should increase the rates of forced migrants), in May of 2015, were largely positive about it (72%), but a year later, they radically shifted their opinions, with only 33% being in favour.

I don't talk too much about it in the book, but it's going to be a topic of my second book with my co-author, James Denison of the European University Institute. We focus on the issue of salience and importance. The biggest factor in whether immigration matters politically is whether it's present or not in the public discourse, and not just what people think about it. This is actually the biggest immigration attitude factor that correlates with support for right-wing parties. People are more likely to change their preferences when they actively think about and are exposed to the topic through media and politics. When immigration is not a consideration, it's hard to form preferences. However, when the issue is more prominent, individuals are more willing to adjust their opinions.

In your book, you propose to think of nationalism as parochial altruism. What does this mean exactly?

Nationalism is a complex issue, often viewed differently across various contexts—psychological, philosophical, and political. I primarily see it as tied to people's psychology and the belief that a government in a liberal democracy should prioritize the public interests of those who are citizens. Most people recognize this principle and nationalism as an important motivation in life. Other common motivations include self-interest and opposition to foreign or ethnically different groups. I view nationalism as a limited form of parochial altruism, where individuals are willing to help their fellow countrymen more than other national groups. In many European countries, including Poland, people typically conceptualize the public good in national terms. While there are some who embody a broader European identity or cosmopolitan views, these perspectives are rare among the general population and are more common among academics and immigration supporters.

I would like to challenge your claim that national interest outweighs racial prejudice by providing an example from Poland. Over the past few years, we have observed starkly contrasting responses to two different groups of forced migrants: a relatively small-scale forced migration from the Middle and Far East throughout the Polish-Belarusian border, and a large-scale

forced migration from Ukraine. Since 2021, a conflict at the Polish-Belarusian border has escalated, with black and brown people crossing the border and trying to apply for asylum in Poland. The response was putting in walls, escalating pushbacks at the border, and framing immigration in the public debate as a major threat to the country. Soon, following February 2022, the forced migration crisis from Ukraine unfolded with over a million mainly white Christian mothers with children being welcomed in Poland. It's hard not to compare it in terms of racial prejudice. How would you explain that?

I recently led a discussion at a university about the film "Green Border," where I shared my limited knowledge on the topic. The situation is quite complex, as many factors can be at play. While I acknowledge that racism exists, I believe it may not be the primary factor influencing people's attitudes. It seems that individuals are often more willing to accept humanitarian migrants when they can frame it in terms of national interest. This relates back to our earlier discussion on Polish foreign policy, suggesting that supporting certain migrant groups might align with national interests, particularly in opposition to Russia. However, I don't see this dynamic playing out with the situation at the Polish-Belarusian border. To better understand public opinion, we could conduct an experiment asking people how they feel about migrants irregularly crossing the border, specifically focusing on individuals

with lighter skin, such as those from Georgia or similarly stereotyped countries. This could yield interesting insights into the variations in attitudes towards different groups of migrants.

A team of our colleagues, including Kamila Fialkowska, has been [researching Roma forced migrants fleeing war in Ukraine](#). They collected stark evidence of people being discriminated against at the border. They were racialised and consequently treated worse than white people crossing the border.

This may be true. But when considering countries where people may appear different, it's important to recognize that they might also practice different religions or have different values. This is particularly relevant in Poland, where religion plays a more significant role than in some other nations. If any opposition to immigration based on ethnicity or religion is automatically labelled as racist, then the situation may seem straightforward. However, as is often the case, the world is much more complicated than that.

In your book, you contrast Canada's relative success in maintaining public support for immigration with Sweden's struggles, linking Sweden's difficulties to its historical prioritization of humanitarian goals over demonstrable national interest, which eroded public legitimacy. Can you explain these two models?

Canada's immigration system, created in the 1960s, has been explicitly designed to attract immigrants who visibly benefit the country. Its point-based system, adjusted and improved many times throughout history, allows anyone to check their eligibility for permanent residency based on age, skills, and job offers, which helps prevent situations like skilled immigrants being underemployed. In contrast, Sweden's system is primarily humanitarian. Historically, they didn't even count labor migrants until 2001, with most immigration focused on refugees, asylum seekers, and their family members. Despite perceptions of Sweden as a progressive, cosmopolitan nation, this approach has struggled to maintain long-term support for immigration. Sweden's generous social welfare system benefited many, but now, with tighter restrictions, there are challenges in providing long-term shelter for those in need.

So, what went wrong in Sweden?

Their system from the start was not designed to appeal to people and their perceptions of national interest, even in this very unique, cosmopolitan context. There were many reasons why it happened like it did, but ultimately, they didn't have to do it this way. They didn't need to adopt a fully humanitarian approach from the beginning. Now, even when we think about immigration from a primarily humanitarian perspective, Canada is accepting a large number of refugees and asylum seekers. It

might be a very small fraction of overall immigrants, but because they accept so many people, they end up accepting more refugees per capita than most other countries. So, even if the goal is simply to provide a place for vulnerable people from around the world, the Canadian system is certainly better than the Swedish system in terms of creating resilient public support.

I would argue that the Swedish model was popular initially. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Swedes presented themselves as setting moral standards in human rights and gender equality across Europe. Immigration policy was part of this.

It worked until they actually had a large number of immigrants coming in, after the Syrian war. If only a few migrants arrive, you can give them full rights, and no one will have an issue with that because there are so few migrants in the first place. Right? But eventually, when people start seeing migrants everywhere and realize that they might not pay as much in taxes as they consume in social welfare, perceptions could change.

Another important point about Sweden is that if you take an average foreign-born **person there, it's a fact that they consume more in social welfare than they contribute in taxes. Of course, you can spin this in many different ways, like emphasizing certain diversity benefits that some mainstream parties try to promote.** But it's hard to deny the reality of this. Economists also talk a lot about indirect fiscal benefits—

when migrants take essential jobs, allowing native workers to move up their career ladder. This argument makes sense to me and other migration scholars. However, I don't think most voters can easily understand or accept this. So, it's a much trickier claim.

You make a good point about the challenges of integration and economic costs for Swedish society. I wonder why these challenges and costs appeared in the first place. We can refer back to prejudice. You mention strong anti-discrimination policies in Sweden, yet discrimination in the labor market remains one of the highest in Europe.

It's also interesting that, when looking at their integration policies, Sweden is consistently ranked among the best in the world. But when examining the actual integration outcomes—things like employment rates and language skills—they're not that impressive. I think much of this is due to the complete lack of any selection process. One fact from the book is that no country in the world has managed to make its immigration system popular without being somewhat selective. The Swedish system was almost unselective, by design, accepting more vulnerable people with less education. Even if opportunities are provided, it's tough to fully educate these individuals within just one generation. It's just a challenging task, as you know.

The lack of selection is one possible explanation. Another is that Swedish integration policies overlooked the dual nature of integration, focusing only on immigrants and not adequately educating mainstream society about how it changes and will no longer be only white and Protestant.

I see this argument, but I also feel like, if you look at any of those cross-national surveys, it seems that, again, there are racist people in Sweden, and that people have biases. But I feel like, relatively speaking, if any country is supposed to be dealing with this, it should have been Sweden. So, they're definitely less prejudiced than most other Europeans, at least in terms of the questions we see in the World Values Survey. A lot of it can be self-reported preference, rather than actual discrimination. So, I don't see any evidence that Swedes are more racist than people in other countries. The challenges that they face are similar to those faced by different countries.

Yet, [reported discrimination due to origin ranks high in Sweden.](#)

They definitely could have implemented more strategic actions. It's not a coincidence that Canada, not Sweden, came up with the idea of refugee private sponsorship, which is very popular. They recently attempted to do the same in the US and other countries. I haven't seen any evidence of public pushback towards that. It's because natives and citizens are inviting refugees on their own behalf and are willing to use their own resources to support them if needed. Many people understand that this approach works.

Usually, when someone in the US or other countries suggests "let's open up immigration," the counterargument is: are you willing to host them in your own house? But many people with more progressive values actually say yes. The problem is that most governments worldwide prohibit this and, instead, prefer a centralized federal refugee resettlement process.

Perhaps social engagement in the host society is the key here, or at least an important factor in welcoming newcomers.

Yes! But we need to give people more ways to express their pro-immigration preferences legally.



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