# Migration and the European left

IPS



## Turn left. The other left!

East European politicians aren't more xenophobic. They just understand their voters better

*<link about writers-and-contributors writer ellie-mears-1>Ellie Mears speaks to Yougov's Marcus Roberts about the attitudes of Europe's social democrats towards migration.*

**Immigration featured strongly in recent election campaigns in France and the Netherlands, and concern over immigration was one of the main reasons cited for Brexit in the UK. How is the issue of immigration perceived by left-wing voters in these countries?**

| Immigration rules should be... | Self-identify as "left wing" | All GB |
|---|---|---|
| Relaxed | 7% | 16% |
| Kept the same | 34% | 19% |
| Tightened | 45% | 69% |

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As you can see from the above table, those identifying as "left-wing" show higher levels of support for the status quo than average, but the majority still would rather see a tightening of immigration rules. This division in the "left wing" vote has been one of the difficulties that social democrats have faced in recent elections across the continent.

The politics of immigration in France, Holland and the UK have been very challenging for the centre-left, as concern or enthusiasm about immigration has become a key dividing line within centre left electoral coalitions.

Unless the centre left can address this (see 3.) then electorally its prospects look grim indeed.

**We're often told that anti-immigrant feeling is strongest in communities where there aren't many immigrants. Is this true? If so, why?**

Communities that have seen high levels of migration over a long period of time, such as London or many other big European cities, often have the most positive views on immigration which has led some to draw this conclusion. However when you look a bit deeper into the data it isn't quite that simple.

The academic, Eric Kaufman, looked into the relationship between support for the anti-immigration party UKIP in the UK and immigration patterns. He concluded that the highest levels of support was in areas near communities that had seen rapid recent changes caused by waves of immigration.

It may be helpful to think of reactions to immigration in communities as being shaped as much by the speed of change as the scale of change.

**How do you think centre-left parties can bridge the gap between their traditional working class supporters, who tend to be more wary of immigration, and the "metropolitan elite" who view it as a benefit?**

Centre-left parties have three choices: they can side with liberal middle class voters, they can side with more socially conservative working class voters or they can try to fudge the issue. Ed Miliband's Labour Party in the UK's 2015 general election attempted the latter and was heavily criticised by both wings as a result.

Most centre-left parties across Europe have for decades now demonstrated a political and policy bias towards a highly liberalised immigration approach, to the approval of their middle class bases. But with centre-left parties losing working class support (and with it, power) there is an electoral argument that their position on immigration should be modified to better reflect the views and concerns of working class voters – most notably their legitimate concerns around low pay, low skill worker competition and a pace of immigration change that overwhelms local integration efforts.

Furthermore, the centre-left needs to remember that it was founded by, with and for working class voters as its chief moral purpose. The centre-left does not exist to further concentrate power and advantage in the hands of middle class liberals alone. Speaking personally, as a social democrat of the Fabian tradition, I see nothing wrong with wanting to regulate markets to the advantage of workers. This should include the labour market. That's why I believe there is a strong left-wing argument for managing immigration in a way that safeguards workers' wages, allows for sensible public policy planning based on a

known maximum flow of migrants and ensures integration at the community level.

A good example of this policy in practice is Canada. Long held as a shining example of liberal values, Canada in practice operates a strict economic migration policy balanced with a generous refugee policy.

In short, the middle class liberal wing of the centre-left coalition has called the shots long enough. If the centre-left is to survive and thrive it needs to reconnect with working class voters and immigration is one area where it should do so.

**How has the debate around migration in Sweden changed in the last few years?**

Immigration has definitely become a more prominent issue in Sweden over the past few years. Some polls have even showed the anti-immigration Swedish Democrats in the lead (including the latest YouGov poll which had them on 24 percent). When we asked last summer what problems are the most important facing Sweden right now, immigration came top at 46 percent.

Interestingly though, the Swedish social democrats have enjoyed good polling and political success in this area over the last year, as they have tackled voter concerns on the issue head on. They have not pandered to lowest common denominator politics but they have demonstrated through consistent politics that they understand and respect the concerns voters have about the pace of change immigration is bringing to Sweden. What's more, when they propose action on the issue, they make an effort to ground their proposals in the actual lived experience of voters, with an emphasis on stories rather than statistics to demonstrate an emotional understanding of the issue.

This has not of course 'solved' the political problem immigration poses for the Swedish social democrats outright, but it has lowered the emotional temperature of the issue, won back some of their voters and helped them go on to speak about other issues as well.

**How do the attitudes of Eastern European voters towards migration differ from those of their Western European counterparts?**

When you look at attitudes towards migration from outside the EU there isn't really a simple Eastern Europe / Western European split.

However, there is a split when it comes to attitudes towards migration from other EU counties. Britain, France, Italy and Holland were the most hostile of the countries we surveyed, while three of the four countries that were least hostile were in Eastern Europe (the fourth

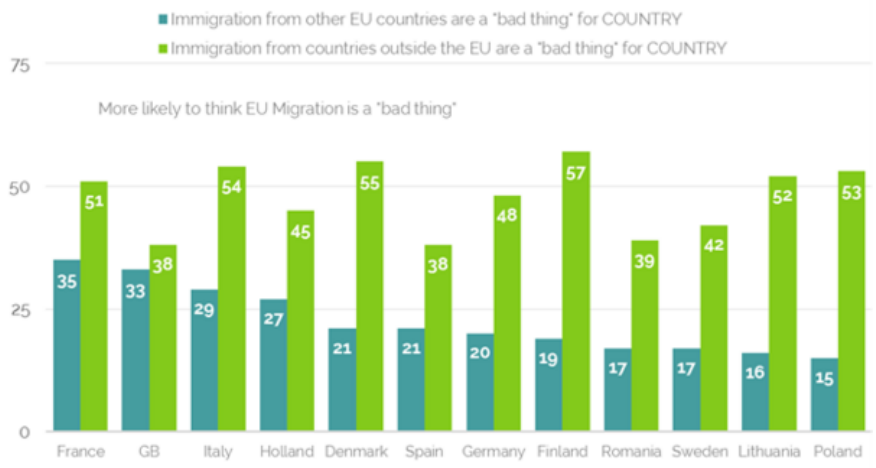
being Sweden).

When it comes to the politicians, we see quite a discrepancy between the attitudes of social democrats in Eastern and Western Europe to migration. For example, Slovakia's social democratic prime minister, Robert Fico, has drawn an "absolute link between migration and terrorism", and has warned that Muslim migrants will "change the face of the country". Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, meanwhile has called for asylum seekers to be "rounded up and deported". Western European social democrats, even those who call for more controlled migration, tend at least to be milder in the language they use.

The discrepancy between these two attitudes is easily explained in terms of politicians responding to their electorates. And I don't just mean responding to poll numbers or election results but rather being shaped by the politicians' own personal experience of voters. It may well be that more community-centred, street politicians in Eastern Europe are simply more accurately and directly reflecting the views of some of their voters than that of their Western European counterparts. This likely also speaks to the rise in the West of technocratic political leaders whose middle class, liberal, political career-only background often insulates them from working class public opinion.

**Do you think European member states will ever find a workable compromise on resettling refugees?**

Absolutely. Because the scale of the challenge is so great. It is also likely that Europe will face similar refugee crises in the future, to which it will be forced to respond once more. There is a simple, logical, equitable solution to this challenge that I believe is inevitable: the sharing of refugees across Europe on a quota basis. This is a case in which a genuinely 'more Europe' politics is absolutely necessary in order to share the burden of host communities and also best assist the refugees themselves by allowing them to settle in places and in numbers that do not overwhelm local integration efforts. YouGov will be polling potential solutions to the refugee crisis later in the summer and I'll be delighted to share the findings with your readers then.






**Marcus Roberts**
London

Marcus is Director of International Projects at YouGov. He previously worked for the Labour Party in the UK and the Democratic Party in the US as well as for a number of think tanks and campaigning groups across Europe and America. He tweets as @marcusaroberts.