Anti-immigration Activism and the Far-Right in Europe

An Interview with Kristian Berg Harpviken

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Professor, thank you very much for agreeing to speak with us. I would like you to start by talking about the project Reaching Out to Close the Border: The Transnationalization of Anti-Immigration Movements in Europe (MAM) coordinated by you at Prio. What are the key research objectives?

Dr. Kristian Berg Harpviken [KBH]: The MAM (Mobilization Against Migration) was set up to try to understand in detail the mobilization against immigration in Europe. We're doing this on the basis of case studies of six, quite different countries, which include Norway, the UK, Germany, Austria, Italy and Portugal. Furthermore, we are looking at different dimensions of this issue. One facet is looking at who the actors are, how they work together, to what extent they work together (Bedock *et al*., 2023). It's now become quite clear to us that it's difficult to really say that this is a "movement". To a large extent, it's an amalgamation of different types of activists, perhaps even appealing to different parts of the political spectrum. And there are interactions but not necessarily the steady interactions that makes this a movement. It's even hard to pin down who the leadership is (Heinze and Weisskircher, 2020). And we also see this as a movement which is very closely interacting with party politics, particularly on the far and the extreme right (Rydgren, 2018).

Now, the second aspect we're looking at is what we call "frames" (Snow and Benford, 1988). Thus, this involves how activists justify their resistance to immigration. And there are a number of different types of frames circulating. So, some will be emphasizing the economic impacts of immigration, its impacts on employment or on the sustainability of the welfare state. Others would emphasize the security challenges that may come with immigration, this could be crime, or organized crime, it could be terrorism, or it could be other things (Rydgren, 2008). Some would even emphasize issues such as the environmental impacts of immigration at a time when climate change and environmental concerns are high on the agenda even though this is still embryonic (Turner and Bailey, 2022). However, we are seeing some activists who actually make reference to environmental concerns and perhaps more prominently, particularly over these past few years, there have been public health references with concerns that mass immigration may also come with new diseases and new forms of contagion (Pickup *et al*., 2021). Perhaps they even, you know, make the argument that immigrants from certain other parts of the world don't necessarily have the same hygiene culture as people in Europe. Those kinds of concerns also get used as justifications.

And then, ultimately, we are also interested in what the impacts of anti-immigration mobilization are. Does it really lead to changes in policy? (Bedock *et al*., 2023; Kyriazi *et al*., 2022; Bazurli *et al*., 2022). If so when? The Danish government,

for example, has over the last two or three years worked very, very hard to not only enter into an agreement with Rwanda but to start having Rwanda process its asylum seekers on Rwandan soil (Amnesty International, 2021). Is that something the Danish government does because, in a sense, it thinks this represents the best way to manage migration. Or does it do it as a gesture to the harsher immigration critics within Danish politics? Those are the kinds of questions we are grappling with. And for all of these questions, we are also interested in trying to understand how it is that anti-immigration activists are reaching out across boundaries, how they are comparing notes, drawing on each other's ideas, learning lessons from the success or lack of success of various forms of activism and so forth.

How did your academic trajectory lead you to study the far-right and anti-immigrant movements in Europe?

KBH: In a way, I come to this from a very unconventional background. My main interest had been in issues relating to war and peace in countries far away from Europe. So, I've been doing a lot of work on understanding the armed actors in Afghanistan and the nature of the conflict there (Strand, Borchgrevink and Harpviken, 2017; Harpviken, 2009). I've also been working on post-conflict recovery in places like Mozambique and Angola (Millard, Harpviken and Kjellman, 2002). I'm currently particularly focusing my studies on various issues interrelating with the Middle East, including issues connected with migration (Palik *et al.*, 2020). However, all of these issues are only remotely connected to the debates about immigration in Europe. Although perhaps the overlap is that when we look at anti-immigration in Europe, we're again talking about political movements (Harpviken, 2008). Furthermore, much of my work in other parts of the world has been about political and politically militant movements. Of course, there is my interest in migration as an issue, although this has previously been about understanding migration and how and why people decide to migrate and what impact this has on their lives and, for that matter, on the lives of those who don't migrate. There is clearly also some connection to the resistance to migration. There is at least some utility in understanding what migration is about. However, I think it's a very indirect and somewhat unexpected route for approaching this particular issue. So, what really triggered my interest was the enormous intensity we have seen in the immigration debate in Europe now ongoing for quite a while. This really took off in the aftermath of the so-called refugee crisis in 2015. In addition, the time when I started to develop this research in 2017, we found it was already a very salient issue on the political agenda in most countries of Europe. It's less prominent today but I think the potential for this to re-emerge as

the key issue in a number of European countries still remains very high.

How do you see the future of anti-immigrant movements in Europe? Will they continue to grow in popularity and influence or are they destined to decline? What is the role of political leadership in determining this outcome?

KBH: This is the million-dollar question. I believe this represents a question every responsible political leader in Europe is grappling with at the moment. And I also don't think this issue is going away any time soon. I would predict we are likely to see major outbursts of anti-immigrant sentiment. And what particularly concerns me is that, when you look at the trend over, let's say, the last ten years, two aspects stand out. One is that, by and large, on average, he European population is becoming increasingly positive to immigrants (European Commission, 2021). So, in that sense, there is good news. However, the bad news is that the share of the population deeply opposed to immigration is also increasing (Heath et al. 2020). And not only is that share increasing, but that segment of the population is becoming ever more deeply critical. Thus, in other words, we're seeing a massive polarization around immigration issues. Therefore, there are of course some countries where parties that are themselves strongly opposed to immigration are in government. You know, in Sweden, for example, which has commonly been seen as the most immigrant friendly country in Europe, we now have a situation where the Swedish Democrats staunchly anti-immigrant, far right party is a party supporting the government's coalition. They're not in government but they are supporting the government. There is also Poland where, as you know, the Freedom and Justice Party is a government that has quite pronounced and sceptical views on immigration and holds a majority in government. The situation is very different from one country to the next. However, this poses a major concern and is interlinked with a number of other issues. Fortunately, at the moment, the biggest migration challenge Europe is facing is immigration from Ukraine. And despite the enormous volume of that migration, it's largely been met with sympathy. You hear very, very few voices expressing fundamental opposition to welcoming Ukrainian refugees although, of course, it should be noted that welcome is only temporary in most countries. They face, and unlike what it would have been if we go to 20 or 25 years back, temporary protection and those sorts of mechanisms rather than direct asylum in a number of different countries.

Given the multiple realities, should we consider these movements in a specific manner in each country or may we approach them as pan-European?

KBH: In both ways. I mean, this project was partly inspired by the desire to understand to what extent this is a movement in which activists collaborate across borders. And it's still a little early to draw firm conclusions but I do think our initial findings indicate that most activists in the anti-immigration movement see themselves very much within a national framework or even within a local framework. However, that doesn't actually mean there isn't a lot of interaction across borders because what we also find is that there are key individuals who act as information brokers, interlocutors who pass on lessons learned and new ways of thinking and acting (Rydgren, 2005). Indeed, there is a strong transnational dimension, although for most activists there is very little consciousness, even awareness, of that transnational outreach.

One of the objectives of the project is to understand the political-ideological framing of these movements. Are they always linked to the far-right?

KBH: Well, if you put this in a longer time perspective, for example, of ten, twenty or even thirty years, anti-immigration sentiments have been very closely linked to the far right and even to the extreme right (Stockemer, Halikiopoulou and Vlandas, 2021). However, part of the motivation behind this the project lies in the observation that anti-immigration sentiments hold some appeal in other parts of the political spectrum (Hjorth and Larsen, 2022). Now, if you take my own country, Norway, which has been perhaps modestly immigrant friendly, even if not a mass-immigrant receiving country, and quite different to its neighbour Sweden, for example, the mainstream parties, the Labour Party and the Conservatives have both been very concerned about the issue of the far right's ownership of immigration (Fangen and Vaage, 2018). Hence, in 2017, when there was a new government, when we had parliamentary elections, both parties evaluated their failure in those elections. They both lost out massively (Fangen and Vaage, 2018) and associated that closely with their lack of a clear stance on immigration. Indeed, a clear stance would here mean a somewhat stricter line, although not necessarily fully embracing the line taken by the far-right populist party, the Progress Party. But nonetheless, trying to wrestle issue ownership away from that party by defining distinct policies and communicating those policies very effectively to the public (Hagelund, 2020). So, yes, they are conventionally closely associated with the far-right. However, I would say there is some broader appeal. And I mentioned the different types of justifications earlier in our conversation. Indeed, I think if you look at the far-right, a number of different justifications would be used, including, for example, cultural justifications, you know, a threat to our language, to our way of life, threats to the culture, our family patterns, gender roles. Gender equity may even be an issue that is brought up here

(Fangen, 2020). Of course, there is plenty of irony in seeing traditionalists on the far right criticizing immigrants over not treating women in the way they should be treated in our society given that, they themselves tend to be fairly backward-looking in their perceptions of gender roles.

However, that aside, we see that in other parts of the political spectrum, there may perhaps be other types of justifications with greater appeal. For example, if you talk to a traditional labor union segment of the population, perhaps the main argument would relate to unemployment, the threats to jobs that stem from large scale immigration and social dumping. Wages are actually going down because there is more competition for jobs. Or, alternatively, there might be concerns about the sustainability of the welfare state. Can we really afford to receive so many immigrants who would at least need support for a transition period and many would perhaps not even be able to find jobs in our labour market and would end up on social support even in the long term. Well, these types of concerns may have more appeal. There are different arguments that appeal in different ways to different parts of the population. But, I still think it is absolutely clear that the one section of the political spectrum for which anti-immigration is a core issue, is the far and the extreme right, and it's a much more divisive issue in other parts of the political spectrum. Thus, even in a country like Denmark, where the Social Democrats and Labour Party have been going quite far in adopting much stricter immigration policies, this is still a difficult issue for these parties to deal with simply (Grødem 2022).

Can you explore further what motivates anti-immigrant movements in Europe?

KBH: Well, ultimately, I think for many people it's a sense that their way of living is under threat. And what that means may be quite different things (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas, 2019). For some, it may be their jobs, the basis for their welfare, that they feel are under threat. For others, it may be the very traditions that they abide by. So, it can really be quite different. However, I also think that, to some extent, the resistance to immigration is an outgrowth of concerns that have very little to do with immigration. Indeed, there are other types of crisis that very, very seriously affect politics in the European context. We've had periods of profound economic recession. We had mass restructurings of economies in which some groups, who would traditionally have been coming out quite favourably in terms of income and living standards, are losing out (Vogt Isaksen, 2019). And, even by a stretch of the imagination, blaming immigrants for that doesn't really hold water. Nevertheless, immigration is, in a sense, a very visible and easily identifiable phenomenon. This holds to such an extent that I would argue that immigrants and immigration

become scapegoats, blamed for concerns that are serious concerns in the lives of a lot of European citizens but, at the end of the day, aren't actually primarily about immigration or other structural changes of an economic nature, but also other ongoing political transformations.

And what about the cultural factor? For example, concerns about changing their cultures and European culture?

KBH: Yes, this is an issue. Perhaps the most dramatic manifestation has been the resistance to immigration from Islamic countries. Of course, we also saw that in the US with Donald Trump, soon after having taken up the presidency in 2017, actually banning immigration from a number of Muslim countries (Pertwee, 2020). And yes, also in a number of European countries. We may also at least report how immigrants from certain Muslim countries are, in a sense, integrating to a lesser extent than other immigrant groups (Simonsen and Bonikowski, 2020). So, in my own country, Norway, for example, Norwegian Pakistanis are more segregated from the rest of the population than immigrants from other countries (Friberg and Sterri, 2021). Now, we should be careful to generalize here and it's not clear this arises from religion or even what country they are from. I think it has just as much to do with class. For example, what is the educational and economic backgrounds of those people who end up coming to Norway from a Pakistani background? I believe many of them belong to a type of social and economic background that makes it more difficult to secure good jobs and integrate smoothly into Norwegian society. In addition, we see that in the second and third generations, it's already a very different story. You know, they start to intermarry with people from very different backgrounds and they get good educations and perhaps fare better than the so-called ethnic Norwegian population. However, the skepticism towards the migrant that arrives and that is seen as culturally very foreign, very different, has been strong. And culture here interacts not only with economic concerns but also with security concerns. Clearly, the enormous fixation that we've had, particularly from 2001 onwards, on the threat from Islamic extremism has also not been helpful. Of course, once again, that is ultimately very unfair because extremism does not receive widespread support amongst Muslims in Europe but it only takes a couple of dramatic events to feed those stereotypes.

What is the role of social media and the media in general in disseminating anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe? How are anti-immigrant voices amplified and spread online?

KBH: The media are obviously very important. But then the media are also so many different things. To simplify somewhat what is a far more complex reality, let's distinguish between the mainstream media and niche media. The mainstream media would here be the traditional television and radio channels, newspapers and even digital channels with mainstream orientations and I think they do, willingly or otherwise, easily contribute to escalating anti-immigration sentiments by covering events that could be perceived as demonstrating immigration-related problems. One example of that would be the media coverage of the New Year's spectacle in Cologne a few years back when immigrants got blamed for four serious incidents of sexual harassment, for the sexual harassment of women (Bielicki, 2018). Furthermore, the mainstream media may also pay undue attention to far-right demonstrations and other actions (Brown and Mondon, 2021). And, as you know, we all see in our respective countries that even types of demonstrations that gain virtually no resonance apart from a select few who take part in that particular demonstration but nonetheless draw massive attention from the media. In my own country, for example, there is an organization called Stop Islamisation of Norway (Sian). This organization commonly stages demonstrations where they burn the Quran (Hafez, 2018), for example, and there's only a handful of people who actually support them and who turn up. However, these demonstrations nonetheless very often receive massive coverage and sometimes even massive international coverage. So, yes, the mainstream media, willingly or not, do contribute to amplifying voices who often may actually be quite marginal. Of course, you also have the niche media, which are much more in number. I'm here talking mainly about the mainstream media that speak on behalf of the anti-immigration activists as well as anything from dark web media where they publish their own materials out of the public eye to distinct websites and channels run by critiques of all migration (Ekman, 2019). Furthermore, we have a number of platforms like that in in every European country. And, these are certainly, once again, very important in keeping the movements together. Their levels of credibility may vary, and they come in very different shapes and forms, but they are certainly massively important.

What policies and approaches might help promote a more positive and inclusive view of immigration in European society?

KBH: This is a massively challenging question and a difficult issue. Indeed, I would be very careful about claiming I have any prescription for solving that challenge. It clearly is a major current challenge for European politics. And I'm sure it's inevitably going to be a major challenge as we move forward. I do think that our

mainstream politicians will have to prove their ability to balance between what what are ultimatelyconflicting legitimate concerns. At least, if you presume that a system of nation states is legitimate, and that is the way the world is now organized but that's a different discussion. So, let's leave that aside for now. There are a number of problematic aspects but that is how the world works. Given that it is ultimately legitimate for politicians to regulate immigration, they will have to balance that against very clearly communicatingthe need for inclusiveness and recognition of the huge contributions that immigrants are making to our societies. And alongside an understanding of what it is that produces migration in the first place. I think the Ukrainian example has been very interesting. At least I haven't so far identified any strong counter reactions to the welcoming of Ukrainian refugees. I think this partly stems from such a strong identification with Ukraine and also the rather comprehensive coverage of what it is these people are fleeing from. Nevertheless, this also has to do with the uncomfortable fact that they are a little bit more similar to us than many of the other immigrants that arrive. But, I would especially relate this with how we have, as citizens, a deeper understanding of their need for protection and the reasons that they have to flee their country.

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