Political legacies and present perceptions of migrants

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Abstract

This paper examines the long-term impact of past political processes and events on current perceptions of immigration. As a case study, we focus on contemporary public perceptions of migrants by citizens of the Baltic states and ask how historical migration patterns and policies within the former Soviet Union are reflected in these perceptions. Our analysis is based on original survey data collected from nationally representative samples in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Employing structural topic modeling (STM), we analyze over 1,100 responses to an open-ended survey question asking respondents to describe the group that comes to mind when thinking about immigrants in their country. Using STM allows us to identify socially meaningful themes, as highlighted by the respondents, and without bias from any predefined categories. Our findings demonstrate that, while Russia's invasion of Ukraine featured significantly in the responses, the Soviet political legacy and the related Soviet era migration continue to shape perceptions of migrants in the Baltic States thirty years after their independence. Thus, even in the context of the most salient migration-related events, such as war, past geo-political processes can play a significant role in the formation of current public perceptions of immigration.

Keywords Migration, Public opinion, Postsocialism, Legacies, Baltic states, Text-as-data

Introduction

Although historical political processes can have lingering effects on present attitudes toward migrants (Hiers et al., 2017), their impact often goes unnoticed in attitudinal research. Despite its extensive body of research, attitudinal studies tend to focus more heavily on the role of immediate social and political events in how migrants are imagined and perceived. For example, there are studies on the effect of terror attacks (Czymara & Gorodzeisky, 2024; Godefroidt, 2023; Nussio et al., 2019), the notable refugee influx of 2015/16 (Bansak et al., 2016; Czymara & Schmidt-Catran, 2017), and the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine (Letki et al., 2024a; Weber et al., 2023). However, there is very little research on the long-standing effects of historical and geopolitical processes on current attitudes toward migrants and migration. The most notable exception is the study by Hiers et al. (2017) that systematically investigated the influence of past geopolitical competitions and wars on current attitudes toward immigration. Other scholars

have discussed how a country's immigration history, whether it is an older immigration country with long-established migrant communities or a newer one experiencing large-scale immigration more recently, shapes the development of anti-immigrant attitudes (Semyonov et al., 2006; Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2018).

In this paper, we explore how citizens imagine migrants and ask to what extent past migration-related historical and political processes have a long-lasting impact on current public images of migrants in post-socialist states. The contemporary Baltic States, namely Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, provide us with an excellent opportunity to examine the long-term effects of past geopolitical processes on current perceptions of migration. All three countries were annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, re-established their nationhood after the fall of the USSR in the early 1990s, and joined the EU in 2004. Yet, they differ in what we call the *Soviet political legacy*, consisting of the number of Russian speakers relocated there from other republics during the Soviet period, the resulting ethnic composition, and the citizenship laws passed in the Baltic States after regaining independence. While we cannot disentangle the effects of each one of these components, we are interested in their joint impact on current perceptions of migrants in post-Soviet countries.

Our study is based on original survey data collected from nationally representative samples of the adult population in the three Baltic states, conducted in the Fall of 2022. At the center of our analysis is an open-ended question asking respondents to describe the first group that came to their minds when thinking about immigrants in their country. We employ structural topic modeling, which uncovers hidden themes in textual datasets (Boumans & Trilling, 2016) and provides "a direct view into a respondent's own thinking" (Roberts et al., 2014, p. 1065) without imposing any pre-established categories. Thus, our approach offers distinct advantages over closed-ended questions usually analyzed in public opinion research. Despite these benefits, only a handful of studies on immigration attitudes used open-ended questions (Asbrock et al., 2014; Braun et al., 2013; Flores & Azar, 2023), and only Asbrock et al. (2014) collected data from a nationally representative sample (the German population).[1]

Adopting a mixed-method approach based on this innovative methodology, we first apply algorithm-based topic modeling, an *inductive* machine learning technique, to identify how citizens of the Baltic states imagine migrants in their respective countries based on their textual responses to the open-ended question. We then qualitatively examine key excerpts from survey responses in the statistically identified topics, assigning each topic a title that best reflects its content. The findings of this exploration are presented in the results section *How Citizens in the Baltic States Imagine Migrants*. Here, we heed Flores and Azar's (2023, p.2) call for the necessity "to understand how natives perceive immigrants in a more open and inductive manner." To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to do so using both data collected from national representative samples and a structural topic modeling approach. We expect that these images of migrants reflect both current (e.g., Russia's invasion of Ukraine, refugee migration) and past (e.g., Soviet political legacy) events.

Second, at the *deductive* stage of the analysis, we focus on two specific topics: Soviet internal migration and positive perceptions of migrants. We compare the prevalence of

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[1] Although Blinder (2015) also explored how people imagine migrants, his study relied on closed-ended questions and predefined categories.

these two topics across countries as well as across ethnic groups and age, using regression methods. We discuss these findings in the results section *Cross-national and Individual-level differences.*

Soviet political legacy and migration in the Baltic States before and after the fall of the Soviet Union

The Baltic States experienced successive occupations during the Second World War, first by the Soviet Union in 1940, then by Nazi Germany, and again by the USSR where they became the Soviet republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania until their independence in the early 1990s. While the international borders of the USSR were tightly sealed, relocation between the different republics within the Soviet Union was relatively commonplace. This internal migration was often prompted by central government resettlement policies and structured by the distribution of the Soviet state's industrial sectors. Despite essentially being internal Soviet migrants, they were retrospectively labeled *international* migrants according to the definition, adopted by major cross-national data sources (i.e. international migrant is a person born abroad according to the present-time borders) (Gorodzeisky and Leykin, 2020, 2022). Contrary to this definition , this study calls those residents of the Baltics who moved to the region from other Soviet republics when Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were part of the USSR "*historically internal migrants"* (Gorodzeisky and Leykin, 2020).

The volume of Soviet internal migration to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania during the period when they were republics within the USSR varied substantially. This contributed to the different ethnic compositions of the three countries on the eve of the collapse of the USSR. In 1989, Latvia and Estonia were home to significant Russian-speaking communities, with ethnic Russians comprising 34% and 30% of the total population of the two countries (Matulionis & Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, 2014, p. 90). In contrast, in Lithuania, ethnic Russians constituted only 9.4% of the total population, with ethnic Poles also constituting another sizable minority (ibid.). The prominent presence of large and culturally cohesive Russian-speaking minority populations in Latvia and Estonia fed concerns about the nations' "cultural extinction" (Duina & Miani, 2015). In common with other newly established postsocialist states, the Baltic countries were founded with the aspiration of creating ethnically and culturally homogeneous imagined communities, centered around a distinct national identity rooted in an ethnocultural core (Anderson, 2016; Brubaker, 1996; Hroch, 1993). In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the perceived threat to indigenous culture, language, and national identity led to the introduction of restrictive and exclusionary citizenship policies in Latvia and Estonia (Agarin, 2018; Brubaker, 1996, 1997; Dzenovska, 2018; Feldman, 2005). In Lithuania, the smaller proportion and greater heterogeneity of the non-Lithuanian population, including a significant Polish minority, alleviated the perceived sense of threat and facilitated the adoption of more inclusive citizenship laws (Brubaker, 1997; Duina & Miani, 2015; Klumbytė & Šliavaitė, 2021; Kūris, 2010).

More specifically, at the beginning of the 1990s, Latvia and Estonia adopted laws that granted automatic citizenship only to people who had been residents of the countries *before* the annexation by the Soviet Union in 1940, and to their descendants. In line with the new citizenship laws, individuals who had relocated to Estonia and Latvia after 1940, including those from other parts of the USSR, along with their descendants already born

in Estonia and Latvia, were designated as non-citizens or aliens (Krūma, 2015; Priit & Poleshchuk, 2013). In 1991, this totaled approximately 740,000 non-citizens in Latvia, 28% of the total population of 2,651,000 (Krūma, 2015; Muiznieks et al., 2013). In Estonia, 32% of the total population, or 500,000 individuals out of 1,533,000, were classified as aliens in 1992 (Muiznieks et al., 2013; Priit & Poleshchuk, 2013, p. 4). The majority of these non-citizens were individuals who had migrated to Latvia and Estonia from other Soviet republics during the period when the Baltic states were part of the Soviet Union (Brubaker, 1997; Krūma, 2015; Muiznieks et al., 2013; Priit & Poleshchuk, 2013). Furthermore, despite not crossing sovereign borders at the time of their migration, individuals who moved from other republics to Estonia or Latvia during the Soviet period have occasionally, post-independence, been classified as foreigners or international migrants both by national institutions (Statistical Database: Latvia, 2023; Statistics Estonia: Population Census, 2021)[2] and in political discourses (Cheskin & Kachuyevski, 2019; Dzenovska, 2018, pp. 62–69; Smith et al., 2002, pp. 75–76).

In contrast to Estonia and Latvia, Lithuania, after regaining independence in 1990, adopted a "zero-option" citizenship policy, granting citizenship to all legal residents of the country on the day the law was adopted, their own and their parents' place of birth notwithstanding (Kūris, 2010, pp. 12–21). Unlike in Estonia and Latvia, describing Soviet internal migrants as foreigners is absent at least in Lithuanian national official statistics. The differences in citizenship legislation in the three Baltic states have had long-standing effects on the share of non-citizens in each country. Thus, in 2022, the percentage of "non-citizens" in Lithuania was only 1.2 (Eurostat, 2022). In contrast, more than thirty years after independence, the percentage of "non-citizens" in Latvia and Estonia was among the highest in the European Union, at 15.2 and 13.1, respectively (Eurostat, 2022). This high percentage of "non-citizens" in Latvia and Estonia reflects the restrictive citizenship and naturalization policies in these countries (Agarin, 2018; Priit & Poleshchuk, 2013).

The volume of international migration to the Baltic states since independence, and until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, was very minor and quite similar across the three countries. Most *e*migrants were Russian-speaking residents who arrived there during the Soviet era, and the number of new arrivals to the region in the 1990s remained statistically negligible (Kirch et al., 1993). Joining the EU in 2004, as well as the 2008 global financial crisis, substantially increased the rates of *e*migration of the Baltic States' citizens to wealthier EU countries, while immigration remained minor (OECD, 2013). In 2015, the year known in the European political discourse as the year of the "refugee crisis," the number of asylum applicants per million residents in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania was only 172, 165, and 93, respectively (Eurostat, 2024a). The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the subsequent military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, and the tightening of authoritarian control in Belarus following the 2020 civil uprising triggered a new, albeit very limited, wave of migration from these regions to the three Baltic States.

In 2021, considerable public attention was directed toward a new group of migrants from Middle Eastern and African countries who were entering Lithuania and Latvia via

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[2] In 2012, Estonian statistics designated specific categories to the descendants of those who relocated to Estonia from other Soviet republics during the period when Estonia was part of the Soviet Union, classifying them as a second and even third generation foreign-born population (Grommé & Scheel, 2020).

the Belarusian border. During the summer of that year, in retaliation for EU sanctions, the Belarusian government arranged the arrival of thousands of individuals from several Middle Eastern and African countries on tourist visas to Belarus and transported them to the EU border, facilitating their attempted crossings into EU territory (BBC News, 2021a, 2021b; Dixon, 2021; Von Der Burchard, 2021). Thousands of people gathered near the Lithuanian and Polish borders, enduring harsh conditions as they waited to enter the EU (Braw, 2021). As a result of this orchestrated crisis, Lithuania received approximately 3,900 asylum applications, while Latvia registered around 600 (EUAA, 2022). Thus, the average yearly number of immigrants that entered Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania between 2015 and 2021 was about 17, 10, and 31 thousand, respectively (Eurostat, 2024b). During the same period, the average yearly number of people who emigrated from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania was 12, 16, and 36 thousand, respectively (Eurostat, 2024c). This trend of minor international migration inflow, with negative migration net in Latvia and Lithuania, drastically changed in all three Baltic States in 2022, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. By the end of 2023, the number of Ukrainian refugees in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania was about 35, 44, and 75 thousand respectively (Eurostat: Statistics Explained, 2024).

In short, how many people moved to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania during the Soviet period played a highly formative role in the subsequent ethnic composition of the Baltic states and the promulgation of post-independence citizenship laws. Our investigation aims to explore how these processes, which we subsume under the term *Soviet political legacy*, influence current perceptions of migrants.

It is, of course, unlikely that present-day perceptions of migration in the Baltic states reflect exclusively the Soviet political legacy. When forming their views, people are likely to also draw upon recent events related to immigration. In the context of the present study, the most important events and developments include Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Letki et al., 2024b; Weber et al., 2023), the orchestrated migration crisis on the Belarusian border (Von Der Burchard, 2021) a few years prior to the invasion, the mass immigration of refugees to Europe (Bansak et al., 2016; Czymara & Schmidt-Catran, 2017), and labor migration to the Baltics mostly from former Soviet republics, but also from India (OECD, 2021). Such events can prime individuals to connect related information when thinking about immigration (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010; Zaller, 1992). However, while current events and post-independence migration have had a relatively similar impact across the Baltic States, these states differ in their Soviet histories. Analyzing these cross-national differences allows us to study how historical political processes shape current perceptions of migrants.

Hypotheses
Soviet internal migration
The historical differences discussed above imply that the Soviet historical legacy of internal migration will be more present in people's minds in Latvia and Estonia, where internal migrants from other Soviet republics may still be considered foreigners by the public at large (although it does not automatically imply that public perceptions in Latvia and Estonia are identical). This contrasts with Lithuania, where the volume of Soviet internal migration was much lower and where, following independence, internal migrants from

other Soviet Republics were automatically given citizenship status, thus becoming less distinct from the general citizenry. This leads to our first hypothesis:

- H1: When it comes to how people imagine immigrants today, historically internal migration as a constitutive element of the Soviet political legacy is a more relevant topic to people living in Latvia and Estonia than in Lithuania.

There are also reasons to expect differences in the relevance of historically internal migration in perceptions of migrants across ethnic groups and age within the Baltic region. First, most members of the Russian-speaking *ethnic minority* in the Baltic region are descendants of those who moved there from other Soviet republics before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Russian speakers who relocated to the Baltic region during the Soviet period perceived their relocation as a residential move within the same sovereign state (Kolstø, 1999). It is reasonable to suggest that their descendants share this point of view. Thus, our hypothesis is:

- H2: Members of the Russian-speaking minorities are less likely to refer to Soviet internal migration when describing imagined immigrants than the ethnic majority or other ethnic minority groups.

We also expect that the salience of the topic of historically internal migration will vary with *age*. Older people are more likely to think about Soviet internal migration when they think about migrants in the country because they were much more exposed to that wave of migration compared to younger people. This leads to our next hypothesis:

- H3: The likelihood of addressing Soviet internal migration, when describing imagined immigrants, increases with age.

Positive perceptions of migrants

As mentioned before, variations in the volume of Soviet migration resulted in different proportions of ethnic majority populations and different citizenship laws across the three countries. This might have also led to differences in the presence of positive images of any newcomers. This is because the legacy of the Soviet migration in Latvia and Estonia, which resulted in a relatively large and homogenous out-group population, may have fostered the perception that any additional newcomer poses a threat to the native culture, language, and national identity (Gorodzeisky, 2021). Lithuania's smaller, more diverse minority populations may have led to more tolerant and favorable attitudes toward immigrants. Yet, it is not only the size and diversity of the ethnic minority population that matters, but also the historical context accompanying Soviet-era migration to the Baltics. The Soviet Russian-speaking minority represents both the unresolved grievances stemming from the Soviet occupation and a persistent source of anxiety regarding the region's geopolitical stability and its future (Cheskin & Kachuyevski, 2019; Dzenovska, 2012; Klumbytė & Šliavaitė, 2021). Feelings of threat and anxiety about one's own collective interests are often translated into hostility toward any 'others'. Put differently, the historical differences in Soviet migration patterns, which resulted in the countries' distinct ethnic compositions, may have led to differences in citizens' perceptions of any migrants, whether they tend to see them in negative or positive terms. Thus, we formulate the following hypothesis:

- H4: Positive perceptions of immigrants are more present in Lithuania than in Latvia and Estonia.

As to the differences in the prevalence of positive perceptions of immigrants at the individual level, we expect that members of any *ethnic minority group, including Russian speakers*, are more likely than members of the ethnic majority group to perceive immigrants in positive terms. Cultural marginality theory suggests that belonging to a minority group and being "socialized into believing themselves to be marginalized" (Fetzer, 2000, p. 17) can lead to sympathy for other marginalized or disadvantaged groups (Allport, 1954; Fetzer, 2000). Personal experiences of exclusion may also enhance empathy toward other outgroups. Likewise, perspective taking, i.e., placing oneself in the position of another (Todd et al., 2011), may be more common among minority members who have firsthand experience with discrimination, making them more inclined to view immigrants positively. Furthermore, social identity theory suggests that minorities may be more likely to include immigrants within a broader, shared group identity, which can foster ingroup cohesion (Tajfel et al., 1979). In line with these arguments, previous research in postsocialist contexts has demonstrated that ethnic minorities tend to express more positive attitudes toward immigrants than the dominant ethnic majority group (Alexseev, 2010; Brunarska, 2019; Gorodzeisky, 2021; Gorodzeisky & Glikman, 2018). This leads us to expect that:

- H5: Ethnic minority groups in the three Baltic states are more likely to perceive immigrants in positive terms than the ethnic majority.

Data and method

The data we analyze are based on nationally representative CATI (computer-assisted telephone interview) surveys conducted in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia in the Fall of 2022[3]. The samples were drawn using random digit dialing from stratified administrative districts and were collected by trained, supervised interviewers. The same sampling strategy and (translated) questionnaire were used in all three countries. To ensure the comparability of the question wording, two-way translations from English to the local language and back were implemented for each country. For Russian speaking respondents, the questionnaire was also translated into Russian in all countries. All the responses to the open-ended question were translated from the respective native language into English by the three polling institutes commissioned for the survey. The responses were treated with strict confidentiality so that participants' identities could not be identified in the survey results. The survey was conducted approximately half a year after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. That said, we developed the research design and survey questionnaire some time before the invasion; hostilities broke out just as we were ready to begin pretesting the questionnaire.

The survey questionnaire included attitudinal questions and items about the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents. Each country sample consisted of about 400 respondents. After removing those who reported that they were not born in Latvia/Lithuania/Estonia, respectively, and listwise deletion for the variables, our final sample

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[3] We commissioned data collection to three polling institutes: Latvijas Fakti for Latvia, Turu-uuringute AS for Estonia, and Baltijos tyrimai for Lithuania. Table A1 in the appendix compares the demographics of each population and the respective sample.

consisted of 1,136 respondents. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the analytical sample[4]. In all three countries, individuals were classified into one of three categories based on their self-declared ethnicity: the ethnic majority of the respective country, a Russian-speaking minority (Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians in Latvia; Russians and Ukrainians in Estonia; Russians and Belarusians in Lithuania), and other ethnic minorities (such as Finns, Poles, and others not belonging to the previous two groups).

In the empirical analysis, we focus on the responses to the survey's first and open-ended question, asking respondents to describe who comes to their mind when they think about immigrants. Specifically, the question reads: *"When you think about immigrants in [country], which group do you think of first of all? Please describe the group in your own words, and in as much detail as possible."* In introducing this question, we follow a handful of studies that previously used a similar question in attitudinal survey research (Asbrock et al., 2014; Blinder, 2015; Braun et al., 2013; Flores & Azar, 2023). Notably, their respective approaches to the analysis of the responses to this question were remarkably different from ours. They either provided the respondents with a variety of closed categories as optional responses (Blinder, 2015), or manually coded the responses to the open-ended question, while focusing only on the first migrant group mentioned (Asbrock et al., 2014). We, on the other hand, let the algorithm reveal all the possible themes in the entire content of the 1,136 analyzable responses to this question.

We use R for our analysis. The replication material is available at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/4YDWN. The average length of the response in the survey was 10.62 words (standard deviation: 10.63). For subsequent analysis, we organized these responses into a Document Term Matrix (DTM). In this matrix, each row represents a respondent, and each column corresponds to a specific term. The frequency of each term in an answer is recorded in the cells of the matrix. To clean our data, we removed stop words and non-letter characters and applied stemming to the terms. We also replaced references to either Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania with the term *ourcountry*. These pre-processing tasks

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the samples

	Combined data	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
	Mean (Standard deviation)	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean (SD)**
Age	49.29 (17.10)	48.5 (18.1)	49.16 (15.9)	50.1 (17.4)
Female	54.4	53.4	54.6	55.1
Education				
Basic	4	6.5	3.7	2
General secondary	17.6	25	10	18.4
Vocational secondary	26.6	29	23.9	27
Higher	51.8	39.5	62.5	52.6
Ethnicity				
Ethnic majority member	82.9	84.1	70.6	93.5
Russian speaking minority	13.5	14.5	23.9	2.7
Other minority	3.6	1.4	5.5	3.7
Country				
Estonia	31			
Latvia	33.5			
Lithuania	35.5			

[4] The sample is almost equally distributed in terms of gender. In Latvia, over 60% of native respondents have higher education; in Estonia 40%, and in Lithuania 51%. We account for these compositional differences in education levels in our model.

were facilitated by the use of R's quanteda package, developed by Benoit et al. (2018). After cleaning the data, the resulting Document Term Matrix (DTM) comprised 1,136 rows, representing usable answers, and 937 columns, indicating relevant terms.

To identify the main topics in the respondents' answers, we applied Structural Topic Modelling (STM) using the STM package by Roberts et al. (2014). STM is a technique that groups words in the data into clusters, with each cluster being identified as a topic. The only initial decision this algorithm-based approach requires of the researcher is the number of topics; otherwise, the approach is inductive. We ran a set of models with different numbers of topics. Following the criteria of Weston et al. (2023), we then compared their Semantic Coherence, Held-Out Likelihood, and Residuals. For the main analysis, this comparison led us to a model with 14 topics. While remaining parsimonious, the 14-topic model performed well based on the metrics and the qualitative analysis of the proposed topics (Figure A1 in the Appendix).

STM produces two types of posterior probability distributions. The first is the probability distribution of each term being associated with each topic, essentially detailing how words cluster together (see Table 2 below). Each topic is composed of all terms, but the probability of a term belonging to a topic varies, theoretically ranging from zero (the term is definitely not part of the topic) to one (the term is definitely part of the topic). The second distribution is how the topics are represented in each response, based on the words used by the respondent. Again, each answer contains elements of all topics, but with varying probabilities, theoretically ranging from zero (the topic is not present in the response) to one (the response exclusively pertains to that topic).

In the next stage, to test how each topic's probability varies across countries, ethnic, and age groups, we added the respondents' country of residence, ethnic group, and age as document-level covariates to the STM models, controlling for education and gender.

Table 2 Top terms (FREX) of each topic

1 Generic definition of migration	2 Ukrainian refugees	3 Racialized image of migration A	4 Unspecified A	5 Unspecified B	6 Racialized image of migration B	7 Soviet internal migration
come	Ukrain	want	outsid	moth	black	ourcountry
reason	war	young	connect	comment	one	came
left	flee	skin	worker	other	asian	speak
person	refuge	say	consid	difficult	home	integr
differ	alon	dark	good	alone	settl	refus
example	fled	anyth	among	class	earn	soviet
elsewhere	sorri	syrian	people	order	can	union

8 Labor migration	9 Positive perceptions	10 Unspecified C	11 Life improvement	12 Women with children	13 Asia and Middle East immigrants	14 Respondents found the question difficult to answer
work	immigr	help	countri	children	middl	answer
belarusian	think	need	life	women	East	imigr
asylum	posit	run	better	emigr	border	job
older	encount	import	anoth	Iraq	eastern	peopl
age	necessarili	must	third	mayb	cross	state
know	toler	accept	foreign	mother	illegal	profession
seek	thought	idea	african	readi	central	count

In other words, we ran an additional set of models that regress the probability of each topic on each of the covariates mentioned above (see the estimateEffect() function of Roberts et al. (2019) for further details on the estimation procedure).

How citizens in the Baltic States imagine migrants

Overview of the topics

To explore how native-born citizens in the Baltic region imagine international migrants, Table 2 showcases the 14 topics identified by the structural topic model. It includes the terms that are both frequent and (relatively) exclusive to each respective topic (so-called FREX). Balancing frequency and exclusivity is important because words that just appear frequently may be merely functional to discuss any topic, while words that are completely exclusive to a particular topic might be so rare that they offer limited informational value.

Looking into FREX terms, some topics relate to the reasons for migration (e.g., refugees, labor migration), geographical origins (e.g. Asia and Middle East; former Soviet Union), gender and age composition (e.g. women with children), and perception of migrants (e.g. positive perceptions; racialized image of migration). To provide names for the topics, we also read the fifteen most probable answers in each topic. As typical for topic modelling, there were also several topics for which it was not possible to specify a shared theme.

The first topic includes rather generic definitions of migrants, such as *"Those who leave their homeland to live elsewhere"* or *"There are various reasons why a person has had to leave his homeland."* The war – underway at the time when the data were collected – is reflected in the second topic, *Ukrainian refugees*, through the use of terms such as *ukrain[e]*, *war*, *flee*, and *refuge*. Closely related to the topic of *Ukrainian refugees* is topic 12, which addresses the migration of women with children, often in connection with the war in Ukraine, for example: *"Because of the war in Ukraine, women are traveling with children..."*.

Topics 3 and 6 are connected to racialized stereotypes of migrants. For example: *"Blacks, they catch your eye, and you can immediately tell that they have moved in."* Responses associated with the topic frequently mention skin color as the main characteristic of migrants: *"To me, they are dark-skinned, some from Iran, Pakistan. You can see single men with darker complexions walking in the city"* or *"There are a lot of dark-skinned people, it's hard to say from which countries."*

Topics 8 and 11 include migrant definitions related to work (*"People of working age who want to continue to Europe"*) or the pursuit of a better life (*"That is a person who has decided to go to another country in search of a better life"*).

In addition, there are three topics, 4, 5, and 10, that we could not specify. They refer to rather heterogeneous migrant groups and do not seem to share a common thread. The last topic, number 14, includes answers from respondents who were unsure about how to define migrants.

Topics 7 (*Soviet internal migration*) and 9 (*positive perceptions*) pertain to our theoretical interest in the long-term impact of the Soviet political legacy on the images of migrants in the contemporary Baltic States. Historically internal migration shaped by the Soviet legacy is present in topic 7, which includes the terms *soviet*, *union*, and past tense *came*. A look at the top answers for this topic clarifies the theme. For example:

"People who came in Soviet times (from other Soviet republics)"; A woman from Estonia complains: *"Russians who do not speak Estonian, who came to Estonia a long time ago but have not integrated into Estonian society."* Another Estonian woman thinks of *"A person who came to Estonia from elsewhere,* e.g., *a Russian who came to Estonia after World War II, had not studied Estonian but presents their demands"*; A 70-year-old man from Estonia referred to those migrants as *"Occupiers, workers who came during the Soviet era"*. It is noticeable that the top answers from this topic are mostly from Estonian respondents, which suggests that the *Soviet internal migration* topic might be especially relevant in Estonia (We will analyze this more systematically below).

Topic 9 covers positive perceptions of migrants and includes terms such as *think posit(ive)*, or *toler(ance)*. It is worth mentioning that rather than emphasizing the rejection of immigrants, which is typically the focus of migration studies, perception of migrants in *positive* terms were identified by the Structural Topic Model as a distinct topic. For example, a woman from Lithuania said that she *"positively views immigrants. They need some help."* Some based their positive views on interpersonal interactions. Two women from Lithuania exemplify this. The first said that she *"is positive about immigrants. Meets with immigrants personally, communicates with a Ukrainian woman on work matters."* The second said that she thinks *"positively about immigrants. I met an immigrant colleague from Ukraine at work, she is a war refugee."* Thus, a positive perception of migrants is sometimes, but not always, connected to Ukrainian refugees. Other respondents stressed their positive perceptions, even though they had not had any contact with immigrants. A man from Lithuania stated that he *"reads the press and is interested in immigrants. The opinion about immigrants and immigration is good,"* although he *"didn't get to meet the immigrants personally".* Another Lithuanian said that he is *"interested in immigrants from television, media,"* but also *"encounters immigrants personally, because immigrants live in the neighborhood"* and *"only think[s] positively about immigrants."* The top answers to this topic, thus, seem to come primarily from Lithuanians, which is in line with our theoretical argument outlined in Hypothesis 4. We will test this more thoroughly in our regression analysis below.

Not all topics are equally represented in the data. As can be expected, Fig. 1 shows that Russia's war against Ukraine and the resulting influx of war refugees featured heavily in the image of migrants in the Baltic states in late 2022. Consequently, the topic of Ukrainian refugees is by far the most prevalent one, making up roughly a quarter of all content according to our model. Yet, our model reveals that respondents also regularly addressed historically internal migration shaped by the Soviet legacy and their positive perceptions of migrants. These two themes rank among the first five most prominent topics. The *Soviet internal migration* topic amounts to 8.7% and the *Positive perceptions* topic to about 6.2%, respectively, of all content, based on this 14 topics model.

Correlations between the topics

To systematically examine how our topics relate to each other, we plot their correlations based on each topic's posterior probability. Based on this, Fig. 2 illustrates whether any two topics are *more* likely to co-occur (positive correlation, in green) in the same response, *less* likely to co-occur (negative correlation, in red) in the same response, or *independent* of one another (zero or weak correlation). Each line in Fig. 2 indicates a correlation that is stronger than 80% of all correlations. Consequently, a missing line implies
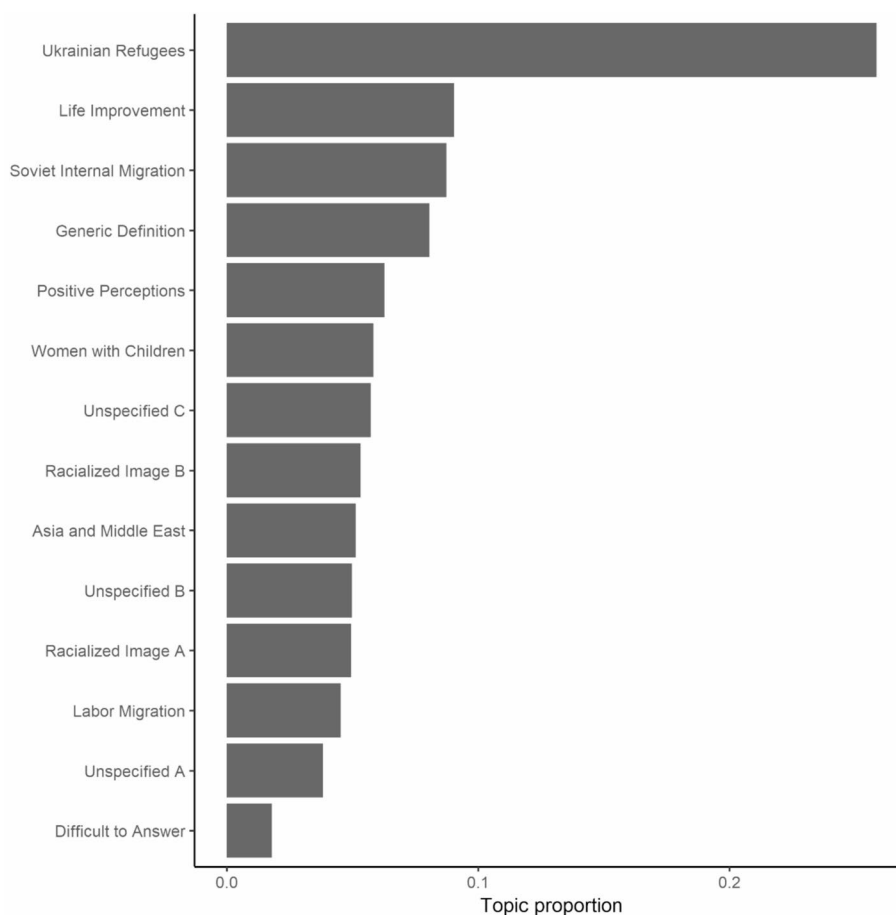
Fig. 1 Topic proportions

a correlation between topics that is weaker than this (the full marginal topic proportion correlation matrix can be found in Figure A2 in the appendix)[5].

Many of the correlations are indeed negative, meaning that if one topic becomes more prevalent in respondents' answers, then the other topic tends to become less prevalent. This is partially driven by the formulation of the survey question, which asked which group comes to a respondent's mind first when thinking about immigrants in their country.

The two topics of our theoretical interest, *Soviet internal migration* and *Positive perceptions*, negatively correlate with one another, suggesting that those rarely occur together in the same response. However, it appears that *Soviet internal migration* is positively correlated with the topic of the *Generic definition of migration*. This suggests that those thinking about an imagined generic migrant population when asked to describe a migrant in their country, also tend to think about Soviet internal migrants as illustrative of this generic image. *Positive perceptions*, on the other hand, positively correlates with the topic of *Labor migration*, suggesting that migrants who come to a country to seek work are often viewed rather favorably.

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[5] We do not include the ambiguous topics 4, 5, 10, and 14 in Fig. 2 for reasons of clarity. We also examined the correlations for each country separately and did not find any meaningful differences.
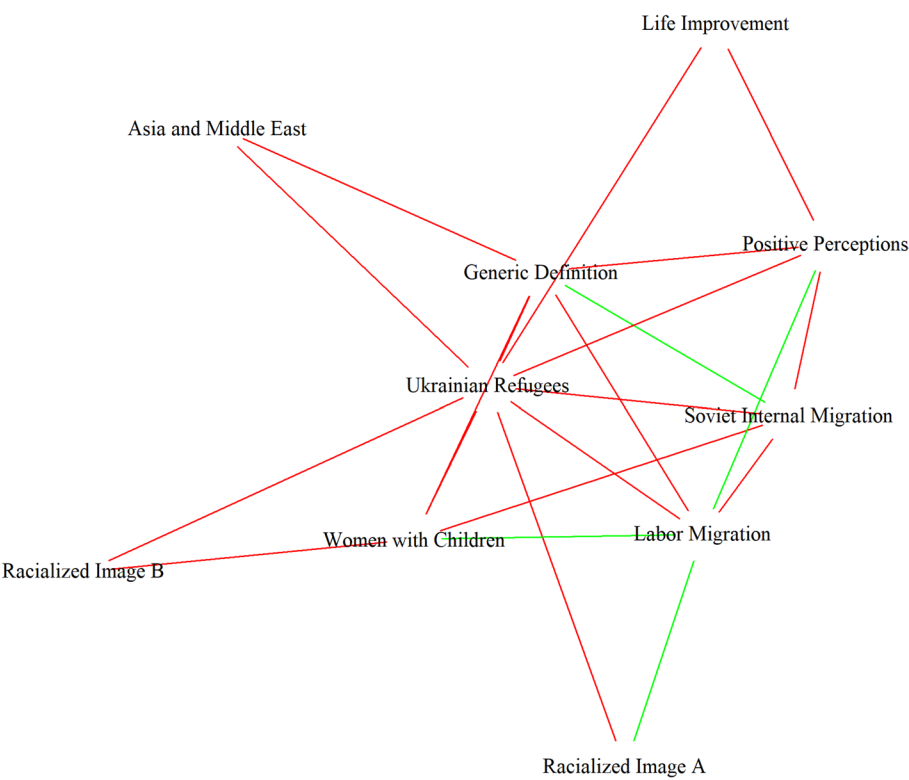
Fig. 2 Correlations between the topics based on the posterior probabilities of the topics. Note: Lines represent the 20% strongest correlations; green lines represent positive correlations, red lines negative correlations; irrelevant topics removed for clarity
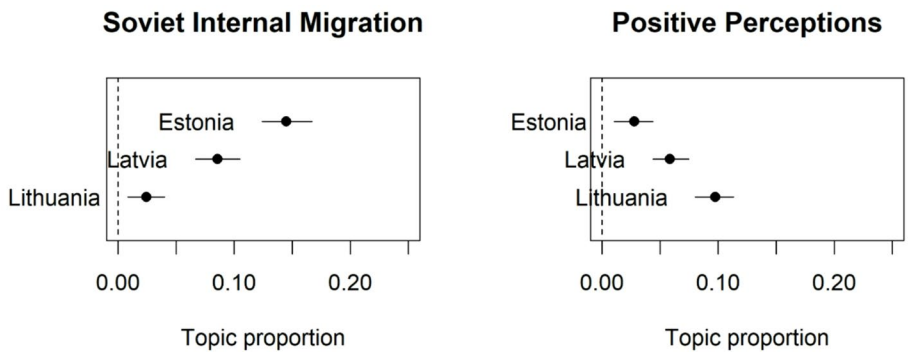
Fig. 3 Cross-national differences between the *Soviet internal migration* and *Positive perceptions* topics

Cross-national and Individual-level differences

Thus far, we have established the images that come to mind when people in the Baltic states hear the term "immigrant," and demonstrated how these images are empirically connected. To test our hypotheses related to *Soviet internal migration* and *positive perceptions of* migrants, we estimated each topic's probability (i.e., "Soviet internal migration" and "Positive perceptions") as a function of country, ethnicity, and age, accounting for education and gender as control variables. Following H1 and H4, Fig. 3 presents the findings related to the question of whether a topic is more likely to be addressed in one country as compared to another country, controlling for composition effects (see Figure A3 in the Appendix for an overview of the cross-national differences across all topics).

Table 3a Correlates of the *Soviet internal migration* topic

	Estimate	Std. error	t value	Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)	-0.022	0.025	-0.902	0.367
Estonia (ref. Lithuania)	0.124	0.012	10.169	0.0001
Latvia (ref. Lithuania)	0.063	0.01	6.076	0.0001
Female (ref.: male)	-0.015	0.009	-1.736	0.083
Age	0.001	0.0001	2.2	0.028
Gen sec education (ref: basic)	0.036	0.022	1.695	0.09
Voc sec education (ref: basic)	0.041	0.022	1.85	0.065
Higher education (ref: basic)	0.029	0.021	1.358	0.175
Other minority member (ref.: majority)	0.023	0.024	0.932	0.352
Russian speaking minority (ref. majority)	-0.041	0.013	-3.064	0.002

Table 3b Correlates of the *Positive perceptions* topic

	Estimate	Std. error	t value	Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)	0.1	0.024	4.174	0.0001
Estonia (ref. Lithuania)	-0.071	0.009	-8.015	0.0001
Latvia (ref. Lithuania)	-0.041	0.01	-4.055	0.0001
Female (ref.: male)	0.015	0.007	2.005	0.045
Age	0.0001	0.0001	0.2	0.842
Gen sec education (ref: basic)	-0.002	0.022	-0.112	0.911
Voc sec education (ref: basic)	0.018	0.02	0.913	0.362
Higher education (ref: basic)	-0.018	0.021	-0.881	0.379
Other minority member (ref.: majority)	-0.051	0.017	-2.993	0.003
Russian speaking minority (ref. majority)	-0.011	0.011	-1.02	0.308

Soviet internal migration

The left panel in Fig. 3 shows that the *Soviet internal migration* topic emerges far more often in Estonia, followed by Latvia and then Lithuania. Compared to Lithuania, the topic is 12 percentage points more likely to appear in Estonia, and 6.1 percentage points more likely to appear in Latvia, controlling for compositional differences. Both differences are substantial and statistically significant at $p < 0.001$ (see Table 3a). The findings thus confirm Hypothesis 1, which proposed that such a topic is theoretically more likely to arise in Estonia and Latvia than in Lithuania due to differences in the Soviet political legacy among the countries. However, we did not expect to find the difference between Estonia and Latvia.

On the individual level, we find that members of the *Russian-speaking minorities* are less likely than the members of the ethnic majority and other ethnic minorities to mention the topic of Soviet internal migration when asked to describe an immigrant in their country. This finding supports H2, implying that Russian-speaking minorities are less likely to perceive their ancestors who moved to the Baltic states during the Soviet era as immigrants in a conventional sense. The coefficient of *age* is also in the expected direction (H3): With each year of age, the probability of this topic increases by about 1 percentage point ($p = 0.028$). Older people in the Baltic states, thus, are more likely to think about historically internal migrants shaped by the Soviet legacy when describing current immigration in their country.

Positive perceptions

The right panel of Fig. 3 shows that the topic *Positive perceptions* is more frequently mentioned in Lithuania compared to Estonia and Latvia. The findings presented in

Table 3b demonstrate that the probability of the topic appearing in Estonia and Latvia is lower than in Lithuania by 7 and 3.9 percentage points respectively, controlling for composition effects. Both differences are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$. The findings thus confirm H4, suggesting a higher likelihood of current positive perceptions of immigrants in Lithuania than in Estonia and Latvia because of the Soviet political legacy regarding migration.

Further findings demonstrate that there is no difference between the members of the ethnic majority and Russian-speaking ethnic minorities in the frequency of *Positive perceptions* when describing their images of migrants in the country. The coefficient is rather small in size and statistically insignificant. However, compared to the members of the ethnic majority, members of other ethnic minority groups are less likely to address the topic of *Positive perception* by 5 percentage points. These findings are going against our theoretical predictions outlined in H5, suggesting that any ethnic minority is more likely to express positive perceptions toward immigrants than the ethnic majority.

Conclusion and discussion

Migration patterns during the Soviet era significantly shaped the ethnic makeup of the Baltic states and influenced the creation of post-independence citizenship laws (Agarin, 2018; Brubaker, 1996; Dzenovska, 2018; Duina & Miani, 2015). In this paper, we explored the current popular images of migrants in the Baltic States and the long-term impact of the *Soviet political legacy* on how people in these countries imagine migrants currently. Our analysis is based on original representative surveys conducted in the three Baltic States and it employs Structural Topic Modeling to analyze textual responses to an open-ended survey question asking respondents to identify the first groups that come to mind when thinking about immigrants in their country.

Our findings demonstrate that differences in the volume of Soviet internal migration to the Baltic Soviet republics were reflected in the public images of migrants even thirty years after regaining national independence. In Estonia and Latvia, which had experienced a high inflow of Russian-speaking migrants from other Soviet republics and thus a rather homogeneous ethnic minority population, residents were more likely to address the history of Soviet internal migration and less likely to express positive perceptions of any migrants compared to their Lithuanian counterparts, where a smaller volume of Soviet internal migration had resulted in a much smaller and more diverse ethnic minority population. The lasting impact of the Soviet political legacy is corroborated by additional findings, showing that older people were more likely to address Soviet internal migration, while Russian-speaking minorities were less likely to do so.

Contrary to our expectations and prior research, positive perceptions towards migrants were not more pronounced among ethnic minorities. One possible explanation for this is that earlier studies drew their conclusions from closed-ended questions using standard anti-immigration attitude scales (Alexseev, 2010; Brunarska, 2019; Gorodzeisky, 2021; Gorodzeisky & Glikman, 2018). In contrast, we examined responses to open-ended questions about how people imagine focal migrant groups in their country.

It is worth noting that the large influx of war refugees to the Baltic States following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was heavily reflected in the public images of newcomers, as it was the most prevalent topic in our data. Given that

people are generally more positive toward refugees due to humanitarian concerns (Bansak et al., 2016), this may have shaped the positive views in our data. Yet, there is no reason to assume that it shaped the difference in positive perceptions between Lithuania and the two other Baltic States.

Our case study highlights the long-term impact of past geopolitical processes on the present perceptions of migration, where even in the context of the most salient migration-related events, such as Russia's war on Ukraine, historical processes of internal Soviet migration continue to shape public perceptions of migrants in this region. While our study offers new insights into the formation of public images of immigrants in response to historical developments, it is not without limitations. We drew our conclusions from a most similar cases design, yet the empirical analysis is a comparison of three countries, as captured by country dummy variables. In line with research demonstrating that poor economic conditions are associated with negative attitudes toward immigration (Semyonov et al., 2006), national wealth could be a competing mechanism underlying cross-country differences in public perceptions of migration. However, national economic conditions cannot explain the cross-country differences we have observed: In the years preceding the survey, Estonia, the country with the least positive perceptions of migrants, had the lowest unemployment rate among the three countries and a higher GDP per capita than Lithuania, the country with the most positive perceptions (World Bank, 2025).

A fruitful direction for future research might be collecting contextual data on political histories and related variables in other postsocialist countries to model historical influences in detail. Analyzing more countries would enable the use of multilevel modeling and the statistical control of factors such as present-day economic conditions or the general political climate (Schmidt-Catran & Czymara, 2023). Alternatively, future research could focus on the regional level and examine whether past regional socio-political developments continue to shape current perceptions of immigrants. For example, Libman and Obydenkova (2020) found that attitudes toward immigration in contemporary Russia are more negative in regions with stronger Communist legacies. Finally, future work may apply our theoretical argument on the impact of past migration-related historical and political processes on current images of immigrants in contexts beyond postsocialist Europe. In particular, studies could examine the role of political discourses and media narratives in constructing past migration histories in order to understand how current public perceptions of migration are channeled through the social construction of the past.

Supplementary Information
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Supplementary Material 1

Declarations

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Publisher's note