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Cutting in line ahead of us: the role of group relative deprivation in shaping gatekeeping attitudes across different immigrant integration contexts in Europe

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ABSTRACT

Although research shows that anti-immigrant sentiments are generally lower in liberal integration policy contexts, popular backlash against immigrants become salient in many pro-immigration and inclusive integration policy contexts in Europe today. Developing a contextualized mediation model, this research suggests that feelings of deprivation vis-à-vis immigrants influence attitudes toward selective immigrant admission in Europe. From a cross-country analysis of the 2014–2015 European Social Survey through multigroup structural equation modeling, our findings reveal that sentiments of group relative deprivation translate into stronger gatekeeping attitudes throughout Europe by developing threat perceptions from immigration. Relative deprivation-driven threat perceptions influence gatekeeping attitudes more potently in countries where integration policies grant immigrants more comprehensive and equal rights, while they remain relatively dormant in countries with exclusionary integration policies. These findings contribute to our understanding of how and to what extent relative deprivation sentiments vis-à-vis immigrants shape gatekeeping attitudes while shedding light on the unintended impacts of liberal integration policies on public opinion regarding immigration.

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relative deprivation; perceived threat; attitudes toward immigrants; immigrant integration policy

Introduction

Mobilized grievances over migration have far-reaching socio-political repercussions, including the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union (Joppke 2020), the rise of populist radical right parties in many Western democracies (Ivarsflaten 2008), and anti-refugee protests that have taken place in several European cities. Recent studies underscore that group relative deprivation, feelings of being left behind and losing status vis-a-vis immigrants and minorities, lies behind exclusionary political attitudes and nativist populism (Abts and Baute 2022; Cohen 2019; Cramer 2016;

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Hochschild 2016). Group relative deprivation, defined as the sentiments of violated entitlements, anger, and resentment prompted by unfair differentials between social group positions, escalates anti-immigrant prejudice (Pettigrew et al. 2008), support for anti-immigration policies (Gheorghiu, Pehrson, and Christ 2022), and opposition to multiculturalism (Leviston et al. 2020).

Although the literature establishes that sentiments of group relative deprivation are significant drivers behind exclusionary attitudes and political preferences, it falls short of explaining by which mechanisms they translate into attitudes toward immigrant admission across different contexts. Addressing this gap, our research answers: (i) How do feelings of group relative deprivation shape attitudes toward immigrant admission criteria? (ii) What role does the immigrant integration policy context play in the way feelings of group relative deprivation translate into attitudes toward immigrant admission criteria? We suggest that feelings of group relative deprivation result in greater gatekeeping attitudes across many countries, typically through the mediation of immigration-related threat perceptions. How strongly group relative deprivation and threat perceptions influence gatekeeping attitudes, we argue, is contingent on the integration policy context defining immigrants' entitlements to rights and opportunities in society.

Prior research has underscored the norm-conveying function of inclusionary integration policies, which grants comprehensive and equal rights to immigrants, documenting that the average level of perceived threat and anti-immigration attitudes are lower in inclusionary integration policy environments (Denney and Green 2021; Kende et al. 2022; Schlueter, Masso, and Davidov 2020). These findings, however, do not sufficiently explain anti-immigration trends even among the most liberal integration policy environments in Europe, like Sweden. Some natives in more liberal integration policy contexts can nevertheless continue to see immigrants and minorities as *line-cutters* who encroach on their rights and privileges (Abts and Baute 2022; Davis and Wilson 2022; Hochschild 2016; MacDougall, Feddes, and Doosje 2020). Although liberal integration policies contribute to lowering the average prevalence of anti-immigrant sentiments in society, we suggest that the effects of group relative deprivation and threat perceptions can become stronger among natives who still experience these sentiments, leading to more stringent gatekeeping attitudes. By inspecting the patterns in the effects of group relative deprivation and threat perceptions on gatekeeping attitudes across differing integration policy contexts, this study offers a novel perspective to the ongoing debates on the role of integration policies in shaping public opinion on immigration.

Utilizing the seventh round of the European Social Survey data from 2014 to 2015 (ESS 2014), we examine how group relative deprivation shapes gatekeeping attitudes, directly and indirectly, by the mediatory role of threat perceptions across 20 European countries. We employ Multigroup Structural Equation Modeling (MGSEM) as an effective strategy to disentangle the direct and indirect effects of group relative deprivation in each country and test the measurement equivalence of the constructs across countries. Our findings demonstrate that group relative deprivation translates into gatekeeping attitudes through the mediation of threat perceptions from immigration across various migration contexts in Europe. The present analysis demonstrates that the impact of threat perceptions and the mediated effect of group relative deprivation via threat perceptions were much more potent in contexts where integration policies provide immigrants with more equal and comprehensive rights and opportunities. These results

remain robust after potential demographic and socio-economic contextual confounders are controlled.

The contribution of this research is threefold. First, providing much-needed cross-country evidence, the current study reveals that group relative deprivation is a powerful driver behind threat perceptions and gatekeeping attitudes in many European countries. Second, this research breaks new ground, demonstrating that decomposing the effects of group relative deprivation is essential to uncover the social-psychological mechanism by which relative deprivation sentiments lead to gatekeeping attitudes, mainly through immigration-related threat perceptions. Last but not least, examining cross-country patterns in the associations between group relative deprivation, perceived threat, and gatekeeping attitudes depending on the immigrant integration policy contexts, our findings contribute to the literature and socio-political debates on varying repercussions of immigrant integration policy on public opinion regarding immigration.

Gatekeeping attitudes: the connection between group relative deprivation and threat perceptions

Immigrant admission criteria define statutory terms of eligibility to enter a national territory by usually stipulating some legal, economic, and social credentials (Bourhis et al. 1997). In the last couple of decades, the logic of immigrant admission policies has centered around a human-capital focus, making highly educated and skilled immigrant candidates more welcome than their low-skilled counterparts (Ellermann 2020). Citizens support such qualifying criteria for entry into the country to differing extents. According to the evidence from cross-national (Citrin and Sides 2008; Green 2009) and experimental studies (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015; Turper et al. 2015; Valentino et al. 2019), public opinion on immigrant admission attaches high importance to individual competencies, professional and language skills, or education level. Greater public preference for selective admission criteria reflects gatekeeping attitudes seeking to exclude certain categories of immigrants (i.e. low educated, less qualified in language or work skills) from entering the country (Green 2009; Heath and Richards 2020). Hence, preferences for more stringent and selective qualifying criteria for entry into the country indicate a form of opposition towards immigrants.

According to the group position model (Blumer 1958), exclusionary attitudes toward immigrants are most likely to arise when natives perceive an encroachment on their proprietary claims over certain rights, statuses, privileges, and resources (Bobo 1999). The model suggests that exclusionary attitudes fundamentally inhered in the sense of group position, wherein natives harbor (i) a self-assured feeling of superiority compared to immigrants, (ii) a belief that immigrants are intrinsically different and alien, (iii) a sense of proprietary claim to certain rights, privileges, and statuses, and (iv) a perception of threat from newcomers who are believed to demand a greater share of natives' prerogatives (1958, 4). The combination of the first two conditions alone – feelings of superiority and distinctiveness – does not necessarily result in exclusionary attitudes. The model posits that such attitudes emerge from the sense of proprietary claim or prior rights to socially valued resources, privileges, or statuses.

Most research on anti-immigration attitudes focuses predominantly on perceived threat aspect through intergroup competition over scarce resources as a zero-sum game in which

immigrants and host community members are locked into (Green 2009; Meuleman, Davidov, and Billiet 2009; Pereira, Vala, and Costa-Lopes 2010; Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders 2002; Valentino et al. 2019). The sense of violated proprietary claims and entitlements to areas of privilege is equally central in forming exclusionary attitudes, even when immigrants' access to rights and privileges does not necessarily impede natives from enjoying them. Recent evidence shows that exclusive group entitlements to the country and its resources, material or symbolic, play a critical role in shaping attitudes toward immigrants (Martinović and Verkuyten 2023; Nijs et al. 2021; 2024). It is presented that natives who perceive themselves as exclusively entitled to the country and its resources more strongly endorse stricter immigration policies (Straver et al. 2023).

Relative deprivation – defined as the feelings of anger and resentment that are evoked when a person or their ingroup perceives themselves to be unfairly worse off or experiencing a loss of status compared to a relevant referent person or group (Runciman 1966; Smith et al. 2012) – well captures the sense of violated entitlements.[1] When natives believe that immigrants have equal – or maybe even more – opportunities to access resources and privileges than their own group, the gap in group positions would unfairly shrink in their sight, putting their proprietary claim at stake. Consequently, the majority members would feel those *line-cutters* encroach upon their entitlements and privileges. Arising from social group comparisons resulting in a confrontation with an unjustifiable discrepancy between *what is* and *what ought to* be (Gurr 2016; Smith et al. 2012), higher levels of group relative deprivation motivate people to display stronger opposition and bias towards the reference outgroup in comparison (Grant and Brown 1995; Pettigrew et al. 2008) as a defensive strategy to maintain the current hierarchy, in which majority members benefit from higher stakes and advantages (Sidanius et al. 2004).

Recent research provides evidence regarding the centrality of group relative deprivation in shaping immigration attitudes in various societies. In the context of the United States, for instance, the majority group members perceiving immigrants and minorities as 'cutting in line' ahead of them express feelings of violated entitlements and resentment, which result in higher support for nativism, exclusionary political preferences, and anti-immigrant rhetoric (Gest 2016; Hochschild 2016). Group relative deprivation is also demonstrated to motivate native-born citizens to oppose multicultural policies in Australia (Leviston et al. 2020) and express higher levels of concern over immigration, resulting in Euroscepticism in the Belgian context (Abts and Baute 2022). Gheorghiu, Pehrson, and Christ (2022) show that British respondents who feel their group is more deprived relative to immigrants display higher support for anti-immigration policies concerning low-status immigrants. Following the theoretical framework and the empirical findings, we expect higher levels of group relative deprivation to be associated with stricter gatekeeping attitudes. Those feeling that their ingroup is more deprived relative to immigrants would be more likely to prefer selective admission criteria, endorsing entrance of more qualified candidates in the country as a defense strategy.

H1: Those with higher levels of group relative deprivation would be more likely to support more selective immigrant admission criteria.

Given that the motivation to preserve superior group status for the native population is a powerful driver that intensifies intergroup competition (Bobo 1999; Halevy et al. 2010), group relative deprivation may also indirectly influence gatekeeping attitudes through

threat perceptions from immigration. When native-born citizens feel that their ingroup is losing status vis-à-vis newcomers, they are more likely to see an intense intergroup competition and perceive greater threats to collective group interests. Even when immigrants' access to benefits and comprehensive rights does not limit majority group members' ability to enjoy them, they may deem their superior position and proprietary claims over resources and privileges at stake due to the shrinking disparity between social group positions. Research shows that the tendency to regard outgroup members as competitive threats is higher when individuals consider that their ingroup is treated unfairly (Bobo and Hutchings 1996). Similarly, recent cross-country evidence demonstrates that feelings of group relative deprivation considerably increase perceived threat from immigration (Meuleman et al. 2020). Considering evidence together, we suggest that perceived threat from immigration functions as a conveyor belt transmitting the effects of sentiments of violated entitlements and resentment in shaping gatekeeping attitudes. As such, we theorize a mediation mechanism where group relative deprivation is connected with threat perceptions, which, in turn, leads to favoring more selective immigrant admission criteria.

H2: Those feeling higher levels of group relative deprivation would be more likely to perceive threat from immigration, leading to greater support for selective immigrant admission criteria.

How do impacts of group relative deprivation and threat perceptions vary depending on migration context?

Immigrant integration policies are the legal institutionalization of predominant understandings regarding the rights, expectations, and responsibilities of immigrants in a country. Given that policies have a feedback effect on public opinion because they reshape the broader socio-political context (Mettler and Soss 2004), immigrant integration policies can instigate or alleviate how strongly group relative deprivation and threat perceptions take effect on immigration attitudes. Depending on the extent to which equal rights and opportunities are granted, immigrant integration policies can be described through a dimension varying from exclusionary to inclusionary (Bourhis et al. 1997; Geddes and Scholten 2016). Exclusionary integration policies are characterized by assimilationist and exclusionist orientations, which hinder social engagement and preservation of cultural distinctiveness. These policies grant immigrants limited rights and minimal equality, often accompanied by strict preconditions. Inclusionary integration policies embrace anti-discriminatory rules and norms based on pro-multicultural orientations, enabling immigrants to participate in society while maintaining their cultural heritage. These policies bestow encompassing rights on immigrants, providing equal access to education, health care, housing, or the labor market along with opportunities such as long-term residence, citizenship acquisition, political participation, and family reunion. Thus, inclusionary integration policies allow immigrants to improve their socioeconomic position, which contributes to bridging the gap in social group statuses between natives and newcomers (Bilgili, Huddleston, and Joki 2015).

Arguing that integration policies provide normative cues affecting citizens' opinions about immigration, recent studies establish that more inclusionary integration policies

reduce perceived threat (Callens and Meuleman 2017; Green et al. 2020; Schlueter, Meuleman, and Davidov 2013) and anti-immigrant sentiments (Kende et al. 2022). These findings are mostly attributed to the norm-conveying role of inclusionary integration policies, often suggested to facilitate the internalization of anti-discriminatory norms and tolerance for immigration among native-born citizens (see Kende et al. 2022). Following a socialization perspective, these studies analyze the average effects of integration policies on public opinion and implicitly assume unanimity among citizens (Traunmüller and Helbling 2022). However, the premise that liberal immigrant integration regimes foster pro-immigrant and tolerant citizens, while restrictive regimes breed intolerant nationals, does not adequately capture anti-immigration backlash and grievances about the so-called 'integration failure'.

Liberal and multiculturalist integration policies do not make countries immune to anti-immigration sentiments (Lesińska 2014). Experimental evidence demonstrates that in contexts where anti-discriminatory norms prevail, those who perceive outgroup members as threatening are more likely to discriminate against outgroup members than their counterparts in pro-discriminatory contexts (Falomir-Pichastor et al. 2004). That is because, by increasing their discriminatory responses, natives in anti-discriminatory contexts are motivated more to compensate for the equal treatment specified by the norm itself. In parallel, in their experimental research, Traunmüller and Helbling (2022) show that liberal policy decisions granting immigrants political rights create polarized views in the United Kingdom[2]: those who agree with the liberal policy decision become more tolerant toward immigrants, while those who favor restrictive policies become more critical of newcomers.

Following the theoretical discussion and evidence above, we expect the impact of threat perceptions on gatekeeping attitudes to be stronger in countries with inclusionary integration policies granting immigrants access to more equal rights and opportunities. Since exclusionary integration policies already have their own institutional guardrails in place to preserve the prerogatives of natives vis-à-vis immigrants, threat perceptions in these contexts would exert relatively weaker influences on gatekeeping attitudes.

H3: Perceived threat would take more pronounced effect on gatekeeping attitudes in countries with more inclusionary integration policies.

From a series of experiments, Roberts and Davidai (2022) demonstrate that people are prone to viewing others' gains as coming at their own expense. They show that these views are especially exhibited when people feel threatened by others' gains but not when being reassured about their own gains. Majority group members in many countries have gravitated toward the political rhetoric suggesting that native-born citizens, the true right-holders, are being left behind of immigrants, which reflects their feelings about being politically neglected, economically disadvantaged, and culturally insecure (Gidron and Hall 2017). Considerations that the present system has failed to compensate for their deprivations and represent them go along with a significant political discontent accompanied by xenophobia (Dennison and Geddes 2018; Gest 2016; Kim 2024). Accordingly, we expect natives in contexts where integration policies are more liberal and inclusionary to be more sensitive to deem immigrants' access to equal and liberal rights and opportunities at their expense. Even if rights and opportunities provided to immigrants do not impede natives' entitlements, they can still be perceived as challenging

their proprietary claims, signaling a violation of fairness in the social group positionings. According to those feeling that their entitlements are violated, the institutional structure is seen as negligent in guarding natives' superior positions and privileges. Exclusionary and stricter integration policies, however, reassure the native community about their superior social position, protecting and promoting their proprietary claims through institutional guardrails. Thus, even if people harbor feelings of group relative deprivation in exclusionary integration contexts, the policy cues do not further strengthen the impacts of relative deprivation on threat perceptions and gatekeeping attitudes.

H4: The effect of group relative deprivation on perceived threat would be stronger in inclusionary immigrant integration policy contexts.

H5: The effect of group relative deprivation, direct or mediated, on gatekeeping attitudes would be stronger in inclusionary immigrant integration policy contexts.

Data and methods

We utilized the 7th round of the ESS fielded in 2014 and 2015, including 20 European countries and Israel, with a total sample size of 40,185 respondents (ESS 2014). We omitted Israel from the analysis for having different immigration dynamics. As the focus of this research is on majority group members' sentiments of relative deprivation, we also excluded respondents who were non-citizens, foreign-born, or members of an ethnic minority group from the sample. The final sample size included 32,433 individual cases. We applied the design weight provided with the ESS data in all analyses.

We measured **attitudes toward immigrant admission** through the extent to which native-born citizens attach importance to several immigrant admission criteria. We employed questions asking respondents how important they think the following should be in deciding whether someone born, brought up, and living outside the country should be able to come and live in the country; (i) good educational qualifications, (ii) language skills, and (iii) work skills (0 = extremely unimportant, 10 = extremely important). Cross-country and experimental studies illustrate that citizens attach high importance to individual qualifications and competences for immigrant admissibility (Citrin and Sides 2008; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015; Turper et al. 2015; Valentino et al. 2019).[3] Albeit attaching importance to individual qualifications and skills seems compatible with the prevailing meritocratic and egalitarian norms, increased public support for any criteria to raise the bar high for immigrant admissibility reflects gatekeeping attitudes and symbolic group boundaries (Green 2009; Heath and Richards 2020).

Scholarly works often combine realistic and symbolic threat into a single construct of perceived threat since they are often concurrently observed and highly correlated (Meuleman et al. 2020; Riek, Mania, and Gaertner 2006). Following this tradition, we measured **perceived threat** by the items inquiring whether the respondents think that (i) immigrants are good or bad for the economy, (ii) cultural life is undermined or enriched by immigrants, and (iii) the country is made a better or worse place to live by immigrants. The response system was an eleven-point bipolar scale where higher values indicate higher levels of perceived threat.

ESS measures **group relative deprivation** through an item asking respondents' opinion on whether the government treated recently arrived immigrants better or worse than members of their own group on a five-point scale (1 = much worse, 5 = much better). Following prior research (Meuleman et al. 2020), we used this item to measure group relative deprivation.

Positive contact experiences with members of ethnic groups are documented to affect group relative deprivation (Bagci and Turnuklu 2019), threat perceptions (McLaren 2003) and immigration attitudes (Schlueter and Scheepers 2010). Therefore, we utilized the **cross-group friendship** question to measure contact quantity and quality (Green et al. 2020), asking whether the respondents have any close friends of different races or ethnicity (0 = none, 1 = few or several friends). We further controlled for several other socio-economic characteristics in our models. We included respondents' subjective evaluations of their income, where higher values indicate greater difficulty in living on existing income. Respondents' level of education was measured by a variable based on ISCED categories classification by distinguishing between seven educational categories (less than lower secondary, lower secondary, lower tier upper secondary, upper tier upper secondary, advanced vocational, lower tertiary education, and higher tertiary education). Employment status was operationalized by a measure combining respondents' activity status and the occupational group that differentiates between white-collar, blue-collar, self-employed, unemployed, and other economically inactive categories. We further controlled for respondents' gender and age.[4]

For the assessment of **immigrant integration policies**, we used the 2014 data of MIPEX (Huddleston et al. 2015) as it constitutes the most extensive comparative index of migrant integration policies. The index evaluates the extent to which immigrants have comparable opportunities, rights, and access to services in eight different policy domains (i.e. access to nationality, anti-discrimination laws, family reunion, health care, education, labor market mobility, permanent residence, and political participation). It ranges from 0 (exclusionary) to 100 (inclusionary) and has been widely used in comparative studies (Callens and Meuleman 2017; Green et al. 2020; Kauff et al. 2013).

As the robustness checks, we also controlled for the effects of immigrant group size, operationalized as the country's immigrant stock per 100 inhabitants, and long-term unemployment rate in 2014, retrieving data from the Eurostat Statistics Database.[5] We also controlled for the GDP per capita, drawing data from the World Development Indicators database and the social expenditure percentage of GDP from the OECD Social Expenditure Database (SOCX). Appendix F reports the results of robustness checks.

Modeling strategy

We conducted multigroup structural equation modeling (MGSEM) (Bollen 1989; Schumacker and Lomax 2016) across 20 countries to investigate the associations between group relative deprivation, perceived threat, and attitudes toward immigrant admission criteria in each country individually and to assess the similarities and differences in these associations across the countries. MGSEM has several advantages over traditional regression modeling: It allows the estimation of the mediation mechanisms by decomposing the direct and indirect effects of group relative deprivation on immigration attitudes while efficiently accounting for measurement errors through the construction of

latent variables (Schumacker and Lomax 2016). An alternative strategy for a cross-country mediation analysis with latent constructs could be Multilevel Structural Equation Modelling (MSEM). However, research shows that the common country sample size of 20 in a cross-country analysis does not yield accurate estimations at all (Meuleman and Billiet 2009). Even a relatively simple model, including one latent construct at both levels along with a contextual predictor, necessitates at least 40 countries (Meuleman and Billiet 2009).[6] Moreover, the countries included in cross-national surveys are often not random samples, which raises concerns about the justifiability of statistical inferences in a multilevel analysis (Ebbinghaus 2005; Goerres, Siewert, and Wagemann 2019). For these reasons and following the analytical approach of previous research using ESS data (Davidov et al. 2020), we conducted multigroup SEM instead of multilevel analysis, as the latter would have led to biased estimates of the associations in each country.

We estimated all models using MPlus 8 (Muthén and Muthén 1998–2017). The average rate of missing values in our data was 2%, with most variables displaying less than 3.5% missing values. We, therefore, utilized full information maximum likelihood to deal with missing cases efficiently (Schafer and Graham 2002). For evaluating the model-data fit, we regarded comparative fit index (CFI) values 0.95 or higher, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) values 0.06 or below, and standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR) values 0.08 or lower as the criteria for good model fit (Hu and Bentler 1999). We reported the chi-square for each model but did not rely primarily on it for evaluating the model-data fit because it is overly sensitive for large sample sizes (Cheung and Rensvold 2002).

Findings

We started our analysis with multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (MGCFA) to inspect the measurement invariance for the latent constructs of threat perceptions and attitudes toward immigrant admission criteria across the countries. Establishing measurement invariance is pivotal to guarantee that differences in regression coefficients between countries represent actual similarities or differences rather than being caused by systematic biases in responses or different interpretations of the questions across countries (Seddig, Maskileyson, and Davidov 2020). Our findings from MGCFA confirmed partial metric invariance across 20 countries for both threat perceptions ($\chi^2(36) = 208.68$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.055, CFI = 0.990, SRMR = 0.04)[7] and attitudes toward immigrant admission criteria ($\chi^2(33) = 124.79$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.042, CFI = 0.992, SRMR = 0.03).[8] Partial metric invariance indicates that the relationships between observed measurement items and their underlying latent constructs are sufficiently equivalent across countries to draw substantive conclusions. This ensures that any differences found in the relationships between main variables under study can be interpreted as fundamental differences across countries rather than artifacts of measurement. Therefore, these relationships can be meaningfully and accurately interpreted across countries (Meuleman and Billiet 2012; Steenkamp and Baumgartner 1998).

Our theoretical discussion suggests that opposition to immigration is an outcome of a multifaceted process that can be better understood by accounting for majority group members' sentiments of group relative deprivation. We, therefore, analyze a mediation model in which the effects of group relative deprivation on gatekeeping attitudes are –

partially – mediated by threat perceptions (Table 1). The model revealed a good model-data fit, $\chi^2(1029) = 3630.294$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.039, CFI = 0.960, SRMR = 0.026.

Table 1 reports the MGSEM results, displaying the associations between group relative deprivation, perceived threat, and public attitudes toward admission criteria. Our findings confirm the hypothesized mediation model for eighteen countries our of twenty countries, except Lithuania and Portugal. More specifically, perceived threat did not significantly predict attitudes toward immigrant admission criteria in Lithuania and Portugal.[9]

For more than half of the countries in our sample, the findings support our first hypothesis suggesting that those with higher levels of group relative deprivation are more likely to attach importance to selective criteria for entry into the country across Europe (H1). We found that group relative deprivation has a significant and positive direct effect on gatekeeping attitudes in twelve countries, Austria, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Finland, France, the United Kingdom, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Sweden. For eight countries in the sample (Belgium, Czechia, Estonia, Spain, Norway, Poland, Portugal, and Slovenia), group relative deprivation is not directly associated with public preferences on qualifying criteria for entry into the country.

The absence of direct effect of group relative deprivation does not mean that it is uncorrelated with gatekeeping attitudes. Since our theoretical discussion hypothesizes a mediation model, group relative deprivation is also expected to be indirectly associated with gatekeeping attitudes through threat perceptions (H2). In line with prior evidence (Meuleman et al. 2020),our analysis shows that group relative deprivation has a significant positive effect on perceived threat in all countries, varying from $b = 0.34$ ($p < 0.001$)

Table 1. Effects of group relative deprivation and threat perceptions on gatekeeping attitudes.

	THR →Gatekeeping		GRD → Gatekeeping		GRD → THR		GRD → THR → Gatekeeping (Indirect)	
	b (SE)	std. *b*	*b (SE)*	std. *b*	*b (SE)*	std. *b*	*b (SE)*	std. *b* (SE)
Austria	0.25***(0.04)	0.27	0.22***(0.06)	0.13	0.85***(0.05)	0.48	0.21***(0.04)	0.13
Belgium	0.42*** (0.04)	0.43	0.11 (0.06)	0.07	0.57***(0.05)	0.34	0.24***(0.03)	0.15
Switzerland	0.32*** (0.06)	0.27	0.18*(0.08)	0.10	0.60***(0.06)	0.37	0.19***(0.04)	0.10
Czechia	0.14** (0.04)	0.13	0.004 (0.07)	0.00	0.55***(0.06)	0.28	0.08** (0.02)	0.04
Germany	0.38*** (0.03)	0.34	0.20***(0.05)	0.11	0.65***(0.04)	0.39	0.24** (0.03)	0.13
Denmark	0.31***(0.04)	0.32	0.27***(0.07)	0.13	0.75***(0.06)	0.35	0.24***(0.03)	0.11
Estonia	0.10* (0.04)	0.12	−0.16 (0.10)	−0.07	0.69***(0.09)	0.24	0.07* (0.03)	0.03
Spain	0.40*** (0.05)	0.37	0.07 (0.07)	0.04	0.69***(0.05)	0.38	0.28***(0.04)	0.14
Finland	0.36*** (0.04)	0.31	0.25***(0.06)	0.10	0.56***(0.05)	0.26	0.20***(0.03)	0.08
France	0.30*** (0.05)	0.33	0.20** (0.06)	0.13	0.76***(0.05)	0.45	0.23***(0.04)	0.15
UK	0.31***(0.03)	0.42	0.19*** (0.05)	0.13	1.17***(0.05)	0.56	0.36***(0.04)	0.24
Hungary	0.20*** (0.04)	0.20	0.17** (0.06)	0.09	0.62***(0.06)	0.33	0.12***(0.03)	0.07
Ireland	0.15*** (0.03)	0.17	0.33***(0.05)	0.19	0.73***(0.05)	0.39	0.11***(0.03)	0.07
Lithuania	0.07 (0.04)	0.07	0.20** (0.08)	0.09	0.34***(0.06)	0.15	0.03 (0.01)	0.01
Netherlands	0.40*** (0.06)	0.33	0.21*** (0.06)	0.12	0.55***(0.04)	0.38	0.22***(0.04)	0.12
Norway	0.43*** (0.05)	0.34	0.15 (0.08)	0.07	0.65***(0.06)	0.36	0.28***(0.04)	0.12
Poland	0.12* (0.05)	0.10	0.14 (0.08)	0.06	0.40***(0.07)	0.20	0.05* (0.02)	0.02
Portugal	0.05 (0.06)	0.05	0.06 (0.10)	0.03	0.48***(0.10)	0.21	0.03 (0.03)	0.01
Sweden	0.51*** (0.05)	0.39	0.20** (0.07)	0.08	0.55***(0.06)	0.28	0.28***(0.04)	0.11
Slovenia	0.26*** (0.05)	0.28	0.12 (0.08)	0.07	0.45***(0.07)	0.22	0.12***(0.03)	0.06

Note: THR = perceived threat, GRD = group relative deprivation, Gatekeeping = support for more selective immigrant admission criteria, b = unstandardized coefficient, SE = standard error, std. *b* = standardized coefficient. The data was weighted for cross-national differences in sampling design (weight variable: *dweight*). Two sided tests, *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

in Lithuania to $b = 1.17$ ($p < 0.001$) in the United Kingdom. That is, native-born citizens feeling more deprived vis-à-vis immigrants are more likely to perceive threat from immigration across Europe. Corroborating H2, the analysis confirm that group relative deprivation also connects with gatekeeping attitudes, indirectly through the mediation of threat perceptions from immigration. Table 1 reports the observed indirect effects, demonstrating that perceived threat from immigration significantly mediates the relationship between group relative deprivation and gatekeeping attitudes in all countries but Lithuania and Portugal. Except these countries, the analysis lent substantial evidence for the mediation mechanism, establishing that sentiments of group relative deprivation significantly predict gatekeeping attitudes in eighteen European countries, through immigration-related threat perceptions.

These findings revealed the deprivation-loaded social-psychological state behind public support for more selective immigrant admission in Europe. Stemming from a perceived 'unfair' shrinkage in the gap of social group positions between natives and immigrants, sentiments of group relative deprivation motivate native-born citizens to favor more selective admission criteria via perceived threat from immigration. Since group relative deprivation itself has a sizeable direct effect on gatekeeping attitudes besides its indirect effect, the mediation mechanism was observed to be partial in eleven countries. For Belgium, Czechia, Estonia, Spain, Norway, Poland, and Slovenia, a full mediation mechanism was supported because group relative deprivation magnified the propensity to adopt gatekeeping attitudes by running only through threat perceptions.[10] Presenting cross-country evidence, our findings underscore the central role of group relative deprivation in shaping public opinion on immigrant admission in Europe.[11]

Cross-country variations

To examine whether the effects of group relative deprivation and perceived threat are identical across different migration contexts, we conducted further analysis to compare alternative models in a stepwise fashion. In each step, we imposed a cross-country equality constraint on one structural path while keeping the effects of all control variables unconstrained across these models. In the last step, we imposed cross-country equality constraints on all structural paths except the control variables. Table 2 shows the model-data fit indices of all estimated alternative models and reports the results of chi-square difference tests conducted to test differences between hypothesized (Model 1 in Table 2) and alternative models. According to the results of Satorri-Bentler scaled chi-square difference tests and the Akaike information criterion (AIC), imposing equality constraints on the links between group relative deprivation and perceived threat (Model 2), between group relative deprivation and gatekeeping attitudes (Model 3), between perceived threat and gatekeeping attitudes (Model 4), and on all of the structural paths (Model 5) across countries displayed marginal deteriorations of the model-data fit compared to the main model (Table 2). This implies that the effects of group relative deprivation and perceived threat on opposition to immigration were not identical across Europe.

Although group relative deprivation among host community members was found to be connected with gatekeeping attitudes similarly across eighteen European countries through the mediation of perceived threat, these associations are not equally strong in all countries. To test the further hypotheses predicting a cross-country pattern in the

Table 2. Comparisons of the model-data fit.

	Chi-square	AIC	RMSEA	CFI	SRMR	Satorri-Bentler scaled chi-square difference test
Model 1	$\chi^2(1029) = 3630.29$, $p < 0.001$	1440940.85	0.039	0.960	0.026	–
Model 2	$\chi^2(1048) = 3846.69$, $p < 0.001$	1441166.74	0.041	0.957	0.029	$\Delta\chi^2(19) = 213.78$, $p < 0.001$
Model 3	$\chi^2(1048) = 3821.02$, $p < 0.001$	1441140.44	0.040	0.957	0.029	$\Delta\chi^2(19) = 182.00$, $p < 0.001$
Model 4	$\chi^2(1048) = 3669.03$, $p < 0.001$	1440948.00	0.039	0.960	0.027	$\Delta\chi^2(19) = 38.09$, $p < 0.01$
Model 5	$\chi^2(1067) = 3897.03$, $p < 0.001$	1441195.22	0.040	0.956	0.031	$\Delta\chi^2(38) = 261.61$, $p < 0.001$

Note: Model 1: The hypothesized model where all structural paths were estimated freely; Model 2: Partially constrained alternative model in which an equality constraint was imposed on the link between perceived threat and group relative deprivation; Model 3: Partially constrained alternative model in which an equality constraint was imposed on the link between perceived threat and gatekeeping attitudes; Model 4: Partially constrained alternative model in which an equality constraint was imposed on the link between group relative deprivation and gatekeeping attitudes; Model 5: Constrained alternative model in which equality constraint was imposed on all structural paths.

effects of group relative deprivation and perceived threat depending on immigrant integration policies, we conducted correlation analyses with unstandardized regression coefficients in Table 1 and immigrant integration policy scores. We also performed the same analyses for immigrant group size, long-term unemployment rate, GDP per capita, and social expenditure spending in robustness checks.

Our third hypothesis suggested that perceived threat from immigration takes stronger effects in more liberal and inclusionary immigrant integration policy contexts (H3). Corroborating this expectation, the present results present a strong positive correlation between the effects of perceived threat and inclusiveness of immigrant integration policies ($r = 0.88$, $p < 0.001$). Figure 1 plots the effects of perceived threat in each country with different integration policy scores, demonstrating the strong pattern in the association between the effect of perceived threat and inclusionary integration policy contexts.

The same analysis was conducted to inspect whether the effect of perceived threat on gatekeeping attitudes display a significant pattern depending on potential contextual confounders (Table F1 in Appendix F reports full results). The findings show that the effect of perceived threat is not found to be significantly or strongly correlated with immigrant group size ($r = 0.38$, $p > 0.05$), long-term unemployment rate ($r = -0.08$, $p > 0.05$), and social expenditure spending ($r = 0.43$, $p > 0.05$). We found a moderate positive correlation between the effect of perceived threat and GDP per capita on a statistically significant level ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.05$). However, when we estimated an OLS regression for the connection between the effect of perceived threat, integration policies, and GDP per capita, the association of GDP per capita disappeared ($b = 0.000$, SE = 0.000, $p > 0.05$), and the relationship between integration policies and the effect of perceived threat remained ($b = 0.010$, SE = 0.001, $p < 0.001$).[12]

Our next hypothesis predicts the effect of group relative deprivation on perceived threat to be positively connected with the immigrant integration policy scores (H4). Figure 2 plots the correlation analysis, rejecting H4 ($r = 0.04$, $p > 0.05$). Contrary to our prediction, feelings of deprivation relative to immigrants display stronger effects on perceived threat in countries with rather stricter integration policies such as, Estonia, Hungary or Austria, whereas less strong effects in more liberal integration policy environments like the UK.

Our final hypothesis suggests a positive association between the inclusiveness of integration policies and how strongly sentiments of relative deprivation predict gatekeeping attitudes, directly or indirectly (H5). The analysis partially supported our expectation.

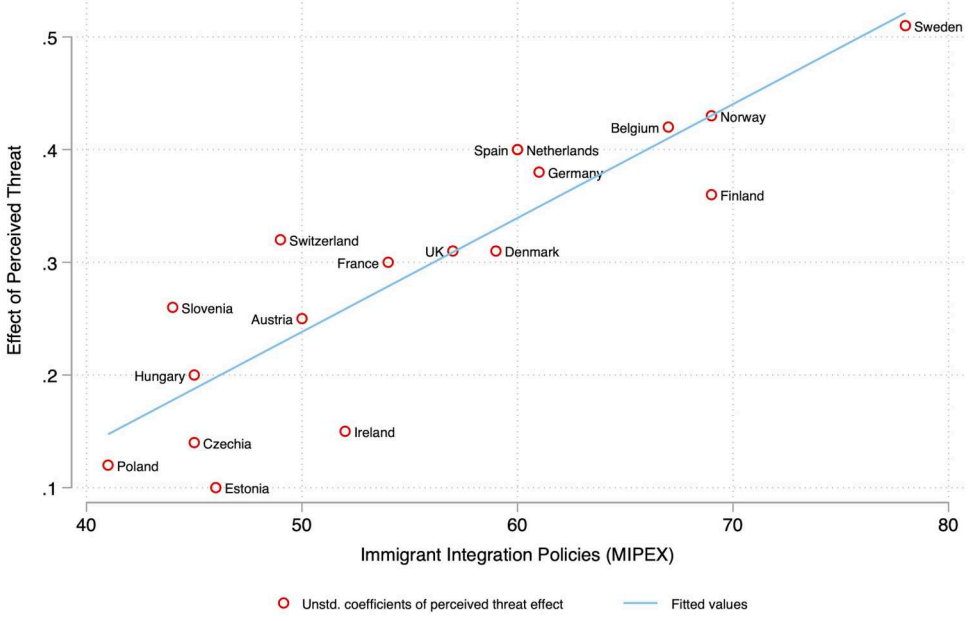


Figure 1. The cross-country pattern of the association between perceived threat and gatekeeping attitudes depending on immigrant integration policy contexts.

Note: Correlation between immigrant integration policy scores and unstandardized coefficients of perceived threat ($r = 0.88$, $p < 0.001$), after unsignificant coefficients were dropped.

For the direct effect of group relative deprivation, we did not observe a significant connection between the direct effect of group relative deprivation on gatekeeping attitudes and immigrant integration policy scores ($r = 0.14$, $p > 0.05$).[13] When it comes to its indirect effect, we found a strong positive pattern displaying that the mediated effect of relative deprivation through perceived threat is more pronounced in the inclusionary integration policy contexts ($r = 0.80$, $p < 0.001$). Figure 3 plots this strong positive correlation, demonstrating that in the most liberal and inclusive integration policy environment, the mediated effect of group relative deprivation through perceived threat has the strongest impact on gatekeeping attitudes, as in Sweden.

The correlation analysis was also conducted to examine whether the indirect effect of group relative portrays a similar pattern depending on the other contextual indicators (Table F1 in Appendix F reports full results). According to our results, the indirect effect of group relative deprivation does not display a significant correlation with immigrant group size ($r = 0.40$, $p > 0.05$), long-term unemployment rate ($r = -0.12$, $p > 0.05$), and social expenditure spending ($r = 0.45$, $p > 0.05$). We observed a significantly moderate correlation between the indirect effect of relative deprivation and GDP per capita ($r = 0.50$, $p < 0.05$). However, estimated an OLS regression was estimated for how integration policies and GDP per capita predicts the indirect effect of relative deprivation, we did not find a significant effect of GDP per capita (b = 0.000, SE = 0.000, $p > 0.05$), while the effect of integration policies remained significant ($b = 0.007$, SE = 0.001, $p < 0.001$).[14]

These findings support our 'guardrail' argument. Although immigration-related threat perceptions resulted in higher preferences for selective immigrant admission criteria, this

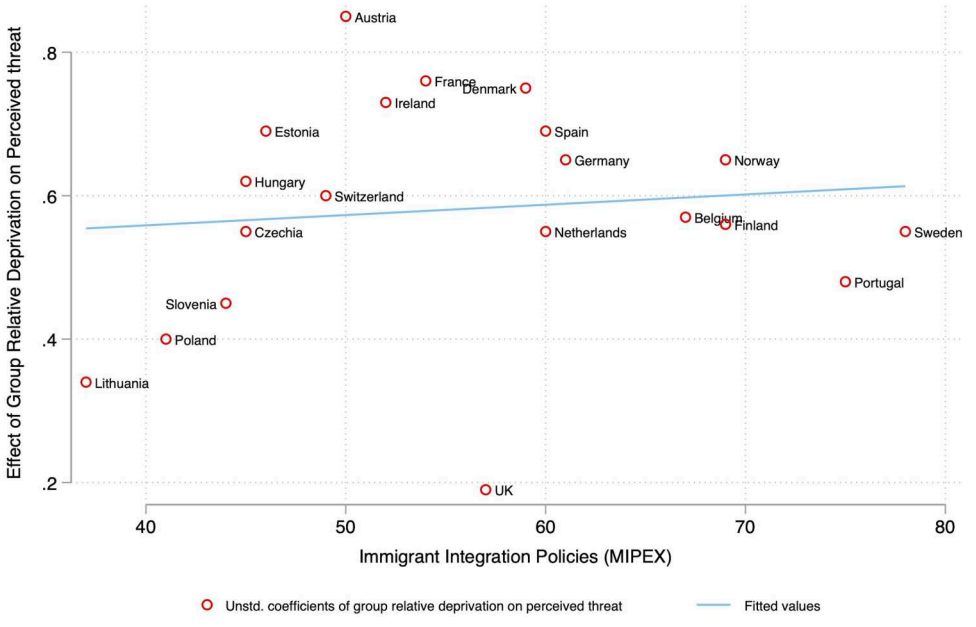


Figure 2. The interplay between the effect of group relative deprivation on perceived threat and immigrant integration policies across Europe.

Note: Correlation between immigrant integration policy scores and unstandardized coefficients of group relative deprivation on perceived threat ($r = 0.04$, $p > 0.05$).

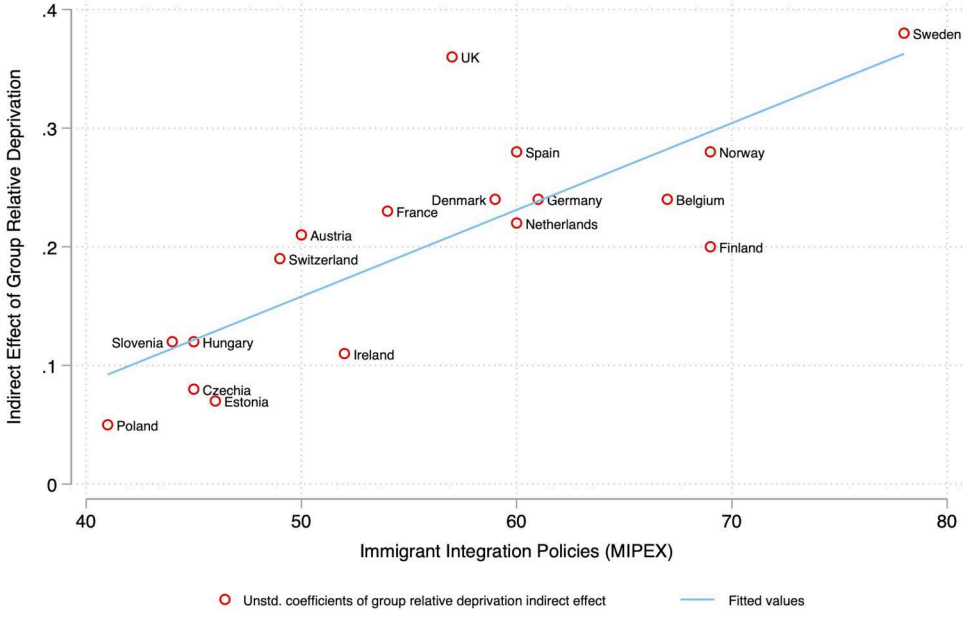


Figure 3. The interplay between the indirect effect of group relative deprivation and immigrant integration policies across Europe.

Note: Correlation between immigrant integration policy scores and unstandardized coefficients of the indirect effects of group relative deprivation ($r = 0.80$, $p < 0.001$), after unsignificant coefficients were dropped.

effect comparably fades in the contexts where integration policies put institutional guardrails to preserve natives' prerogatives and privileged positions. This finding also holds for the indirect effect of group relative deprivation. When immigrant integration policies are less liberal, already guarding natives' prerogatives and proprietary claims, we observe that the effect of group relative deprivation is more likely to remain relatively dormant.

Conclusions

Popular backlash against immigration is sweeping across western societies (Cramer 2016; Davis and Wilson 2022; Hochschild 2016). Growing immigration and following integration problems are shown as lying at the heart of public grievances that generate opportunities for populist far-right parties to attract electoral support (Ivarsflaten 2008; van der Brug and Fennema 2003). To explore the role of group relative deprivation in public opinion on immigrant admission, we theorize a mediation model suggesting that group relative deprivation fosters desires to restrain immigrant admission to the most qualified and skilled candidates through the mediation of perceived threat from immigration. The analysis offers cross-country evidence for a prominent position of natives' deprivation feelings relative to immigrants in the study of public opinion on immigrant admission in Europe.

Our take in this study relies on the role of relative deprivation sentiments in understanding the connections between immigration-related threat perceptions and public support for limiting immigrant admission to highly skilled and qualified candidates. Consistent across eighteen European countries, natives who feel their group is more deprived vis-a-vis immigrants are more likely to feel threatened by immigration, which connection, in turn, leads to stricter gatekeeping attitudes among native-born citizens. More importantly, the effect of relative deprivation-loaded threat perceptions on gatekeeping attitudes holds ground even stronger in the policy contexts where immigrants are entitled to access more liberal and equal rights and opportunities.

The present findings have several important implications. Decomposing the direct and indirect effects of group relative deprivation is of key importance to shed light on the social-psychological mechanism behind gatekeeping attitudes. According to our results, even if group relative deprivation does not lead directly to stricter attitudes toward immigrant admission in every country, it powerfully transmits its effect through perceived threat from immigration. That is, sentiments of relative deprivation vis-à-vis immigrants display the most potent impact on stricter gatekeeping attitudes when they translate into threat perceptions from immigration. Equally relevant is its intensified mediated impact through perceived threat in more liberal integration policy environments. This finding provides important insights into understanding the current anti-immigrant backlash: Even well-intentioned inclusionary rights and opportunities for immigrants may contribute to elevating the impact of immigrant-related negativities in society, hence jeopardizing an increased backlash among natives who already feel relative deprivation and threatened by immigration. These results also offer a novel perspective to the relevant research highlighting that when policy requirements for immigrant integration fail to produce tangible integration outcomes (Ersanilli and Koopmans 2011), it might lead to negative reactions to immigration and increased frustrations about immigrant integration processes within society (Alarian and Neureiter 2021).

Studies resting on the group conflict theory mostly portray intergroup relations as a zero-sum competition where one party's gains are necessarily offset by the other party's losses (Billiet, Meuleman, and De Witte 2014; Blalock 1967). Recent evidence, however, emphasizes that people are more susceptible to view others' gains at their own expense (Roberts and Davidai 2022). Supporting recent evidence, our research stresses that the perceived shrink in the gap of social group positions between natives and newcomers is crucially relevant for studies on perceived threat. Even when immigrants' access to more liberal and equal rights and opportunities does not limit natives' ability to enjoy them or their prerogatives, feelings of deprivation relative to newcomers can hold ground in shaping perceptions and attitudes toward immigration. Accordingly, we suggest that relative deprivation sentiments should be considered a prominent theoretical component in research on perceived threat and immigration attitudes.

We acknowledge the potential limitations of our research developed on observational data alone. As we provide only correlational inferences, the implications stand relevant in offering how and under which contexts feelings of deprivation relative to immigrants could play a role in the study of attitudes toward immigrant admission. To address this limitation, we call future research for experimental designs to test causal and further alternative mechanisms. Relatedly, the ESS data employed in this research allowed us to inspect the suggested mediation model through a multigroup analysis since the data contains 20 countries. To thoroughly investigate the cross-level moderation effects of integration policy contexts, future studies could employ multilevel analysis by using a broader cross-national dataset or adopting alternative advanced statistical strategies. By this way, further analysis could also be run to simultaneously examine direct and moderating effects of immigrant integration policies on immigration attitudes. Importantly, we recognize the inherent endogeneity of the link between public opinion and immigrant integration policy. Considering that public opinion can also influence national integration policy decisions, which is beyond the scope and focus or our research, further analysis could be conducted through longitudinal designs, to examine how public opinion influence national integration policy decisions.

Notes

1. In describing relative deprivation, Runciman (1966) distinguishes between individual (egoistic) relative deprivation, a feeling of being unfairly worse off as an individual, and group (fraternal) relative deprivation, a feeling that one's own group is disadvantaged compared to a relevant referent outgroup. Although both types of relative deprivation can be expected to influence anti-immigrant attitudes, individual relative deprivation appears to be less predictive for outgroup prejudice and perceptions of threat (Pettigrew, Wagner, and Christ 2007) but more predictive to person-related consequences (Pettigrew et al. 2008; Smith et al. 2012; Vanneman and Pettigrew 1972).
2. The integration policy regime in the UK is often described as multiculturalist with a liberal stance in terms of immigrants' access to cultural and political rights (Weldon 2006).
3. Particularly, people attach more importance work skills, language qualifications, and education level more than categorical characteristics, including skin complexion, national origin, and religious belongingness, according to those studies.
4. See Appendix A for details of item information and Appendix B for descriptive statistics. Correlations between the main observed variables in the measurement models are reported in Appendix C.

5. The data code for immigrant group share is migr_imm8 and migr_pop1ctz (https://rb.gy/k2gen8), and long-term unemployment rate is sdg_08_40 (https://rb.gy/ep4fo3). The data of GDP per capita, international $ can be retrieved from https://rb.gy/vm68cu; and OECD Social Expenditure Database (SOCX) from https://rb.gy/kwwkgu.
6. Likewise, overestimated and biased statistical inferences at the between-country effects are reported as important pitfalls in multilevel regression models (Schmidt-Catran et al. 2019).
7. Factor loadings ranged between 0.674 to 0.902 ($p<0.001$). For establishing partial metric model, through inspection of MI and EPC values for model misspecification, we released the equality constraints on factor loadings of the cultural life item in France and Finland.
8. Factor loadings ranged between 0.501 to 0.872 ($p<0.001$). For establishing partial metric model, through inspection of MI and EPC values for model misspecification, we introduced error correlations between educational qualifications and work skills items in Spain and Germany and released the equality constraints on factor loadings of work skills item in Denmark, Ireland, and Lithuania.
9. Although Portugal is an immigrant-receiving country, it has a low level of politicization of immigration in the media, public debates, and mainstream political party discourses compared to other European countries (Carvalho and Duarte 2020). Besides, studies report that public opinion in Portugal significantly shifted towards more pro-immigrant attitudes in 2014 after the labor market recovery and economic growth (Czaika and Di Lillo 2018). These characteristics might be potential explanations regarding the absence of a connection between perceived threat and gatekeeping attitudes. Lithuania, on the other hand, is a relatively homogeneous society and not overtly xenophobic due to the absence of large numbers of new immigrants. Most immigrants in the country are already naturalized Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians while many Lithuanians have rather emigrated to other EU member states for employment after the EU accession (Zukauskiene 2007).
10. Table D1 in Appendix D reports the total effects of group relative deprivation on gatekeeping attitudes.
11. Table E1, Table E2, and Table E3 in Appendix E reports the effects of control variables on threat perceptions, group relative deprivation, and gatekeeping attitudes respectively. Table E4 reports R-square estimates of the model with and without control variables.
12. Table F2 in Appendix F reports the OLS analyses controlling for the other contextual confounders.
13. The correlation analysis was conducted with the countries where the effect of group relative deprivation was significant.
14. Table F3 in Appendix F reports the OLS analyses controlling for the other contextual confounders.

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