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Weaponising Immigration on the EU-Belarus Border

Perception of immigrants and immigration
in Latvian society

Research report

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Abstract

Since the summer of 2021, the Belarussian authorities have supported illegal migration from largely Middle Eastern countries to the European Union. This has artificially created a migration crisis on the EU's eastern border. This report examines the effect of the EU-Belarus border crisis on Latvian society. It explores major attitudinal patterns and public opinion dynamics towards immigration.

In the first chapter, the report focuses on secondary data that outlines the general trends within Latvian public opinion towards immigrants and immigration. The second chapter presents findings from a survey experiment by exploring how irregular migration from Belarus is treated in Latvian society and how the competing framing of this ongoing issue shapes Latvia's public opinion.

The findings of this study indicate that Latvian society maintains a moderately unfavourable opinion towards immigration. Since the outbreak of the immigration crisis on the EU-Belarusian border in August 2021, anti-immigrant sentiment has increased alongside immigration as a political issue. Our results demonstrate that exposure to strategic narratives about immigration crisis increases support for stricter border controls and the unequal treatment of immigrants. Our use of vignettes as discussion points provoked a striking and increasingly stereotypical perception of immigrants, suggesting that humanitarian perspective of this immigration crisis have strengthened rather than weakened anti-immigration sentiments in Latvian society. There are differences among respondents based on their ethnic background. Ethnic Latvians tend to align with a pro-Latvian and pro-EU perspective on illegal immigration from Belarus. The representatives of ethnic minorities who are mostly Russian speakers in Latvia demonstrate a more complex position, on some occasions being critical towards the authoritarian leader of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko.

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Content

Weaponising Immigration on the EU-Belarus Border

INTRODUCTION	4
METHODOLOGY	5
DYNAMICS IN ATTITUDES TOWARDS IMMIGRANTS AND IMMIGRATION IN LATVIA	7
SUPPORT FOR STRATEGIC NARRATIVES ON IMMIGRATION CRISIS: A SURVEY EXPERIMENT	12
ATTITUDES TOWARDS IMMIGRATION POLICY AND IMMIGRANTS	14
POLICY TOWARDS ASYLUM SEEKERS	16
MEASURES AGAINST ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION FROM BELARUS	18
APPROVAL OF LUKASHENKO IN THE LATVIAN SOCIETY	20
CONCLUSIONS	22
BIBLIOGRAPHY	24
APPENDIX 1. THE SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE (TRANSLATED FROM LATVIAN)	25
APPENDIX 2. VIGNETTES	27



Introduction

In recent months, the EU Member States bordering Belarus have faced thousands of migrants stranded on the EU's external border being used as a political weapon. Responding to EU sanctions, authoritarian leader of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko has organised and escorted migrants to the borders of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland from the Middle East (primarily Iraq and Syria). While security experts call this a form of hybrid warfare, it has also triggered different responses in the societies of targeted countries. The goal of this report is to examine the attitude of Latvian society towards immigration in general and illegal immigration from Belarus in particular.

For a long time, Latvia's migration balance has been negative — more people have left the country than have arrived. However, this balance has shifted over the past five years, almost approaching a zero balance of emigration and immigration (CSP, 2022). Half of Latvia's immigration is made up of return migrants. The share of third-country nationals has significantly increased, especially from the CIS (e.g. Ukraine, Russia, Uzbekistan) and Asia. Labour migration, international students, family reunions, and investment in real estate account for the majority of third-country immigration to Latvia. Third-country migrants are often employed in construction, trade, catering, as well as in transport and logistics (Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2017: 32).

The number of asylum seekers has remained relatively low in Latvia. The highest number of asylum applicants was reached between 2014 to 2017, when 1,395 applicants were registered and 700 applications were withdrawn (see Eurostat, 2022a and Eurostat, 2022b). However, this small and specific category is often used in political rhetoric both in Latvia and

elsewhere in the region to justify the need for general immigration restrictions or for the strengthening of migration control. The public image of asylum seekers in Latvian society has emerged to a large extent from international news flows. This was particularly intense during the so-called European refugee crisis of 2015 (see Lulle & Ungure 2015; Rožukalne et al. 2017; Šulmane 2017). Meanwhile, irregular immigration orchestrated by the Belarusian state since the summer of 2021 has demonstrated to Latvian society that immigration can be weaponised by posing a tangible threat to the country's security.

Taking into account the increasing number of irregular migrants, the Latvian government announced a state of emergency in the counties bordering Belarus on 10 August 2021. The state of emergency in the border area is set to last until 10 May 2022. Since the introduction of the state of emergency, 5,556 people have been deterred from crossing the Latvian state border illegally up until 1 February 2022; 113 people have been accepted on humanitarian grounds. In contrast, a total of 465 third-country nationals who crossed the state border illegally have been detained in this period (Valsts robežsardze, 2022).

The goal of this study is to explore major attitudinal patterns and public opinion dynamics towards immigration in Latvia. Specifically, the study focuses on people's perceptions by using an experimental methodology that helps to understand how malleable Latvian public opinion is regarding recent illegal immigration supported by Belarussian authorities. The report is organised around two sections. The first section examines secondary data that outlines general trends within Latvians' attitude towards immigrants and immigration, whereas the second section presents the findings of the survey experiment.

Methodology

This study has two primary objectives: (1) to outline the attitude of Latvian society towards immigration and specific immigrant groups and (2) to explore how irregular migration from Belarus is treated in Latvian society and to what extent the competing framing of this ongoing issue can shape Latvia's public opinion. Given these objectives, the report is based on secondary survey data collected previously, as well as on data collected specifically for this study by conducting a survey experiment.

The survey experiment has become increasingly prominent in the methodological arsenal of the social sciences over the past 30 years. The main advantage of this method is to identify if and how the attitudes of survey participants change depending on context. Thus, the survey experiment helps us draw data-based conclusions about the effects of priming and framing. Although the use of a single survey experiment does not allow to judge the persistence of such an effect, it allows to experiment (unlike the classic observational study) with large random samples under controlled conditions. The survey experiment consists of one or more treatment groups and a control group. A fundamental condition of such research design is the inclusion of respondents on a random basis in both the test and control groups.

The survey experiment is also used in migration studies. Researchers have examined how attitudes towards specific groups of migrants change depending on whether migration is framed through economic, cultural, security, or criminal vignettes (Hellwig & Sinno 2017). Similarly, Kaufmann has shown how opponents to immigration may change their attitude if immigrants are presented as successfully integrated persons (Kaufmann 2019; Sobolewska et al. 2017). Research utilising survey experiment has focused on how framing immigration with positive media news can increase support for easing immigration restrictions (Facchini et al. 2016).

The survey for this report was carried out during December 2021 in cooperation with the sociological company "Norstat Latvia". In total, 4,380 respondents from the company's database were recruited to take part in the survey, representing the socio-demographic characteristics of Latvian society. The survey employs an experimental vignette research design. Before answering questions related to illegal immigration on the EU-Belarus border, respondents were randomly assigned to either the control group or one of three treatment groups. The survey items were identical for all respondents, with an exception that individuals in the treatment groups were asked at the beginning to read an informational description (a vignette) describing the Latvian-Belarusian border crisis from a specific perspective (see the questionnaire in Appendix 1). Each group consisted of 1,095 individuals and they are

balanced in terms of gender, ethnicity, region, and education. As group assignment is random, it is possible to estimate a causal relationship between attitudes and exposure to a particular vignette.

All vignettes had an identical introduction, stating that it is a draft text to be included in an internet encyclopedia and the following questions will be asked to evaluate the text. Every vignette started with a summary that there has been an increase of illegal border crossings by migrants at the Belarusian border since the summer of 2021 (including the border with Lithuania and Poland as well as Latvia). Thousands of people have come from countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan are staying on the Belarusian border, where they have been stopped by the border guards of Latvia and other countries. The remaining part of the vignettes employed a different framing of what has happened and who is responsible. These represented Belarusian, Latvian, or EU perspectives. For analytical purposes, they are referred to as pro-Belarusian, pro-Latvian or pro-EU perspectives in the text (all vignettes can be seen in Appendix 2).

The pro-Belarusian vignette emphasised the humanitarian crisis created by neighbouring countries that do not want to admit asylum seekers. The vignette claimed that Belarusian authorities provide assistance to the asylum seekers while Latvia, Lithuania and Poland take measures to prevent immigration. At the end of the vignette, it was also emphasised that according to international rights the EU

countries are liable to shelter asylum seekers.

Conversely, the pro-Latvian vignette informs that Latvia has accepted some asylum seekers on humanitarian grounds. It also notes that Latvian authorities put the blame on Lukashenko's authoritarian regime for creating an immigration crisis and that Latvian institutions are concerned with the potential security risks of this situation, as they fear terrorists could exploit this situation to enter the country. Additionally, the vignette mentions that Latvia intends to accelerate the development of infrastructure on the border with Belarus to minimise security risks.

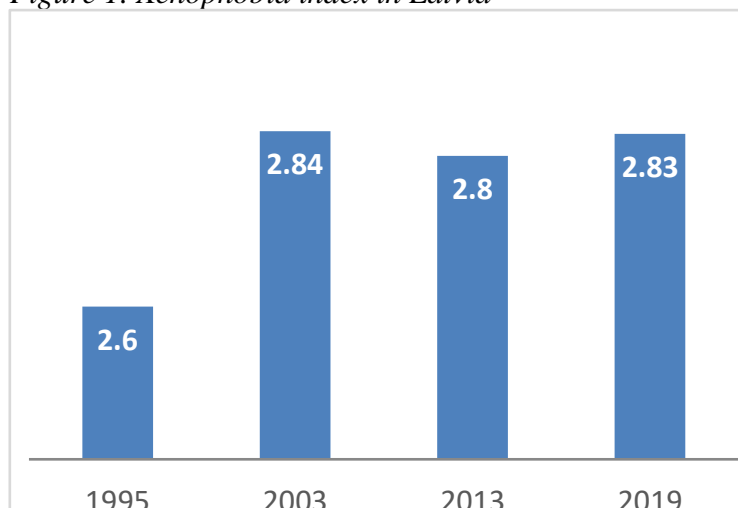
Finally, the pro-EU vignette claims that the EU authorities put the blame on Lukashenko's authoritarian regime. Yet instead of focusing on the measures taken by the Latvian authorities, it provides a broader geopolitical context of the immigration crisis and highlights the EU sanctions imposed on Belarus. On the one hand, this vignette argues that Belarus could have coordinated these events with Russia, who is interested in destabilising the EU. On the other hand, the vignette asserts that the EU has actively assisted in solving the immigration crisis by using diplomatic means towards the Middle Eastern countries. It is also stated that the EU have prepared new economic sanctions against Belarus and have provided help in strengthening the EU's eastern border. Simultaneously, the pro-EU vignette stated that this crisis does not change the open migration policy of the EU, and Brussels will not contribute financially to building a fence on the EU's eastern border.



Dynamics in attitudes towards immigrants and immigration in Latvia

Ethnic diversity is part of everyday life to many Latvians.

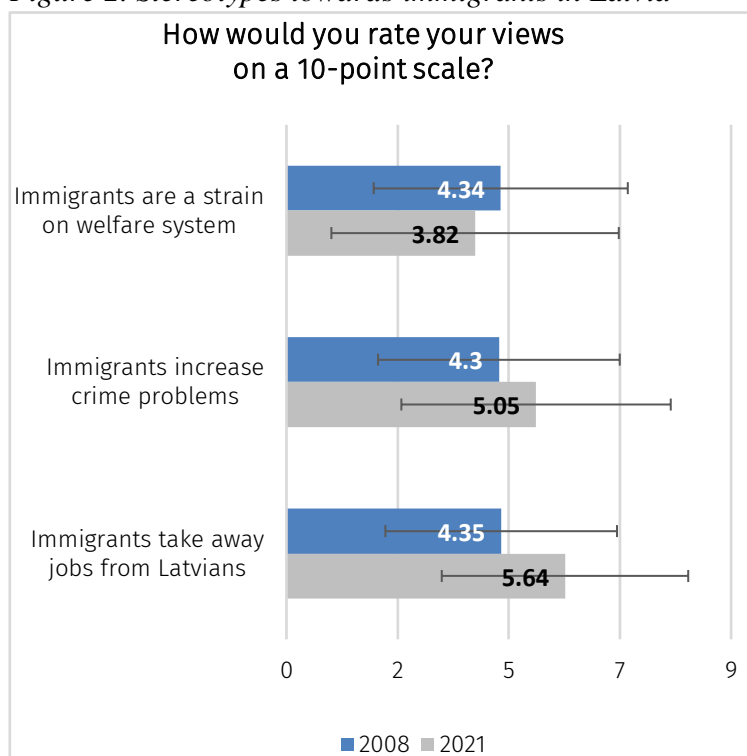
Figure 1. Xenophobia index in Latvia



Note: The figure shows the numeric distribution of answers from 1 (extremely negative attitude) to 5 (extremely positive attitude).

Source: Kaprāns & Mieriņa 2019, p. 62.

Figure 2. Stereotypes towards immigrants in Latvia



Note: The graph presents mean values where 1 - strongly agree, 10 - strongly agree with the opposite view. The graph also displays standard deviation bars. Data is taken from the European Value Study.

Latvia's historical experience with immigrants and the density of the multilingual and multicultural environment in particular places mark a difference in social attitudes towards immigration. Latvian society, as demonstrated by Xenophobia index (Kaprāns & Mieriņa 2019), has remained moderately unfavourable towards immigrants over the last 20 years (Figure 1). According to this index, a very negative attitude towards immigrants (2 or less on the xenophobia scale) is shared by 26 per cent of Latvian society.

This attitude is driven by various negative stereotypes towards immigrants. Immigration is often seen as a threat, and any group of immigrants (even from the geographically closest countries) are treated with caution. Hence, Latvians tend to support a strict and conservative immigration policy. Nevertheless, this negative attitude towards immigrants has significantly declined, but has also become more polarised over the last 13 years. People are now less likely to associate immigrants with crimes or threats to the local labour market, whereas a belief that immigrants are a burden to the welfare system has strengthened (Figure 2).

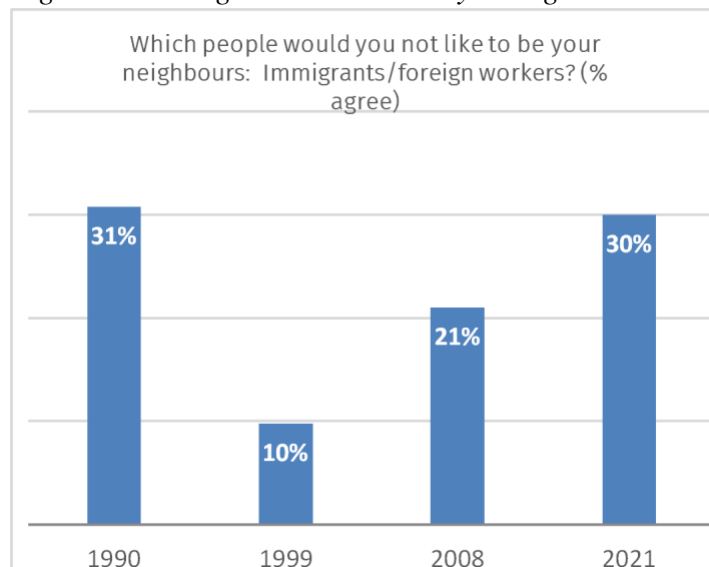
Today, a considerable share of Latvian society would rather choose to maintain a social distance from immigrants.

Data from the European Value Study indicates that the share of society that does not want immigrants entering their private space has increased over the last 20 years (Figure 3). On an aggregate level, a sociodemographic analysis has revealed a somewhat consistent pattern, i.e. that anti-immigrant sentiment is more common among men, ethnic Latvians, older cohorts (55+) and lower income quintiles. In addition, unlike the residents of smaller towns and rural areas where ethnic fragmentation is much lower and ethnic Latvians predominate, the residents of the largest cities are more open to immigrants.

Along with a moderately negative attitude, Latvians tend to align more with pragmatic and meritocratic arguments. That is to say, professional qualifications, skills, and the ability to integrate into Latvian society are seen as most important characteristics of preferred immigrants than their religious affiliation or skin colour. Society in general displays a rather strong consensual view that immigrants should have right to preserve their culture as long as they accept the Latvian culture and respect the local way of life. The majority of Latvians also consider that welfare benefits (such as health care) should be equally granted to immigrants (Kaprāns et al. 2021). Simultaneously, it should be taken into account that the attitude of Latvians is directed by a certain hierarchy in which the geographical and cultural proximity of the migrants' country plays a pivotal role, i.e. the closer the country, the more open the attitude towards immigrants from this country and *vice versa*.

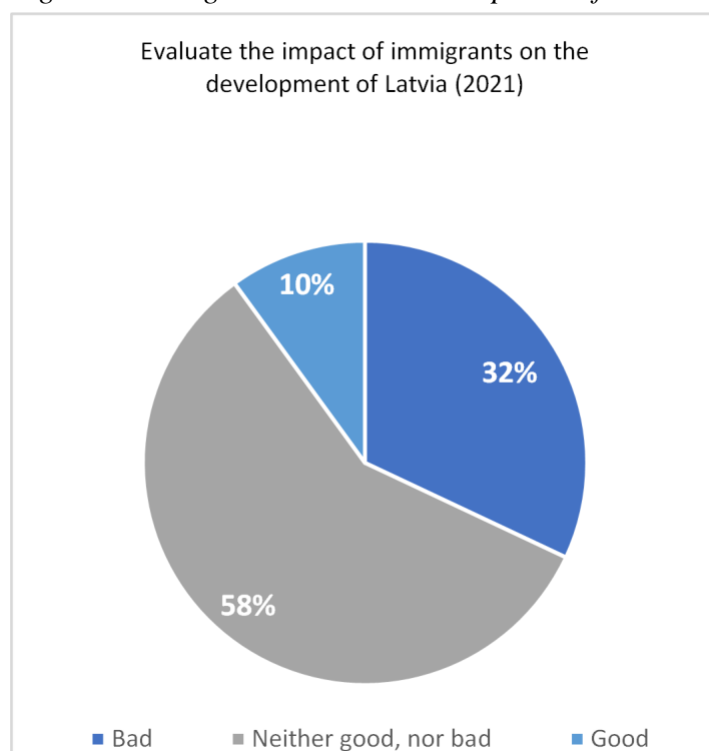
Various studies suggest that by framing immigrants as the driver of economic growth increases public support for immigration and reduces the role of negative stereotypes in Latvia (Kaprāns et al. 2021; Kaprāns et al. 2020). Overall, the majority considers the impact of immigrants on the development of Latvia either in apathetic or positive terms (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Willingness to live nearby immigrants in Latvia

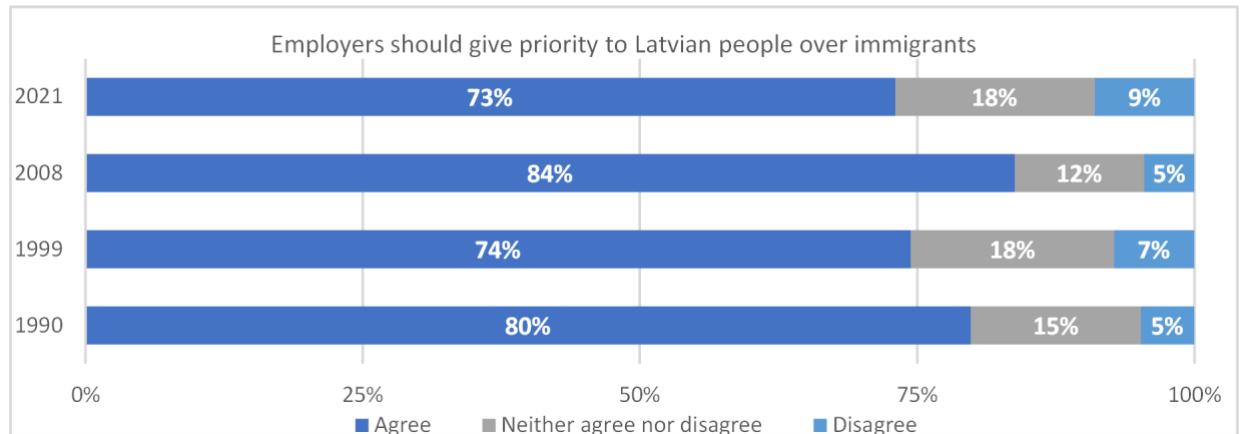


Source: European Value Study.

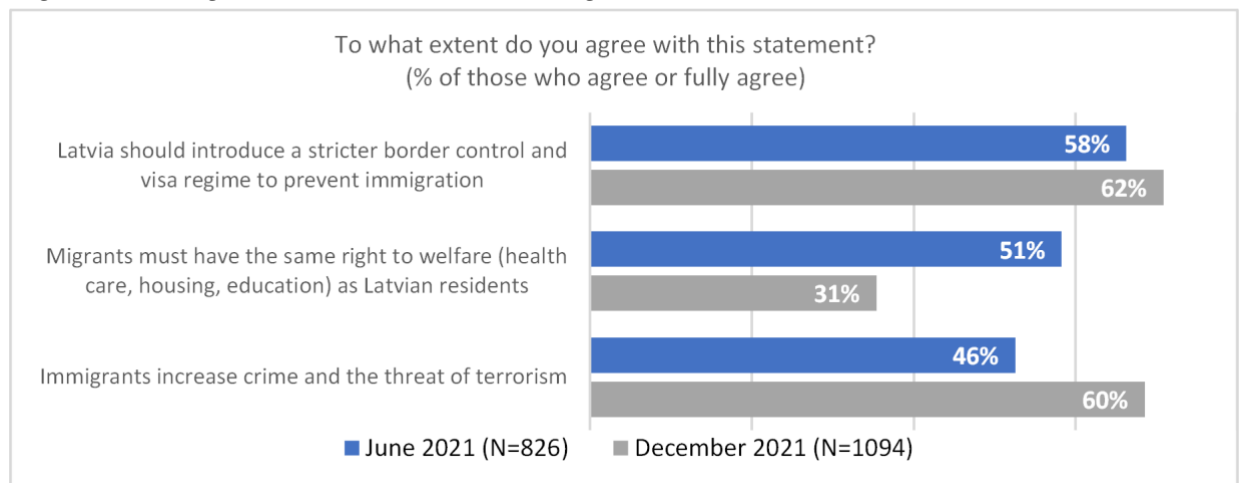
Figure 4. Immigration and the development of Latvia



Note: In this graph, the items "Very good" and "quite good" are merged into "Good", and "Very bad" and "Quite bad" into "Bad". Data is taken from the European Values Study.

Figure 5. Support for labor market protectionism

Source: European Value Study.

Figure 6. Changes in attitudes towards immigration in Latvia

Note: Data in June 2021 are taken from Kaprāns et al. 2021. Data from December 2021 are reported on the control group only (see the Methodology section).

Economic claims that ignore the needs of the Latvian workforce may increase rather than weaken support for labour market protectionism. Cross-sectional data reveals that Latvian society shares a strong consensus in terms of protecting the labour market for domestic workers (Figure 5). However, this data also indicates that societal consensus has weakened over the past decade, decreasing by 11 percentage points between 2008 and 2021.

Unlike legal labour migration, the irregular immigration supported by the Belarusian state addresses the humanitarian dimension of human mobility. Prior research has

demonstrated that humanitarian claims emphasising global responsibility for immigration do not evoke cosmopolitan empathy in Latvian society. In fact, the opposite effect is more likely to be observed: support for a stricter immigration policy and an increasingly demonising attitude towards immigrants. Hence, asylum seekers remain a highly contentious issue provoking strong opposition in Latvian society (Kaprāns et al 2021).

In light of illegal immigration from third countries supported by Belarussian state, a similar attitudinal pattern can be observed. The analysis of data collected in June and

December 2021 allude to a spill-over effect, as immigration endorsed by Belarus has, arguably, fostered the increase in a negative attitude towards immigrants in general (Figure 6). Latvians have started to associate immigrants with crimes and terrorism more often and support for the equal treatment of immigrants has significantly declined. Given that Latvian support for stricter border controls and a stronger visa regime in order to prevent immigration was already relatively high, it has not increased as significantly as other attitudes, but it has been reinforced during this migration crisis.

Anti-immigrant sentiment related to the activities of the Belarusian state is also likely to have political implications. Our data suggests that the importance of immigration issues have dramatically increased in the Autumn of 2021, and this presumably could have implications for the national elections that will be held on 1 October 2022 (Figure 7). The December 2021 survey indicates that Latvian voters, who consider immigration a very important issue are more likely to demonstrate a consistent anti-immigrant attitude. Namely, they fully support stricter border controls and a more robust visa regime. They are also the most ardent supporters of building a permanent fence on Latvian-Belarusian border. These voters who consider immigration very important tend to be firmly against the equal treatment of immigrants, more frequently associate immigrants with crime and terrorism, and are convinced that not a single migrant from the Middle East who arrived in Latvia

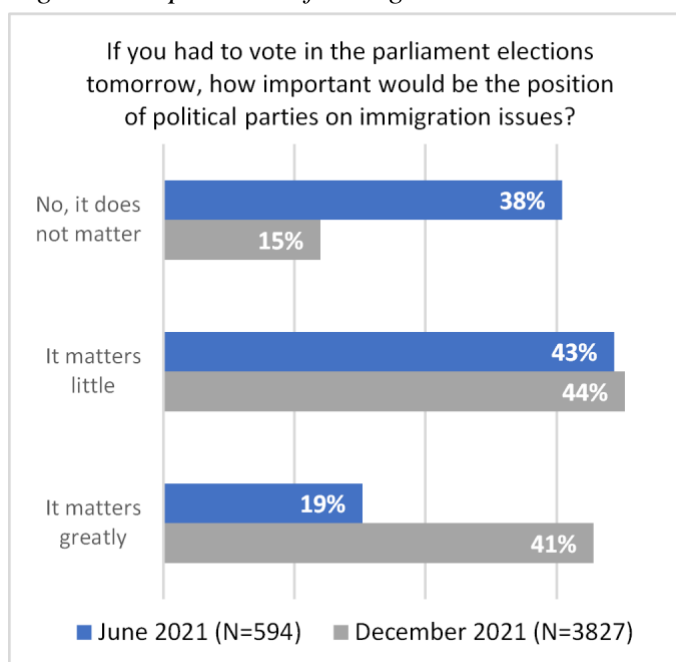
from Belarus should be allowed to stay. However, while these voters align with anti-immigrant stances, they also support more severe EU sanctions against Belarus.

Latvians' attitude towards Belarus' authoritarian leader Alexander Lukashenko is a major differential regarding support for measures to cope with illegal immigration from Belarus. Our data from December 2021 revealed a rather strong negative correlation between participant's assessment of Alexander Lukashenko and their attitudes toward preventive measures (Figure 8). Namely, the more positive the view of Lukashenko, the weaker the support for building a permanent fence along the Latvian-Belarusian border ($r = -.405$, $p < .01$) or for strengthening EU sanctions against Belarus ($r = -.494$, $p < .01$). Yet respondents that held a positive view of Lukashenko are simultaneously more likely to hold the view that not a single asylum

seeker from the Middle East that sought to enter Latvia should be admitted, (54% and 37% respectively). This suggests that the minority of Latvians who approve of Lukashenko are more likely not to blame Belarus for organising illegal migrants on the Latvian-Belarusian border.

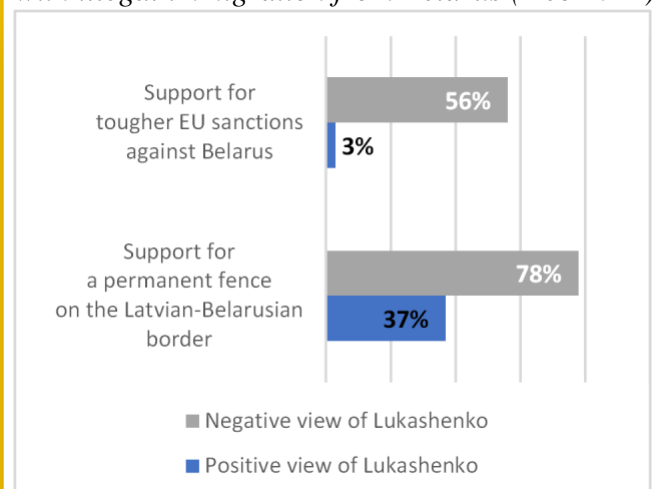
Overall, these multi-faceted survey data provide a sufficient basis to argue that Latvian public opinion was already moderately negative towards immigrants. The illegal immigration orchestrated by the Belarusian state exploited already existing sensitivities to increase anxiety in Latvian society. Anti-immigrant sentiment has evidently increased during this EU-Belarus border crisis and has mobilised support for stricter domestic policies vis-à-vis Belarus in general and illegal migrants in particular. This, however, has also opened new avenues for societal polarisation and radicalisation that can be exposed to external influence.

Figure 8. Importance of immigration issues



Note: Respondents who do not participate in parliamentary elections are excluded from this graph.

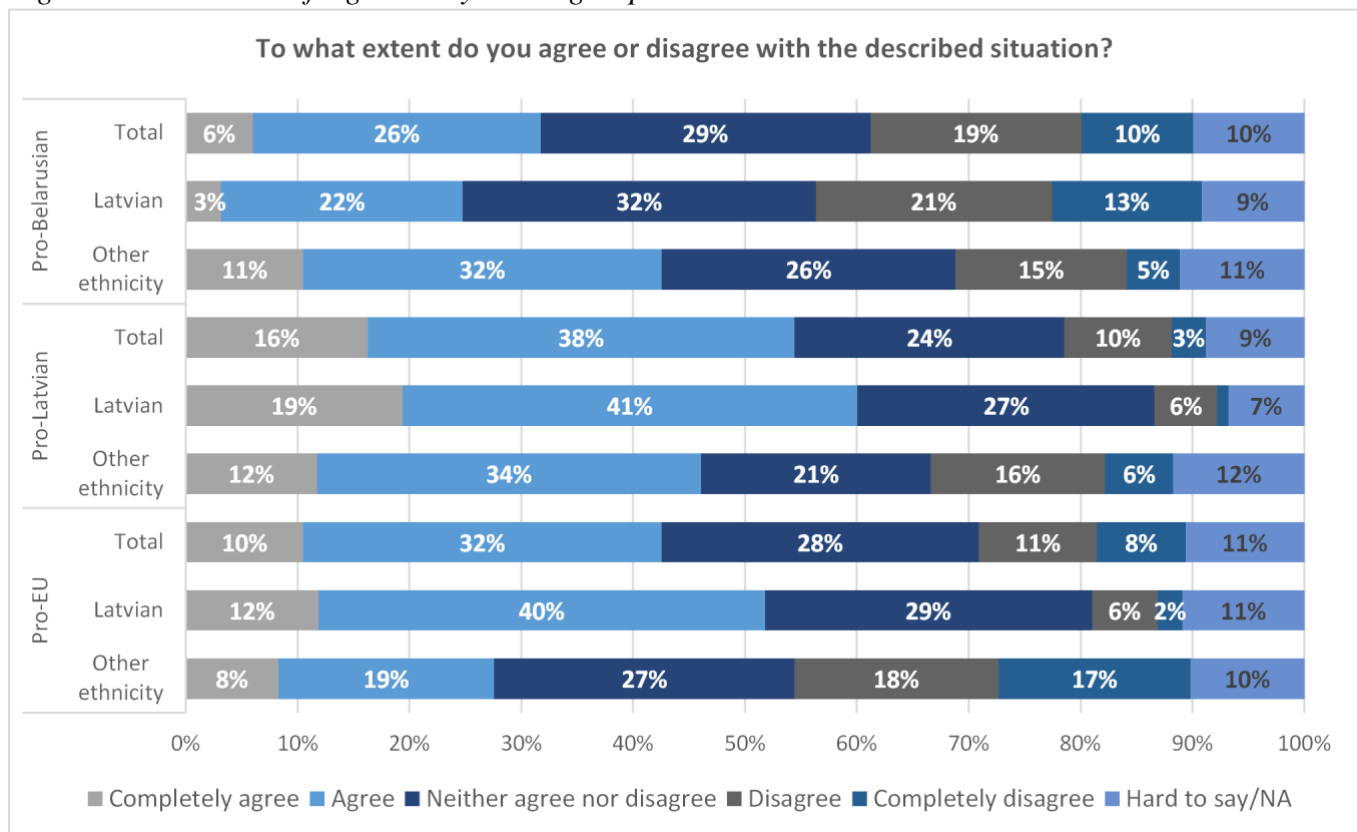
Figure 7. Support for different measures to cope with illegal immigration from Belarus (Dec 2021)



Note: The graph displays the answers of respondents who have either a positive view (positive or somewhat positive) or negative view (negative or somewhat negative) of Lukashenko as the president of Belarus. In the category 'support for a permanent fence on the Latvian-Belarusian border' the 'positive attitude' and 'somewhat positive attitude' answers are merged together.



Support for strategic narratives on immigration crisis: a survey experiment

Figure 9. Assessment of vignettes by ethnic groups

The three vignettes that we have used in our survey experiment represent three distinctive strategic narratives about the immigration crisis on the EU-Belarus border.

Among the three vignettes, the pro-Latvian one received the highest approval rating (Figure 9). More than half of the respondents who read the pro-Latvian vignette aligned with this narrative. The pro-EU narrative received significantly lower approval (42%) whereas only one in three respondents agree with the pro-Belarusian narrative.

Support for the different narratives varies across different ethnic groups. Ethnic Latvians overwhelmingly support pro-Latvian and pro-EU interpretations (60% and 52%, respectively). Only one in four (25%) Latvians agree with the pro-Belarusian narrative. Meanwhile, support for the pro-

Latvian narrative is relatively lower (46%) among ethnic minorities.¹ Conversely, respondents with an ethnic minority background often (43%) expressed affinity with the pro-Belarusian narrative. The pro-EU vignette is the least supported by ethnic minorities as only 27% of respondents agreed with it. More ethnic minority respondents (35%) disagreed with the pro-EU narrative than agreed with it. Such a discrepancy suggests that the vignette's effect might differ based on the respondent's ethnic identity. For this reason, the following analysis is carried out on both a full sample and separately on ethnic Latvians and ethnic minorities.

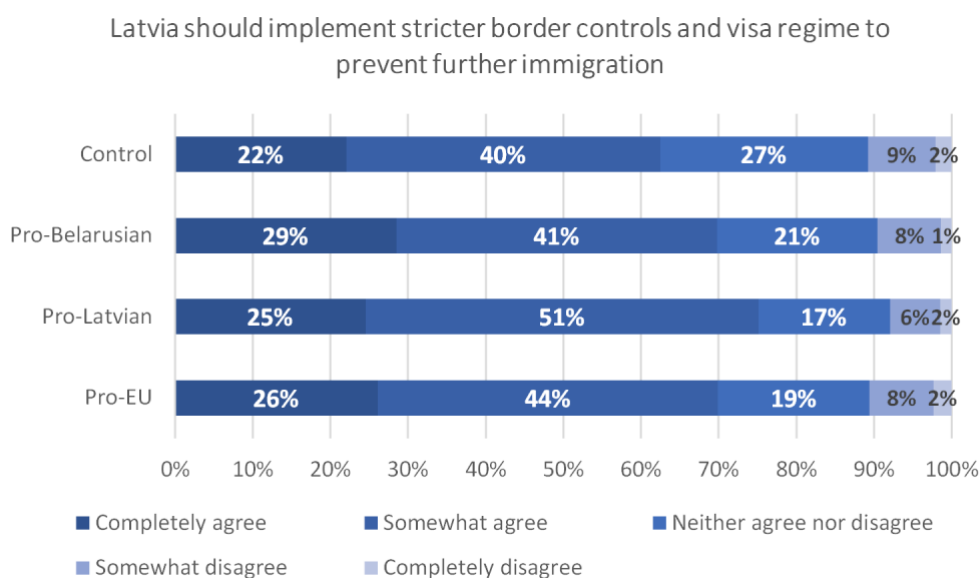
¹ Ethnic minorities account for about 38% of Latvian society. For most, the native language is Russian.

Attitudes towards immigration policy and immigrants

As noted before, our findings reveal that the majority of Latvian residents tend to support stricter border controls and a harsher visa regime to prevent further immigration. More than 60% of respondents (both in the control group and in any of the treatment groups) would welcome a harsher border policy (Figure 10). When respondents are exposed to any of the three vignettes, their opinion becomes more decisive, as fewer individuals chose the neutral “neither agree nor disagree” answer.

That difference is particularly observable among those who read the pro-Latvian vignette. In this case, support for a stricter immigration policy increased by 14 percentage points compared to the control group. The same (albeit to a lesser extent) can be observed among respondents exposed to the pro-EU or pro-Belarusian vignettes.

Figure 10. Support on stricter border control and visa regimes



Interestingly, the pro-Latvian vignette has particularly mobilised ethnic minorities by favouring stricter immigration policy to a much larger extent than the treatment with any other vignette (Figure 11). In the pro-Belarusian and pro-EU vignettes, support for stricter policies is expressed by around 65% of the treatment groups. Support for

the pro-Latvia vignette increases to 73% in the minority subgroup, and it is close to the approval level observed in the ethnic majority. Hence, the pro-Latvian vignette that focuses on threats to domestic security seems to deliver a more consensual perspective on future immigration policy.

Figure 11. Support for stricter border control and visa regime among ethnic groups

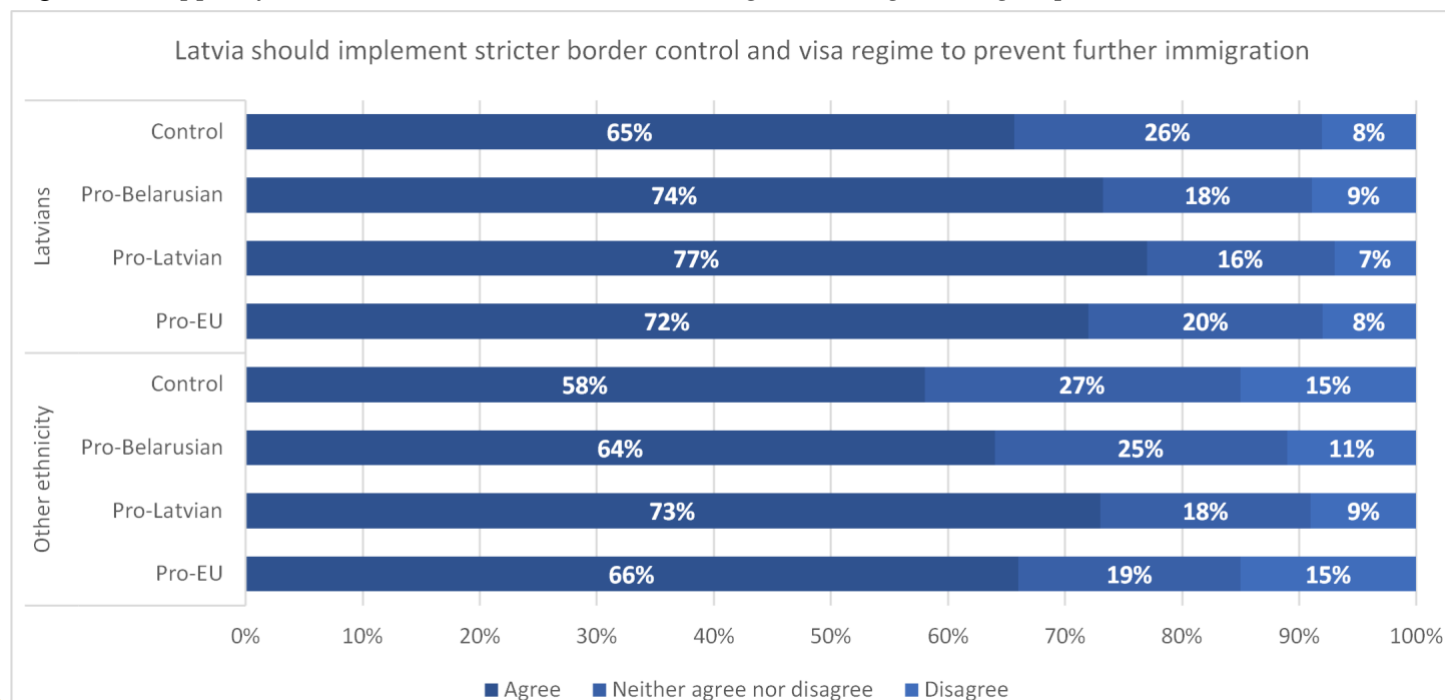
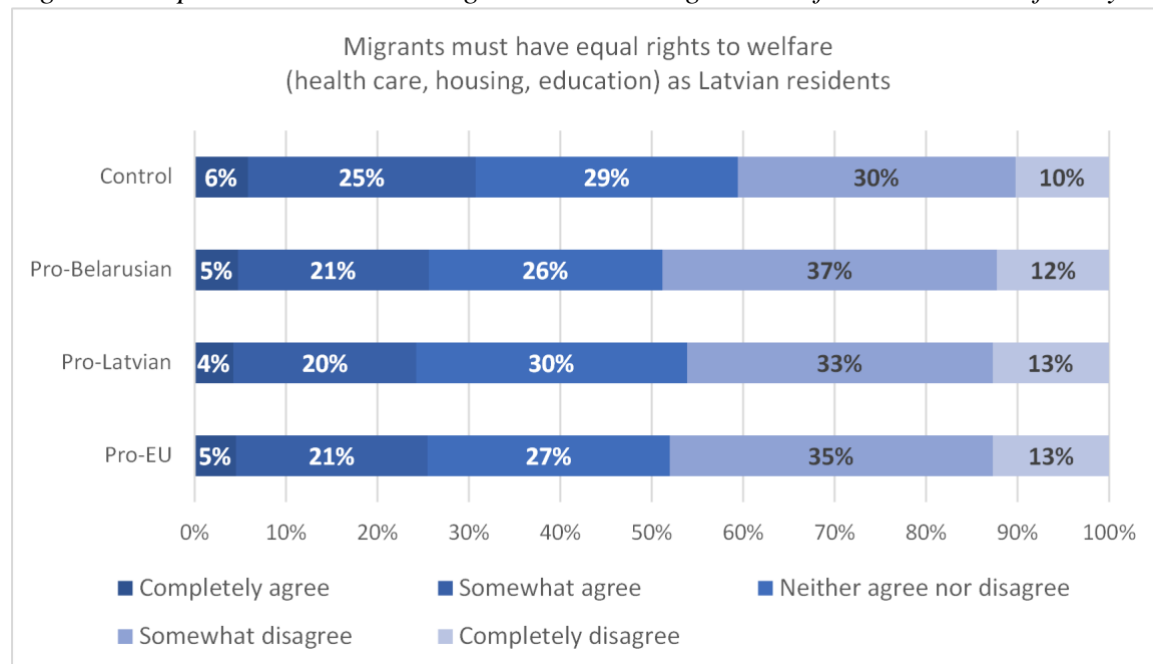
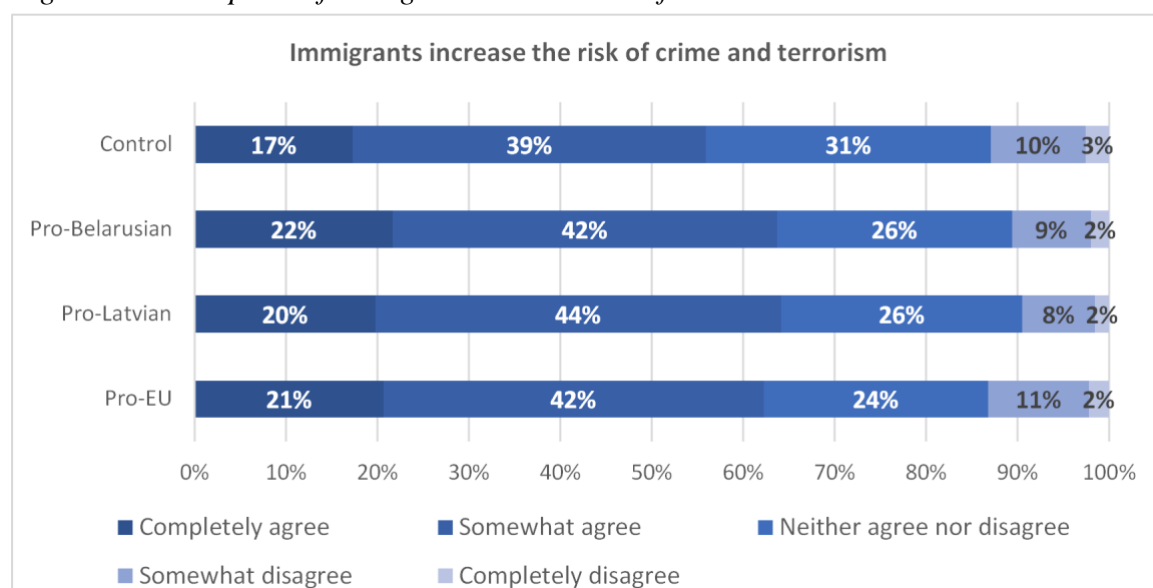


Figure 12. Opinions on whether migrants should be granted a full access to welfare system*Figure 13. Perception of immigrants as a source of crime and terrorism*

The EU-Belarus immigration crisis affects not only opinions on border control, but also diminishes support for claims that immigrants should be granted the same rights to use the Latvian welfare system as locals (Figure 12). Overall, the treatment groups tend to agree that immigrants should be granted limited access to the welfare system.

This attitude is the most salient among respondents of the pro-Belarusian vignette. Notably, this survey item did not trigger significant differences between the ethnic majority and ethnic minorities.

Our data also indicates that all vignettes significantly increase stereotypical attitudes towards immigrants (Figure 13). In the

control group, 56% of respondents agreed that immigrants increase the risk of crime and terrorism. In the treatment groups however, this claim was approved of by 63% of respondents. As with the previous question about welfare, there are no significant differences between ethnic Latvians and ethnic minorities..

Policy towards asylum seekers

Our data reveals that exposure to the EU-Belarus immigration crisis increases support for a more open asylum policy (Figure 14). In the control group, 49% of respondents approved a selective immigration policy, while support for such a policy decreases by around seven percentage points to 42% in the treatment groups.

In general, ethnic Latvians are less supportive of a selective immigration policy but, after reading vignettes, their support decreased even more – by up to ten percentage points (Figure 15). Conversely for ethnic minorities, this decrease does not exceed six percentage points.

Figure 14. Attitudes towards selective immigration policy

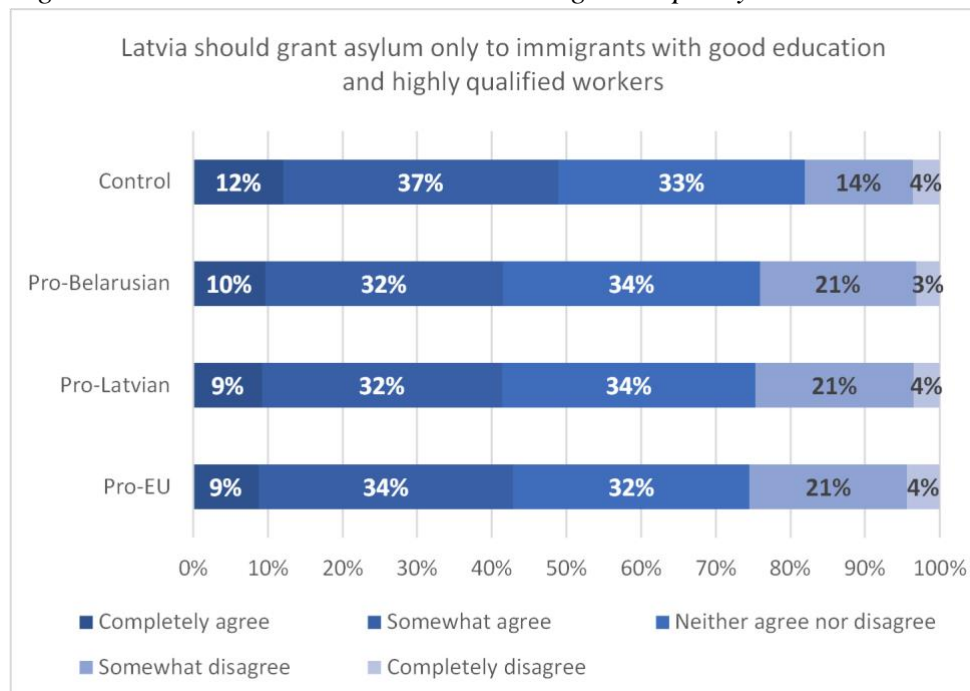


Figure 15. Support for a selective immigration policy among ethnic groups

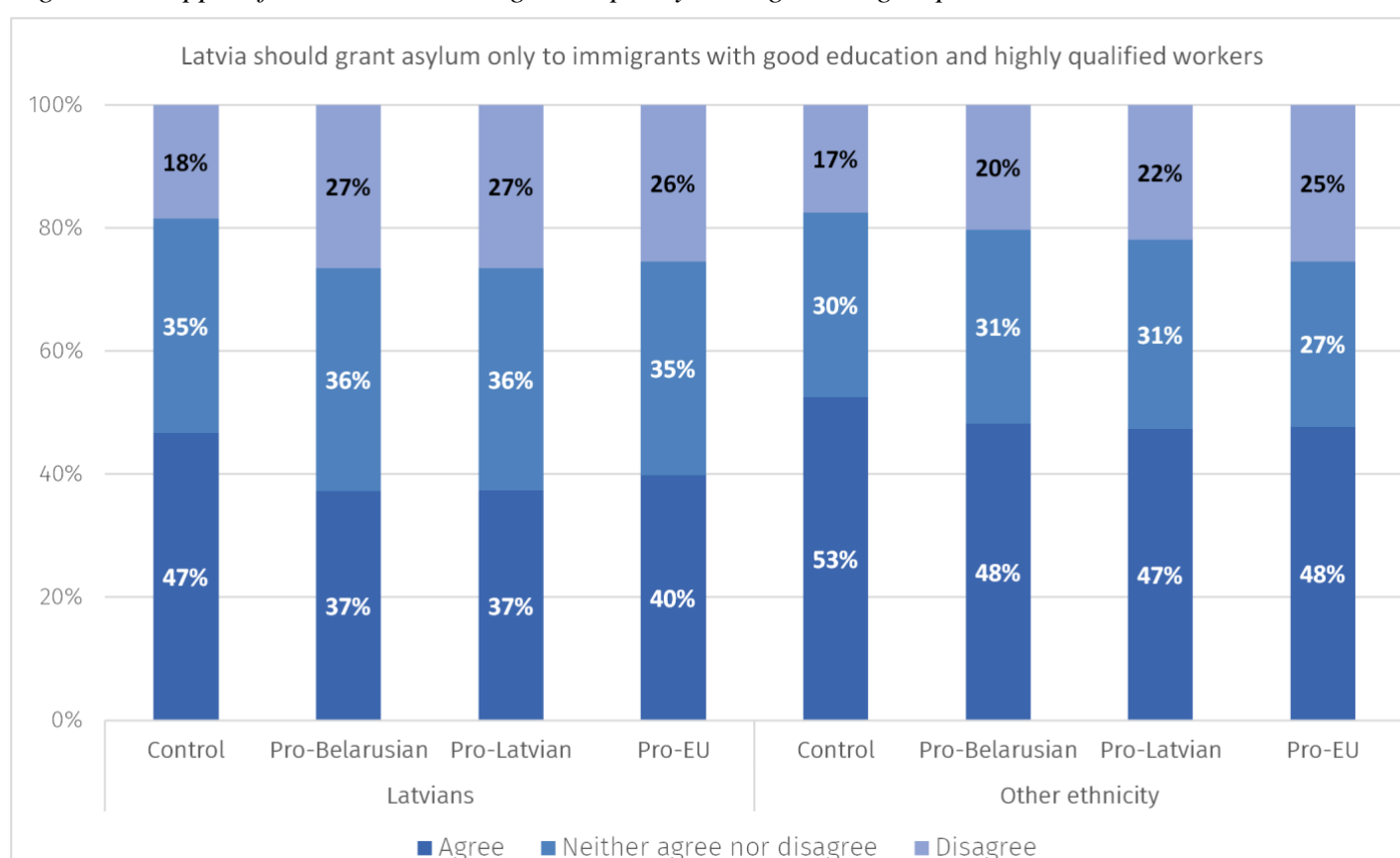
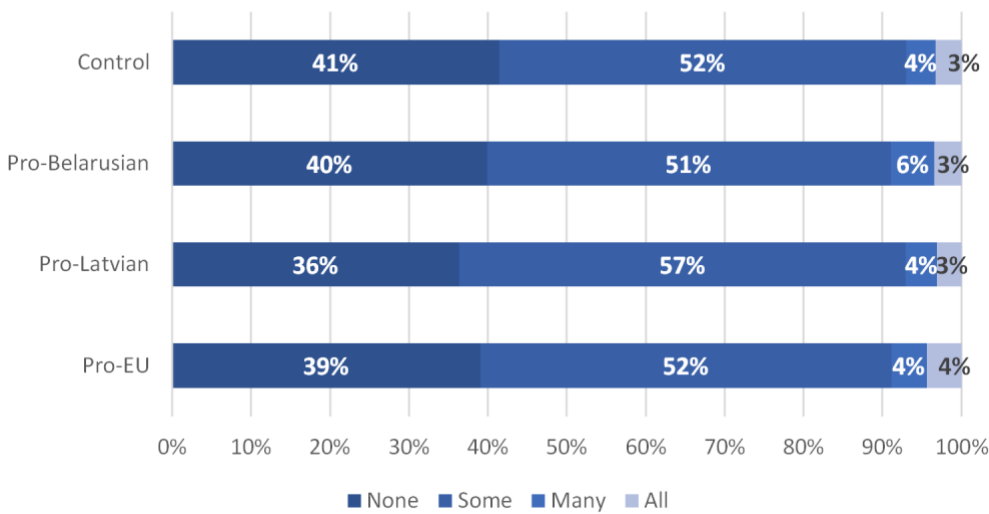


Figure 16. Willingness to accept asylum seekers

How many asylum seekers from the Middle East should Latvia accept?



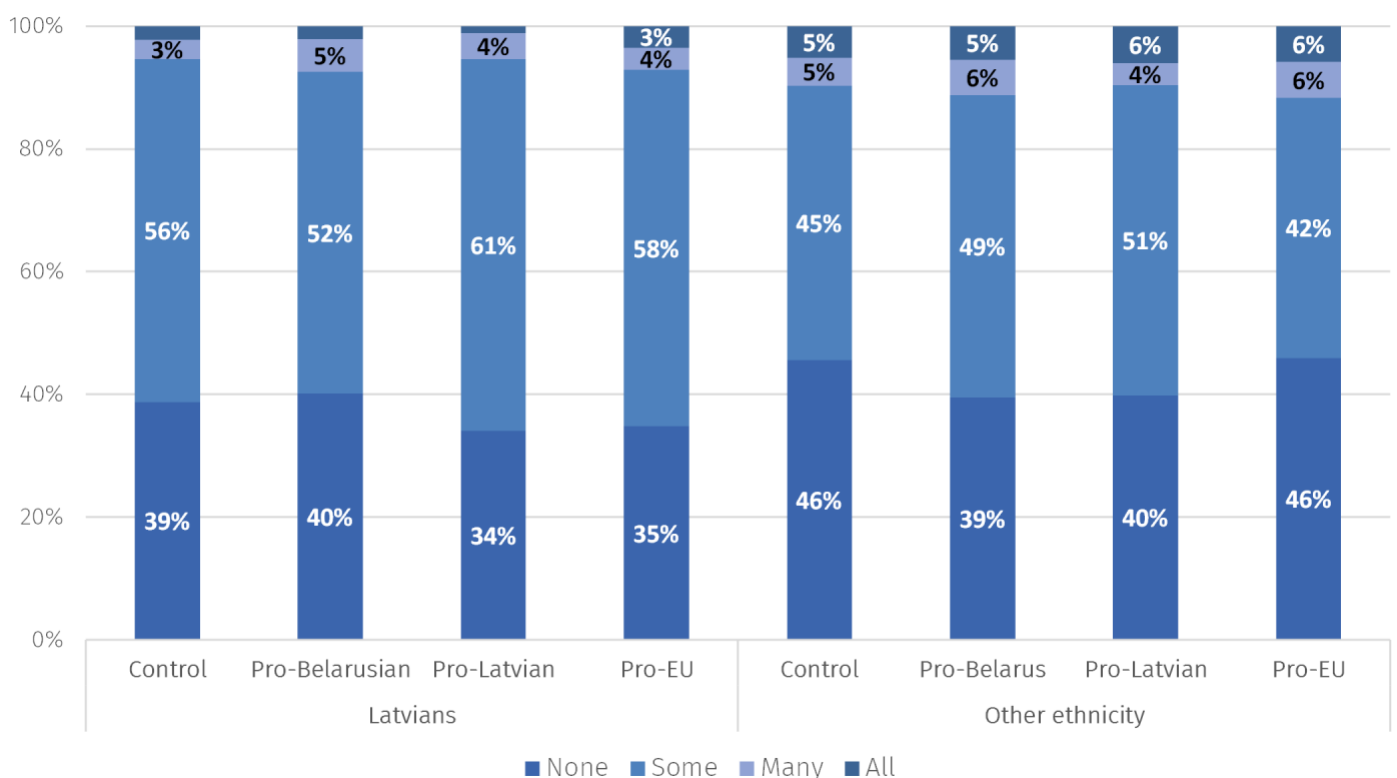
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Simultaneously, the vast majority of all our respondents believe that Latvia should accept just a few of the migrants who try to cross the EU-Belarus border (Figure 16). In other words, only a few (less than 9%) consider that Latvia should accept 'many' or 'all' asylum seekers from the Middle East.

Notably, the pro-EU vignette did not affect the willingness to accept asylum seekers. Meanwhile, the pro-Belarusian vignette slightly changed the opinion of ethnic minorities who become less strict towards migrants at the EU-Belarus border (Figure 17). In turn, the pro-Latvian vignette increased support for accepting 'some' asylum seekers by 6 percentage points among both Latvians and ethnic minorities.

Figure 17. Willingness to accept asylum seekers among ethnic groups

How many asylum seekers from the Middle East should Latvia accept?



Measures against illegal immigration from Belarus

Latvian society tends to approve of the government's decision to build a fence at the EU-Belarus border to prevent further illegal immigration. This somewhat consensual support is expressed by around 61% of surveyed respondents (Figure 18).

However, one can observe a strong polarisation in the control group on an ethnic basis (Figure 19). While 72% of ethnic Latvians approve of this policy, support is less pronounced among ethnic minorities (41%). None of the vignettes were able to significantly affect this juxtaposition and change attitudes, albeit the pro-Latvian vignette slightly increased support for the fence among ethnic minorities.

Figure 18. Attitude towards a fence on the border with Belarus

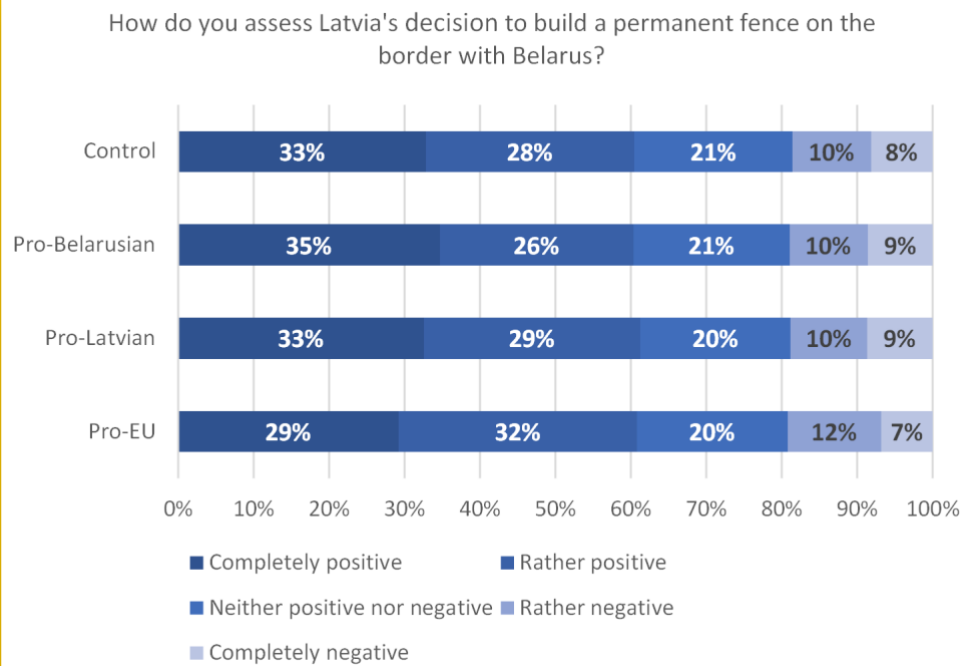


Figure 19. Attitude towards Latvia's decision to build a fence on the border with Belarus among ethnic groups

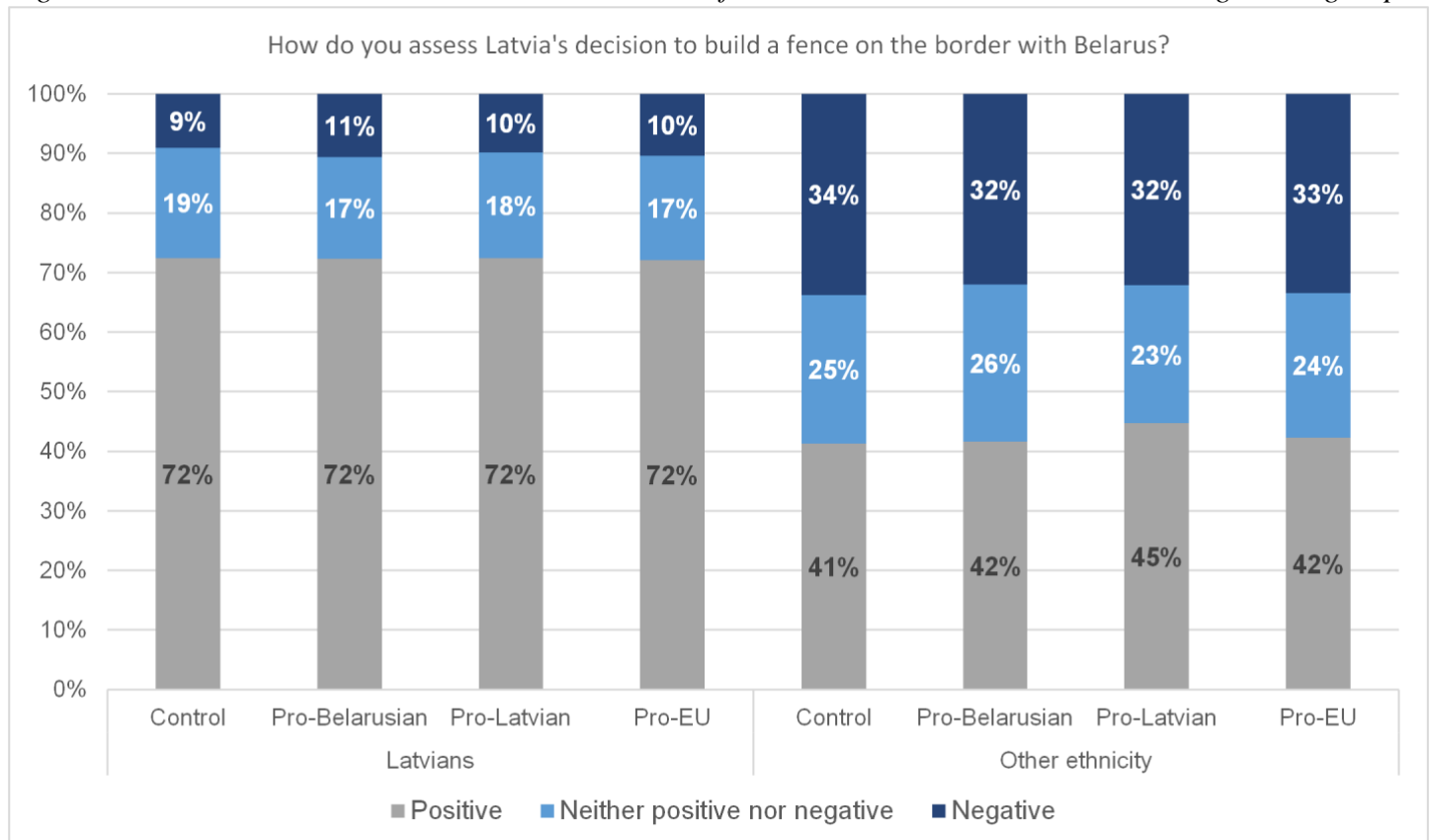
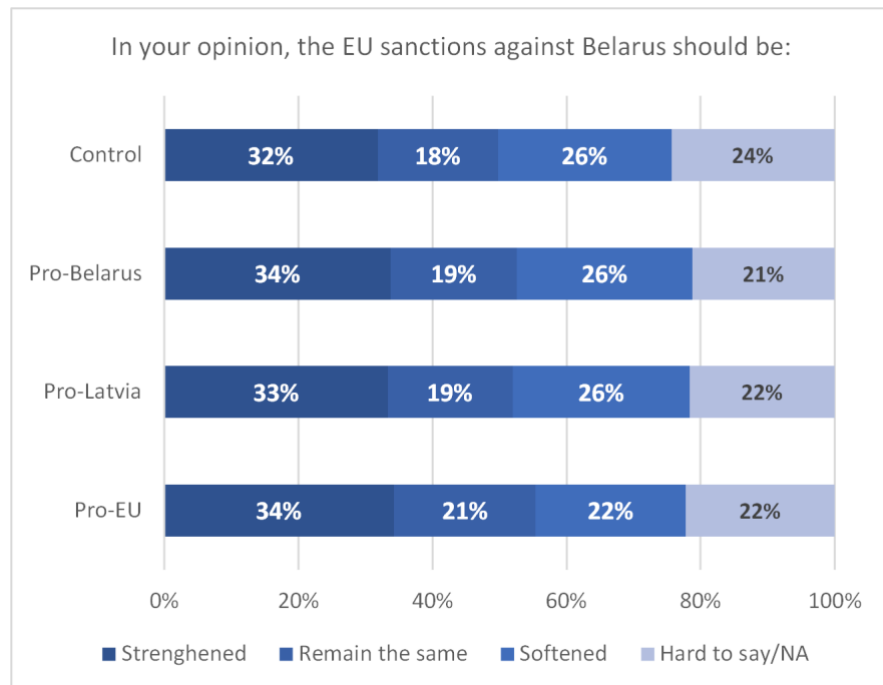


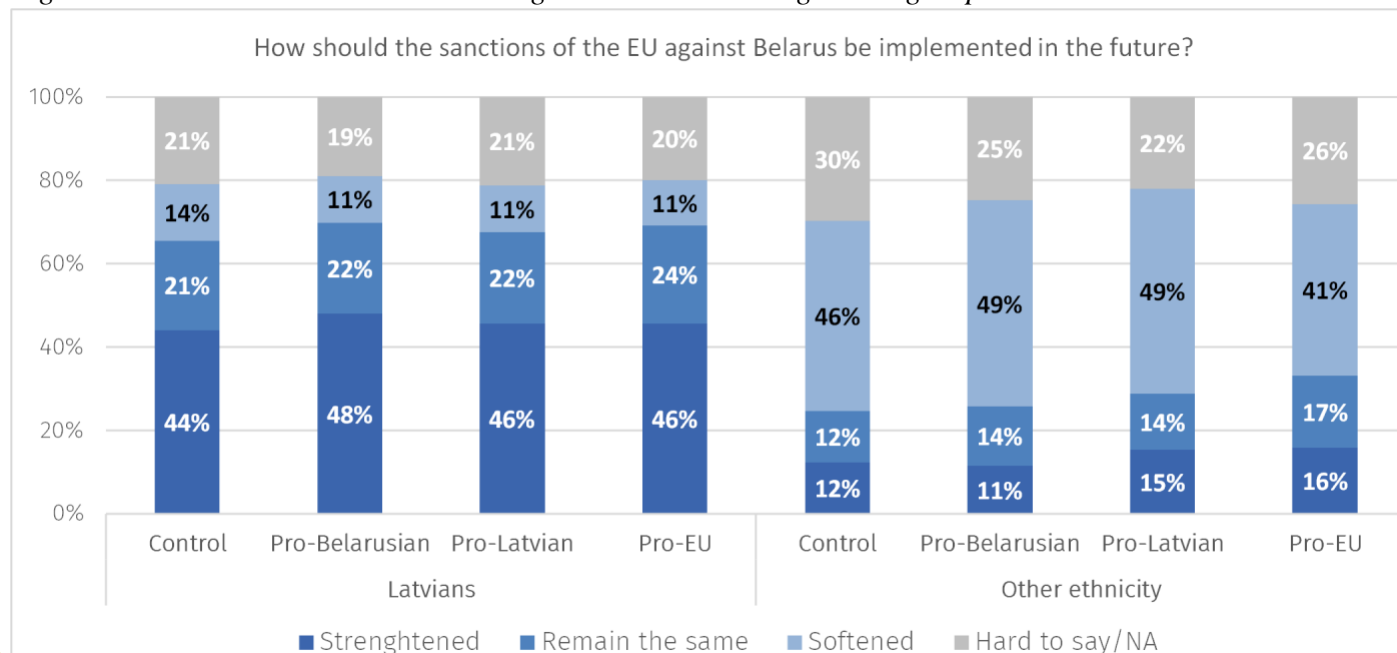
Figure 20. Attitude towards EU sanctions against Belarus



Along with building a fence, reinforcing EU sanctions against Belarus is also frequently mentioned as a preventive measure by policymakers. Around one in four respondents (26%) in the control group felt that sanctions against Belarus should be eased (Figure 20). Neither the pro-Belarusian nor pro-Latvian vignette changed these attitudes. Meanwhile, only 22% of the pro-EU vignette readers answered that international sanctions should be softened.

The same can be observed for the border fence, with support for sanctions again varying between ethnic Latvians and ethnic minorities (Figure 21). A lack of discrepancy between ethnic Latvians in the control and treatment groups suggests that ethnic Latvians maintain a strong support for sanctions. In turn, respondents with an ethnic minority background are more likely to change their minds and become more lenient towards imposing new sanctions on Belarus after reading the pro-EU vignette. Thus, the share of ethnic minority respondents who favour stronger sanctions (or at least the continuation of existing sanctions) increases. In the control group, this view is held by 24% of ethnic minority respondents, whereas in the pro-EU treatment group support increases to 33%. Similar changes can be noticed in other treatment groups, albeit to a much smaller extent.

Figure 21. Attitudes towards sanctions against Belarus among ethnic groups



Approval of Lukashenko in the Latvian society

Another divisive issue that is examined in our survey experiment is the approval of Belarus' authoritarian president

The Belarus' leader Alexander Lukashenko has remained to power in a non-democratic and highly dubious way. Can different strategic narratives about illegal migration from Belarus influence the perception of Lukashenko?

Our data indicates that around half of respondents expressed a negative opinion of Lukashenko (Figure 22).

Figure 22. Approval of Lukashenko in the Latvian society

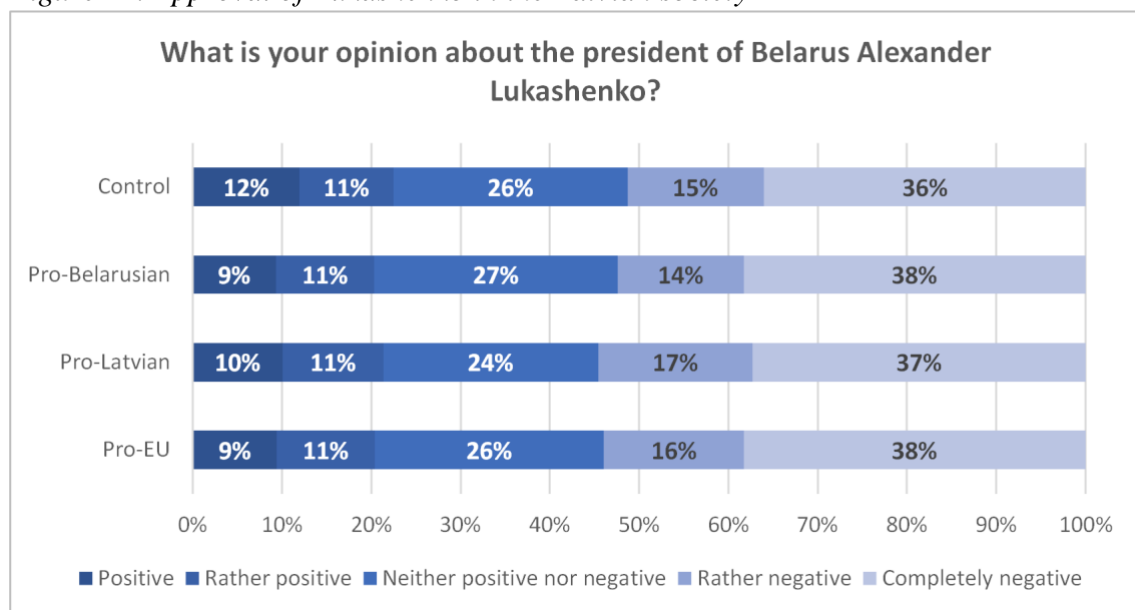
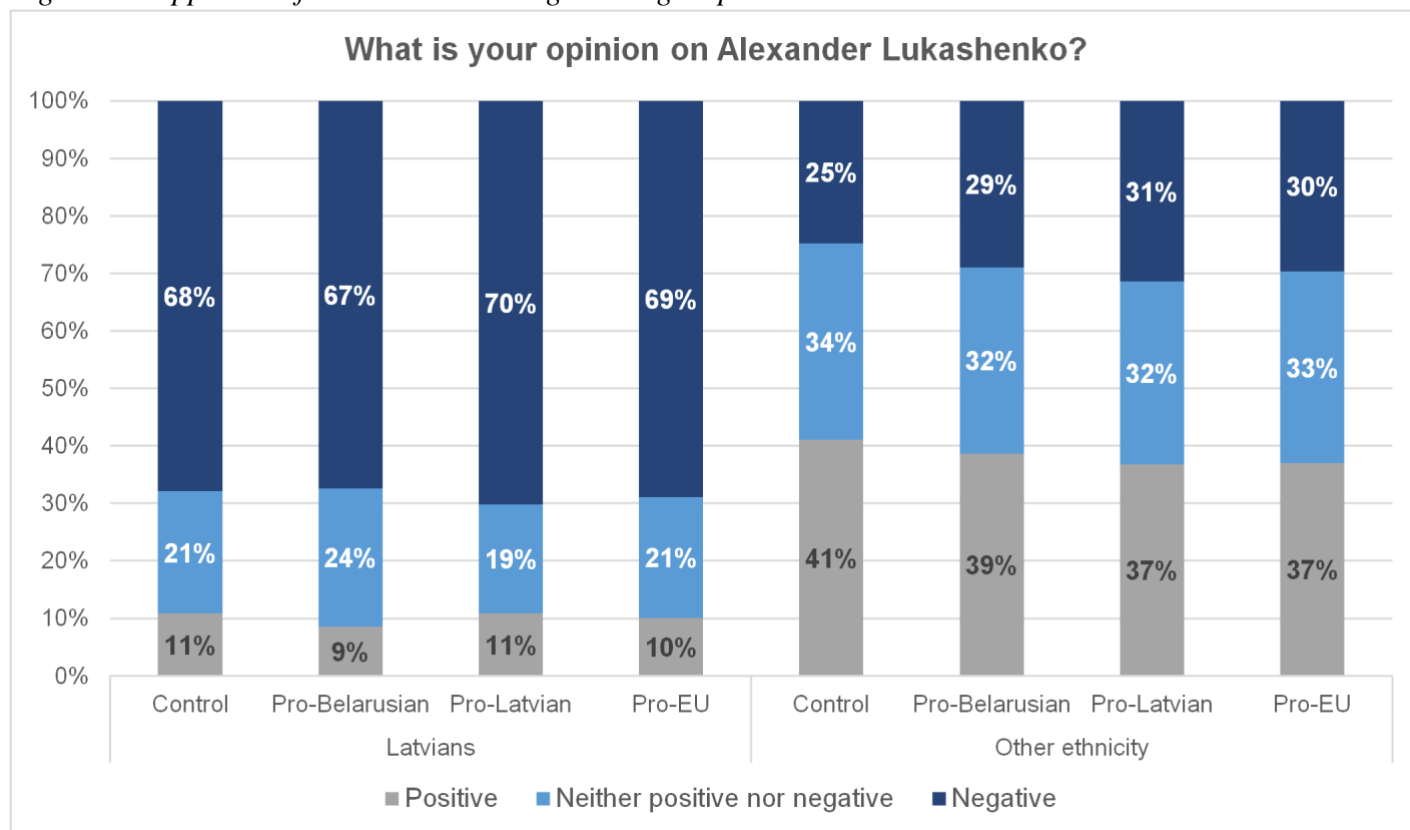


Figure 23. Approval of Lukashenko among ethnic groups in Latvia



Negative opinion is less pronounced among ethnic minority respondents where only one in four (25%) respondents are critical of Lukashenko as opposed to two in three (68%) ethnic Latvians (Figure 21). Attitudes towards the dictatorial and pro-Kremlin president of Belarus is the main fault line that polarises the Latvian ethnic majority and ethnic minorities.

However, when ethnic minority respondents are exposed to the EU-Belarus immigration crisis by any of the vignettes, negative attitudes towards Lukashenko increase by around five percentage points. Such an effect is not observable among Latvians who tend to have a strongly unfavourable, pre-existing opinion of Belarus' authoritarian leader.

Conclusions

In this report, we have sought to outline a general pattern and the conditions that characterise the attitude of Latvian society towards immigration. The ongoing illegal immigration on the Latvian-Belarusian border inspired this study, encouraging us to examine contextual factors, as well as the role of specific narratives that could account for public opinion on immigration in strategic terms.

The cross-sectional data explored in this report indicates that Latvia's public opinion remains moderately unfavourable towards immigration. Although some evidence suggests that anti-immigrant sentiment has weakened, it is still quite widespread and can mobilise a sizable opinion group in Latvian society. A dominant, attitudinal pattern supports very selective and controlled immigration that is guided by pragmatic and economically driven considerations. Yet, such a rather prudent approach to immigration does shed light on vulnerability and potential moral panic that uncontrolled and illegal immigration may trigger in Latvia. The situation on the Latvian-Belarusian border is a case in point. Since the outbreak of the immigration crisis in August 2021, anti-immigrant sentiments have been exacerbated, which has led to the growing political relevance of immigration. Noticeable changes in public opinion provide opportunities for political parties planning to securitise the immigration issue in their pre-election campaigns before the 2022 parliamentary elections. Our data not only demonstrates the potential of societal mobilisation around immigration, but also reveals how irregular immigration organised by Lukashenko's regime succeeded in endorsing anti-immigrant sentiment and political relevance of immigration issue, as well as polarising Latvian public opinion.

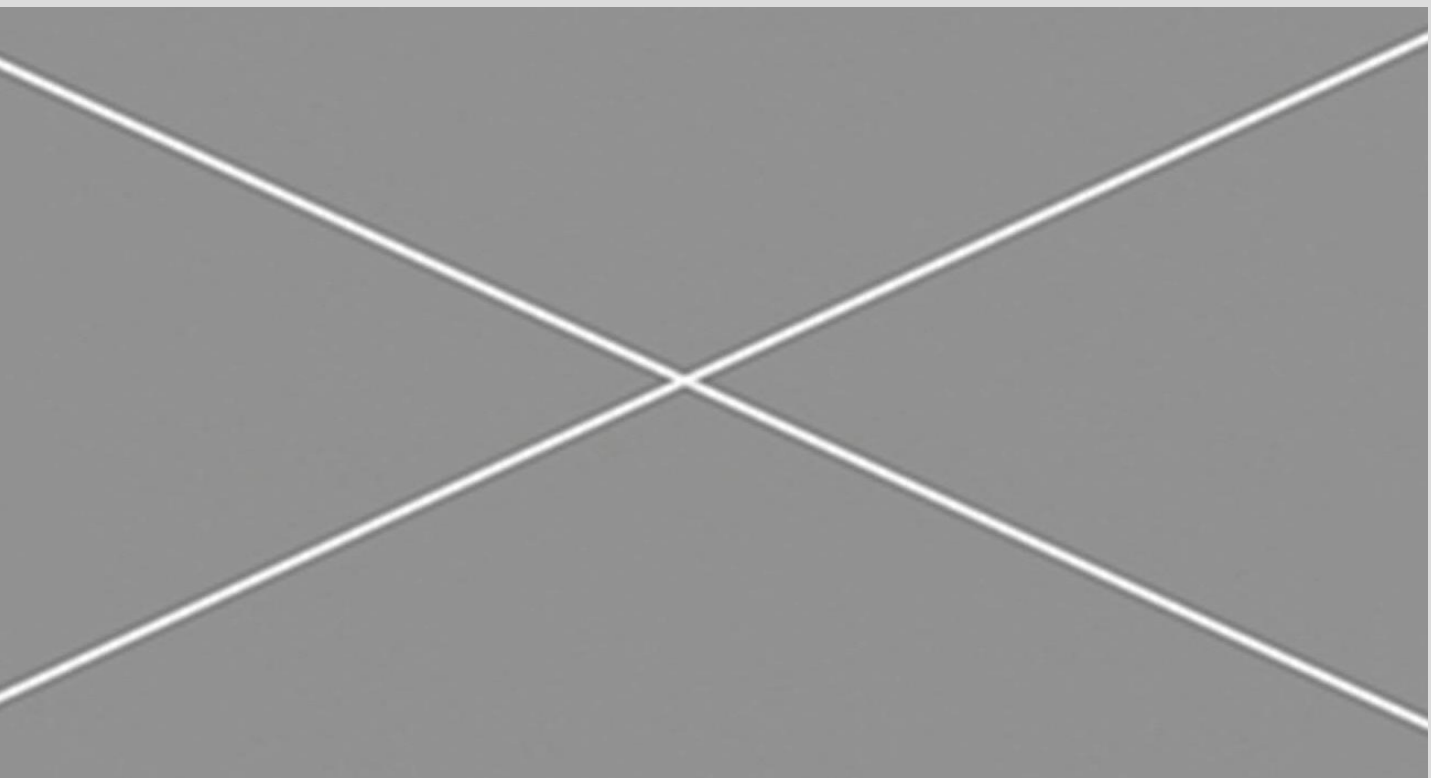
Our survey experiment shows that exposure to strategic narratives about immigration crisis on the Latvian-Belarusian border increases support for stricter border controls and the unequal treatment of immigrants. The three vignettes employed in this experiment also reinforced stereotypical perceptions of immigrants, suggesting that offering humanitarian perspectives on the immigration crisis strengthens rather than weakens anti-immigration sentiment in Latvian society. This corroborates our previous findings about Latvian attitudes towards immigrants and immigration (Kaprāns et al. 2021). At the same time, our experimental data reveals that the crisis on the border makes Latvians less willing to support a selective immigration policy that would grant asylum only to the educated and highly-qualified. However, this does not necessarily mean that Latvians will change their minds — 40% of respondents in all groups believed that not a single asylum seeker should be admitted by Latvia.

Policymakers should take into account that there are strong divisions formed in Latvian society regarding the interpretation of illegal immigration from Belarus. These differences can be seen in the ethnic background of Latvian residents. Ethnic Latvians largely align with a pro-Latvian and pro-EU perspective on illegal immigration from Belarus. Representatives of Latvian ethnic minorities meanwhile demonstrate a more complex positioning, as pro-Belarusian and pro-Latvian narratives are equally supported. The pro-EU narrative that highlights Russia's role in destabilising the situation in the region and the EU's role in trying to settle the immigration crisis on its eastern border are the least likely to be approved by ethnic minorities. This confirms pre-existing attitudes in society towards immigration in general and asylum seekers in particular that are hard to change at this point.

Our subgroup analysis also shows that ethnic minorities (who are largely Russian speakers in Latvia) are more open to immigration and less protective regarding border control. They are also more likely than ethnic Latvians to change their opinion after being exposed to a particular strategic narrative on the immigration crisis. For example, they may become more sympathetic towards a stricter immigration policy, bringing them closer to the dominant attitude of ethnic Latvians. This is particularly pronounced when ethnic minorities are exposed to the pro-Latvian vignette. In other words, if there is fight for hearts and minds in this immigration crisis, then Latvian ethnic minorities (particularly Russophones) are more likely to be affected by pro-Latvian narratives. Conversely, ethnic Latvians demonstrate a strong consensus that the current Belarusian regime has

waged hybrid warfare by deliberately bringing migrants from Middle Eastern countries to its borders with the EU.

The relationship with Belarus, however, is a different story. Latvia's ethnic minorities are evidently much more favourable towards Lukashenko's authoritarian regime. Thus, measures such as tightening EU sanctions or building a permanent fence find support mostly among ethnic Latvians. However, it should be noted that Latvia's ethnic minorities exposed to the pro-EU vignette are more likely to approve of sanctions against Belarus. Likewise, exposure to the EU-Belarus border crisis by any vignette decreases support to Lukashenko among the ethnic minorities. In other words, focusing on illegal immigration supported by Belarus undermines rather than improves the image of Belarus' authoritarian leader among Latvia's ethnic minorities.



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Appendix 1. The survey questionnaire (translated from Latvian)

1. If you had to vote in the Saeima elections tomorrow, how important would the position of political parties on immigration issues be?

That would be important	1
I would give it a little importance	2
I do not attach any importance to it	3
Would not vote	4

2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I like it when people of different nationalities are speaking different languages and living around me?

Fully disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Fully agree
1	2	3	4	5

A-C vignettes (see Appendix 2)

3. To what extent do you agree with the description of the situation in the text?

Fully agree	1
Agree	2
Neither agree nor disagree	3
Disagree	4
Fully disagree	5
Hard to say	8

4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with such statements?

	Fully agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Fully disagree
Latvia should introduce a stricter border control and visa regime in order to prevent immigration	1	2	3	4	5
Migrants must have the same rights to welfare (health care, housing, education) as Latvian residents	1	2	3	4	5
Immigrants increase crime and the threat of terrorism	1	2	3	4	5
Latvia needs to grant asylum only to those immigrants who have a good education and who are highly qualified workers	1	2	3	4	5

5. Since the summer of 2021, asylum seekers from the Middle East (Iraq, Syria, etc.) have been regularly trying to enter Latvia. How many such people should Latvia accept?

None	A few	Many	All
1	2	3	4

6. In response to the crisis on the border between the European Union and Belarus, the Latvian government has decided to build a fence along the Latvian-Belarusian border that could help stop asylum seekers from crossing the Latvian border illegally. What is your assessment of such activity by the Latvian government?

Positive	Somewhat positive	Neither positive not negative	Somewhat negative	Negative
1	2	3	4	5

7. Following the last presidential elections in Belarus in August 2020 and the subsequent repressions towards Belarusian civil society by the Belarusian authorities, the European Union has imposed tougher sanctions on Belarus. Should the current European Union sanctions against Belarus be...

Tightened	1
Remain in the current status	2
Softened	3
Don't know	8

8. In general, what is your assessment of Alexander Lukashenko as the President of Belarus?

Positive	Somewhat positive	Neither positive not negative	Somewhat negative	Negative
1	2	3	4	5

Appendix 2. Vignettes

A. The pro-Belarusian vignette

Since the summer of 2021, there has been a significant increase in asylum seekers looking for opportunities to enter the territory of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland illegally. Thousands of people have come from Middle Eastern countries (Iraq, Syria, etc.) and are residing by the Belarus border, where they have been suspended by border guards of Latvia and other countries. In the autumn, the living conditions of these people have deteriorated as the cold weather approached. Asylum seekers (including families with small children) had to stay in the open for days, and they could warm up only by the fire. This has affected their health — several deaths have already been recorded among the migrants. While the Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish authorities are considering measures to prevent asylum seekers from entering their countries, the Belarusian authorities and international humanitarian organisations are seeking to provide support for these people in difficulty by offering them food and primary health care. Under international law, countries (including EU member states) are obliged to grant asylum to individuals.

B. The pro-Latvian vignette

Since the summer of 2021, there has been a significant increase in asylum seekers looking for opportunities to enter the territory of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland illegally. Thousands of people have come from the Middle East countries (Iraq, Syria, etc.) and are residing by the Belarus border, where they have been suspended by border guards of Latvia and other countries. This has increased the discontent and the level of aggression among migrants. The Latvian authorities have allowed individual asylum seekers to enter Latvia for humanitarian reasons. Latvian officials point out that the Belarusian authorities deliberately do not prevent the border crossing, thus punishing Latvia for supporting the Belarusian opposition and sanctions against the authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko. In August, the Latvian government introduced a situation of emergency in the counties situated at the Belarusian border. There are concerns that terrorists may also enter Latvia disguised as asylum seekers. This has triggered anxiety among people living in the border area. Given the possible threat of illegal immigration to national security and public order, Latvia plans to accelerate the construction of the Latvian-Belarusian border infrastructure.

C. The pro-EU vignette

Since the summer of 2021, there has been a significant increase in asylum seekers looking for opportunities to enter the territory of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland illegally. Thousands of people have come from the Middle East countries (Iraq, Syria, etc.) and are residing by the Belarus border, where they have been suspended by border guards of Latvia and other countries. European Union officials have repeatedly stressed that the Belarusian authorities are deliberately organising such immigration and using asylum seekers as a weapon to retaliate for the EU's support for the Belarusian opposition and sanctions against the Alexander Lukashenko regime. It is believed that Belarus has coordinated this operation with Russia and that it is also interested in destabilising the EU. The European Union describes Belarus' activities as hybrid warfare and promises to help strengthen the EU's external border. EU officials have reached an agreement with Middle Eastern countries to stop the flow of migrants and return the migrants to their homeland and prepare new economic sanctions against Belarus to punish them for the ensuing crisis. At the same time, this crisis does not alter the open immigration policy of European Union, and Brussels does not intend to finance the construction of a fence on the Union's external border with Belarus.



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