



# How do immigrant concentration and local socioeconomic contexts shape public attitudes to immigration in Europe?

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- The link between the spatial concentration of immigrants and attitudes toward immigrants is an important concern when asylum seekers and refugees arrive in large numbers and need to be distributed within and across EU member states.
- The ‘contact hypothesis’ says that locals’ attitudes towards immigrants are more positive when there is more contact between them and immigrants. Hence, attitudes should be more positive in areas with a higher share of immigrants in the local population.
- We combine European Social Survey data with aggregated census and register data for 12 European countries to show that in areas (specifically, NUTS3 regions) with a higher concentration of immigrants, locals indeed tend to display a more positive attitude toward them.
- Importantly, however, this positive effect depends on the local socioeconomic context: It is stronger in regions with higher per-capita income and disappears completely in the most deprived regions with the lowest income and highest unemployment rate.
- Newly arriving asylum seekers and refugees often seek out areas with an already high concentration of immigrants to gain access to peer networks. However, when policy decisions are made on the spatial distribution of newly arriving asylum seekers and refugees, the local socio-economic context needs to be considered. Allocation to areas that have more socioeconomic resources might be more conducive to fostering immigrants’ acceptance by the majoritarian population; already deprived areas should not be overburdened with new integration challenges.

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# How do immigrant concentration and local socioeconomic contexts shape public attitudes to immigration in Europe?

By Rezart Hoxhaj and Carolina V. Zuccotti<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Recent policy debates about whether and how to distribute asylum seekers and refugees across EU member states, and across local areas within EU countries, have revived interest in long-standing research and discussions about the role of the spatial concentration of immigrants in shaping objective and subjective outcomes for migrants and existing residents. Specifically, a key question is whether an increase in the physical presence of immigrants—on the streets, in neighborhoods, at work, on the bus, at school—exerts a positive or a negative effect on how the majoritarian populations perceive immigrants. It is important to ask whether and how the socioeconomic conditions of the local area play a role in conditioning and shaping the relationship between immigrant concentration and attitudes to immigration. We argue that, while contact with immigrants might be positive for attitudes in areas that are better off—with more availability of jobs, better infrastructure, etc.—a greater presence of immigrants might bring no or even a negative effect on attitudes in areas with poorer (i.e., scarcer) resources. Our new empirical analysis of European Social Survey data in combination with aggregated data at the NUTS3 level (Hoxhaj and Zuccotti 2020) provides evidence that supports some of these expectations.

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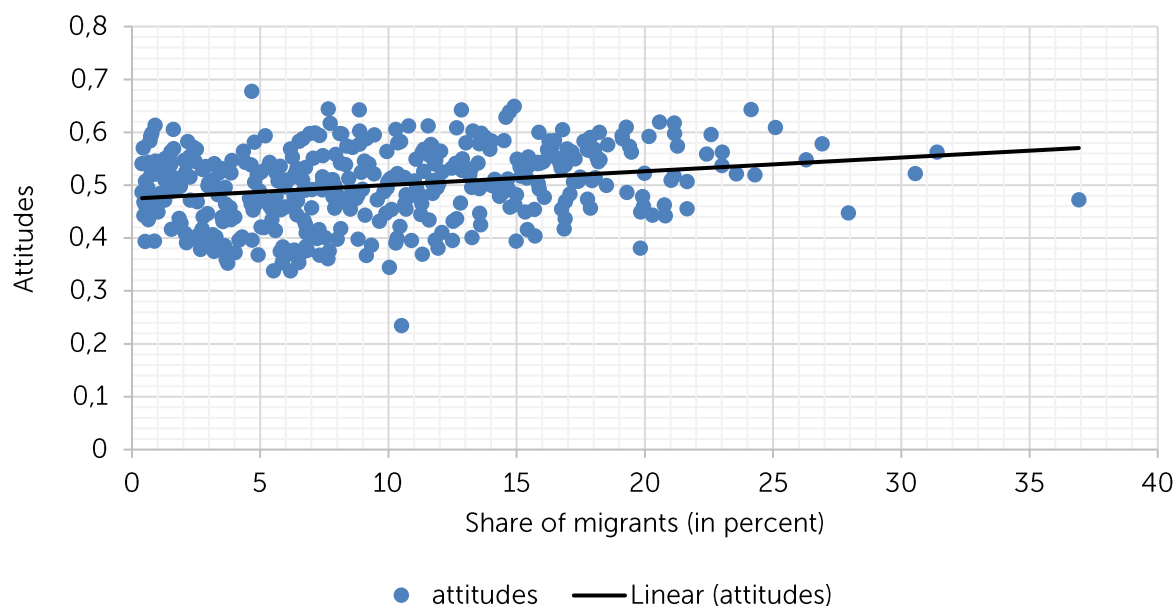
<sup>1</sup> Rezart Hoxhaj is a research associate at the Roma Tre University and Carolina V. Zuccotti is a research fellow at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET) and the University of San Andrés. This policy brief builds upon research conducted by the authors as MEDAM research fellows at the Migration Policy Centre (MPC) at the European University Institute in Florence (EUI). The responsibility for the contents of this publication rests with the authors, not the Kiel Institute or the Mercator Dialogue on Asylum and Migration (MEDAM). Any comments should be sent directly to the authors.

## The relationship between immigrant concentration and attitudes

The link between the immigrant composition of geographical areas and attitudes toward immigration (or immigrants) has been explored by a large number of studies (e.g., Kaufmann and Harris 2015; Markaki and Longhi 2013; Weber 2015). Most studies that measure the presence of immigrants at the local level find a positive correlation between immigrants' concentration and attitudes. This is often explained by so-called *intergroup contact theories*, whereby exposure or contact with members of other groups, which inevitably happens in areas with a higher concentration of immigrants, should lead to greater familiarity with those groups and, hence, enhance acceptance of them.

The descriptive statistics in our study (Hoxhaj and Zuccotti 2020) also reveal a similar pattern. Figure 1 shows the relationship between the average score in attitudes toward immigrants at the NUTS3<sup>2</sup> level and the share of immigrants at the NUTS3 level. In general, attitudes are more positive in areas with a higher share of immigrants.

**Figure 1:**  
Attitudes toward immigrants (NUTS3 average) by share of immigrants at the NUTS3 level



Source: Own calculations based on ESS (2014) and aggregated Census data (2011).

Note: The average score refers to the mean score of individuals' attitudes measured at the NUTS3 level. Attitudes vary between 0 and 1 (more positive).

<sup>2</sup> Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS), are standardized geographies that are often used for the elaboration and presentation of cross-national statistics in Europe. The definition of NUTS3 includes areas with a size of between 150,000 and 800,000 inhabitants.

## Is the relationship between immigrants' concentration and attitudes conditioned by the socioeconomic context?

There are theoretical reasons to expect that the positive relationship between immigrants' concentration and attitudes might not be present with the same intensity across areas with different socioeconomic levels. In contrast with contact theory, *intergroup threat theories* suggest that increased contact or exposure to immigrants can lead to increased negative views toward them (Quillian 1995). Feelings of threat may emerge for different reasons. Some explanations center on social-psychological mechanisms (i.e., feelings of threat toward the own identity); but most importantly for the arguments posed in our study, threat might also emerge through more rational reasoning, especially in terms of cost-benefit relationships (Citrin et al. 1997; Markaki and Longhi 2013). For example, concerns about personal socioeconomic situations, or that of the area of residence or the country, might lead people to see immigrants as competitors for scarce resources (Blalock 1967; Coenders and Scheepers 2008). That is, as increased numbers of ethnic or racial minorities compete for jobs, housing, and other economic resources, the majoritarian population might increasingly feel that their economic well-being and dominance are threatened (Wang and Todak 2018).

In practice, contact and threat theories might coexist. But the extent to which one of the two theories prevails is likely to be related to the conditions under which such contact or exposure occurs. While an increase of immigrants in poor areas does not necessarily mean that attitudes toward immigration will worsen, poor socioeconomic conditions may discourage the development of positive attitudes. Conversely, contexts where social exchanges occur with less competition for resources are more likely to enhance positive attitudes toward immigration.

## As the socioeconomic conditions of local areas worsen the positive effect of immigrants' concentration on attitudes becomes smaller

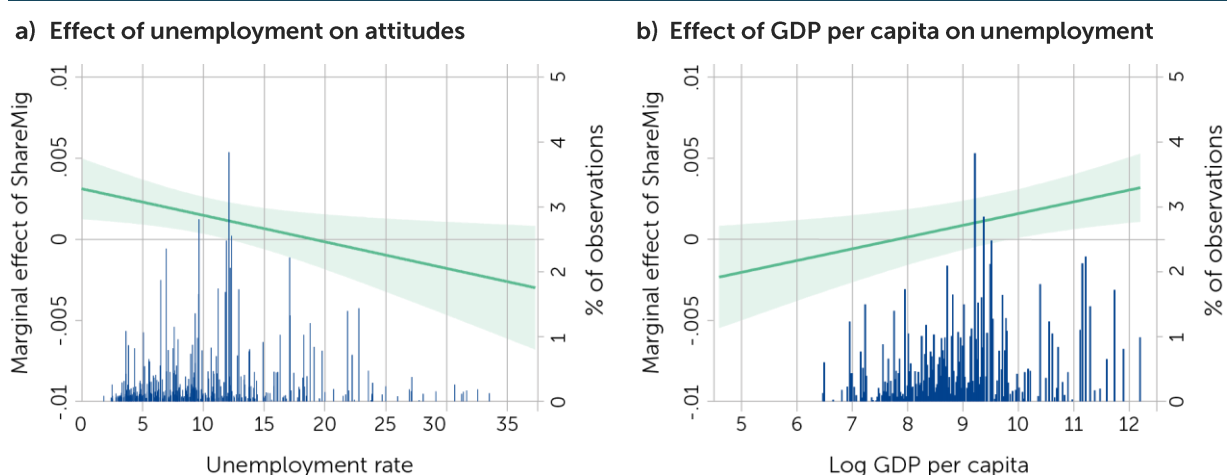
Our analysis is based on the seventh round of the European Social Survey (2014–15) in combination with aggregated data at the NUTS3 level (2011). We focus our analysis on the majoritarian non-migrant population, defined here as those born in the European countries under study and who have at least one parent born in the same country. Our key variable of interest, *attitudes toward immigrants*, varies between 0 and 1 (where 1 refers to attitudes that are most positive). It is measured using a combination of seven questions on whether immigrants worsen or improve life in the country, and more specifically, on whether immigrants present an economic, cultural/religious, or public threat to the country. Data on contextual characteristics (measured in 2011) was obtained for NUTS3 geographies and include

the share (percentage) of immigrants in NUTS3 and the socioeconomic characteristics of NUTS3 (including the unemployment rate and GDP per capita).

Figure 2 presents the results of our analysis. It shows how socioeconomic conditions influence the relationship between the share of immigrants and attitudes to immigration, holding constant a series of other key factors that may also affect individuals' attitudes to immigration, such as their education, social class, and political values, among others.

The results show that individuals in areas with a higher share of immigrants have more positive attitudes toward immigration. This result is in line with contact theory. At the same time, the graphical representations also show that local socioeconomic factors, such as the unemployment rate (panel a) and GDP per capita (panel b), condition the positive effect of the concentration of immigrants on attitudes. In other words, individuals who reside in areas with better socioeconomic conditions (lower unemployment and higher GDP per capita) have more positive attitudes to immigration than comparable individuals residing in areas with worse socioeconomic conditions. These results are consistent with the argument that the perceived threat of migrants may be greater in areas with worse socioeconomic conditions, and that this can reduce any positive impact of the presence of migrants on attitudes. Still, it is interesting to note and worth emphasizing that the research also finds that in areas where one would expect threat mechanisms to occur to the greatest extent—i.e., in areas with the poorest socioeconomic conditions, where competition for public services and jobs is probably the highest—an increase of migrants does not seem to have an impact on attitudes. This applies to areas with an unemployment rate of more than 12.5 percent (in panel a) and areas with a log GDP per capita below 9.5 (in panel b).

**Figure 2:**  
Illustrations of marginal effects of immigrant concentration on attitudes toward immigration



Source: Hoxhaj and Zuccotti 2019.

Notes: The figures show the trend over time of the average non-humanitarian ODA allocated by all donors (one year lagged) to the top 10 IDP- and refugee-hosting countries.

IDP =internally displaced person.

Our results are in line with studies using similar data and geographies. For example, Hjerm (2009) finds for Sweden that people have stronger anti-immigrant attitudes in *municipalities* where unemployment is high and the proportion of foreign-born people is larger. Similar findings are observed in Branton and Jones (2005), who study attitudes toward immigration policy across *counties* in the United States. As to whether this effect holds when the share of immigrants and socioeconomic conditions are measured at the *country level* is a matter of debate. In often-cited research from Western Europe, Quillian (1995) shows that prejudice is more likely when there is both a large foreign presence and poor economic conditions in a country, compared with a situation in which each factor was considered independently. However, a more recent study based on a larger sample and our same data (European Social Survey) does not find an interaction effect between share of immigrants and socioeconomic conditions of countries (Hjerm 2007).

## Implications for policy debates

From a theoretical perspective, the results of our study suggest that contact theory is probably a suitable framework for explaining attitudes at the local level. At the same time, the fact that attitudes become less positive as local socioeconomic conditions worsen might be an indication of threat explanations emerging. In other words, even if the effect of immigrant concentration on attitudes remains positive, a reduction in this effect indicates that the potential benefits associated with contact will not necessarily apply everywhere.

From a policy perspective, our work contributes to the vivid debate on the spatial (re-)allocation of asylum seekers and refugees across local areas. In particular, our work suggests that a policy promoting the spatial distribution of immigrants should consider the socioeconomic characteristics of the areas in which they will reside. The allocation of immigrants in areas that have greater socioeconomic resources might be more conducive to fostering immigrants' acceptance by the local population.

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