

# Perception of refugees in Lithuania

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# PERCEPTION OF REFUGEES IN LITHUANIA

*Rūta Dapkūnaitė*

## Abstract

This article offers a partial answer to the question, “why are the vast majority of Lithuanians opposed to refugees immigrating to Lithuania?” I use cultural model theory (CMT) to find the salient characteristics Lithuanians attribute to refugees. Using methods associated with CMT, I shed light on some of the underlying conditions from which a negative perception of refugees emerges. Surprisingly, the negative image of refugees is not just reproduced from social media and news platforms that overwhelmingly depict refugees negatively but stems from Lithuanians’ precarious feelings about their own lives. I thus propose that Lithuanians cultural models of refugees do not simply mirror political or social media portrayals of them as folk devils, but that Lithuanians construct their own cultural models from their life experiences and use these to substantiate their cultural model of refugees.

**Keywords:** *perception, refugees, integration, resistance, media, cultural model*

## Introduction

While researching the portrayals of refugees by Lithuanian media and its government and citizens, it became apparent that while there were similarities, there were also significant differences between the views of citizens and those of both the government and the media. Therefore, in this paper, I seek to describe the generally negative view the Lithuanian public has of refugees and explain why this view is not just a simplified reflection or passive mirroring of the media or the government. I argue that these perceptions by Lithuanians reflect the value orientation and perspectives of their local community.

I want to add that there are many Lithuanians in favour of helping refugees, but my focus is on those who are, for the most part, adamantly opposed to any refugees entering and staying in Lithuania. In this paper, I aim to show through people’s personal experiences how they develop their prejudices towards refugees. I seek to illuminate some of the reasons why a large body of Lithuanians, if not most, are staunchly resistant to refugees immigrating to the country and, in particular why they consider government assistance for refugees “unfair” (lit. *neteisinga*). The answer to the question regarding Lithuanians’ widespread prejudices against refugees is multifaceted, but there are essential aspects of the root causes of local resistance that are surprising and complexify the nature of Lithuanian resistance to refugees in particular and immigrants in general.

I use cultural model theory to describe and analyse a cultural configuration of resistance to refugees. The individually constructed opinions are similar and converge on a few collectively shared negative images of refugees. When shared, such individual schemas are usually referred to as cultural models (Bennardo and De Munck 2014). Holland and Quinn defined cultural models as:

*[...] presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared (although not necessarily to the exclusion of other, alternative models) by the members of a society and that play an enormous role in their understanding of that world and their behaviour in it.*  
(1987, 4)

There is more than one cultural model of refugees in Lithuania; however, the one I developed sheds light on the underlying conditions that shape critical features of the Lithuanian cultural model of intolerance.

This article will start with a brief explanation of the cultural model theory, followed by a concise literature review on immigration and the concept of integration, and a subsequent discussion about methods of analysis and types of collected data in the methodology section. The last section summarises the results from gathered data and introduces the concept of the precariat (Standing 2012; 2014).

### **Literature review and issues of the concept of integration**

To begin with, I will clarify the refugee definition within this text and will shortly present the Lithuanian context. This paper defines refugees as persons who hold asylum status in a host country, in this case – Lithuania. Lithuania opened its borders to refugees in 1997, but between 1997–2015, it has received a little more than 200 asylum seekers who were granted refugee status (MIPAS, 2017) and has never become a major destination country (EWSI 2019). According to Lindberg and Borrelli (2021), Lithuania is among the least popular destinations for asylum-seekers arriving in Europe. In 2015, Lithuania received 291 asylum applications (EMN Lithuania 2018). Only a few Lithuanians ever come into direct contact with refugees; however, the public shares common cultural models or political narratives not necessarily constructed or implied by the media.

Vermeulen and Penninx (2000, 263) asserted that integration is a multi-dimensional concept with strongly related structural and cultural dimensions. The social integration approach is one of the main processes used by the host country to integrate refugees or immigrants (Bornschiefer and Trezzini 1997). Robila (2018) emphasised multiple factors that contribute to successfully integrating refugees in the host nation. Her “smooth” (2018, 10) integration formulation includes their experiences, physical and mental health, and social support factors. Robila argues that, in general, there is a lack of understanding of the cultural diversity and the range of experiences refugees bring in. She mentioned the key resilience characteristics: personal agency, beliefs that life has meaning, goal direction, a sense of purpose, and motivation.

A problem with this notion of integration is that it is all one-sided – the immigrants are expected to adapt to the local social and cultural system. Thus, as Rytter (2019) defined, the concept of integration reflects and promotes an asymmetrical relationship between majorities and minorities. Further, he mentioned that integration often invokes the idea of society as a whole, where someone (refugees) needs to be integrated into something (the Lithuanian society).

This research focuses on revealing how members of the public in the host countries create obstacles not just to immigration and integration but to the act of tolerance and being sympathetic to the marginal status of refugees. Thus, the question arises whether there are particular features in the Lithuanian ethos (or character). I will argue against the tendency to characterise intolerance as part of a people's cultural configuration reflecting racism or extreme nationalism. Instead, I will show that intolerance is, in part, an outcome of a widespread feeling of socio-economic and cultural insecurity.

## Methods

One year of fieldwork and participant observation has been conducted for this research (before the war in the Ukraine and the resulting Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022). During this research, a number of other methods were used: 60 informal conversations with locals and refugees, 33 online surveys, 40 interviews with locals and 20 interviews with refugees and immigrants, two freelists with a total of 79 participants, and a media content analysis in which I reviewed 12 national media articles. This article presents data elicited using the freelist method. This emic method is simple to use, where people are asked to “list all the things they associate with X.” Each informant should give you a list of at least five or more terms. Dengah II et al. (2021) describe freelisting as follows:

*Freelists allow social scientists to uncover the components that contribute to an individual and collective understanding of a given cultural domain. Once replicated, with more informants and data, we can begin to see a cultural domain take shapes – some items are recurrent and frequently cited, while others are more idiosyncratic, uncommon, and thus personal rather than cultural. By looking for patterns across multiple informants, we can ascertain how members of a cultural group understand a specific domain. (2021, 15–16)*

According to Dengah II et al. (2021) and Handwerker et al. (1997), a sample of 30 respondents should be adequate to obtain culturally reliable responses to a freelist question on a specific domain. The first freelist (N = 33) question was to list “what and why you think other people do not like about refugees and their situation?” Results are presented in Table 1 below. A second freelist (N = 46) was somewhat similarly phrased but focused on concerns (which could also be positive concerns); it asked informants to “list all the concerns Lithuanians have for refugees immigrating to Lithuania” (see Table 2). Interviews and participant observation data are also used to interpret the implications of the freelist results.

All participants were born in Lithuania. Different informants were recruited for each sample, so there was no overlap. The median age of participants for the first freelist was 31 years with an age range between 17–45, while for the second, the median age was 54.5 with an age range between 27–82. Women constituted 70 % of the two samples and men 30 %. All research instructions were in Lithuanian and translated for publication by the author.

### Freelist results and analysis: depiction of refugees

Table 1 presents the frequencies and saliency indices of the top terms listed for “what do Lithuanians dislike about refugees?” The reason was to minimise answering in politically correct terms if the question concerned their own opinions. It also allowed the portrayal of the collective rather than individual perception. The main term mentioned was *fear* of others (here, others refers explicitly to refugees), followed by *comes for social and monetary benefits*, *negative media news* and *terrorism/criminality*. Concepts of racism and nationalism appeared at the bottom of the list, only mentioned once each. More than half the respondents listed that other people do not like refugees because they are afraid of different cultures, different people, Muslims, and others.

**Table 1** Total frequencies for the top terms (please list what and why you think other people do not like about refugees and their situation)

Cited Items	Frequency of Mention	Relative frequency of Mention	Smith Index
Afraid (fear) of different culture, people, unknown, muslims, others	19	0.576	0.5758
Comes for social, money benefit	9	0.273	0.1591
Negative media (construct the negative opinion)	9	0.273	0.1768
Terrorism, criminals, dangerous, aggressive – feeling unsafe	8	0.242	0.1591
Personal characteristics (unpatient, lazyness, unreliable, emtionality)	3	0.091	0.0808
They take the jobs	3	0.091	0.0758
Islamophobia	2	0.061	0.0455
Negative politicians (construct the negative opinion)	2	0.061	0.0455
Stereotypes	1	0.030	0.0303
Nationalism	1	0.030	0.0303
Racism	1	0.030	0.0152

*Note:* Table created by the author with the own data set from the unpublished manuscript “Thinking behind the numbers: A test case for identifying and understanding factors of national cultural resistance that hinder integration of refugees” (2018–2019, Center for Social Anthropology, Vytautas Magnus University).

Some assumptions can be drawn that the high frequency of the answer *fear of others* implies a kind of nationalistic defence mechanism concerned with how Lithuanian culture may be viewed as under attack by foreigners. This interpretation appears to be validated by a wave of extreme anti-immigrant protests throughout Lithuania in the last few years. These occur across the country but are intentionally located where refugees reside when they first enter the country. Another presumption rose from the freelist and interview materials that Lithuanians identify refugees by external features: skin colour, clothes, and language.

The results of the second freelist (Table 2) are similar to the first one but present rational rather than emotional terms. As in the first freelist, the second freelist also listed *fear of others* as the primary concern. After that, there were some significant differences. *Job loss and unemployment* were significantly more prominent responses than in the first freelist. People are also worried about the crimes, and they view refugees with suspicion and ambivalence as refugees are thought to be reluctant to adapt to Lithuanian society. Another interesting choice with a high frequency was *disrespect*, which is, in fact, a fear of losing Lithuanian culture, language, culture, religion, and identity.

**Table 2** Total frequencies for the top terms (please list all the concerns Lithuanians have for refugees immigrating to Lithuania)

Cited Items	Frequency of Mention	Relative frequency of Mention	Smith Index
Fear of others	14	0.311	0.2894
Crime	9	0.200	0.1677
Integration	9	0.200	0.1370
Job loss, unemployment	8	0.178	0.1354
Reluctant to adapt	8	0.178	0.1312
Cheap labour	7	0.156	0.0550
Disrespect to LT	7	0.156	0.0934
Security	6	0.133	0.0833
Social benefits	5	0.111	0.0722
Terrorism	4	0.089	0.0722
Fear of Islam, agitation	4	0.089	0.0722
Negative opinion, rumours	4	0.089	0.0444
Resistance to Muslims	4	0.089	0.0722

*Note:* Table created by the author with the own data set from the unpublished manuscript "Thinking behind the numbers: A test case for identifying and understanding factors of national cultural resistance that hinder integration of refugees" (2018–2019, Center for Social Anthropology, Vytautas Magnus University).

Thus, the high frequency of answers regarding crime and integration was the leading theme of the second freelist. Answers uncovered that people think rather rationally than emotionally, and their concerns are related to the integrational process, including the language barrier, educational differences, accommodation, their ability to adapt to a working environment, etc.

Material benefits combined with terms referring to a potential reduction of material benefits for Lithuanians were also a prominent theme of the second freelist with a quite high frequency of such answers. Possibly, Lithuanians feel that they are the victims of social injustice because of their inadequate salaries, low socio-economic unemployment support, and fear that emigrants will take their or their children's future jobs. Social service benefits for *pen-sininkai* (the retired) and the unemployed are too insufficient to provide anything but minimal subsistence. Some typical comments from the interviews were: "The elite force us to feed refugees when we are starving;" "refugees never worked and will not work in Lithuania;" "their social benefits will be higher than our minimal salary;" "refugees are being shoved to us, and then we have to support them financially."



Locals perceive refugees as benefitting from unfairly given privileges by the government. Interview and freelist data indicate that intolerance for refugees partially is a product of their sense of belonging to what Standing (2012; 2014) refers to as the *precariat*. Standing explicitly considers the *precariat* a “dangerous class” because it rejects normative democratic political ideology and practices. He defined the *precariat* as consisting of three main qualities: insecure jobs with no occupational identity; their educational levels are higher than the labour they are expected to fulfil, and that leads to the status of intense frustration (2012, 10); they rely on wages and insufficient pensions, paid holidays, and other external benefits, their relation with the state is volatile because the state continues to reduce infrastructural and general benefits to communities and groups suffering unemployment. It feeds into their feelings of rage, nostalgia for a better past, and a strongly felt sense of precariousness in their lives and families.

As Standing (2012) depicts, the *precariat* is portrayed as a cultural model or an outlook on the self and society that emerges and is shaped mainly by the material instabilities of contemporary life. I do not fully agree with a theoretical model of Standing because it remains vague though vivid. However, it captures the felt anger, even rage expressed by many Lithuanians about their lives and the immigration of refugees. Another theoretical perspective that fits the data is Foster’s concept of the “Image of the Limited Good” lens based on a zero-sum distribution of finite resources – “the more party x receives, the less I receive” (1965, 296). Both theories pose a material basis for the emergence of psychological dispositions which pit the self against some “feared” others. Foster provides the generative concept of refugees taking from the pool of finite resources that would otherwise go to Lithuanians, and Standing offers a view of a modern world where individuals have uncertain job situations and lack financial or social security due to the failings of the state and modern political-economic systems that reduce their ability to find suitable stable work. Consequently, many post-truth characteristics can be attributed to refugees.

The contribution of this study is that, rather than looking at Lithuanian’s negative perceptions of refugees being a product of inherent psychological dispositions, they can be seen stemming from the tenuousness felt in their lives. Perhaps one counter-intuitive means to reduce intolerance is to lessen the precariousness of middle and lower class lives. Another instrument could be to emphasise how refugees can work in Lithuanian businesses or farms to improve the well-being of both groups.

## Conclusions

Many studies have shown that media shapes people’s beliefs, values, and behaviours (Dubow, Huesmann, and Greenwood 2007). However, the views of Lithuanian citizens, who rarely come into direct contact with refugees, are not simply a reflection or passive mirroring of the media or government.

They individually craft their own schema or script similar thoughts about refugees and create a shared image and response to the immigration. Thus, Lithuanians are not just passive receivers of media input but active agents viewing refugees as a threat to their well-be-

ing. Therefore, they adopt media narratives that characterise refugees as folk devils (Cohen 1972) that will negatively impact Lithuanian culture and threaten lives. However, while this may be interpreted as the media causing Lithuanians to hold intolerant views of refugees, my brief analysis points to another interpretation, one where Lithuania's insecurities lead them to have negative feelings towards perceived threats to their well-being, and therefore they use media-constructed narratives to justify their intolerance. Underlying this ready acceptance of negative profiles is the failure of the country to provide Lithuanians with reasonable wages, secure employment, and minimal social services. However, it is important not to see Lithuanians who have negative attitudes towards refugees not as automatons following negative caricatures of refugees without thinking, but rather to understand their existential situation as unstable and under pressure.

Refugees' situation and public resistance are considered negative not because of ethnicity but influenced by life's material and economic conditions. Therefore, because the media and all the news are primarily contradictory, it has influenced and formulated Lithuanians' view of refugees negatively, relating them with terrorism, violence, or hate. Furthermore, an opinion prevails that unfamiliar people who happened to be the *others* possibly will take away material things like jobs, cultural heritage and symbols that Lithuanians perceive as part of their national identity. Thus, refugees are perceived to represent an economic, cultural, criminal, and psychological threat to the citizens of Lithuania. Consequently, the hindrance is being created due to a widespread feeling of socio-economic and cultural insecurity.

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