

Complexities of Anti-Refugee Sentiment: the importance of historical and societal explanations

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Anti-refugee sentiment is underpinned by complex societal and historical factors, along with media influence and resources. Importantly, it is not necessarily a result of host country's negative experiences with refugees. Rather, it can be a perceived threat with roots in history, perceptions of nationhood and current ethnic relations. Therefore, whilst anti-refugee sentiment might be present across Europe, each country will experience it differently, based on their own unique mix of factors influenced by the past and the present alike.

In this qualitative study that consisted of ten in-depth interviews, I focused on Latvia, a country in the European Union that has accepted 374 refugees- a relatively small number. Despite refugees' small presence in the country, anti-refugee sentiment has been evident in the media, political rhetoric and public protests. This makes it crucial to explore why accepting so few refugees provoked such a powerful response.

To explore the possible causes, I focused on the influence of Latvia's history of occupation by the Soviet Union and interviewed two groups- ethnic Latvians and Russian-speaking minorities that constitute 34 per cent of the population. The research unveiled a set of two very different interpretations of history, nationhood and citizenship, which underpinned attitudes towards refugees. Both groups cited different reasons for their apprehension and whilst ethnic Latvians were concerned with societal integration and knowledge of Latvian language and history, Russian speakers emphasised refugees' economic integration. Consequently, the study illustrated how the historically rooted views of each group shape their responses to the arising political and social challenges.