

Contact, threat, and distance: An analysis of Lithuanians' attitudes toward African immigrants

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Abstract

This study examines Lithuanians' social distance towards African immigrants, focusing on perceived threat levels, frequency of contact, and attitudes towards integration. The data were collected through a cross-sectional online survey between September 13, 2024, and March 8, 2025. After excluding participants who failed the attention check, analyses were conducted on 284 individuals; models using integration support as an independent variable were tested on 177 participants. Perceived threat was measured across economic, cultural, security, and social adaptation dimensions, while social distance was measured using seven different social proximity thresholds. The scales demonstrated adequate to high internal consistency ($\alpha = .795-.948$). The findings indicated a strong positive correlation between social distance and general threat ($r = .729, p < .001$). The highest social distance was observed in the family and marriage domain ($M = 3.208$), while the lowest was in the close friendship domain ($M = 2.461$). Bootstrap-based mediation analyses revealed that more frequent contact is associated with lower social distance via lower general threat ($ab = -0.079, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.139, -0.014]$). Similarly, participants who believed that African immigrants should be better integrated into Lithuanian society exhibited significantly lower social distance, mediated through general threat ($ab = -0.683, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.951, -0.419]$) and economic, cultural, and especially security threats ($ab = -0.657, 95\%$

CI [-0.910, -0.403]). Consequently, the study demonstrates that social distance is shaped less by the mere presence of migrants, but rather by how this presence is interpreted within the frameworks of threat and integration. However, due to the cross-sectional design, these findings should be interpreted as correlational patterns and theoretically informed mediation effects rather than causal evidence.

Keywords: African migrants, Lithuania, threat perception, social distance, contact, integration, mediation analysis.

Introduction

Modern societies do not experience migration merely as population movement; rather, it is also perceived as a matter of identity, security, and belonging. Thus, it is not only who arrives in a country that matters, but also the symbolic meanings attached to their arrival. In 2024, approximately one in ten people living in the European Union were not citizens of their country of residence. As of January 1, 2025, the number of foreigners residing in Lithuania reached 217, 290. Of these, 106, 400 held temporary residence permits based on employment while approximately 9,000 resided in the country for educational purposes. Data from Eurostat and the Migration Department reveal that migration is no longer a marginal aspect of Lithuanian public life, but rather a daily issue that can be seen in the labour market as well as university campuses (Eurostat, 2025; Migration Department under the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania, 2025).

Nevertheless, Lithuania's migration experience does not fully align with the classical migration societies of Western Europe. In the Baltic context, the image of the "migrant" is shaped not only by contemporary development but also by historical process. The political legacy of internal migration from the Soviet period, the wave of displacement triggered by the war in Ukraine after 2022, and the increasing visibility of labour migration in recent years all contribute to this perception. Czymara et al. (2025) compare Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and find that perceptions of migrants are still influenced by historical-political legacies, although positive perceptions of migrants are more evident in Lithuania than in the other Baltic countries. The authors emphasize that this does not mean that Lithuanian society is uniformly open to migration; rather, they argue that public attitudes reflect a layered "mental map" oscillating between acceptance and suspicion, necessity and anxiety, as well as

proximity and distance (Czymara et al., 2025).

The Integrated Threat approach is probably one of the best theoretical frameworks for understanding this mental map. Stephan et al. (1998, 1999) demonstrated that negative attitudes towards immigrants can be attributed to realistic threats (jobs, resources, well-being, security), symbolic threats (values, norms, lifestyle), anxiety, and negative stereotypes. Meta-analytic reviews further support this perspective, showing that different types of perceived threat are consistently associated with negative attitudes towards outgroups (Riek et al., 2006). In the context of immigration policy, perceived threat is shaped not only by numerical indicators but also by discourse and framing. The language is also important; expressions such as "they're taking our jobs," "they're breaking the rules," and "they're undermining social harmony" can be as influential as material conditions in shaping public attitudes.

One of the most visible forms that the perception of threat manifests in social behavior is through social distance. The measurement logic proposed by Bogardus nearly a century ago not only tests people's abstract opinions about a group, but also the degree of closeness they are willing to share with that group: as neighbors, coworkers,

friends, family members (through kinship or marriage), within hierarchical relations, or in a shared social environment. For this reason, social distance can be understood as a subtle yet tangible expression of prejudice; it reveals not whether individuals accept the "other" in principle, but the extent to which they are willing to include them in everyday social life (Bogardus, 1925). Indeed, current literature on prejudice continues to treat social distance as one of the most explanatory indicators of attitudes towards outgroups (Uygur et al., 2024).

However, the link between social distance and threat is neither one-sided nor deterministic. Contact theory has long argued that interaction between different groups can reduce prejudice under appropriate conditions. A meta-analysis conducted by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) across 713 independent samples demonstrated that intergroup contact generally reduces prejudice. In the European context, McLaren (2003) demonstrated that friendships formed with minority members reduce the desire to exclude immigrants from the country even when the perception of threat is controlled for; furthermore, contact indirectly mediates the effect of environmental conditions by reducing the perception of threat. De Coninck et al. (2021), however, found that in attitudes towards refugees, not only the frequency but also the quality of contact is decisive; the

valence of contact is often a stronger explanatory factor than mere frequency. In short, contact is not merely a count of encounters but a form of relationship.

This perspective is also evident in recent Turkish literature. Eser and Uygur (2019) examined attitudes towards Syrian migrants by considering threat and social distance together; Uygur et al. (2024) demonstrated that multiculturalism negatively predicts social distance towards Syrian refugees, and that high social distance is associated with lower and less meaningful contact as well as a higher perception of out-group threat. However, in the Baltic context, public perceptions are often shaped through the lenses of Ukrainian asylum seekers, post-Soviet mobility, or the general "migrant" figure. Precisely for this reason, a separate examination of attitudes towards African migrants in the Lithuanian context appears necessary from both theoretical and empirical perspectives (Czymara et al., 2025; Eser & Uygur, 2019; Uygur et al., 2024).

This article addresses Lithuanians' attitudes towards African migrants precisely at this critical juncture. The study examines the perception of threat under headings such as economic competition, cultural erosion, security risk, and disruption of social cohesion; it considers social distance through daily proximity thresholds such as

neighborliness, working together, close friendship, marriage into the family, membership in the same social or religious group, managerial relationships, and buying or renting housing. It also examines the role of the frequency of contact with African immigrants and the belief that they need to be better integrated into Lithuanian society within this network of relationships. Thus, the article aims to shift the migration debate away from abstract declarations of principle and into the quieter yet more decisive realm of everyday life: the extent to which individuals are willing to make space not for those like themselves, but for those perceived as "foreign."

Literature review

The set of variables established in this study is not arbitrary. The survey measures the perception of threat across dimensions of economic competition, cultural erosion, security concerns, and the breakdown of social cohesion; it measures social distance, meanwhile, along the thresholds of everyday closeness such as neighborliness, working together, close friendship, marriage into the family, membership in the same social or religious group, managerial relationships, and shared housing. In addition, the frequency of contact with African immigrants and opinions regarding their better integration into Lithuanian society are included as separate variables.

Consequently, this section does not aim to provide an abstract discussion of migration; rather, it establishes the theoretical foundation for the relationships among these variables.

Key trends explaining attitudes towards migrants

Public attitudes towards migrants are not the product of a simple emotion or a single calculation of self-interest.

Comparative literature has long shown that anti-migrant sentiment is shaped less by an individual's personal economic situation than by collective imaginaries concerning the nation as a whole. People often answer the question "What will happen to the country?" before asking "What will happen to my pocket?" For this reason, the figure of the migrant is constructed in the political and cultural imagination before it is encountered in everyday life. Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014) demonstrate that attitudes towards immigrants are often explained by sociotropic assessments of economic and cultural consequences at the national level; Ceobanu and Escandell (2010), meanwhile, show that cross-national studies must consider threat, identity, institutional context, and contact

experiences together. Similarly, Esses's (2021) confirms this line of thought, arguing that prejudice against immigrants is not merely an opinion but a form of social regulation that can extend to discrimination.

What is crucial here is that anti-immigrant sentiment depends not only on "actual circumstances" but also on how those circumstances are interpreted. The same demographic profile can elicit different reactions in different countries; because population movements are not read as bare facts, but through the lens of history, media, politics, and collective memory. A person who fills a labour shortage in one society can become a foreigner who disrupts the cultural order in another discourse. Therefore, the central issue in migration research is not merely the presence of the migrant, but the meaning attributed to them.

Perception of threat and social distance

One of the most widely used frameworks for explaining negative attitudes towards migrants is the integrated threat theory. Stephan et al. (1998, 2000) demonstrated that negative evaluations of out-groups are largely constructed around realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup

anxiety, and negative stereotypes. This theoretical framework has since been supported by meta-analytic studies; Riek et al. (2006) demonstrated that the relationship between threat and negative attitudes towards out-groups is consistently replicated across different samples and contexts. In short, threat is not merely a fear of material loss; it also encompasses concerns that values will erode, public order will be disrupted, security will be compromised, and the sense of "in-group" solidarity will weaken.

This theoretical framework is in line with the dimensions measured in the dataset of this study. Economic threat refers to anxiety or fears related to employment, wages, social assistance, and the distribution of resources. Cultural threat refers to anxiety or fears related to values, traditions and ways of life, encompassing all concerns that are not strictly economic. Security threat refers to anxiety or fears related to crime, violence, and physical insecurity. Social cohesion threat refers to anxiety or fears related to legal and normative issues, social division and public disorder. The European literature clearly shows the

empirical grounding of these distinctions. According to McLaren (2003), the perception of threat is a strong determinant of preferences for the exclusion of immigrants. Schneider (2008) argued that the size of the out-group matters only through perceptions of ethnic threat. In other words, the problem is not with the numbers themselves, but rather how they are cognitively processed.

Social distance is the first and most obvious manifestation of threat at the behavioural level. Bogardus classic measurement logic captures prejudice not only at the level of discourse but also through the thresholds of social closeness considered acceptable. Do we accept an immigrant as a neighbour, co-worker, or even a son or daughter-in-law? These questions differ in the extent to which they reflect varying degrees of relational proximity. Since Bogardus, social distance has been interpreted as one of the most concrete and everyday indicators of attitudes towards out-groups. The work of Jasińska-Kania (2009) has shown that social distance is closely tied to the limits of national identity, while social acceptance is a layered phenomenon,

particularly when it comes to immigrants and minorities. More specifically, a distinction can be made between layers of social acceptance that are based on attitudes towards immigrants, ethnic minorities and a particular social group, which in this case is social immigrants. Prejudice sometimes makes itself known not with loud words but with how wide the door is left open.

The transformative role of contact

The second major strand, which engages with rather than opposes, threat theory, is contact theory. According to meta-analysis by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), intergroup contact usually reduces prejudice. Dovidio et al. (2011) further expand the concept of contact, arguing that not only direct contact but also indirect, extended, and imagined forms of contact should be considered in research. Furthermore, it states how not only direct contact but also indirect, extended and imagined contact must be considered in research. Moreover, they highlight the capacity of contact to reshape group norms and increase perceived intergroup closeness. In Europe, McLaren's (2003) findings are particularly striking: friendships with immigrants help reduce

exclusionary attitudes and continue to have an effect even when the perceived threat diminishes. This indicates that contact not only offers "information" but also challenges the perception of the "stranger" as distant and anonymous.

However, contact is not always the automatic precursor of positive consequences; the tone of contact is equally as important as actual contact. De Coninck et al. (2021), in their study of the European refugee context, examine both the frequency and valence of direct contact, showing that positive contact is associated with lower perceptions of realistic and symbolic threat, as well as more favourable attitudes. They showed that positive contact leads people to perceive realistic and symbolic threats as lower and to have more positive attitudes. In conclusion, contact should be understood not merely as an encounter, but as a qualitatively experienced social interaction. Accordingly, this study proposes that greater contact frequency may reduce social distance by lowering perceived threat, a proposition that is strongly supported by existing empirical research.

The idea of integration and public consent

As a result of migration debates, integration has often been framed in terms of a false dichotomy between full assimilation and overly optimistic expectations of harmonious coexistence. Nevertheless, the literature indicates that integration is best understood as an institutional balance between public order and pluralism. In an experiment conducted in the United Kingdom, Neureiter (2022) shows that entry frameworks combined with integration measures such as language and citizenship education can increase acceptance, impacting refugees positively. This indicates that integration is not only a duty to which migrants are expected to adapt but also a symbolic and institutional framework that shapes host-society threat perceptions.

Kende et al. (2022) show that inclusive integration policies attenuate the connection between high migrant presence and anti-migrant prejudice. To put it differently, immigrants being visible does not, on its own, generate negative attitudes; rather, it is the legal and social regime within which this

visibility is interpreted that is decisive. The variable "African immigrants should be better integrated" used in this essay is not, in a technical sense, a policy indicator. However, it does indicate whether a person expresses normative support for integration. Theoretically, this variable reflects an integrationist orientation, whereby individuals who view integration as legitimate and necessary are more likely to perceive migrants not as sources of disruption but as potential participants in social coexistence. It is therefore expected that support for integration will be associated with lower perceived threat and reduced social distance.

The Baltic context, racialization, and the figure of the African migrant

Considering attitudes towards African migrants means not treating the category 'migrant' as a neutral label. In a European context, the figure of the African migrant is read not merely as foreign but also as the racialized history of blackness. The 2023 official report by the FRA shows that the experience of people of African descent is widespread and entrenched in Europe. A comparative field experiment in Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain

(2023) by Polavieja et al. reveals that appearance-based racial discrimination operates "explicitly" in hiring processes. By comparison, Potârca and Mills (2015) employed the more private domain of online dating preferences to illustrate that the preference for a partner of the same race and racial hierarchies remain persistent in European countries. Therefore, the social distance towards African migrants is determined not only by border policies but also by social codes inscribed on skin color.

The Eastern European and Baltic dimension is important too. According to Kalmar (2023), the issue of race and racialization in the eastern part of the European Union is often neglected or treated as secondary by the region itself. Moreover, this region is both subject to racialisation from outside and actively involved in producing new racial boundaries. Given all these factors, perceptions of African migrants in Lithuania are informed not only by broader anti-migrant attitudes but also by the post-socialist regimes of belonging and intra-European hierarchies.

Recent findings regarding the Baltic states confirm this view. The Soviet past,

past migration patterns and political legacies shape migrants' perceptions in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, according to Czymara et al. (2025). The research by Leykin and Gorodzeisky (2025), however, demonstrates a significant disconnection between the 'migrant' categories used by official institutions and the 'migrant' image circulating among ordinary people, suggesting that popular imagination can be more enduring than official classification. Bell et al. (2021), while examining the evolution of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim attitudes across Europe over time, demonstrate that these attitudes are not static but are sensitive to historical and political events. Therefore, examining attitudes towards African migrants in Lithuania requires accounting not only for current patterns of contact but also for symbolic boundaries carried over from the past.

Recent literature and the theoretical framework of this study

Studies in the Turkish literature that address the relationship between threat, contact, and social distance together also provide a useful comparative ground for this research. Eser and Uygur (2019) examined attitudes towards Syrian

migrants through the lens of integrated threat and social distance theories; Uygur et al. (2024), meanwhile, demonstrated the connections between multiculturalism, social distance, out-group threat, and the quality of contact. Although both studies pertain to a context geographically distinct from Lithuania, they are significant in that they demonstrate the general pattern, where perceived threat increases social distance while contact can reduce it, is not unique to a single country. The value of these studies lies not in the direct transferability of their results, but in their ability to reveal the repetitive nature of the network of relationships.

When this entire body of literature is considered together, the theoretical expectations of this study become clear. First, it is expected that both the general level of perceived threat and each of the economic, cultural, security, and social integration dimensions will increase social distance. Second, it is expected that more frequent contact with African immigrants will reduce perceived threat and thereby decrease social distance. Third, individuals who believe that African immigrants should be better

integrated into Lithuanian society are expected to perceive immigrants as less threatening and to exhibit lower social distance towards them. Therefore, threat is considered a mediating mechanism in both the relationship between contact and social distance and the relationship between pro-integration attitudes and social distance. The survey design of the study is, in fact, built precisely on this theoretical logic.

Method

Research design and data collection process

This study was designed as a web-based, cross-sectional, quantitative survey examining the relationship between Lithuanians' perceptions of threats posed by African immigrants and their levels of social distance. The Qualtrics platform was used to develop the questionnaire. The participants were informed, on the first page, of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality policy, their right to skip any question they wish, and their right to withdraw at any time. The information text was protected by electronic consent. To be eligible to participate, individuals had to meet three basic criteria: they had

to be at least 18 years old, Lithuanian citizens and residents of Lithuania. The survey was administered in Lithuanian and was estimated to take approximately seven minutes to complete, as stated in the information sheet. Following the recommended standards for online survey research transparency reporting, the sampling, data cleaning, and data analysis steps were clearly reported (American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), 2023; Eysenbach, 2004).

The data collection process was conducted between September 13, 2024, and March 8, 2025. The raw dataset contains 288 completed responses. An attention control item placed between scale blocks explicitly asked participants to select the "I disagree" option. Four participants who did not respond to this item as expected were excluded from the dataset, reducing the main analysis sample to 284 participants. The mean age of the participants was 24.96 (SD = 9.11; min = 18, max = 63). The sample consists of 55.3% women (n = 157), 40.8% men (n = 116), 1.8% nonbinary individuals (n = 5), 0.4% other (n = 1), and 1.8% who did not wish to answer (n = 5). In terms

of educational background, high school graduates (n = 131, 46.1%) and college graduates (n = 80, 28.2%) are the most common; in terms of employment status, students (n = 118, 41.5%) and full-time workers (n = 95, 33.5%) were the most prevalent. A large number of participants (72.9%) reported having contact with African migrants "rarely" or "never." Responses to the question "African migrants should be better integrated into Lithuanian society" were "yes" for 140 people (49.3%), "no" for 37 people (13.0%), and "I don't know" for 107 people (37.7%). Therefore, models using the integration perspective as an independent variable were estimated based on 177 participants. Since the sample is a non-probability, voluntary online sample, the findings should be interpreted not as representative but as a test of theoretical relationships (AAPOR, 2023).

Measurement instruments

The survey included variables measuring threat perception, social distance, and contextual contact. Threat items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree." Social distance items

were measured on a scale from 1 = "completely ready" to 5 = "not at all ready." Thus, a high score on the threat scales indicates a higher perception of threat, while a high score on the social distance scale indicates greater social distance. Scale scores were calculated using item averages rather than total scores; this choice was made to ensure that all composite variables remained on the original 1–5 metric.

Threat perception was examined across four subdimensions. Economic threat consists of 4 items related to the impact of African migrants on job opportunities, social services, wages, and limited resources. Cultural threat includes 4 items centered on cultural values, lifestyle, integration into society, and conflict with traditional norms. Security threat consists of 4 items measuring perceptions of crime, insecurity, violence/unrest, and threats to national security. Social cohesion threat consists of 4 items regarding the impact of African immigrants on societal contributions, respect for laws and norms, intergroup division, and social harmony. Additionally, these 16 core items were combined to calculate a

general threat composite score. The item serving as a control function, "please check the 'I disagree' option", was not included in the scale scoring. Social distance was calculated based on seven items measuring willingness to engage in neighborly relations, working together, close friendships, marriage within the family, membership in the same religious or social group, managerial relationships, and the desire to buy or rent housing to African immigrants.

The survey also includes three single-item contextual variables: living in a community with a high concentration of African immigrants, frequency of contact with African immigrants, and the belief that they need to be better integrated into Lithuanian society. The original coding of contact frequency had a range from 1, signifying "every day" to 6, denoting "never". In the analysis, this variable was reversed. A higher score implies more contact. Responses to the integration perception variable, which had the options of "yes," "no," and "I don't know" were collected; in the mediation models, this variable was transformed to binary "yes = 1" and "no = 0" while "I don't know" responses were

deleted from relevant models. Variables such as age, gender, education, employment status, monthly income, and the density of African immigrants in the living environment were used to describe the sample but were not included as covariates in the primary mediation models. Although the social integration threat subscale was calculated, it was not included in the main set of mediation models; the reason for this is that the items in this subscale are conceptually closer to judgments regarding public coexistence and social closeness, and the desire to prevent unnecessary blurring of boundaries with the social distance variable.

Data preparation and analysis strategy

The sole exclusion criterion applied during the data cleaning process was failure to complete the attention control task. Apart from this, there were no item-level missing values in the cleaned dataset. The internal consistency of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951). However, the fact that the data were collected from a single source, via self-report, and at a single point in time does not entirely eliminate the possibility of

common-method bias. Nevertheless, procedural remedies such as emphasizing voluntariness and confidentiality, presenting the items on threat and social distance in separate blocks, using different response cues, and adding an explicit attention item to the questionnaire were implemented to mitigate this risk (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Statistical analyses were conducted in a Python 3.13 environment. The analysis procedure consists of four stages. In the first stage, the demographic distributions and basic descriptive statistics of the sample were calculated. In the second stage, the reliability coefficients of the scales were examined. In the third stage, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the linear relationships between variables theoretically considered to be related. In the final stage, simple mediation analyses based on regression were conducted. In assessing indirect effects, 5,000 bootstrap resampling and a 95% confidence interval were used; the absence of zero in the confidence interval was interpreted as indicating a significant indirect effect (Hayes, 2022; Hayes & Scharkow, 2013; Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Accordingly,

five primary models were tested: (1) contact frequency → general threat → social distancing; (2) integration perspective → general threat → social distancing; (3) integration perspective → economic threat → social distancing; (4) integration perspective → cultural threat → social distancing; (5) integration perspective → security threat → social distancing. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the data, these models were treated not as causal proofs but as theoretical tests demonstrating patterns of indirect relationships among variables.

Results

The findings are presented in a sequence ranging from descriptive statistics at the scale-level descriptive statistics to correlations between variables, and finally to bootstrap-based mediation analyses. The perceived threat in the survey form was organized under economic, cultural, security and social integration headings. For social distance,

it was conceptualised through thresholds of everyday relationships such as neighbourhood relations, working together as co-workers, friendship, marriage within the family, membership in the same social or religious group, administrative relations, and house dealing. The analysis below follows the same internal logic. The reliability is reported using Cronbach's alpha, whereas the mediation results are reported using a , b , c , c' , and bootstrap confidence intervals (Cronbach, 1951; Hayes, 2022; Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

The analyses are primarily based on 284 participants who successfully completed the attention check. In models that utilize the integration perspective as an independent variable, the sample size is 177 when "don't know" responses are removed. The findings now speak in measurements, not interpretations; sometimes, numbers say more than words (the results speak very clearly).

Descriptive characteristics and reliability of the scales

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for the scales

Scale	Number of items	A	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Economic threat	4	0.810	2.834	0.895	1,000	5,000
Cultural threat	4	0.795	2,799	0.898	1,000	5,000
Security threat	4	0.899	2,742	1,050	1,000	5,000
Social/adaptation threat	4	0.866	2,819	0.932	1,000	5,000
General threat	16	0.948	2,798	0.855	1,000	5,000
Social distancing	7	0.924	2,775	1,077	1,000	5,000

Table 1 demonstrates that the scales are reliable. The various alpha coefficients ranged from 0.795 to 0.948; the scales for general threat ($\alpha = 0.948$) and social distance ($\alpha = 0.924$) especially showed very high internal consistency. The average scores ranging from 2.742 to 2.834 on a 1-5 scale show that none of the samples is clustered at either end of the acceptance or rejection pole. The attitudes are more accurately hovering around the mid-point in a reserved and cautious zone.

Among the sub-dimensions, economic threat ($M = 2.834$) and social /integration threat ($M = 2.819$) showed the highest average scores, while security threat ($M = 2.742$) displayed a low average score. The

average threat in the overall situation is 2.798, while the social distance average is 2.775. Given that both values sit just under the neutral mid-point, it is impossible to speak of a fully closed exclusion pattern for the whole sample. However, some points of tension come to light when looking at the item level. Lithuanian society." ($M = 3.127$) Among confrontation items, the highest average was from the belief that "African immigrants are not sufficiently integrated in Lithuanian society. Next comes worry about getting social services ($M = 2.993$), followed by the feeling that resources are scarce and nothing else ($M = 2.961$). It immediately explains why integration is the central theme of the study.

The item-level manifestation of social distance

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for social distance items

Item	Mean	SD	N
Accepting as a neighbor	2,785	1,321	284
Collaboration	2,577	1,249	284
Close friendship	2,461	1,253	284
Marriage to a family	3,208	1,330	284
Membership in the same religious/social group	2,775	1,315	284
Acceptance as a manager/supervisor	2,908	1,315	284
Renting/selling a home	2,711	1,314	284

Note: A higher score indicates greater social distance. The items reflect the seven social proximity thresholds in the questionnaire.

Table 2 indicates that social distance does not exert the same force in every relational environment. The item measuring willingness to accept marriage within the family showed the highest level of reluctance, with an M value of 3.208. This is the only item that exceeds the scale midpoint. The second measure is the disinclination to accept an African immigrant as a manager or supervisor (M = 2.908). Conversely, the lowest means were found in close friendship (M = 2.461) and working together (M = 2.577).

It indicates that social distance is not linear but layered in nature. While the ordinary domains of daily interaction, working together, and being friends appear relatively more open, the thresholds of kinship and hierarchy generate stiffer resistance. In other words, in this sample, "living side by side" and "forming close kinship" are not the same social threshold. Social distance intensifies particularly in the realms of intimacy and authority.

Interrelationships among variables

Table 3. Pearson correlations across scales

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Economic threat	2,834	0.895	,	,	,	,	,	,
2. Cultural Threat	2,799	0.898	0.747** *	,	,	,	,	,
3. Security threat	2,742	1,050	0.696** *	0.792** *	,	,	,	,
4. Social/adjustment threat	2,819	0.932	0.704** *	0.821** *	0.791** *	,	,	,
5. General threat	2.798	0.855	0.864** *	0.926** *	0.913** *	0.916** *	,	,
6. Frequency of contact	2.222	1.367	-0.157**	-0.066	-0.186**	-0.103	-0.144*	,
7. Social distance	2.775	1.077	0.596** *	0.667** *	0.708** *	0.660** *	0.729** *	-0.286** *

Note. N = 284. Contact frequency is reverse-coded; a higher score indicates more frequent contact. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

Table 3 clearly confirms the study's core relationships. First, the threat dimensions show strong and positive correlations among themselves ($r = 0.696\text{--}0.821$, $p < .001$). As expected, the correlations between the general threat and the sub-dimensions are even higher ($r = 0.864\text{--}0.926$, $p < .001$); since the general threat composite variable represents the common core of these sub-dimensions.

Social distance is significantly and positively related to all threat indicators. The strongest relationship was found between general threat and social distance ($r = 0.729$, $p < .001$). When examining the sub-dimensions, security threat ($r = 0.708$, $p < .001$), cultural threat ($r = 0.667$, $p < .001$), social/adaptation threat ($r = 0.660$, $p < .001$), and economic threat ($r = 0.596$, $p < .001$) all move in a meaningful direction alongside social distance. This result indicates that regardless of the form threat perception takes, it shares a common thread that fuels social distance.

The frequency of contact, however, is negatively correlated with social distance ($r = -0.286$, $p < .001$). In other words, as contact increases, social distance decreases. There is a significant and negative relationship between contact and the general threat dimension ($r = -0.144$, $p = .015$). Nonetheless, contact and the sub-dimensions of threat are relatively weakly related. The relationship between the economic threat and security threat is significant ($r = -0.157$, $p = .008$; $r = -0.186$, $p = .002$, respectively), whilst the correlations with cultural threat and social/adaptation threat are not significant ($r = -0.066$, $p = .269$; $r = -0.103$, $p = .082$, respectively). It appears that contact is not a panacea for resolving the entire spectrum of security threats. Contact appears to be selective, seemingly operating on economic competition and the image of security.

Mediation models

Five models were tested in the mediation analyses. In Model 1, the independent variable is contact frequency, the mediator is general threat, and the dependent variable is social distance. In Model 2, integration support predicts social distance through general threat. In Models 3, 4, and 5, the same independent variable is associated with social distance and through economic threat, cultural threat, and security threat, respectively. The results are presented in accordance with the reporting format established in the mediation analysis literature (Hayes, 2022; Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

Table 4. Results of the mediation models

Model	N	a	B	C	c'	Ab	95% CI	Intermed iation %	R ²	Decision
Model 1	284	-0.090*	0.885**	-0.225**	-0.145**	-0.079*	[-0.139, -0.014]	35.3%	0.565	Supported
Model 2	177	-0.057**	0.797**	-1.248**	-0.565**	-0.683**	[-0.951, -0.419]	54.7%	0.590	Supported
Model 3	177	-0.062**	0.611**	-1.248**	-0.721**	-0.527**	[-0.771, -0.298]	42.2%	0.445	Supported
Model 4	177	-0.056**	0.710**	-1.248**	-0.712**	-0.536**	[-0.797, -0.279]	42.9%	0.543	Supported
Model 5	177	-0.1027**	0.640**	-1.248**	-0.591**	-0.657**	[-0.910, -0.403]	52.6%	0.571	Supported

Note: B coefficients are raw coefficients. Model 1 = contact frequency → general threat → social distancing. Model 2 = integration support → general threat → social distancing. Model 3 = integration support → economic threat → social distancing. Model 4 = integration support → cultural threat → social distancing. Model 5 = integration support → security threat → social distancing. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.

According to Table 4, all models are supported. In the first model, more frequent contact is associated with a lower perceived general threat ($a = -0.090$, $p = .015$); the general threat, in turn, strongly increases social distance ($b = 0.885$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect is significant ($ab = -0.079$, 95% CI [-0.139, -0.014]). However, the direct effect also persists ($c' = -0.145$, $p < .001$). Therefore, this represents partial, not full, mediation. The total relationship between

contact and social distance is explained by general threat (35.3%). To put it differently, the effect of contact not only creates closeness but also weakens some sort of threat belief.

According to the models based on the integration perspective, this pattern is even more evident. In Model 2, individuals who think that African immigrants should receive better integration in Lithuania, overall have a

lower perception of threat ($a = -0.857$, $p < .001$), which in turn lowers social distance ($ab = -0.683$, 95% CI $[-0.951, -0.419]$). The mediation coefficient was 54.7%, and this model had the largest explanatory power for social distance ($R^2 = 0.590$). In the subsample giving a definitive and "yes" or "no" answer for integration, the average general threat score of those favouring integration was 2.648 and that of those opposed to it 3.505: their average social distance scores were 2.462 and 3.710, respectively. This difference is where model coefficients become something more tangible than mere statistics with social significance.

Models built using sub-dimensions of threat also support this trend. The total effect is given by -0.783 and 42.2% of this is explained by -0.527 , which is the indirect path via economic threat. The mediation rate is 42.9% with the value of -0.536 via cultural threat. However, the security threat seems to be the strongest specific mediator among the sub-dimensions: the indirect effect is -0.657 , the mediation rate is 52.6%, and the explained variance is $R^2 = 0.571$. The strength of the security dimension suggests that social distance towards African immigrants is built not just around cultural or economic issues but also around safety and public order perceptions.

A significant point which must be mentioned here is that the total effect coefficient is

constant for Models 2–5 ($c = -1.248$, $p < .001$). This means that the independent and dependent variables do not change, while only the mediator variable changes across models. The indirect effect is significant in all models, indicating how threat perception serves as a crucial mechanism in reducing social distance, leading to integration. The evidence shows that the direct effect is still significant in all models, which depicts that mediation is rather partial than total. As such, at the core of this story is threat perception, but that is not the complete story.

The findings come together to support three propositions. First, social distance is systematically increasing as threat perception gets high. Second, the effect of contact is not only direct but also indirect, operating through the reduction of perceived threat. Third, support for integration is associated with lower social distance, particularly through its effects on general and security-related threat perceptions. Thus, in this data set, what measures social distance is not just the migrant being present but the meanings attributed to that presence.

Dicussion

One of the most interesting findings of this study is that social distancing from African immigrants does not relate only to the "presence of immigrants", but rather to the perceived threat associated with such

presence. The robust correlation detected between general threat and social distance ($r = .729$) and the fact that all mediation models proved significant indicate that the integrated threat approach is also applicable in the case of Lithuania. Essentially, the issue is not so much the movement of the population but rather how people interpret this movement. Stephan et al. (1998) and Riek et al. (2006) showed that negative attitudes towards outgroups are often grounded in perceived threat, rather than fear of material loss, and we find the same pattern in this dataset. In this context, social distance is not simply an individual discomfort but also reflects implicit boundaries regarding how close the public is willing to engage with outgroups.

However, not all threat dimensions had equal influence. While economic threat appeared to be one of the highest-ranking dimensions on average, it is notable that the security threat played the most significant role among specific mediating variables. This distinction is important because, while people may worry about resource sharing, what actually limits social proximity is often concerns related to security and social order. In the European literature, Schneider (2008) demonstrated that fears related to cultural conflict and otherness can be as effective as, and in some contexts even more effective than, economic competition in anti-immigrant sentiment. Landmann et al. (2019), meanwhile, revealed

that security, social conflict, and symbolic differences act in tandem to reinforce negative attitudes towards refugees. Our findings suggest that, in addition to this general trend, the figure of the African migrant is particularly associated with the security threat in the Lithuanian sample. This is more likely to be related to the associations of crime, disorder, and risk attributed to Black migrants in Europe rather than to directly experienced conflicts. FRA reports and recruitment experiments across Europe demonstrate that individuals of African descent are subjected to systematic racialization in public and institutional spheres; Kalmar's (2023) discussion on Eastern Europe also highlights that this racialization is not absent in post-socialist regions, but often manifest in indirect form (De Coninck, 2022; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2023; Kalmar, 2023; Polavieja et al., 2023; Schneider, 2008).

The distribution of social distance items further illustrates this pattern. The highest average score was observed in the item regarding marriage within the family, while the second-highest average was found in the item regarding accepting an African migrant as a manager or supervisor. In contrast, items associated with teamwork and close friendship received lower score. The out-group is first tolerated in everyday functional domains and finally accepted in domains of

intimacy and authority (Bogardus, 1925; Jasińska-Kania, 2009). What we see here is thus not simply a 'yes' or a 'no'; it is a multi-layered, selective and hierarchical pattern of acceptance. Relationships such as neighbourship and coworking are generally perceived as acceptable in principle, whereas kinship and authority represent boundaries where acceptance becomes more restricted. This indicates that the distance towards African immigrants is associated with issues of status, hierarchy, and descent as much as cultural differences. Experiences of discrimination in Europe also indicate that these boundaries become more pronounced, particularly in the areas of hiring, housing, and institutional gatekeeping. In the survey form, these thresholds were measured directly through marriage, management, neighborly relation, and work relationships.

Findings regarding the contact variable both confirm and moderately support the core insight of contact theory. More frequent contact is associated with lower general threat and lower social distance. However, this relationship operates through partial mediation rather than a full one. General threat explains 35.3% of the total relationship between contact and social distance. This result is consistent with the meta-analytic findings of Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), McLaren's (2003) European data, and the findings of De Coninck et al. (2021) in a refugee context. However, it is

not surprising that the effect of contact remains limited here. This is because, in this study, contact was measured by its frequency rather than its quality. Yet the same literature indicates that whether contact is experienced as positive or negative is just as decisive as its frequency. Uygur et al. (2024) also demonstrated that higher social distance is associated with less frequent and less meaningful contact. Therefore, this study does not imply that contact is ineffective, but rather that contact can be transformative only under certain conditions.

There is one detail here that should not be overlooked: 72.9% of the sample reported that they had "rarely" or "never" been in contact with African migrants. In this context, the figure of the migrant becomes less a person encountered in person and more an image constructed from a distance. Where encounters are rare, narrative takes precedence over experience; where neighborly ties are weak, news, rumors, and indirect representations gain greater influence. Esses et al. (2013) demonstrated that feelings of uncertainty and threat can facilitate the dehumanization of migrants through media representations; Wojcieszak and Azrout (2016), meanwhile, showed that indirect and media-mediated contact can also influence attitudes towards outgroups. Viewed within this framework, it can be argued that a significant portion of the image of African migrants in Lithuania is

derived not from direct experience but from secondary representations and mediated narratives. Here, the migrant is first a story, then a person. The frequency of contact and perceptions of integration are directly included as individual items in the survey form.

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to adopt an overly optimistic interpretation regarding contact. Paluck et al. (2019), upon re-evaluating studies that included experimental and delayed outcome measures, demonstrated that although contact generally reduces prejudice, its effect may be weaker in interventions targeting ethnic and racial prejudice. More importantly, Shulman et al. (2025) demonstrated that fluctuations in everyday, casual contact do not directly correspond to short-term fluctuations in prejudice. Consequently, findings from our contact study should not be interpreted mechanically as "contact happened, prejudice dissolved". Rather, we suggest the following interpretation: those who feel less threatened might engage in more contact, while increased contact might gradually reduce threat over time. Cross-sectional data can not differentiate between these two directions. As a result, contact should not be seen here as a magic bullet but rather as a cumulative process dependent on the context.

The integration variable is the most political and perhaps the most philosophical part of the study. Those participants who think that African migrants should be integrated into Lithuanian society report lower levels of general threat and economic, cultural and security threat, while the reduction significantly decreases social distance. In particular, the mediation coefficients derived from the general threat (54.7%) and security threat (52.6%) indicate that the concept of integration is not merely a policy preference but is deeply connected to the moral foundations underlying social distance. Neureiter (2022) notes that integration policies can increase public acceptance, particularly towards refugees; Kende et al. (2022) show that inclusive integration policies weaken the link between high immigrant presence and anti-immigrant prejudice; while Fouka (2024) demonstrates that immigrant integration is a process shaped not only by individual adaptation but also by state policies and institutional design. The fact that one of the highest-scoring threat items in our data is the belief that "African migrants are not sufficiently integrated into Lithuanian society" further reinforces this interpretation. The implicit question being asked is not "Can they be here?" but "Can they belong here?"

However, the discourse of integration itself is not innocent. On the one hand, integration can serve as the institutional foundation for

shared life; on the other hand, it can become the name of a one-sided test imposed by the majority society on the minority. If the call to "integrate" functions not as the opening of equal citizenship but as proof of cultural conformity, it produces a language that is disciplinary rather than inclusive. Harell et al. (2026) demonstrate that migrants often face a "membership penalty" in many societies, meaning that full inclusion and a sense of shared belonging are not easily granted to them. From this perspective, the demand for integration can sometimes be less about inclusion and more about continuously regulating the migrant's position in society. Nevertheless, the fact that those supporting integration in our dataset exhibit significantly lower levels of perceived threat and social distance suggests that, within this specific sample, the idea of integration functions more as an inclusive horizon than as an exclusionary test. However, it must not be forgotten that this interpretation can easily shift within different political discourses.

These results cannot be fully understood without considering the Baltic and post-socialist context. The findings of Czymara et al. (2025) show that the perceptions of the Baltic states' citizens towards migrants continue to be influenced by the Soviet political and demographic legacy. Leykin and Gorodzeisky (2025), on the other hand, show that in post-socialist Europe, the question of

"who counts as a migrant? In response to geopolitical developments, geopolitical behaviour is reconfigured, not fixed. According to Kalmar (2023), Eastern Europe often perceives itself as existing outside racial frameworks; however, it is racially constructed from external perspectives. Furthermore, Eastern Europe also reproduces its own internal borders through racial and cultural markings. Within the framework, the African migrant's figure can carry strong symbolic weight in Lithuania even if it is not an object of frequent daily interaction. In other words, it may not just be a lack of direct experience at work here, but also the influence of historical associations and pan-European racial narratives embedded in collective memory that create this sense of distance. According to FRA data and field experiments across Europe, such narratives are likely to have both intellectual and institutional effects. At this point, it is also evident that these findings resonate with some studies in the Turkish literature. Eser and Uygur's (2019) study on Syrian refugees and Uygur et al.'s (2024) study examining the relationship between multiculturalism, social distance, and perceived threat demonstrated the general pattern that perceived threat increases social distance, while positive contact and more inclusive frameworks can reduce this distance. The Lithuanian data also demonstrates that the same theoretical framework is applicable in a different geographical context. However, there is a

significant difference between the two contexts: while the target group in the Turkish example is a denser and more visibly present Syrian refugee population in daily life, the figure in question in this study is an African migrant who is encountered less frequently and is more distinctly racialized. Therefore, while similar theoretical relationships may be observed, the historical and social resonance of these relationships is not the same. The same grammar speaks with a different emphasis.

The study's limitations must also be clearly stated here. First, the sample is based on non-probability online survey and has a low average age; the high proportion of students limits the generalizability of the findings to the entire Lithuanian population. Second, the data are cross-sectional; thus, while the mediating pathways are theoretically robust, causality cannot be definitively established. Third, contact was measured solely in terms of frequency; the quality of contact (i.e., whether it was positive or negative) was not assessed. Yet current meta-analytic evidence suggests that the effect of negative contact may be stronger than that of positive contact (Paolini et al., 2024). Fourth, the exclusion of variables such as media usage, political orientation, and ideological stance from the model leaves a significant gap, particularly in contexts with low exposure. Therefore, future

research should measure the nature of exposure and media mediation together using samples with high representativeness and longitudinal or experimental designs. Additionally, comparing African migrants with other migrant groups could more clearly reveal when and how perceptions shift from being framed primarily in terms of "migration" to being shaped by racialization.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that social distance arises not from bare difference, but from the interpretation of difference through perceived threat and questions of membership. Lithuanians perceive distance towards African migrants as threat and integration concern. Since the proximity is limited through direct contact, threat and integration seem to be mediated through distance. According to Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014), attitudes against migrants are shaped by the national imaginary rather than personal experience; as Esses (2021) underlines, this national imaginary produces material consequences leading to discrimination. "The challenge of migration must, then, be approached not just in terms of borders, labour or population, but as a question of who belongs to what and how much." This is precisely what this article demonstrates: sometimes what creates distance is not the stranger's remoteness, but the distance attributed to them.

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