

## Anti-immigrant Sentiments and Immigrants' Happiness in Europe



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### Abstract

**Background:** Anti-immigrant sentiments are macro-level determinants and may explain why immigrants are treated poorly in some host countries. However, very few studies test whether anti-immigrant sentiments at the macro level are associated with individual-level outcomes of immigrants, such as their happiness. This is important because, according to marginalization-related diminished returns (MDRs) theory, immigrants show worse-than-expected outcomes because of reduced effects of socioeconomic resources.

**Aim:** Built on a multi-level model of happiness and MDRs theory; we conducted this study to test the association between country-level anti-immigrant sentiments and individual-level happiness of immigrants across European countries.

**Methods:** For this cross-sectional study, we borrowed data from European Social Survey 2020 (ESS 2020). Participants were recruited from Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Croatia, Hungary, Lithuania, Slovenia, and Slovakia. Participants included 997 immigrants. Age, sex, education, employment (worked in the past week), and self-rated health were control variables. Level of country-level anti-immigrant sentiments was the independent variable. Happiness was the outcome. Linear regression was used for data analysis.

**Results:** There were considerable country-level variations in anti-immigrant sentiment across European countries. There were also considerable variations in immigrants' happiness across countries. Overall, higher levels of anti-immigrant sentiments in the country were associated with lower levels of immigrants' happiness. The results remained similar without and with control variables, including age, gender, education, employment, and self-rated health.

**Conclusion:** Higher anti-immigrant sentiments, at the macro level, are associated with a lower level of happiness among immigrants at the individual level. Research should test if reduced opportunities or worse treatment of immigrants explains why country-level anti-immigrant sentiments contribute to reduced happiness of immigrants.

**Keywords:** Anti-immigrant sentiments, public opinions, immigrants, happiness, socioeconomic status, population groups, nativity.

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### Introduction

Anti-immigrant sentiments are defined as resisting negative public opinions toward immigrants in a host country<sup>1-3</sup>. These anti-immigrant sentiments are made of negative attitudes of the public regarding immigrant populations as well as immigration<sup>4</sup>. These sentiments are higher in countries where native-born people of that country commonly hold public opinions that are opposed to immigration<sup>5</sup>. Anti-immigrant sentiments vary across locations, time, age groups, and cohorts and are commonly shaped by media and populist election campaigns<sup>6</sup>. Anti-immigrant sentiments are also associated with anti-immigrant policies<sup>7</sup>.

High anti-immigrant sentiments are associated with lower opportunities and worse treatment of immigrant individuals<sup>8</sup>. High anti-immigrant sentiments may be one reason behind the high statistics of hate crimes against immigrants in many European and American countries<sup>9</sup>. Anti-immigrant sentiments are one of the main reasons behind verbal threats and harassment of immigrants in some countries<sup>10</sup>. Anti-immigrant sentiments may also result in lynching and massacres to beheading and burying aliens<sup>11</sup>. In recent years, there has been a steady increase in hate crimes against immigrants. Anti-Muslim attitudes have a significant role in shaping anti-immigrant sentiments<sup>6</sup>. Some of the anti-immigrant crimes are committed by Nationalist extremists<sup>12</sup>.

Although research by many scholars such as Marmot [13,14](#), Hayward [15-17](#), Link, [18](#), Ross and Mirowsky [19-21](#), House [22](#), Lantz [23,24](#), Williams [25,26](#), and others [27](#) have shown a link between high socioeconomic status (SES) and better health, health effects of SES are not similar across all population groups. According to the Marginalization-related Diminished Returns (MDRs) theory [28,29](#), the health effects of SES indicators, particularly educational attainment, are weaker for marginalized populations than socially privileged groups [30-36](#). For example, the health effects of SES on stress [37](#), depression [38](#), chronic disease [39,40](#), substance use [41](#), and happiness [42,43](#) are weaker for Black than White individuals [44-46](#). Family SES is shown to protect and benefit White children more than Black children in various cognitive functions [47-49](#). Recent research has shown similar patterns in immigrants in Europe [50](#) and US [51-56](#).

As shown by Assari [28,29](#), Ferarro [57](#), Thorpe [58-60](#), Hudson [61-63](#), Kaufman [64](#), Braveman [65](#), Shapiro [66,67](#), Williams [68,69](#), Ceci [70](#), and Navarro [71-73](#), and others [74](#), SES indicators may differently impact various populations. For example, education may not generate equal returns for immigrants and native-born people because immigrants are maltreated in the host country [75](#). Due to labor market discrimination, social stratification, and residential and job market segregation, education may differently open occupational opportunities for immigrant and native-born individuals [29](#). As a result, across all education levels, immigrants, as marginalized groups, may be more likely to work in worse jobs than native-born people [37](#). If immigrants and non-immigrants are differently treated in society [76](#), and across all SES levels, immigrant and non-immigrant people experience qualitatively different daily lives [77](#). Thus, the effects of an SES indicator such as education would be weaker for (marginalized) immigrants than (privileged) native-born populations. In one study using ESS data, education generated less happiness for immigrants than native-born individuals [75](#). In another study, parental education was associated with better self-rated health, but this effect was weaker for immigrants than native-born people. [78](#)

In line with the Marginalization-related Diminished Returns (MDRs) phenomenon, [28,29](#) Link [79,80](#) and Marmot [81](#) have argued that SES indicators such as education may have different utilities for different populations. However, most of these studies are in the US, so there is a need to study in Europe [82](#). Thus, this study aimed to test the association between anti-immigrant sentiments at the macro level and happiness at the individual level. We expected higher anti-immigrant sentiments to be associated with lower happiness, net of education, and employment.

## Methods

### *European Social Survey*

This study was a secondary analysis of existing data. We used the ESS 2020 data, which is publicly available. Using a cross-sectional design, the data are collected between 17-09-2020 and 30-01-2022. Participating countries included Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Croatia, Hungary, Lithuania, Slovenia, and Slovakia. The European Social Survey (ESS) is an academically driven cross-national survey in Europe that started in 2001. This study has been administered in 40 countries to date. The main aim is to monitor and interpret changing public attitudes and values within European countries. The survey applied random probability sampling, and the ESS has a high response rate and rigorous translation protocols. ESS data are partially collected in an hour-long face-to-face interview. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, at Round 10, a self-completion approach was used in countries where face-to-face fieldwork was not possible. Some countries also included video interviews as a backup for the in-person interviews.

### *Analytical sample*

Our analytical sample included those who had complete and non-missing data on age, sex, self-rated health, employment during the last week, immigration status, education, and happiness. This study only included immigrants. Immigration/Nativity was determined by this question: Were you born in [country]. This number was 508 for immigrants. Native individuals were excluded.

### *Variables*

*Dependent Variable (Outcome).* Happiness was measured using a single-item measure with 11 options. Participants were asked, "Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?" Zero was for extremely unhappy, and ten was for Extremely happy. This variable was treated as a continuous measure, with a higher score indicating higher happiness.

*Independent Variable (Predictor).* Anti-immigrant sentiments were measured using the following three items using the general population in the ESS. These items included 1) is immigration bad or good for the country's economy, 2) Is the country's cultural life undermined or enriched by immigrants, and 3) Do immigrants make the country worse or a better place to live? Answers were on a 0 to 10 scale, with a lower score indicating higher anti-immigrant sentiments. We then reversed the scores, so our higher score indicated higher anti-immigrant sentiments. We calculated the average of the reverse scores, ranging from 0 to 30.

**Confounders.** Age, sex, educational attainment, and employment were the covariates. Age was a continuous variable ranging from 15 to 90, and sex was a dichotomous variable, coded 1 for males and 0 for females. Participants were asked, "What is the highest level of education you have successfully completed?" Education was then treated as a continuous measure ranging from 0 to 8. Employment was measured using a single item that acquired about any paid job in the past 30 days.

### Data Analysis

We performed all our analyses, including univariate, bivariate, and multivariable analyses, in SPSS 21. Univariate analysis was to report the mean (standard deviation; SD) and frequency (%) for our variables overall and by immigration status. Our bivariate analyses included Chi-square and t-test to compare all variables across immigration groups. For our multivariable analysis, we used linear regression models in which the independent variable was the level of anti-immigrant sentiments, the outcome was happiness, and the covariates were gender, age, educational attainment, and employment. Regression coefficient, standard errors (SEs), and p-values were reported. Any p-value of less than 0.05 was significant.

### Ethics

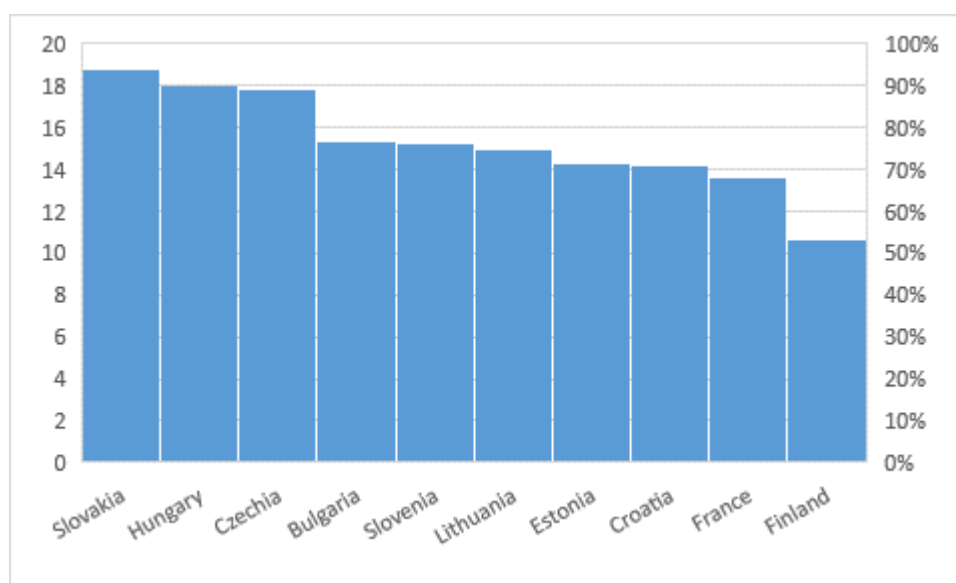
Given that ESS data is fully de-identified and this was a secondary analysis of publicly available data, our investigation was exempt from a full ethics review.

## Results

As shown in [Table 1](#), 16901 individuals entered ESS who reported anti-immigrant sentiments. We calculated anti-immigrant sentiments across countries. Hungary, Slovakia, and Czechia had the highest anti-immigrant sentiments. Finland and France had the lowest anti-immigrant sentiments. Other countries, such as Slovenia, Lithuania, and Croatia, had mid-level anti-immigrant sentiments ([Table 1](#) and [Figure 1](#)).

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics in the pooled sample to calculate national-level anti-immigrant sentiments

Country	N	Mean	SD
Bulgaria	2547	15.28	7.20
Czechia	2289	17.78	7.12
Estonia	1499	14.29	6.22
Finland	1550	10.66	5.35
France	1877	13.59	6.59
Croatia	1467	14.20	7.55
Hungary	1706	18.04	5.90
Lithuania	1476	14.96	6.83
Slovenia	1199	15.21	6.41
Slovakia	1291	18.73	6.96



**Figure 1.** Comparison of countries in Europe for anti-immigrant sentiments

Participants that were entered into our analysis included 997 immigrants. [Table 2](#) shows their mean age, education, SRH, and distribution of country and gender.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics in the pooled sample and overall (n = 997)

	N	%
<b>Country</b>		
Bulgaria	20	2.0
Czechia	71	7.1
Estonia	211	21.2
Finland	57	5.7
France	234	23.5
Croatia	179	18.0
Hungary	27	2.7
Lithuania	53	5.3
Slovenia	129	12.9
Slovakia	16	1.6
<b>Sex</b>		
Female	538	54.0
Male	459	46.0
<b>Employment</b>		
Unemployed	482	48.3
Employed	515	51.7
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Age</b>	54.03	17.45
<b>Education (1-8)</b>	3.96	1.97
<b>SRH (1-5)</b>	2.35	0.94
<b>Country-level anti-immigrant sentiment</b>	14.50	1.60
<b>Happiness (0-10)</b>	7.38	2.11

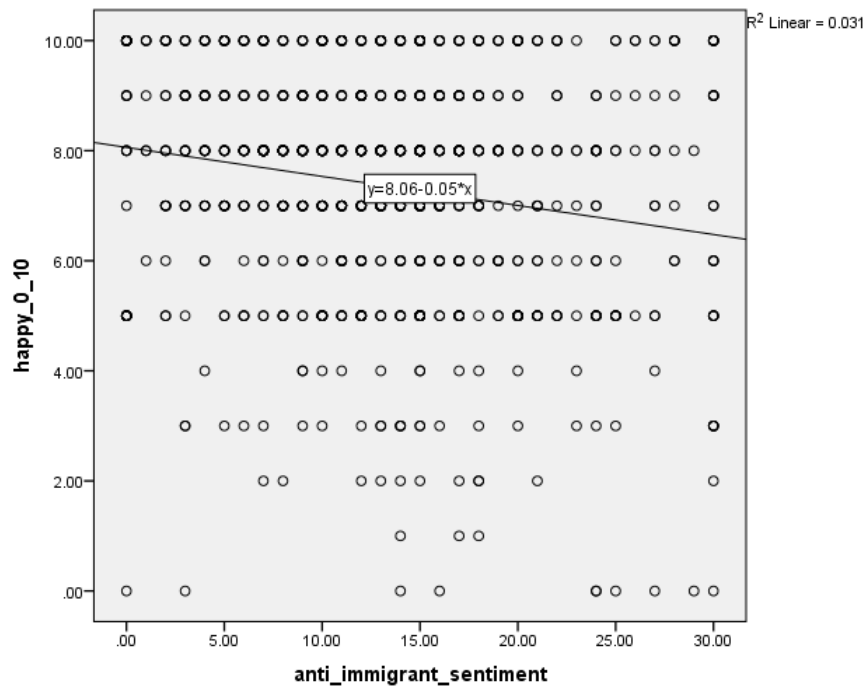
As [Table 3](#) shows, anti-immigrant sentiment was inversely associated with happiness; this association was independent of all covariates. Other determinants of happiness included the female gender and SRH.

To provide a graphic representation of the adjusted association between our predictor and outcome ( $b = -.142$ ;  $p < .0001$ ), [Figure 2](#) shows the adjusted association between anti-immigrant sentiments and immigrants' happiness. The significance and inverse association suggests that a higher level of anti-immigrant sentiments is associated with a lower level of happiness. In other terms, immigrants living in countries with higher anti-immigrant sentiments reported lower levels of happiness.

**Table 3.** Summary of linear regressions in immigrants in Europe

	Unstandardized B	Coefficients Standardized Coefficients	Beta	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	P
Male	-.448	.128	-.107	-.699 - .197	<.0001
Age (Year)	.005	.004	.038	-.004 .013	.288
Educational Attainment (1-8)	.018	.033	.017	-.046 .081	.591
Employment	.196	.141	.047	-.081 .472	.165
Self-Rated Health (SRH) (1-5)	-.746	.076	-.334	-.895 -.597	<.0001
Anti-immigrant Sentiments	-.142	.039	-.109	-.220 -.065	<.0001

Dependent Variable: happiness (0-10)



**Figure 2.** Association between anti-immigrant sentiments and immigrants' happiness

### Discussion

In this study, we explored the association between a macro- and a micro- characteristic of immigrants in Europe. We found that anti-immigrant sentiments are inversely associated with immigrants' happiness. That is, immigrants are less happy when they have immigrated to a country with higher anti-immigrant sentiments. We found that this association was independent of age, gender, education, and employment.

In this study, the following three items were used to measure country-level anti-immigrant sentiments: 1) whether people believe immigration is bad for their country's economy, 2) is the country's cultural life undermined by immigrants, and 3) whether immigrants make their country a worse place to live? Such anti-immigrant sentiments are all negative and reflect how immigrants are viewed (and probably treated) at the macro level. In countries with resistant public opinions toward immigration, immigrants are more likely to be harassed and discriminated compared to immigrants who live in areas with pro-immigrant public attitudes. These anti-immigrant sentiments are high when native-born people commonly hold public opinions that are opposed to immigrants and immigration<sup>5</sup>, which is commonly shaped by populist election campaigns<sup>6</sup> and right-wing media. Some of the anti-immigrant crimes are committed by Nationalist extremists<sup>12</sup>. High anti-immigrant sentiments may also reflect more restrictive policies that do not facilitate the lives and wellbeing of immigrants<sup>4</sup>.

Anti-immigrant sentiments vary across region, cohort, and time. According to our survey, Hungary, Slovakia,

and Czechia were the most anti-immigrants in Europe. On the other hand, Finland and France were pro-immigrant and had the lowest anti-immigrant sentiments. Other countries such as Slovenia, Lithuania, and Croatia were in between as their people had mid-level anti-immigrant sentiments. As many countries in Europe did not participate in our analysis, there is a need to include other studies in the future.

High anti-immigrant sentiments are associated with lower opportunities for immigrants. They may also correlate with worse treatment and higher discrimination against immigrant individuals<sup>8</sup>. Higher anti-immigrant sentiments are also probably one reason hate crimes against immigrants vary across European countries<sup>9</sup>. Immigrants living in countries with higher anti-immigrant sentiments are more commonly threatened and harassed<sup>10</sup>. Immigrants in countries with higher anti-immigrant sentiments may experience massacres such as beheading or lynching<sup>11</sup>. In recent years, there has been a steady increase in hate crimes against immigrants particularly Muslims. Overall anti-immigrant attitudes are worse against Muslims<sup>6</sup>.

Anti-immigrant sentiments are explained by group threat theory as well as symbolic theories. These theories partly explain why anti-immigrant attitudes are higher in some regions than others. The symbolic theories focus on individual psychological processes such as anger, prejudice, and other factors at the individual level<sup>83-85</sup>. According to this theory, anti-immigrant attitudes are the result of divergent, non-complementary attitudes of the individual<sup>83-85</sup>. Group threat theory<sup>86</sup>, by contrast, focuses

on relations between groups<sup>86</sup>. It is assumed, for example, that the threat is larger during a recession, which aggravates anti-immigrant attitudes. There are differences between these two theories, but it is obvious that both theories can sometimes explain the same result. The Californian referendum could be explained by a symbolic perspective, Sawires and Peacock<sup>87</sup> concluded that a group threat explanation would have been equally possible<sup>87</sup>. Esposito and Murphy have discussed the empirical test of Blumer's group threat theory<sup>88</sup>. Moreno in his 1934 theory of saturation point, argued that the size argument was developed much earlier, where a certain proportion of the minority is needed for the majority to treat them negatively<sup>89</sup>. This idea has now disappeared, and the size argument is put forward simply in an additive way<sup>89</sup>.

Anti-immigrant sentiments were associated with lower happiness. Thus, even in the presence of high educational attainment, living in a region with high anti-immigrant sentiments would mean less perceived happiness<sup>75</sup>. A recent study found a weaker association between high education and high happiness for immigrant individuals than native-born individuals in Europe. That study showed that highly educated immigrants in the US are unhappier than their native-born fellows across all educational attainment levels<sup>75</sup>. This diminished return of education on the happiness of immigrants may be in part because of high levels of anti-immigrant sentiments in some European countries.

One of the findings was the lack of a positive association between educational attainment and the level of happiness of immigrants in the US. Although fundamental cause theory, the social determinants of health framework, and other theories have shown a link between educational attainment and the wellbeing of individuals,<sup>90 91-94</sup> in our sample of immigrants, potentially due to diminished returns of educational attainment on happiness aligns with a growing literature on differential effects of SES indicators particularly education on health and wellbeing of population groups, with effects being weaker for marginalized than privileged individuals. Regardless of the outcome, SES indicators, age groups, and context, education has been shown to generate more gains for privileged groups. However, most past research is on Black-White differences in the US, and no previous studies in Europe has focused on the effects of education on happiness.

Educational attainment has weaker effects on happiness and other outcomes such as obesity<sup>95</sup>, depression<sup>96</sup>, anxiety, suicide<sup>38</sup>, internalization<sup>97</sup>, externalization, and self-rated health<sup>98</sup> for marginalized than socially privileged individuals. These differential effects are shown for almost all outcomes, including but

not limited to chronic diseases<sup>99-101</sup>, disability<sup>102</sup>, hospitalization<sup>103</sup>, and mortality<sup>104,105</sup>. In a similar pattern, education better reduces stress<sup>37</sup> and trauma<sup>106,107</sup> for privileged than marginalized individuals. It is known that education has larger effects on mental<sup>108</sup>, behavioral<sup>109,110</sup>, and physical<sup>111</sup> health, as well as healthcare<sup>112,113</sup> of privileged than racialized people. As a result, we observe poor mental health<sup>95,114</sup>, poor sleep<sup>115</sup>, poor diet<sup>116</sup>, and high substance use<sup>110,117,118</sup> in highly educated marginalized people<sup>119,120</sup>. However, these patterns are best described for US than Europe. In addition they are better known for ethnicity rather than immigration as a source of marginalization.

The MDRs theory suggests that studying inequalities should go beyond individual-level SES and social determinants of health and include macro-level factors such as public opinions, racism, and segregation<sup>28,29</sup>. While most previous work has focused on individual-level SES and SDoH, MDRs research goes beyond attributing disparities to the existing gaps in exposures to individual-level risk factors and access to individual-level SDoHs. While SES and SDoH gaps have a major role on shaping human wellbeing, MDRs acknowledge structural factors that may cause inequalities by reducing the returns of SES and SDoH factors in marginalized populations. As such, in the presence of structural racism and societal injustice, disparities between marginalized and privileged groups can be seen across the full SES spectrum. As such, quantitative modeling of disparities should include structural and macro-level factors that can potentially shape the health and wellbeing of marginalized groups beyond their SES and SDoH. For example, in the absence of protection by education, risk factors such as economic stress and negative public opinions may reduce the wellbeing of marginalized people<sup>28,29</sup>. MDRs framework reminds us that health inequalities are multi-level, and our research should also include macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors that may shape disparities.

A wide range of structural mechanisms may explain why and how anti-immigrant sentiments may interfere with the poor wellbeing of immigrants. High anti-immigrant sentiment can interfere with the return of education on income, employment, and wealth accumulation. With high anti-immigrant sentiment, immigrants may live in worse residential areas. In addition, high anti-immigrant sentiment may differently impact immigrants from diverse racial groups<sup>28,29</sup>. For example, high-SES Black immigrants may have different conditions than high-SES White immigrants. Even among immigrants, other sources of marginalization may alter the pay and occupational prestige of some groups of immigrants more than others. Based on residence in ethnic enclaves, some marginalized populations may be

exposed to more stress and toxins<sup>121</sup>. Neighborhood density of poverty, unemployment, and demographic and ethnic compositions of neighborhoods may be another mechanism why marginalized groups benefit less from SES resources such as education<sup>122</sup>. As a result, highly educated immigrants<sup>28,29</sup> remain at risk of economic insecurity<sup>123</sup>, stress<sup>37</sup>, living in poor residential areas<sup>77</sup>, and low wealth<sup>124</sup>. Such interwoven, complex social processes may reduce the effect of education on happiness for immigrants and other marginalized populations.

Future research should test how highly anti-immigrant sentiments may impact work conditions, income, occupational prestige, and employment of immigrants in countries with high opposition against immigration. We also need to study how high anti-immigrant sentiment interferes with education and other individual-level resources on generating health outcomes and wellbeing for immigrants. For example, it is likely that the effects of education on diet<sup>125</sup>, exercise<sup>126</sup>, sleep<sup>127</sup>, and substance use<sup>128</sup> are under the influence of anti-immigrant sentiments. However, the minimum is known regarding the implication of education on income and employment across immigrant and non-immigrant groups. It is also yet to be determined if high anti-immigrant sentiment explains diminishing returns of SES for immigrant people.

### Limitations

We should list few limitations of our study. Given the cross-sectional design, we cannot draw any causal inferences between macro-level public attitudes and individual-level happiness of immigrants. We should use associational, not causal, language to describe our findings. However, it is highly unlikely that unhappiness of immigrants cause macro-level opinions of the non-immigrant population. Another limitation is that we did not include several potentially relevant confounders such as personality, country-level SES, acculturation, duration of stay as an immigrant, or citizenship status. Future research should analyze data on years spent in the host country, legal and citizenship status, skin color, religion, country of origin, and other characteristics related to immigration.

### Conclusion

To conclude, among immigrants in Europe, educational attainment and employment do not correlate with happiness; however, public opinions may have such effects. While highly educated and employed immigrants report similar levels of happiness as their low-educated and unemployed counterparts, those who live in countries with higher anti-immigrant sentiment report lower levels of happiness than those who live in European countries

that are pro-immigrant. Some macro-level disparities affecting immigrants' wellbeing may reduce the wellbeing of immigrants in highly anti-immigrant countries. These findings may be relevant to the observed diminished returns of education and other SES indicators on the wellbeing of immigrants.

### Highlights

#### What Is Already Known?

Countries differ in anti-immigrant sentiments.

Anti-immigrant sentiments are associated with discrimination against immigrants.

#### What Does This Study Add?

European countries vary in anti-immigrant sentiments.

Immigrants' happiness varies across European countries.

Immigrants who live in countries with higher anti-immigrant sentiment report lower levels of happiness than those who live in European countries that are pro-immigrant.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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### Authors' Contribution

SA and BN: Conceptual design, data analysis, draft, revision, and approval.

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**Appendix 1****Appendix 1:** Coding of educational attainment

0	0	Not completed ISCED level 1
1	113	ISCED 1, completed primary education
1	129	Vocational ISCED 2C < 2 years, no access ISCED 3
1	212	General/pre-vocational ISCED 2A/2B, access ISCED 3 vocational
2	213	General ISCED 2A, access ISCED 3A general/all 3
2	221	Vocational ISCED 2C >= 2 years, no access ISCED 3
2	222	Vocational ISCED 2A/2B, access ISCED 3 vocational
2	223	Vocational ISCED 2, access ISCED 3 general/all
2	229	Vocational ISCED 3C < 2 years, no access ISCED 5
3	311	General ISCED 3 >=2 years, no access ISCED 5
3	312	General ISCED 3A/3B, access ISCED 5B/lower tier 5A
3	313	General ISCED 3A, access upper tier ISCED 5A/all 5
3	321	Vocational ISCED 3C >= 2 years, no access ISCED 5
3	322	Vocational ISCED 3A, access ISCED 5B/ lower tier 5A
3	323	Vocational ISCED 3A, access upper tier ISCED 5A/all 5
4	412	General ISCED 4A/4B, access ISCED 5B/lower tier 5A
4	413	General ISCED 4A, access upper tier ISCED 5A/all 5
4	421	ISCED 4 programs without access ISCED 5
4	422	Vocational ISCED 4A/4B, access ISCED 5B/lower tier 5A
4	423	Vocational ISCED 4A, access upper tier ISCED 5A/all 5
5	510	ISCED 5A short, intermediate/academic/general tertiary below bachelor
5	520	ISCED 5B short, advanced vocational qualifications
6	610	ISCED 5A medium, bachelor/equivalent from lower tier tertiary
6	620	ISCED 5A medium, bachelor/equivalent from upper/single tier tertiary
7	710	ISCED 5A long, master/equivalent from lower tier tertiary
7	720	ISCED 5A long, master/equivalent from upper/single tier tertiary
8	800	ISCED 6, doctoral degree

International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)

UNESCO Institute for Statistics. "International standard classification of education: ISCED 2011." *Comparative Social Research* 30 (2012).

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