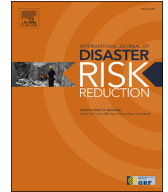




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From compassion to controversy: Unraveling the impact of societal resilience on the tapestry of attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees

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ABSTRACT

Background: Global conflicts and geopolitical tensions are causing mass displacement, making refugee integration a pressing issue. The aftermath of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has resulted in over 5 million internally displaced Ukrainians and more than 8 million refugees settling across Europe. The success of their integration relies on the hospitality and attitudes of citizens of host nations. This study investigates factors influencing attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees in seven nearby countries, focusing on resilience, and both positive and negative coping mechanisms.

Methods: A cross-sectional questionnaire study gathered data mostly through Internet panel samples from Georgia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Romania. The instruments employed in this present study include: attitudes towards refugees, societal resilience, individual resilience, community resilience, hope, morale, feeling safe at home, well-being, sense of danger, distress symptoms, post-traumatic stress disorder, perceived threats, and government support.

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Results: Attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees vary across nations, with Georgia and Estonia displaying the highest acceptance (3.92 and 3.29, respectfully), and Slovakia and the Czech Republic (2.63 and 2.5, respectfully) exhibiting lower levels of positivity. Societal resilience emerged as a key factor influencing positive attitudes towards refugees. Other predictors included hope, individual and community resilience, PTSD, education, gender, and perceived threats. Females and higher-educated individuals expressed more favorable attitudes.

Conclusions: Fostering societal resilience and positive coping strategies is essential for refugees' integration, with targeted interventions, educational programs, and awareness campaigns playing a significant role in building empathy and aiding their acceptance. Policies should encourage social inclusion and economic opportunities for refugees and host communities, addressing negative societal attitudes. These findings may inform crisis support and policies enhancing attitudes toward refugees in host communities.

1. Introduction

As conflicts and geopolitical challenges continue to shape the global landscape, the displacement of populations has become an increasingly prevalent and pressing issue [1–3]. Since its onset on the February 24, 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been characterized by armed conflicts, political instability, and economic hardships, resulting in a vast number of individuals seeking refuge in neighboring countries [4]. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), as of June 9th, 2023 over 5 million Ukrainians are internally displaced and over 8 million refugees have been recorded across Europe (UNHCR, 2023).

The plight of Ukrainian refugees has not only highlighted the dire circumstances faced by those forced to flee their homes but has also exposed the complexities and challenges (e.g., cultural and language barriers, resource strain, economic implications) associated with their inclusion into host communities. Central to this process is the reception, hospitality, and attitudes of nations towards displaced individuals to promote a harmonious co-existence between host communities and incoming displaced individuals [5]. While multiculturalism, interculturality and global openness have been adopted as desirable values in some countries, not only do countries differ in their approaches to integration and inclusion policies of refugees, but they also exhibit varying levels of individual and public support with regard to hospitality or opposition towards their hosting [6–8]. Even though public preferences do not always have a direct impact on policy decisions, a substantial body of political science research has demonstrated that in democratic nations, public opinion can significantly influence prominent and highly visible policies and are significantly intertwined [9].

According to international law, refugees are individuals who are forced to leave their home countries due to conflicts, persecution, or disasters. Denying them sanctuary would have severe and potentially fatal consequences. Consequently, refugees are granted legal asylum in a country other than their own (UNHCR, 2016). On the other hand, an asylum seeker is someone who has fled from conflict and persecution but is still in the process of having their application for refugee status assessed. For the purpose of this article, the term "refugee" will be used inclusively to encompass both refugees and asylum seekers, as they both fall under the broader category of externally displaced individuals. The UNHCR employs the term 'refugees' in a broad manner, encompassing all people who have departed Ukraine because of the conflict and are now displaced. The UNHCR's means of verification and level of access to refugees from Ukraine differed based on the country. In addition, EU Member States had put into effect the Temporary Protection Directive, providing accelerated provisions for stay, residence, and employment status to individuals from Ukraine who departed the country and met the eligibility criteria.

The concept of hospitality in the context of the refugee crisis becomes particularly relevant when considering the historical patterns of social tensions and political conflicts that have arisen from previous waves of refugee migration [10,11]. Extensive global research has consistently demonstrated the challenges in achieving successful integration of refugees across various dimensions, including social, economic, cultural, and spatial aspects [12,13]. This body of evidence highlights the significance of exploring the factors that influence public attitudes towards refugees. Such examination provides valuable insights into the intricate dynamics surrounding refugee integration and acceptance, considering perspectives and implications from both the host community and refugee groups. Frequently, despite acknowledging integration as a two-way process, the primary focus remains on the refugees' capacities, willingness, and potential challenges related to integration. For instance, as postulated by Bourhis et al. [14] in their interactive acculturation model (IAM), the adaptation of migrants relies not solely on their individual attitudes, behaviors, and expectations, but rather on the alignment between the acculturation preferences and anticipations held by immigrants and the host society's members.

1.1. Theoretical anchors for attitude correlates

The first, well-established predictor of attitudes toward refugees are demographic differences, where a connection has been demonstrated between attitudes toward refugees and several demographic factors, such as variations in national identification, gender, age, political orientation, and education levels [15]. Studies have largely corroborated the findings that women, younger people, politically liberal persons, less nationally identified people, non-religiously affiliated persons, and more highly educated people are related to more positive attitudes toward refugees [16,17].

Furthermore, the role of threat has previously been examined as a fundamental factor that helps to elucidate the impact of ideological attitudes on negative attitudes toward out-groups in general, including attitudes toward refugees [18,19]. In Cowling et al.'s [17] meta-analysis, threat was found to have the most substantial effect on prejudice against refugees among all the variables analyzed. In line with the *integrated threat theory of prejudice*, outgroups introduce four discernible categories of threats: realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety, and unfavorable stereotypes. These threats serve as causal factors that contribute to in-

tergroup prejudice within intercultural relations [19,20]. Out-group members, including refugees specifically, can be viewed as competitors for tangible resources like employment, finances, and housing (this was termed as "realistic threats"; [21]). Furthermore, out-group members, including refugees, can be perceived as posing a "symbolic threat" to intangible aspects of the in-group, such as its cultural norms, values, religion, and identity [20,22]. At the core of this perspective is the *social identity theory*, which suggests that individuals generally hold favorable views of themselves and the groups they belong to, while simultaneously differentiating themselves from others [23]. Van Hootegeem and Meuleman [24] utilize the framework of the *group conflict theory* [25,26] to propose a well-substantiated claim relating to intergroup anxiety. According to this claim, negative perceptions within ingroups, who perceive a threat from outgroups like immigrants and ethnic minorities, are primarily rooted in intergroup competition. In other words, the foundation for the construction of negative perceptions among ingroups lies in the dynamics of intergroup competition, as ingroups feel threatened by the presence of outgroups. When faced with competition from foreigners for employment opportunities, or residential space, or any other limited resource, native individuals, acting as rational actors pursuing their own well-being, tend to adopt negative attitudes in order to justify their social positions [27]. This claim is supported by empirical evidence showing that economic conditions, such as increasing rates of unemployment have served as significant predictors of attitudes towards refugees. In particular, during periods of worse economic conditions in the host community, attitudes tend to become more negative [28]. In their comprehensive literature review, Sridharan et al. [29] extensively examined acceptance factors that influence the hospitality extended by host communities toward refugees. Their findings highlighted the crucial role played by contextual factors, including the host community's wealth, government policies, disinformation, and the livelihoods of the host community, in determining the level of acceptance. Tensions or lack of hospitality often arise between resettled populations and their host communities when policymakers prioritize the needs of the displaced communities without adequately addressing the concerns of the existing residents in the surrounding areas. Moise et al. [30] highlighted how attitudes towards refugees are malleable and are influenced by their connection to larger patterns of beliefs (especially regarding immigration and geopolitics), shifting circumstances (various phases of the war), and the influence of opinions about other refugee groups. Lastly, the framework provided by Babajanian and Hagen-Zanker [31] examines the ways in which social protection mechanisms can either contribute to or mitigate social exclusion. In the context of refugees, *social exclusion theory* explores how these individuals might be systematically excluded from the rights, opportunities, and resources that are normally available to members of society and which are key to social integration. This could include exclusion from labor markets, education, healthcare, and social security systems. Attitudes towards refugees can be influenced by whether they are perceived as part of the social fabric or as outsiders who do not contribute to or deserve the benefits of the social system.

1.2. Relationships between resilience, coping mechanisms, and attitudes towards refugees

Existing research on the connection between resilience, and coping mechanisms of refugees has largely focused on the influence of resilience, hope, belongingness, and social support on life satisfaction and flourishing among refugees [32–36]. Resilience refers to the capability to rebound and resume effective operation amidst various challenges, which has previously been shown to be positively related with positive coping mechanisms [37]. These connections have been observed with regards to an individual's ability to endure and recover (referred to as individual resilience; [38]), the collective strength of a community (known as community resilience; [39]), and the broader societal capacity (termed societal resilience; [40]) to recuperate after facing adversities. In the context of the current Ukrainian crisis, literature has illustrated the resilience of Ukrainian war refugees [41–43].

Despite the importance of this complementary topic, there is a scarcity of empirical literature that specifically investigates the interplay between the resilience of host communities, their positive and negative coping mechanisms, and how these factors influence attitudes toward refugees. While there have been insightful examinations of host nations' resilience, such as Mouawad's [44] study on Lebanon's integration of approximately 1.1 million Syrian refugees, and Musa's [45] conceptualization of resilience in refugee host communities in Jordan, empirical investigations on this topic remain limited. One study that contributes to filling this gap is the research conducted by Kossowska et al. [46] which elucidates the role of psychological factors in shaping the assistance provided by the Polish population to refugees from Ukraine. By examining the social identity dimensions of emotional closeness, anticipatory fears, and adherence to social norms, the study sheds light on the collective helping behaviors resulting from a sense of common fate and unity with Ukrainians. However, research explicitly linking societal resilience of host countries to attitudes towards refugees is still notably absent.

1.3. European response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis

In response to the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, which has precipitated a significant refugee crisis akin to a disaster in its disruption of human lives and societal structures, the European Union (EU) has taken decisive steps to address and facilitate the inclusion of Ukrainian refugees. Recognizing the gravity of such crises on both refugees and host nations, the EU has activated the provisions of the 2001 Temporary Protection Directive, thereby allowing for the unrestricted admission of certain categories of refugees and streamlining the administrative processes specifically for Ukrainian refugees [47]. This action exemplifies a proactive approach to disaster risk reduction by mitigating immediate pressures on affected individuals and host communities. Additionally, to bolster the resilience of countries grappling with the crisis, the EU has extended civil protection support to enhance their capacity for an effective response to the influx of refugees, including support to Ukraine, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, and the Republic of Moldova [48].

This manuscript aims to investigate the key factors that significantly influence attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees within the context of the ongoing war. Presented in [Appendix 1](#) are the population sizes of each respective country examined, the Ukrainian refugee population size in each respective country, as well as the percentage makeup of the refugee population amongst the host community. This objective of this study is to explore the relationship between the resilience of host communities at individual, communal, and societal levels and their attitudes toward refugees. It will also investigate how elements like hope, morale, home safety, general well-

being, fear, distress, and perceived threats contribute to this dynamic interplay. To the authors' knowledge, no study has been identified in the literature that explores this interplay, and thus the study aims to address this gap. By gaining a deeper understanding of the reception of Ukrainian refugees in neighboring countries, this research contributes to promoting successful integration and providing improved support to both the refugees and host communities.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The study sample included respondents from the following seven countries: Georgia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Romania. Five of the seven samples included ~1000 participants who were recruited online by Internet panels; the Georgian sample included 317 participants, who were interviewed face-to-face and partially through Google Forms, while the Romanian sample included 548 respondents collected. A minimum sample size was computed for each country using openEPI software. This was conducted by employing proportional sampling to the respective population size of each country using a 95% confidence level. Every country collected samples that exceeded the minimum sample size threshold. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the participants, according to each country: The average participant age of the participants from all countries was 45.09 ± 16.6 although the range was quite different for each country; around 50% from each gender (except for Georgia, with 65% of females, Lithuania with 60% of females, and Romania with 67% females); 38.8% of respondents indicated that their mean family income was below the national average, 24.8% of respondents indicated they had an average family income, while 16.8% indicated they were above the average income. The education levels differed significantly between the participant's countries.

2.2. Measures

The instruments employed in this present study were primarily derived from established and validated measurement tools utilized in previous research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kimhi et al., 2021), with the exception of the questionnaire addressing attitudes toward refugees. All instruments were translated to the respective languages using back-and-forth translation. The instruments are defined below in further detail.

2.2.1. Individual resilience

The individual resilience assessment used in this study was the Connor-Davidson Resilience Short Scale, comprised of two items [49]. Participant responses to these statements are gathered using a 5-point Likert scale, encompassing a range from 1 (Not true at all) to 5 (True almost all the time). Example of an item: "I am able to adapt when changes occur".

Table 1
Demographic characteristics (presented as percentage) of respondent groups according to country.

	Total N = 6038	Poland N = 1078	Georgia N = 317	Czech Republic N = 1011	Estonia N = 1003	Lithuania N = 1073	Slovakia N = 1008	Romania N = 548
Gender								
Male	45.5	48.2	34.3	49.1	53.1	39.7	48.1	32.6
Female	54.5	51.8	64.7	50.9	46.9	60.3	51.9	67.4
Age (Mean \pm SD)	45.1 \pm 16.6	46.2 \pm 16.0	38.8 \pm 14.8	49.2 \pm 15.9	46.7 \pm 8.9	41.4 \pm 11.2	46.5 \pm 15.8	35.3 \pm 17.8
Level of Religiosity								
Secular	37.5	22.4	NA	63.3	54.9	34.8	26.0	15.0
Traditional	35.6	20.9	NA	28.3	32.6	46.0	54.0	29.1
Religious	21.9	56.7	NA	8.4	12.5	19.2	20.0	55.9
Family Status								
Married	52.1	64.5	46.4	48.2	45.0	65.9	51.7	25.0
Single	27.3	20.2	42.9	27.6	20.7	14.3	30.3	64.0
Divorced/Widowed	13.5	12.6	3.2	20.5	16.7	11.7	14.1	4.5
Other	7.1	2.7	7.5	3.7	17.6	8.1	3.9	6.5
Level of Education								
Below high school education	5.8	11.5	1.9	6.0	8.5	0.0	5.2	3.8
High school	32.4	32.9	9.7	63.4	1.4	6.4	63.4	37.2
Higher than high school but with no academic degree	19.6	12.7	12.0	8.7	60.2	15.8	8.8	10.0
Bachelor's degree	17.3	7.1	36.8	5.3	9.9	40.8	4.6	41.1
MS or above	24.9	35.8	39.6	16.6	20.0	37.0	18.0	7.9
Level of Income								
Below mean	38.8	56.4	NA	29.6	80.4	NA	38.3	27.4
Mean	24.8	20.0	NA	36.1	15.7	NA	42.4	46.7
Above mean	14.6	23.6	NA	34.3	3.9	NA	19.3	25.9

Note: 21.8% of the surveyed individuals, income details were not disclosed, and for 5% of them, information pertaining to their degree of religiosity was not provided.

2.2.2. Community resilience

The community resilience scale in the current study is comprised of seven items [41]. Responses to the questionnaire items represent a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (do not agree at all), to 5 (agree to a very large extent). Example of an item: "There is mutual assistance and people in my community care for one another".

2.2.3. Societal resilience

The questionnaire employed in the present investigation comprises a set of 10 statements, adapted from the initial scale containing 13 statements by Kimhi and Eshel (2019). These statements gauge various aspects of societal resilience. Participants are required to indicate their level of agreement with each statement using a response scale that spans from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Example of an item: "During a national crisis, such as the current war in Ukraine, the society in my country will back up government decisions and those of the prime minister/president".

2.2.4. Hope

The scale comprises a set of three statements (for instance, "I have hope that I will emerge strengthened from the current war"). Hope is defined as the fusion of a desire to achieve predetermined goals (emerge strengthened) and the perceived ability to dedicate the necessary effort essential for their attainment. Refer to Kimhi, Eshel et al. [41,42] for more details. Participants are asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement on a scale that extends from 1 (very little hope) to 5 (high hope).

2.2.5. Morale

Morale is assessed through a single question inquiring about an individual's current mood: "How would you describe your mood in recent days?" Response options span from 1 (not good at all) to 5 (very good).

2.2.6. Feeling safe at home

Feeling safe at home is based on one item asking, "How safe are you at your home during this period of the war in Ukraine" Response rate ranges from 1 (Not at all), to 5 (To a very great extent).

2.2.7. Well-being

The scale comprises five statements that capture individuals' assessments of their current life situations across different domains, including work, family, daily life, and involvement in things happening in the country. This questionnaire draws its foundation from the original well-being scale introduced by Kimhi et al. [50]. Respondents are asked to rate each statement on a scale that extends from 1 (very bad) to 6 (very good). Example of one item: "What is your life like at present in terms of your involvement in things that are happening in your country?"

2.2.8. Sense of danger

The questionnaire is derived from the initial scale developed by Solomon and Prager [51]. It comprises a set of five statements, with response options spanning from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much) regarding people's reactions to the war in Ukraine. Example of an item: "How concerned are you that your country will be financially damaged by the war in Ukraine?"

2.2.9. Distress symptoms

The symptoms of distress, encompassing both anxiety and depressive symptoms, consist of a set of eight statements. These statements were adapted from the original collection of nine statements developed by Derogatis and Kathryn [52]. Respondents are prompted to rate their agreement with each statement using a scale that spans from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a very great extent). As an illustration, consider the following statement: "To what degree have you experienced feelings of nervousness in the recent past?"

2.2.10. Post-traumatic stress disorder

The instrument for assessing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) comprises six statements, derived from the original set of six statements introduced by Lang and Stein [53]. Respondents are required to rate each statement on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). As an illustration, consider the following statement: "Please indicate the extent to which you have been experiencing distress due to the following issue in the last month—Frequent and distressing recollections, ideas, or images of a past stressful encounter?"

2.2.11. Perceived threats

This scale comprises five different types of threats that participants are asked to evaluate based on the perceived impact on their personal lives at the moment. These threats encompass economic, social, security, political, and health-related aspects, each rated on a scale from 1 (not threatening) to 5 (extremely threatening). An illustrative statement from the questionnaire is as follows: "Considering your present circumstances, how do you assess the level of threat to you personally from the economic aspect?" Adapted from Eshel et al. (2021).

2.2.12. Government support

This scale consists of one item: "How would you define your degree of support for your government" ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much).

2.2.13. Attitudes towards war refugees

This scale consists of four items designed specifically for the current study, where the respondents are asked to state the degree to which they agree with statements concerning their country (or themselves) providing assistance to refugees from Ukraine, ranging from 1 (not at all), to 5 (very much). The items include: "My country needs to absorb as many refugees as possible; My country should help Ukraine in every way possible; I am personally willing to help refugees from Ukraine; and 'I identify with the refugees and the suffering they go through". Alpha Cronbach of the scale is 0.868.

2.2.14. Alpha Cronbach reliabilities of all tools

The Alpha Cronbach Reliability tests were examined for the scales, across the seven countries. All scales, across the seven countries, presented a high level of Alpha Cronbach reliability (Alpha Cronbach > 0.7) [54]. Table 2 presents the Alpha Cronbach of the scales of the overall sample.

2.3. Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics were used for presenting demographic characteristics (by percentage, mean \pm standard deviation) of respondent groups according to country (see Table 1). Unweighted means were computed for each index. Differences in attitudes towards refugees, as measured by the refugee index by country were analyzed by one-way ANOVA and Bonferroni test for multiple comparisons. Pearson's Correlations tests were used to analyze the associations between various assessed indices and attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees. A stepwise linear regression analysis was performed to predict the variables that impact attitudes toward refugees (Demographics were initially analyzed, followed by countries, and lastly the investigated indices). The variables integrated into the model are age, gender, level of education, country (Slovakia as the reference group, due to its lowest attitudes score), and the following indices: individual resilience, community resilience, societal resilience, hope, threats, PTSD, morale, and feeling safe at home. The linear regression was carried out following negating multi-collinearity and a homoscedasticity check.

We carried out all analyses using IBM SPSS Statistics 28. A p-value of < 00.05 was considered to be statistically significant, based on two-sided tests.

2.4. Ethical considerations

The questionnaire was approved by the Ethics Committee of Tel Aviv University, # 0005146-1 from July 12th, 2022 and all the participants signed an informed consent form prior to their participation. The security of participant information is guaranteed through encrypted databases with access restricted to the research team. Data will be preserved for a period of five years post-publication to allow for verification of findings, after which it will be destroyed. Informed consent was obtained digitally, through a secure online form for participants with internet access, and physically, using paper forms for those without, both versions detailing the study's scope and ensuring confidentiality. These consent forms were securely stored, with digital copies protected by password-secured access and physical copies locked in a secure filing cabinet accessible only by the primary investigator.

3. Results

The sample of the study consisted of cumulatively 6038 respondents. The demographic breakdown of the respondents from each respective country is displayed in Table 1. The majority of respondents from each one of the countries explored were female, except Estonia (46.9% female versus 53.1% male). Furthermore, the average age of all respondents was 45.1 \pm 16.6, in Georgia and Romania the sampled populations were on average younger (38.8 and 35.3 respectively). The majority of sample respondents were married (52.1%), except from Romania, where the sampled population consisted mainly of single persons (64.1%). The level of education varied between countries, with most respondents from Poland and Georgia holding a master's degree or above (35.8 % and 38.5%, re-

Table 2
Correlations (R-Pearson) between varied indices assessed and attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees.

Index name	Alpha Cronbach	Correlation with Attitudes Towards Refugees	p-Value
Societal Resilience	0.912	0.442	<0.001
Support for Government		0.418	<0.001
Hope	0.899	0.389	<0.001
Community Resilience	0.883	0.309	<0.001
Morale		0.195	<0.001
Individual Resilience	0.792	0.169	<0.001
Safety at home		0.116	<0.001
Wellbeing	0.832	0.076	<0.001
PTSD	0.914	0.012	0.337
Distress	0.926	-0.057	<0.001
Threats	0.866	-0.136	<0.001
Economic		-0.124	<0.001
Social		-0.098	<0.001
Security		-0.072	<0.001
Political		-0.160	<0.001
Health		-0.086	<0.001
Danger	0.837	-0.169	<0.001

spectfully), while in the Czech Republic (63.4%) and Slovakia (63.4%) most respondents hold high school degrees, and in Estonia, 60.1% hold higher than high school degree, but non-academic. In Lithuania, 40.8% hold bachelor's degrees.

The spread and central tendency of the attitudes towards refugees' index is presented in Fig. 1, for each respective country. The country displaying the highest positive attitudes towards refugees is Georgia (3.92 ± 0.99), while Slovakia exhibited the lowest positive attitude score (2.50 ± 1.09). Significant differences in average scores according to a post hoc test (Bonferroni test) were found between the majority of the respective countries, except between the Czech Republic and Slovakia ($p > 0.05$), the Czech Republic and Romania ($p > 0.05$), and Lithuania and Romania ($p > 0.05$).

In addition, the attitudes towards the refugee index were correlated with the other indices assessed (see Table 2). While significant correlations (both positive and negative) were found between many of the indices and attitudes towards refugees, the highest positive correlation was observed between the attitudes towards refugees and societal resilience ($r = 0.442$), followed by support for government ($r = 0.418$), hope ($r = 0.389$), and community resilience ($r = 0.309$). Much lower, yet still statistically significant, positive correlations were found between attitudes towards refugees and morale ($r = 0.195$), individual resilience ($r = 0.169$), feeling safe at home ($r = 0.116$), and wellbeing ($r = 0.086$). In addition, negative small, yet statistically significant, correlations were found between attitudes towards refugees and danger ($r = -0.169$), threats ($r = -0.136$), and distress ($r = -0.057$). Appendix 2 displays the Pearson correlations per country between all the variables assessed and the attitudes towards refugees index.

A linear regression analysis was performed to reveal the variables that predict the attitudes toward refugees. The variables integrated into the model are listed in Table 3. The variables that entered the model predict 36.4% of the dependent variable, an acceptable R-squared value according to Ozili [55] in social science research. The significant predictive variables, listed from highest to lowest are societal resilience ($B = 0.319$), hope ($B = 0.187$), individual resilience ($B = 0.132$), community resilience ($B = 0.128$), PTSD ($B = 0.098$), education ($B = 0.097$), gender ($B = 0.049$) and threats ($B = 0.043$).

4. Discussion

Amidst the unfolding waves of forced displacement worldwide, attitudes towards refugees carry significant implications not only for the well-being of displaced individuals and host communities but also for the intricate tapestry of the global society. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has clear impacts on the political, economic, and societal resilience of the global community [41,42,56]. Additionally, it evokes unique reactions and stances from the governing bodies and civil societies of numerous countries. This study delves into the attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees, focusing on the perspectives of seven nearby countries: Slovakia, Romania, Georgia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Lithuania, all within the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The comparative framework of the study reveals notable variations in attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees among these countries. Particularly, Georgia and Estonia stand out with the highest levels of positive attitudes, while Slovakia and the Czech Republic exhibit the lowest levels of acceptance towards Ukrainian refugees.

4.1. Country-specific differences in attitudes toward refugees

Consistent with the present study, previous research on Georgian attitudes towards refugees, reveals positive sentiments and a high level of hospitality (Baliashvili, 2022 [75]). Despite initial public concerns about refugee inclusion, Estonia, as discussed by Jauhainen and Erbsen [57], demonstrated readiness to provide support to Ukraine due to security concerns related to Russia in their

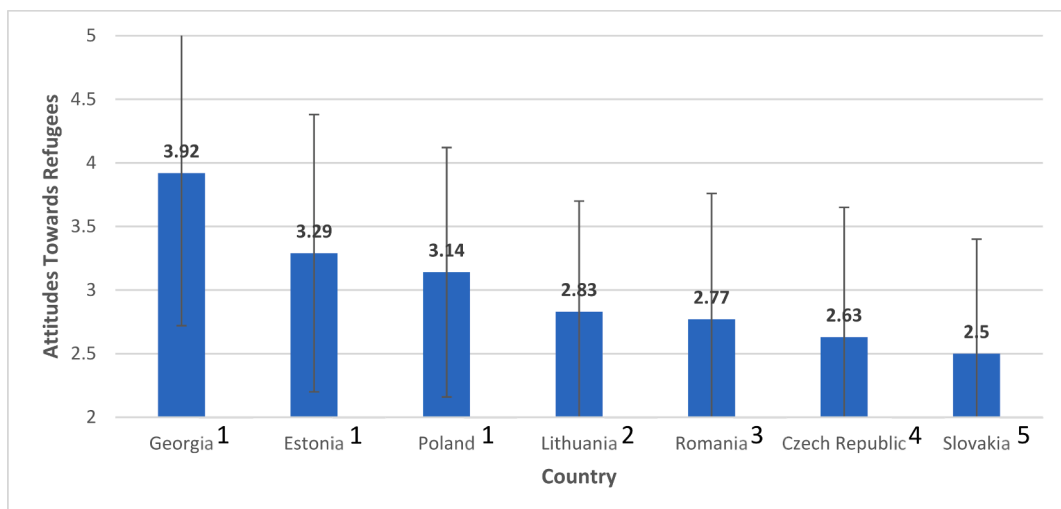


Fig. 1. Spread tendency and central tendency of the attitudes towards refugee index per each respective country. ¹ Significant differences with all other countries. ² Significant differences with all other countries besides Romania. ³ Significant differences with all other countries besides Lithuania & Czech Republic. ⁴ Significant differences with all other countries besides Slovakia & Romania. ⁵ Significant differences with all other countries besides the Czech Republic. Note: Variability between countries was significant between countries except between the Czech Republic and Slovakia ($p = 0.094$), Czech Republic and Romania ($p = 0.216$), and Lithuania and Romania ($p = 0.054$).

Table 3
Results of multiple linear regression for predicting attitudes towards refugees.

Variables	Coefficient B	Beta coefficient B	T value	Significance value
Age	-0.001	-0.016	-1.385	0.166
Gender (1- Male, 2- Female)	0.049	0.022	2.117	0.034*
Education	0.097	0.116	10.111	<0.001*
Country = Poland	0.331	0.118	8.157	<0.001*
Country = Czech Republic	0.045	0.016	1.146	0.252
Country = Estonia	0.489	0.164	10.881	<0.001*
Country = Lithuania	-0.079	-0.028	-1.751	0.80
Country = Romania	0.046	0.011	0.889	0.374
Country = Georgia	1.192	0.245	19.914	<0.001*
Individual Resilience	0.132	0.112	9.112	<0.001*
Community Resilience	0.128	0.087	6.993	<0.001*
Societal Resilience	0.319	0.326	24.001	<0.001*
Hope	0.187	0.179	14.152	<0.001*
Perceived Threats	0.043	0.037	2.829	0.005*
PTSD	0.098	0.084	6.604	<0.001*
Morale	-0.003	-0.003	-0.195	0.845
Safe at home	-0.020	-0.018	-1.474	0.140

$R^2 = 0.364$, $F = 197.466$, $\text{sig} < 0.001$.

Note: * denotes a significant ($p < 0.05$) result of the linear regression.

respective territory. Furthermore, the majority of Ukrainian refugees in Estonia were integrated into the job market, education system, and also reported their intention to return to Ukraine in the near future, and this may have contributed to the favorable attitudes of Estonians towards the refugees (Available at: <https://www.praxis.ee/tood/sojapogenike-kusitlusuuring/>). It is worth noting that both Georgians and Estonians have grappled with the Soviet legacy, and Georgians, in particular, have had to confront the complex history of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region. These regions declared independence from Georgia in the early 1990s and were backed by Russia, leading to armed conflicts in 2008 during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War [58]. Even today, these regions remain sources of contention and sensitive issues in Georgian politics and foreign relations, which likely contributes to the empathy displayed by Georgians towards the Ukrainian refugees.

Conversely, studies focusing on countries like the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as referenced in the Migration Policy Center by Dražanová and Geddes [59], have revealed a limited willingness to host Ukrainian refugees. These sentiments have been long-lasting as indicated by Bruneau et al. [60]. Similarly, the work of Frelak [61] found that among all countries examined, giving shelter to refugees elicited the strongest opposition in Slovakia. Dražanová and Geddes [59] draw significant conclusions regarding countries like the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which have relatively small populations and areas. In the context of the arrival of Syrian refugees, they suggested that the arrival of ethnically and culturally diverse groups is often perceived as a cultural threat in these nations. In these countries, the relatively homogenous nature of the population has historically played a crucial role in shaping their cultural identity and societal norms. As a result, the introduction of ethnically and culturally diverse groups can trigger feelings of insecurity or fear of losing their distinct cultural heritage [20,22]. It is important to note distinctions in the response and narratives to prior refugee crises (such as to Syrian refugees) as compared to the current context [62]. For example, as a significant number of individuals escaping from Syria and Afghanistan started to enter Europe and apply for asylum, their reception in Poland was less than welcoming. They were predominantly viewed not as legitimate refugees but as unauthorized immigrants, which led to a deterioration in how the public perceived them. The report from 2022 notes a change in this trend: the arrival of those fleeing the conflict in Ukraine has been met with a more positive response, indicating a shift towards more favorable views on refugees in certain cases [63].

Interestingly, the literature has explored an intriguing contrast to group threat theory, shedding light on the significant role that intergroup interaction with refugees plays in fostering positive perceptions towards them (known as *Intergroup Contact Theory*; [64,65]). This theory suggests that increased exposure between majority and minority groups can lead to reduced prejudice under certain conditions. The Intergroup Contact Theory offers valuable insights into how interactions and exposure between host communities and refugees can shape attitudes and promote understanding. When majority group members have opportunities to engage with refugees on a personal level, it can humanize the refugee experience, challenge stereotypes, and dispel misconceptions. Based on this, we examined if the country (Appendix 3) with the highest positive attitudes towards refugees may also have the highest percentage of refugees admitted concerning the host country population. We found that Georgia, the country with the most positive attitudes, had the relatively second least percentage of refugees to the size of the host country population, while Estonia, who displayed the second highest attitude had the highest relative percentage of refugees to the host country population size. Slovakia, on the other hand, had the least positive attitudes and was the third lowest relative percentage of admitted refugees to the host population size. These findings indicate that other elements in the context of our findings play a more significant role than what has previously been suggested with respect to intergroup contact theory (size of other refugee/migration groups, close ties with Ukraine, anti-Russian sentiment, etc.) The findings overall reveal a moderate inclination among individuals to assist refugees from Ukraine. These statistics come as a surprise, particularly in light of the robust political backing that Poland and Lithuania have provided to Ukraine. Yet, these num-

bers can be rationalized due to the substantial numbers of Ukrainian refugees in these countries, resulting in associated societal complexities, primarily of social and economic nature.

4.2. Relationship between resilience, coping mechanisms and attitudes towards refugees

Previous research on the relationship between resilience at various levels and attitudes toward refugees has received limited attention in the existing literature. Although existing research has predominantly focused on the shock absorbed by the refugee population upon being displaced, it is important to recognize that this shock is bi-directional, affecting both the refugees and the hosting community. This study examines the phenomenon through the perspective of the host-society.

Despite the importance of understanding how resilience influences perceptions of and interactions with refugees, there remains a noticeable gap in comprehensive investigations on this subject. The current study uncovers intriguing patterns between attitudes towards refugees and various levels of perceived resilience (societal, community, and individual), support for the government, as well as positive and negative coping mechanisms, highlighting the intricate nature of social cohesion and inclusion. Societal resilience denotes a community's capacity to endure and rebound from challenges and crises, creating an environment of stability and security. When individuals perceive their society as resilient, they are more likely to trust in their government's ability to effectively address issues. This support for the government stems from the belief that it can competently handle matters such as refugee integration, ensuring the welfare of both displaced individuals and host communities [66,67].

Similarly, in terms of community resilience, when communities demonstrate higher levels of resilience, they become better equipped to welcome refugees and provide support during the resettlement process [22]. Individual resilience exhibits a positive correlation with well-being (see also [68]) and attitudes toward refugees. Emotionally and mentally resilient individuals are more prone to greater adaptability and engaging in empathetic behaviors, displaying a willingness to understand the experiences and needs of refugees [69,70]. Morale and hope also play a vital role in shaping attitudes towards refugees. A positive outlook on the present (level of morale) and the future (level of hope), coupled with a belief that challenges can be overcome, reflects greater openness to accepting newcomers and offering a helping hand [71]. Furthermore, individuals who feel secure in their surroundings are more inclined to embrace diversity and perceive refugees as valuable assets to their communities rather than as threats [72]. Conversely, the study also reveals that a high sense of danger and a strong perception of threat (including political, economic, social, health, and security) can lead to more negative attitudes toward refugees. This suggests that individuals' feelings of insecurity or fear may impact their willingness to embrace newcomers and may contribute to prejudice and hostility as supported by previous work [17,21,27].

Lastly, the regression analysis revealed noteworthy findings regarding attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees. Females and individuals with higher education levels expressed more positive attitudes, aligning with previous research findings [16,17]. Additionally, among the examined indexes, societal resilience emerged as the most significant predictor of attitudes toward refugees. This highlights the pivotal role of resilience building in promoting positive perceptions, fostering social cohesion, and ensuring the successful integration of refugees into host communities. The independent variables incorporated in our analysis account for 36.4% of the variation in our dependent variable. For a broader grasp of the subject under study, it is recommended that subsequent research efforts could enhance our model by integrating new variables and acquiring more extensive datasets, which may potentially increase the predictive capacity of the regression model.

4.3. Limitations

The study's limitations present several opportunities for future research. First and foremost, the cross-sectional nature of this study offers only a snapshot of the context and does not explore the time-dependent developments of resilience, coping, and attitudes toward refugees. Consequently, the study can establish associations between variables, but causality cannot be determined. Furthermore, while the Internet panels aimed to achieve representative samples based on demographic characteristics published in the National Bureau of Statistics of each respective country, deviations in the collected samples' demographics must be considered when interpreting the study's conclusions. In addition, the smaller sample size of Georgia as compared to the other countries should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings of this study. Thirdly, the current study relied solely on quantitative data. To gain a deeper understanding of how each country handles crises like the ongoing war, future research could benefit from utilizing mixed method designs that incorporate both quantitative and qualitative approaches. As with all studies based on questionnaires, there is the possibility of social desirability bias, which should be taken into account when interpreting the results. It is important to also note that the current study is correlational, and as such, it does not allow for causal conclusions to be drawn. Finally, the data provided in Appendix 2 pertaining to the refugee counts in each respective studied country was extracted from information published in July 2023 (a momentary snapshot), although the numbers changed during the course of the research study and thereafter. Considering the evolving nature of attitudes, it is imperative to conduct a longitudinal prospective study that takes into account the unfolding developments in Ukraine and any shifts in policies within host nations. Equally important is the need for a more intricate comprehension of the process by which attitudes towards refugees are shaped.

5. Conclusions

While refugees are commonly portrayed as a potential threat, our findings indicate that as they grow stronger and more resilient within our communities, we tend to display increased openness and acceptance towards them. This shift not only fosters a welcoming environment but also contributes to disaster risk reduction by strengthening social cohesion and collective capacity to cope with crises. Our study provides several recommendations with implications for disaster risk reduction. First, targeted interventions including education and awareness campaigns, can play a vital role in promoting empathy and understanding toward refugees. In addition,

creating opportunities for meaningful contact between host community members and refugees can also break down threat perceptions and foster positive attitudes. By facilitating genuine interactions and dispelling stereotypes, these initiatives can nurture a sense of shared humanity and mutual respect [73]. Furthermore, policymakers and community leaders must address negative societal attitudes toward refugees. Third, enforcing policies and initiatives that foster social inclusion and economic prospects for both refugees and host communities can help alleviate sentiments of rivalry or perceived threat. By fostering inclusive spaces and platforms for open dialogue, individuals can engage in discussions that challenge biases and cultivate empathy [74]. Taking a comprehensive approach to address the underlying fears and insecurities that contribute to negative attitudes is essential [22]. By doing so, we can create environments that welcome and support refugees and host communities alike, allowing both to thrive and ensuring that newcomers can contribute positively to their new societies.

The findings of this research provide valuable insights that can be utilized in the development of policies aimed at enhancing societies' capacity to effectively respond to ongoing crises and future calamities as well as improve attitudes towards refugees. By better understanding facets of resilience, coping, and attitudes towards refugees, policymakers can develop more informed and targeted strategies to support communities in times of new adversities.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix 1

Table 1
Overview of Scales Used, Their Original Sources, and Item Count in the Final Questionnaire.

Name of scale	Original source	Number of items in scale
Societal resilience	Kimhi and Eshel (2019)	10
Community resilience	Kimhi et al., 2021a	7
Individual resilience	[49]	2
Hope	Eshel et al., 2023	3
Morale	[41]	1
Feeling safe at home	[42]	1
Well-being	[50]	5

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Name of scale	Original source	Number of items in scale
Sense of danger	[51]	5
Distress symptoms	[52]	8
Post-traumatic stress disorder	[53]	6
Perceived threats	Eshel et al., 2021	5
Government support	Eshel et al., 2021	1
Attitudes towards war refugees	Original	4

Appendix 2

Table A2

Correlations (R-Pearson) between varied indices assessed and attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees per country

Index name	Correlation with Attitudes Towards Refugees						
	Poland	Georgia	Czech Republic	Estonia	Lithuania	Slovakia	Romania
Gender	0.076*	0.202*	0.155*	-0.010	0.050	0.006	-0.080
Age	0.174*	0.303*	-0.055	0.105*	-0.054	-0.071*	0.035
Education	0.062*	0.250*	0.192*	0.178*	0.105*	0.170*	0.012
Family status	0.035	0.152*	0.079*	0.083*	-0.023	0.012	0.019
Family income	0.168*	N/A	0.274*	-0.223*	N/A	0.174*	0.089*
Level of religiosity	0.007	N/A	0.016	0.093*	-0.035	0.039	0.031
Societal Resilience	0.239*	0.518*	0.653*	0.632*	0.582*	0.540*	0.357*
Support for Government	0.110*	0.401*	0.692*	0.529*	0.572*	0.413*	0.168*
Hope	0.171*	0.220*	0.478*	0.484*	0.425*	0.308*	0.325*
Community Resilience	0.220*	0.156*	0.440*	0.302*	0.462*	0.294*	0.334*
Morae	0.137*	0.208*	0.287*	0.139*	0.101*	0.127*	0.002
Individual Resilience	0.221*	0.107	0.345*	0.216*	0.194*	0.185*	0.136*
Safety at home	0.136*	0.204*	0.216*	0.097*	0.103*	0.140*	0.025
Wellbeing	0.197*	0.190*	0.136*	0.186*	0.290*	0.003	0.059
PTSD	-0.016	-0.234*	-0.019	-0.083*	-0.041	0.036	0.228*
Distress	-0.091*	-0.336*	-0.202*	-0.132*	-0.050	-0.108*	0.163*
Threats	0.079*	-0.423*	-0.299*	-0.298*	-0.071*	-0.271*	0.130*
Danger	-0.041	-0.134*	-0.326*	-0.194*	0.014	-0.204*	0.206*

Note: * denotes a significant ($p < 0.05$) correlation.

Appendix 3

Table A3

Per country examined, the number of Ukrainian refugees admitted, the population size of the host country and the ratio (%) of refugees admitted to the host country population size. Note: Data retrieved UNHCR (<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukrainet>) (July 2023)

Country	Ukrainian refugees admitted, July 2023	Host country population, July 2023	% of refugees admitted/host country population
Romania	110,921	18.9 million	0.59%
Georgia	25,701	3.9 million	0.66%
Slovakia	111,173	5.8 million	1.9%
Lithuania	75,197	2.8 million	2.7%
Poland	1,564,711	37.7 million	4.15%
Czech Republic	497,217	10.8 million	4.6%
Estonia	67,601	1.4 million	4.8%

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