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Hope and Distress: A Cross-Country Study Amid the Russian-Ukrainian War

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ABSTRACT

Conflict deeply affects human experiences, frequently testing individual resilience to its breaking point and leaving enduring psychological and societal wounds. The current conflict in Ukraine, initiated by Russia's invasion in 2022, illustrates this phenomenon by altering regional relationships and triggering a major humanitarian crisis marked by extensive displacement, loss of life, and emotional turmoil. This study explores the factors influencing hope and distress in Ukraine alongside six nearby European countries during the ongoing conflict. A cross-sectional survey collected data primarily via internet panel samples from the Czech Republic, Georgia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine in the second year since the war's initiation. The current study utilised validated instruments, collecting data on levels of hope, distress, individual resilience, community resilience, societal resilience, morale, sense of danger, perceived security threats, and demographic characteristics. Hope and distress levels differ across countries, with Ukraine exhibiting the highest levels of both (3.74 ± 1.02 and 2.89 ± 0.87, respectively). Overall, average scores of hope were higher than average distress levels. Across the regression models for the seven countries, hope showed strong associations with individual (between $\beta = 0.089$ and $\beta = 0.327$) and societal resilience (between $\beta = 0.206$ and $\beta = 0.514$), while morale (between $\beta = -0.104$ and $\beta = -0.479$) and individual resilience (between $\beta = -0.077$ and $\beta = -0.335$) displayed a protective relationship against distress (all β values were significant, $p < 0.01$). Monitoring hope and distress is crucial during the Russian-Ukrainian war and other adversities, as these factors give insight into the current and future psychological states of affected populations. The results offer valuable information that can guide the development of tailored strategies to enhance hope and buffer distress in war-impacted countries, as well as those experiencing its broader effects. Fostering individual and societal resilience, alongside enhancing morale, may strengthen hope and mitigate

Simon Esbit and Arielle Kaim contributed equally to this article.

distress amid adversity. Developing targeted interventions that address each population's unique needs, as well as their sociocultural and geopolitical contexts can enhance efficacy.

1 | Introduction

War represents one of the most profound and distressing human experiences, pushing individuals to endure hardships that stretch their resilience to its limits. Conflicts impose lasting vulnerabilities on individuals and societies, forcing extraordinary sacrifices and causing both physical and psychological harm (Kaim, Tov, et al. 2024; Kimhi et al. 2023). Beyond the battlefield, wars disrupt familial relationships, destroy property, and create economic and social upheaval. These hardships, compounded by long-term repercussions, deeply affect communities, instilling fear and psychological distress even among those not directly involved (Hang et al. 2021). Moreover, the consequences extend beyond borders, with the influx of refugees, strained resources, and fears of conflict spreading, impacting economies, public health systems, social structures, and the environment far from the conflict zone (Kaim, Tov, et al. 2024; Kaim, Kimhi, et al. 2024; Tampubolon 2022).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, following its 2014 annexation of Crimea, has provoked the most serious military conflict in Europe since 1945 (Kurapov et al. 2022). This war continues to impact Ukraine, European countries, and the global community in various aspects of life, including the global economy (Mbah and Wasum 2022; Porumbescu and Coșciug 2024), physical health (Spiegel et al. 2023), mental health (Osokina et al. 2023), and a migration crisis of both internally and externally displaced Ukrainians (Kaim, Kimhi, et al. 2024). Despite the adversity posed by the war, Ukraine is demonstrating resilience, transforming hardship into a source of national pride (Hrytsak 2024). In the face of Russia's aggression, Ukrainians have mobilised their individual, community, and societal strength to meet the unprecedented challenges (Teperik 2022).

Ongoing attacks on civilians and infrastructure amplify the crisis's impact and affect individual well-being (Mariotti 2022). The destruction of homes, energy facilities, and transportation networks has contributed to widespread instability, displacing millions of Ukrainians (Kimhi et al. 2024). As of September 2024, nearly 7 million Ukrainian refugees have sought safety across Europe and beyond, transforming Ukraine's social structure and leaving long-term scars that will impact future generations (UNHCR 2024; Javanbakht 2022). The prolonged conflict aligns with the polyvictimization model, which posits that repeated victimisation worsens mental health (Kurapov et al. 2023). This may overwhelm healthcare and social systems in host countries. Beyond Ukraine, the psychological impact affects neighbouring populations. A longitudinal study of 17 European countries reported a marked decline in well-being on the day of Russia's invasion, with notably lower well-being on days when the war was more salient in the media (Scharbert et al. 2024). Heightened anxiety and depression have also been observed among Central European students (Riad et al. 2022). Adversities reshape the fabric of life, and it is essential to explore how hope and distress are impacted in order to provide informed recommendations for the future. Levels of hope and distress capture the psychological toll of hardship and can be treated as coping indicators (Eshel et al. 2023; Marciano et al. 2024).

1.1 | Hope

Hope holds a myriad of definitions (Pleeging et al. 2022). Snyder defines hope as 'a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy) and of (b) pathways planning to meet goals' (Snyder et al. 1996). Typically, hope is understood as a desire or preference linked to a possible but uncertain future outcome, intrinsically tied to the perception of future-oriented thinking. Hope and well-being have been shown to be positively associated in both the COVID-19 pandemic and armed conflict settings, as positive emotions enhance subjective well-being (Kimhi et al. 2021; Marciano et al. 2022). People who report higher well-being during adversity tend to be more open to new experiences, relationships, and impressions, allowing them to develop greater skills and insights (Kimhi et al. 2021). Conversely, low levels of hope during times of crisis are linked to a heightened risk of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Hamama-Raz et al. 2024). Studies within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict suggest that as the probability for peace appears more distant, hope levels may decline, reflecting a weakened sense of control and a fading belief in positive outcomes, where citizens' tendency to underestimate their rival's wish for peace can further erode hope and reduce support for peacebuilding (Leshem and Halperin 2020; Ricarte 2023).

Previous literature has identified that hope follows certain demographic trends; individuals with higher socioeconomic status, stronger religiosity, and living in nuclear families report higher levels of hope during times of adversity (Kimhi et al. 2021; Flesia et al. 2023). In a 2016 meta-analysis, Yarcheski and Mahon identified five predictors of hope with large effect sizes (positive affect, life satisfaction, optimism, self-esteem, and social support), one with a medium effect size (depression), four with small effect sizes (negative affect, stress, academic achievement, and violence), and one with a trivial effect size (gender) (Yarcheski and Mahon 2016). Previous research has also demonstrated a positive relationship between hope and resilience at the individual, community, and societal levels during times of adversity (Morote et al. 2017; Kimhi et al. 2021, 2023).

1.2 | Distress

Psychological distress as defined by Ridner, is 'the unique discomforting, emotional state experienced by an individual in response to a specific stressor or demand that results in harm, either temporary or permanent, to the person' (Ridner 2004). Distress is a present-oriented factor (Kaim, Siman-Tov, et al. 2024). Research reveals that distress follows distinct demographic trends;

individuals with lower socioeconomic status, women, those with less education, unmarried individuals, and the secular are more prone to report higher levels of distress during challenging times (Braun-Lewensohn et al. 2021). The length of the adversity plays a crucial role, with prolonged hardships leading to weariness and unfamiliar crises intensifying distress as individuals, communities, and society find it difficult to adjust to new realities (Kaim, Siman-Tov, et al. 2024). Heightened perceived danger, preexisting mental health conditions, and resource scarcity are associated with amplified symptoms of distress, while robust social networks, effective coping mechanisms, and self-efficacy can mitigate the adverse effects of distress (Kaim, Siman-Tov, et al. 2024; Eshel et al. 2023; Almedom 2004).

The study investigates the key factors associated with hope and distress in the context of the protracted war. The levels of hope and distress are explored across Ukraine and six European countries to understand their associations with various demographic and psychological factors, revealing unique regression models for each country. To the authors' knowledge, no previous study has explored this specific interplay, and thus the study aims to address this gap in the literature. By gaining a deeper understanding of the varying levels of hope and distress, and their unique associations across countries, this research may aid in developing country-specific strategies to foster hope and mitigate distress in countries affected by internal and external conflicts.

2 | Methods

2.1 | Study Design & Data Collection

The study aimed to investigate differences in levels of hope and distress across countries, as well as their relationship with psychological factors (individual resilience, community resilience, societal resilience, morale, sense of danger, perceived threats) and demographic characteristics. The psychological factors were previously associated with hope and distress in contexts such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Israel-Gaza war, and socio-political crises, which informed their inclusion in the current study (Eshel et al. 2023; Kaim, Siman-Tov, et al. 2024; Kimhi et al. 2021, 2024). Cross-sectional data was collected using structured questionnaires in seven countries: the Czech Republic, Georgia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine.

Data collection took place from October to November 2023, except for Georgia, where the data collection extended over a longer period, from November 2023 to the beginning of February 2024. The sampling followed National Statistics Bureau reports and set quotas in each country to ensure a representative sample, using stratified sampling based on gender, age, and geographic distribution. Over 1000 respondents were recruited in each country via internet panels in the respective countries, except in Georgia where the data were collected through face-to-face interviews and via Google Forms. The Russian-occupied regions of Ukraine, Crimea, Donetsk, and Lugansk, were not included in the study. All questionnaires, originally developed in English, were translated into the respective local languages using a back-and-forth translation methodology to ensure consistency in wording and clarity. The questionnaire was approved by the Tel Aviv University Ethics Committee (Approval #0005146-1, dated July 12, 2022), and all participants signed an informed consent form before their participation.

2.2 | Participants

The minimum sample size for each of the seven countries was calculated using OpenEpi software. Proportional sampling was employed, based on the population size of each country, and a 95% confidence level was used. Intending to cover varied groups within each population, the collected sample size exceeded the minimum requirement of 385 respondents.

2.3 | Measures

All scales used in this study are based on validated tools utilised in previous studies throughout various adversities including the COVID-19 pandemic, the Israel-Gaza war, and periods of socio-political crisis (Eshel et al. 2023; Kaim, Tov, et al. 2024; Ballada et al. 2022; Kaim, Siman-Tov, et al. 2024; Kimhi et al. 2024, respectively). All the measures assess individual perceptions, even when addressing societal-level issues. Aggregating these individual responses provides collective insights into broader societal trends. Across all countries, all index scales demonstrated Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.7. The instruments are explained in further detail below.

2.4 | Dependent Variables (Hope and Distress)

2.4.1 | Hope Indicator

The hope scale is a future-oriented scale, originally developed by Jarymowicz and Bar-Tal (2006) to assess hope for peace in the Middle East, and was adapted for this study to measure one's perception of hope for oneself, their community, and their country after a crisis (Kimhi et al. 2024). It consists of three items, rated from 1 (very little hope) to 5 (very high hope). A couple of examples from the tool: 'I have hope that I will emerge strengthened from the present situation'. 'I have hope that my country will emerge strengthened from the current situation'. The phrase 'the current situation' is intentionally broad to allow for flexibility across different contexts, enabling participants to interpret it based on their evolving, indivudual circumstances. Specifically, participants are asked to interpret the 'current situation' concerning their individual, domestic, or international challenges—whether these are directly related to the Russian-Ukrainian war or to other factors they may be facing. This broad phrasing reflects the interconnected nature of hope and how it can be influenced by a variety of contexts.

2.4.2 | Distress Indicator

Psychological distress, including both anxiety and depressive symptoms, was assessed using an eight-item scale (Kimhi et al. 2024) adapted from the original nine-item scale by Derogatis and Savitz (2000). The item on suicidal ideation was excluded for

ethical reasons. Respondents rated their own personal experiences of various emotional states on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a very great extent). The items included: 'To what extent have you suffered from this problem in the past month' (1) nervousness, (2) feelings of loneliness, (3) being in a bad mood, (4) lack of interest in anything, (5) hopelessness about the future, (6) feelings of tension, (7) restlessness, and (8) feelings of worthlessness.

2.5 | Types of Resilience

2.5.1 | Societal Resilience Measurement

Societal resilience was measured using a 10-item scale adapted from the original 13-item scale developed by Kimhi and Eshel (2019). Respondents rated their agreement on a scale from 1 (do not agree at all) to 6 (completely agree), assessing their confidence in the government's decision-making, societal support for leaders during crises, trust in security forces, national pride, optimism about the country's future, and trust in national institutions such as the police, parliament, media, and armed forces.

2.5.2 | Community Resilience Measurement

The community resilience scale used in this study consists of seven items adapted from the original 10-item scale from Leykin et al. (2013). Responses are measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A few example items are: 'There is mutual assistance and people care for one another', 'I can count on people in my community to help me in a crisis', and 'Residents in my community trust each other'.

2.5.3 | Individual Resilience Measurement

Individual resilience was assessed using the ten-item version of the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (Connor and Davidson 2003; Vaishnavi et al. 2007). Respondents rated their agreement with statements including: 'I am able to adapt when changes occur', 'I tend to bounce back after illness, injury, or other hardships', and 'I am not easily discouraged by failure' on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (not true at all) to 4 (true nearly all the time).

2.6 | Coping Mechanisms

2.6.1 | Morale Indicator

Morale is assessed using a single-question measure, 'How would you define your mood (morale/spirit) these days?', where respondents rate their current mood on a scale from 1 (very bad) to 5 (very good). This item was utilised in previous studies (Kimhi et al. 2021, 2024).

2.6.2 | Sense of Danger Scale

Sense of danger was assessed using a five-item scale (Kimhi et al. 2024), adapted from Solomon and Prager's (1992) model. Respondents rate their emotional states on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much) based on their experiences over the past month, aimed to describe people's reactions to present situations (including the war in Ukraine). The scale includes questions such as: 'To what extent do you feel that your life is in danger at present?', 'To what extent do you feel that your country is in existential danger at present', and 'How worried are you that your country will be financially damaged by the current situation?'

2.6.3 | Perceived Threat Indicator

This scale is based on a single question in which respondents rate the extent to which they currently feel threatened (Kimhi et al. 2024). Participants are asked, 'How would you rate the following as threatening you personally?': for example, security threat. They note the extent to which they feel threatened on a scale from 1 (not threatening at all) to 5 (threatening to a very great extent).

2.7 | Demographics

The demographic data collected included age, gender (1 = Female, 2 = Male), family status (1 = Married, 2 = Single, 3 = Divorced/Widower, 4 = Other), family income (1 = Much lower than the average, 2 = Lower than the average, 3 = Average, 4 = Higher than the average, 5 = Much higher than the average), education (1 = Elementary school or less, 2 = High school, 3 = Higher than high school but with no academic degree, 4 = Bachelor's degree, 5 = Master's degree and above), children (1 = None, 2 = One, 3 = Two, 4 = Three, 5 = Four or more), religiosity (1 = Secular, 2 = Traditional, 3 = Religious, 4 = Very religious), and political identity (1 = Strong right, 2 = Right, 3 = Center, 4 = Left, 5 = Strong Left).

2.8 | Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to present the demographic characteristics of respondent groups by country, expressed as percentages and means with standard deviations (Table 1). Normality of the outcome variables across all countries was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The results indicated that all data were normally distributed, as the significance values (p-values) for all variables were greater than 0.05. Levels of hope and distress were analysed across countries using one-way ANOVA and a Bonferroni test for multiple comparisons. Linear regression analyses were conducted to explore the factors influencing hope and distress across the seven countries. The presented multivariate analysis was performed against variables associated with the dependent variables in the univariate analysis across all countries after negating multi-collinearity (maximum

TABLE 1 | Demographic characteristics of respondent groups by country (presented as percentages).

	Czech Republic $N = 1509$	Georgia $N = 1007$	Lithuania $N = 1131$	Poland $N = 2118$	Romania $N = 1111$	Slovakia $N = 1506$	Ukraine $N = 2247$
Gender							
Female	51.4	59.3	37.5	53.6	49.3	51.7	52.1
Male	48.6	40.7	62.5	46.4	50.7	48.3	47.9
Age (mean ± SD)	48.8 ± 17.2	42.6 ± 14.8	45.3 ± 13.0	46.5 ± 16.6	44.5 ± 14.6	46.5 ± 16.2	42.2 ± 13.3
Family status							
Married	45.1	54.1	63.7	65.1	58.5	49.3	56.3
Single	30.4	33.2	19.6	18.4	25.2	33.9	23.9
Divorced/Widowed	24.5	11.2	15.0	13.6	12.7	16.9	17.5
Other	0	1.5	1.7	2.9	3.6	0	2.4
Level of income							
Much lower than the average	7.1	1.7	9.2	20.2	16.7	9.3	24.6
Lower than the average	16.1	11.0	20.5	27.0	23.7	17.5	30.5
Average	40.9	58.6	47.6	18.7	36.9	46.3	31.7
Higher than the average	31.3	26.2	20.4	16.9	20.7	23.8	12.0
Much higher than the average	4.6	2.5	2.2	17.2	2.1	3.1	1.2
Level of education							
Elementary or less	6.6	0.3	0.8	1.6	2.4	4.8	0.6
High school	66.6	4.9	10.4	40.4	35.4	61.8	9.5
Higher than high school but with no academic degree	7.2	7.8	21.0	12.1	11.9	11.2	35.0
Bachelor's degree	5.3	32.7	35.0	9.4	37.9	3.5	20.4
Master's degree and above	14.3	54.3	32.8	36.5	12.5	18.9	34.6
Children							
None	29.8	37.5	29.4	34.4	35.9	33.4	26.3
One	20.7	24.6	23.2	25.6	37.7	19.7	33
Two	35.7	25.8	34.9	28.6	22.4	32.3	31.8
Three	10.4	8.5	12.5	8.6	2.7	11.5	6.4
Four or more	3.4	3.5	0	2.8	1.2	3.1	2.5
Level of religiosity							
Secular	63.9	13.2	27.5	24.6	10.9	26.3	15.5
Traditional	28.7	16.5	48.6	49.7	44.0	52.9	54.6
Religious	5.8	38.4	22.1	19.1	40.1	16.7	26.2
Very religious	1.6	31.9	1.8	6.6	4.9	4.1	37.0
Political identity							
Strong right	3.4	2.5	3.8	11.9	3.9	2.8	6.3
Right	18.2	18.5	24.3	13.7	23.9	13.8	22.8
Center	63.2	51.3	56.6	44.4	57.1	62.2	58.4
Left	12.9	25.7	12.7	19.5	12.4	16.8	8.6
Strong left	2.4	2.0	2.6	10.4	2.8	4.4	3.9

variance inflation factor value was 1.977 for hope across all countries and 2.020 for distress across all countries) and conducting a homoscedasticity check. The models included the following demographic and psychological variables: gender, age, family status, family income, political identity, education level, level of religiosity, number of children, levels of morale, distress, hope, sense of danger, perceived security threat, individual resilience, community resilience, and societal resilience. All

statistical analyses were conducted with an a priori significance level of $p \leq 0.05$, using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29.

3 | Results

3.1 | Characteristics of the Sampled Population

The study sample consisted of 10,629 respondents, with the demographic breakdown for each country displayed in Table 1.

The respondents' average ages ranged from oldest in the Czech Republic to youngest in Ukraine. Regarding education, the majority in Georgia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine had a bachelor's degree or higher, while most respondents in the Czech Republic and Slovakia had a high school diploma. Most respondents across countries considered their income average, except in Poland, where lower income was more common. The largest subset in the Czech Republic identified as secular, while in Georgia and Romania, most identified as religious or very religious. In the other countries, most respondents identified as traditional. Most respondents across countries identified as centrists within their respective political landscapes.

3.2 | Levels of Hope and Distress

Figure 1 illustrates the spread and central tendency of hope and distress across each country. A One-way ANOVA revealed significant differences in the levels of hope [$F(6, 10{,}490) = 412.584$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.191$] and distress [$F(6, 10{,}578) = 139.829$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.073$] between the seven European countries. Ukraine exhibited the highest levels of both hope and distress (3.74 ± 1.02 and 2.89 ± 0.87, respectively), while the Czech Republic had the lowest level of hope (2.33 ± 0.99) and Lithuania had the lowest level of distress (2.01 ± 0.85). Post hoc Bonferroni analysis found significant differences in hope levels between all the countries. For distress, significant differences were observed between most countries, with the exceptions being between Poland and Romania, Poland and Georgia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, and Slovakia and Romania ($p > 0.05$).

3.3 | Factors Associated With Hope and Distress

Table 2 presents the results of multivariate linear regression analyses on hope and distress levels across the seven European countries. Lithuania had the strongest model, explaining 39.8% of the variance in hope ($R^2 = 0.398$), while Slovakia had the weakest, explaining only 19.1% ($R^2 = 0.191$). Standardised beta coefficients assessed the relative strength of each variable in the models. Across all countries examined, societal resilience and individual resilience consistently showed the strongest significant association with hope. Concerning the level of distress, Poland's model was the most explanatory, accounting for 49.1% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.491$), while the Czech Republic's model was the weakest, explaining only 25.7% ($R^2 = 0.257$). Morale and individual resilience were the most significant factors, negatively associated with distress.

4 | Discussion

This study explores how levels of hope and distress are associated with the protracted Russian-Ukranian war, focussing on the perspectives of Ukraine and six nearby countries: the Czech Republic, Georgia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. The comparative framework of this study reveals notable

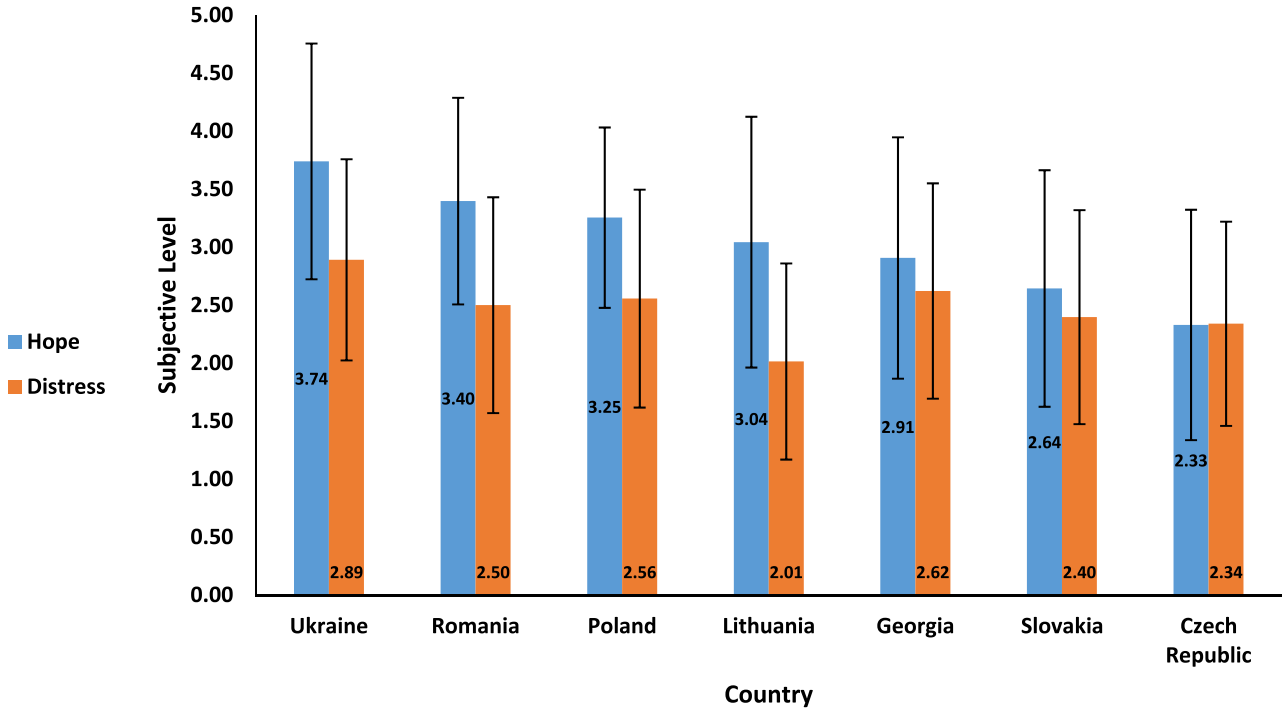

FIGURE 1 | Spread and central tendency for hope and distress levels across seven European countries.

TABLE 2 | Results of linear regressions exploring hope and distress.

	Hope							Distress						
	Lithuania	Ukraine	Romania	Poland	Georgia	Czech Republic	Slovakia	Lithuania	Ukraine	Romania	Poland	Georgia	Czech Republic	Slovakia
Adjusted R^2	0.398***	0.364***	0.384***	0.299***	0.228***	0.279***	0.191***	0.447***	0.319***	0.357***	0.491***	0.454***	0.257***	0.261***
Associated variables (β reported)														
Societal resilience	0.514***	0.377***	0.256***	0.208***	0.315***	0.299***	0.206***	−0.035	0.069**	0.031	0.042	0.003	0.063*	0.106***
Level of morale	0.060	0.082***	0.157***	0.150***	0.111***	0.050	0.061*	−0.479***	−0.363***	−0.422***	−0.419***	−0.374***	−0.149***	−0.104***
Individual resilience	0.089***	0.284***	0.327***	0.319***	0.212***	0.130***	0.221***	−0.077**	−0.104***	−0.086**	−0.162***	−0.148***	−0.265***	−0.335***
Age	0.004	−0.074***	−0.015	−0.107***	−0.039	−0.031	−0.021	−0.141***	−0.194***	0.049	−0.206***	−0.319***	−0.200***	−0.181***
Sense of danger	0.128***	−0.046*	−0.046	−0.018	0.068*	−0.118***	−0.127***	0.113***	−0.187***	0.176***	0.286***	0.150***	0.133***	0.171***
Perceived security threats	−0.032	0.049*	0.004	0.052*	−0.022	0.014	0.008	0.180***	0.152***	0.168***	0.087***	0.078**	0.142***	0.190***
Community resilience	0.071*	0.016	0.064	0.102***	0.100**	0.138***	0.131***	0.024	0.055*	0.081*	0.002	−0.061*	−0.002	−0.003
Level of distress	−0.010	−0.084***	−0.001	0.054	0.105**	−0.017	0.048	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Family status	−0.011	−0.006	0.004	0.013	−0.029	−0.029	−0.016	0.047	0.025	0.056*	0.068***	0.102***	−0.026	0.030
Family income	0.085**	−0.019	0.013	0.004	0.094**	−0.032	−0.026	−0.046	−0.034	0.046	−0.028	−0.016	−0.090***	−0.058*
Children	0.016	0.001	−0.019	0.057*	−0.015	0.023	0.007	−0.015	0.015	−0.086**	0.039	−0.020	−0.094***	−0.044
Education Level	0.047	−0.062***	0.007	−0.057**	−0.084**	−0.029	−0.028	−0.010	0.048*	−0.092***	−0.001	0.025	0.002	0.012
Level of hope	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	−0.009	−0.089***	−0.001	0.039	0.074**	−0.018	0.044
Gender	−0.022	−0.081***	−0.039	−0.016	0.024	0.039	−0.009	−0.089***	−0.010	0.028	−0.039*	−0.042	−0.046*	0.028
Political identity	−0.026	0.011	0.013	0.039	−0.040	−0.030	−0.034	−0.010	0.033	0.057*	0.034	−0.013	0.084***	0.004
Level of religiosity	−0.007	0.028	0.069**	0.046	0.002	0.059**	0.054*	−0.012	0.056**	0.074**	0.016	0.019	0.054*	−0.009

*$p < 0.05$.
**$p < 0.01$.
***$p < 0.001$.

variations in hope and distress levels and their associations within each country. It is important to acknowledge that the cross-sectional design of this study limits the ability to infer causality, as it provides only a snapshot of dynamic psychological factors at a single point in time. These factors require continuous monitoring to capture their fluctuations in response to evolving circumstances.

4.1 | Country-Specific Differences in Hope Levels

The level of hope was highest in Ukraine, followed by Romania, Poland, Lithuania, Georgia, and Slovakia, and the lowest in the Czech Republic. Post hoc analysis revealed significant differences in hope levels between all countries. Ukraine's current crisis poses a profound transformative force on its people. Similar to the Rally-Round-the-Flag phenomenon observed in the United States of America after the September 11, 2001, terror attacks, the severe disruption caused by the war in Ukraine has galvanised a strong public resolve to shape their future (Kimhi et al. 2024). The heightened sense of existential threat has fostered national unity and international solidarity, reinforcing national sovereignty as a central focus during the crisis. This unified commitment may be a key factor contributing to the high sense of hope within Ukrainian society (Kizub et al. 2022).

Romania, Poland, and Lithuania also exhibited high levels of hope. Their economic growth and political stability since joining the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) may contribute to their optimistic outlook (Lenzi and Perucca 2016; Streimikiene 2014). These countries gained international visibility and recognition for accepting and integrating refugees, which can boost hope levels within them (Kaim, Kimhi, et al. 2024). For instance, in Poland, the majority of Ukrainian refugees—who are primarily healthy—have been successfully integrated into the workforce, contributing to a boost in Poland's GDP without having a significant impact on the country's public health (Korzeniewski et al. 2024). Furthermore, Georgia's level of hope is lower than the aforementioned EU and NATO countries, potentially influenced by its aspirations to join the EU and NATO as protection from Russian aggression (Auyezov 2022). The EU's fluctuating stance on Georgia's accession, amid ex-President Saakashvili's trial and treatment in prison, reflects concerns about democratic standards, political stability, and public perception (Genté 2023). Additionally, their hope may be affected by ongoing territorial disputes in Abkhazia and the South Ossetia/Tskhinvali regions (Johnson and Toft 2013; Kaim, Kimhi, et al. 2024). These regions declared independence from Georgia in the early 1990s with Russian support, leading to the 2008 Russo-Georgian War (Kakachia 2014). Slovakia and the Czech Republic, despite being EU and NATO members, exhibit the lowest levels of hope among the countries studied. The Czech Republic's low hope levels may be tied to an enduring and deeply ingrained scepticism within the Czech population. Whether it is reflected in their attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees (Kaim, Kimhi, et al. 2024), scepticism about climate change (Čermák and Patočková 2020), or their relationship with the EU and NATO (Haydanka 2020), a persistent wariness may be at play. This scepticism may, in part, be rooted in a lingering case of Munich Syndrome, the psychological legacy of the 1938 Munich Agreement, in which European powers betrayed Czechoslovakia in an attempt to appease Nazi Germany. The memory of that failure engrained a deep-seated wariness of foreign powers. In light of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, this historical distrust coupled with rising Euroscepticism may lead many Czechs to view the current geopolitical landscape with caution (Eisenchteter 2024). In Slovakia, diminished hope may stem from perceived threats to democracy under the current government. Prime Minister Robert Fico's shift from strong fiscal support for Ukraine to policies prioritising ties with Russia contrasts with the EU's stance, potentially causing friction and lowering hope levels (Khajuria 2024). Furthermore, low levels of hope in Slovakia may be linked to poor mental health levels and significant gaps in social care. Many individuals with mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, and alcohol dependence, remain untreated in Slovakia due to a lack of accessibility to care, insufficient psychiatric resources, and delays in receiving timely treatment (Brazinova et al. 2019). These issues are further compounded by rising mental health concerns, increased suicide attempts, social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing war in Ukraine (Áč 2023). These challenges may contribute to the lower hope levels among the Slovak population as compared to the other studied populations.

4.2 | Country-Specific Differences in Distress Levels

Distress levels were highest in Ukraine, followed by Georgia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, with the lowest in Lithuania. Significant differences in distress levels were observed between most countries, except between Poland and Romania, Poland and Georgia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, and Slovakia and Romania. Distress levels across all countries were generally lower than their corresponding levels of hope. In Ukraine, despite high levels of hope, coexisting high levels of distress may reflect the harsh realities on the ground. Russia's indiscriminate targeting of civilian populations, critical infrastructure, and essential services has precipitated widespread resource shortages, large-scale displacement, and sustained exposure to violence (Kizub et al. 2022). The ongoing threat to their security, along with uncertainty about the future, places immense psychological pressure on the Ukrainian population. High levels of stress, coupled with inadequate healthcare access, exacerbate the physical and psychological toll (Kimhi et al. 2024). In this context, high hope and high distress coexist as a complex psychological response, where the drive to persevere persists even amidst severe hardship. Georgia, with the next highest level of distress, may be influenced by ongoing territorial disputes and haunting echoes from their recent struggle with Russia during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, which resulted in the presence of Russian military troops in 20% of Georgia's territory (Modebadze 2021). The country's pursuit of NATO and EU membership, combined with the lack of formal protection, may heighten the population's sense of vulnerability to Russian aggression. Additionally, allegations of corruption and threats to democracy from the influential Georgian Dream party could steer the country away from the

West and toward Russia, deepening the societal divides, and contributing to elevated distress levels (Kukhianidze 2021). Lithuania reports notably low levels of distress. Lithuanians' low distress levels may be impacted by exceedingly high levels of happiness as reported in the last iteration of the World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al. 2024). Despite being an immediate neighbour to Russia via Kaliningrad, Lithuania's robust backing from NATO seems to enhance its defencive capabilities and cultivate a sense of readiness, buffering the psychological impact of the ongoing Russian-Ukranian conflict and contributing to a more stable and secure outlook (Lingevicius 2020). Additionally, the upcoming establishment of a German brigade in Lithuania, along with widespread requests from Lithuanians to join the volunteer riflemen's union may decrease levels of distress by boosting confidence in their security (Bankauskaité and Šlekys 2023; Malužinas 2024).

4.3 | Psychological Factors and Hope

Hope, a future-oriented state, is a crucial psychological and motivational force during adversities (Valle et al. 2006). In the current study, societal and individual resilience demonstrated the strongest associations with hope in all seven countries (all $p < 0.001$), aligning with existing literature that underscores resilience—whether individual, community, or societal—as a crucial foundation for cultivating hope (Kimhi et al. 2023; Morote et al. 2017). The strong associations identified between individual resilience—defined by as one's 'capacity to foster, engage in, and sustain positive relationships and to endure and recover from life stressors and social isolation'—and levels of hope in Romania and Poland might be explained by cultural differences in emotional expressivity. A 2009 Gallup study found that former Soviet Union countries and satellite states were among the least likely to express emotions daily, with Romania and Poland standing out for their relatively higher emotional expressivity (Clifton 2012). Emotional expressivity could explain the stronger relationship between individual resilience and hope in these countries. Resilient individuals often build competence and self-efficacy by overcoming challenges, reinforcing their belief in achieving goals despite obstacles (Jackson et al. 2007). Cognitive reappraisal allows them to adapt by reframing adversity as opportunities for growth, fostering hope and optimism (Riepenhausen et al. 2022). Research shows this reframing is linked to higher hope in war-affected populations (Halperin and Gross 2011). Those with higher emotional intelligence are typically better at reframing, enabling them to maintain resilience when facing adversity (Megías-Robles et al. 2019). Emotional intelligence training programs could bolster individual resilience and foster hope amid challenges like the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war (Durham et al. 2023).

Supportive relationships at individual and societal levels reinforce hope by fostering camaraderie and the belief that challenges can be overcome. Societal resilience, defined as the ability to absorb shocks caused by disasters, emergencies, and crises and recuperate to resume normal functioning and sustain growth at a societal level (Bodas et al. 2022), has been strongly linked to hope in prior research (Kaim, Tov, et al. 2024). In the current study, Ukraine and Lithuania showed the strongest associations between hope and societal resilience. This may stem from a shared threat from their proximity to Russia. Ukraine, facing an existential threat since Russia's invasion over 2.5 years ago, has unified around survival and nationhood, with international support further enhancing societal resilience and hope (Kizilova and Norris 2024). Lithuania, though not invaded, faces constant risk from its proximity to the heavily militarised Kaliningrad exclave and the Suwałki Gap, which could isolate the Baltic states from NATO (Veebel and Sliwa 2019). This persistent threat may drive Lithuania to prepare by conducting mass casualty incident training, stabilising infrastructure, securing energy grids, reinforcing military installations, and receiving support from NATO, all of which enhance societal resilience and, consequently, foster hope (Putkonen et al. 2022; Isoda 2024). These proactive measures to mitigate imminent danger may help explain why Lithuania was the only country in the study to exhibit a significant positive association between the level of hope and a sense of danger. Furthermore, the relationship between societal resilience and hope in the study cohorts can be explained as it relates to social field theory.

Resilience building, according to social field theory, is shaped by specific threats and the skills needed to address them (Bourdieu 2023). Social fields, structured by power dynamics, emerge in response to these threats, and actors within them enhance resilience by using economic, social, and cultural resources to increase symbolic capital (Obrist et al. 2010). By focussing on community-building, psychosocial support, health programs, economic stability, social equity, and other modifiable factors, governments and non-government organisations can strengthen societal resilience and cultivate hope through collective recovery and well-being (Bodas et al. 2022; Aldrich and Meyer 2015; Schwarzer and Warner 2013).

4.4 | Psychological Factors and Distress

The study finds that, across the board, morale and individual resilience exhibit protective relationships with distress levels (all $p < 0.001$). Prior research indicates a positive association between morale and individual resilience (Eshel et al. 2021). While individual resilience also demonstrated a strong relationship with hope, morale showed only a weak connection—specifically, morale was not significantly associated with hope in Lithuania, despite Lithuania showing the strongest relationship between morale and distress. This pattern was also weakly observed in the Czech Republic. Our analyses align with previous research suggesting that while morale significantly impacts current symptoms of anxiety and depression, it does not seem to strongly affect beliefs about seeing a brighter future (Kaim, Kimhi, et al. 2024). For individuals living in war-affected regions, declining morale can exacerbate anxiety and depression, making daily life more psychologically burdensome (Jones et al. 2004). Morale exhibited the strongest protective relationship against distress in Georgia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine. This finding highlights the critical role of morale in managing distress. Improving morale deserves further investigation, as it could be beneficial in reducing distress and fostering hope. Potential improvements in morale may be achieved by enhancing

support systems, such as health services, and strengthening community cohesion (Gilbody et al. 2006).

Individual resilience emerged as the strongest protective factor against distress in the Czech Republic and Slovakia (both $p < 0.001$). Resilient individuals tend to cultivate competence and self-efficacy through overcoming adversity, strengthening their confidence in achieving goals despite obstacles (Jackson et al. 2007). The historical experiences of the Czech and Slovak populations, particularly the Velvet Revolution and the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia in the Velvet Divorce, may have uniquely shaped their capacity for individual resilience (Bitušíková 2002). These events required citizens to adapt to significant political, economic, and social transitions with minimal external guidance or support, fostering a sense of personal agency and adaptability.

Our findings align with prior research suggesting that a sense of danger and perceived threats are positively associated with higher levels of distress across all countries in the study (all $p < 0.001$), except for Ukraine (Eshel et al. 2023). In Ukraine, perceived security threats are associated with heightened personal distress, whereas a broader sense of danger exhibits a protective relationship with distress (both $p < 0.001$). This broader sense of danger might help Ukrainians find solace in knowing others face similar challenges and unite to support one another, buffering personal distress (Bastian et al. 2014). This broader sense of danger may also enable Ukrainians to shift their focus from personal fears to more manageable concerns or collective action (Kimhi et al. 2024). Such an adaptation could mitigate distress by making them feel part of a larger effort or perceiving their situation as less precarious compared to the societal threat (Scharbert et al. 2024).

4.5 | Demographic Characteristics—Hope and Distress

Demographic characteristics, including gender, family status, number of children, income level, education level, and political identity, and level of religiousity showed little significance throughout the models for the seven countries regarding both hope and distress levels. Many of these displayed significant associations in previous studies, but psychological factors played a stronger role in the current study (Braun-Lewensohn et al. 2021; Flesia et al. 2023; Kimhi et al. 2021; Yarcheski and Mahon 2016). Age, however, emerged as a notable exception, being highly protective against distress in all countries ($p < 0.001$), except Romania. Interestingly, age also displayed a strong negative relationship with hope in Ukraine and Poland, where older individuals reported lower levels of hope despite having lower levels of distress. Previous research suggests that older individuals may be more resilient due to increased life experience, but this does not necessarily imply greater optimism about the future (Eshel et al. 2016). While important for understanding broader social contexts, demographics may not capture the psychological and emotional impacts of conflicts like the Russian-Ukrainian war. These represent more static aspects of individuals' lives, which may be less relevant during times of volatility, diminished security, fear for one's life, as well as concerns about the stability of one's community and the security of the nation, as observed in the context of war (Bonanno et al. 2007).

4.6 | Implications for Interventions

Psychological factors, including morale as well as individual and societal resilience, exhibited strong associations with hope and distress across the seven countries. These findings provide insights for developing tailored strategies to enhance hope and mitigate distress in war-impacted countries and those affected more broadly. Promoting resilience and strengthening morale can bolster hope and alleviate distress during adversity. Evidence-based interventions, culturally relevant and adaptable to each population's geopolitical context, should be explored to leverage these associations effectively.

4.7 | Limitations

The cross-sectional design portrays only a limited time frame within the current context, failing to track how hope and distress levels evolve over time. The study's correlational nature identifies associations between variables but cannot establish causality. Furthermore, as with all questionnaire-based studies, social desirability bias remains a potential concern and should be considered when interpreting the data. Sampling differences and the specific data collection period for Georgia should also be considered. Additionally, the sample demographics may not be representative of the population (e.g., data education levels in Romania do not accurately reflect the broader population). This study is limited by the absence of data from Ukrainians residing in Russian-occupied regions, including Crimea, Donetsk, and Lugansk, which may impact the generalisability of the findings to these populations. Furthermore, the reliance on an internet panel prevents comparisons between respondents and non-respondents, as data are only available for those who complete the panel questionnaire. When interpreting the findings of this study, it is important to acknowledge that the discussion contextualises the results within the broader societal and geopolitical context of the respective countries. However, this approach may introduce the risk of ecological fallacy, where inferences about individual-level outcomes are based on national-level observations. Future research could benefit from longitudinal designs to better capture the dynamic nature of hope and distress and from qualitative approaches such as focus groups to explore personal narratives, and interventions based on study findings to evaluate their impact on psychological factors. Mixed-method designs integrating quantitative and qualitative data would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how each country manages crises such as the ongoing war.

4.8 | Conclusions

Distress and hope are crucial factors to monitor during the Russian-Ukrainian war and similar adversities, as they provide insights into the current and future psychological state of affected populations. Ukraine exhibited the highest levels of

both hope and distress, while the Czech Republic had the lowest level of hope and Lithuania had the lowest level of distress. Across all countries examined, societal resilience and individual resilience consistently showed the strongest significant association with hope. The study highlights the associations between psychological factors such as individual and societal resilience, morale, sense of danger, and perceived security threats with levels of hope and distress. Morale and individual resilience were the most significant factors, negatively associated with distress. Cultivating individual and societal resilience, alongside strengthening morale, can serve as key strategies to enhance hope and reduce distress during times of adversity. These elements should be actively integrated into policymaking efforts to support population well-being. While these findings underscore a shared human response to conflict that transcends national borders, effective interventions must be evidence-based and tailored to the unique needs of each population. Such interventions should integrate culturally relevant and geopolitically informed approaches to address the specific historical, political, and social contexts of different countries. Ongoing monitoring of hope and distress levels is crucial to ensure that interventions remain adaptive and responsive to changing circumstances. Future research should consider longitudinal designs to track these variables over time, incorporate qualitative methods to capture individual experiences and narratives, and assess the impact of tailored interventions on psychological outcomes. Employing mixed-method approaches can offer a more comprehensive understanding of crisis management across different countries and contexts.

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Ethics Statement

This study was reviewed by the ethical committee of the Tel Aviv University (Approval #0005146-1, dated July 12, 2022). The authors assert that all procedures contributing to this work comply with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional committees on human experimentation.

Consent

All participants signed an informed consent form before their participation.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data will be made available upon reasonable request from the researchers.

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