


# Understanding Attitudes Towards Refugees: The Role of Origin and Shared Social Identity

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## SUMMARY

The public's attitude towards pro-refugee policies and the willingness to help refugees largely depend on the specific context of the receiving country. An important factor behind these various attitudes is the degree of identification with refugees, influenced by the similarity of cultural and ethnic identity, as well as by the degree of identification with their refugee experience. In this regard, Croatia is specific because memories of the 1991–1995 war and the refugee experience are still very vivid and frame intergroup relations. We conducted two online studies in Croatia to examine the perception of refugees among Croats. In Study 1 (N=290), we investigated attitudes towards Middle Eastern refugees, willingness to help them, and support for pro-refugee policies. In Study 2 (N=183), we examined the same constructs but focused on refugees from Ukraine. In both studies, the participants were aged between 18 and 63 years, with a higher proportion of female participants. The results of Study 1 revealed a neutral attitude towards Middle Eastern refugees and a lack of prosocial intentions. However, the results of Study 2 indicated a notably positive attitude towards Ukrainian refugees, fair support for pro-refugee policies, and moderate willingness to personally help them. In both studies, regression analyses confirmed that inclusive victim consciousness and empathy were positive predictors of attitudes and prosocial intentions towards refugees, while prejudice towards refugees was a negative predictor. National identification emerged as a relevant positive predictor only when it comes to helping Ukrainian refugees. The results are discussed from the perspective of social categorisation theory, social identity, and the dominant narrative about past collective experiences and the current refugee situation. We also discuss the importance of media, competent authorities, and public policies throughout the crisis in shaping people's attitudes and prosocial intentions towards refugees.

**KEY WORDS:** refugees, attitudes, prosocial intentions, social identity

The global refugee crisis has recently drawn significant attention, especially in Europe, where refugee arrivals from various regions have elicited diverse public responses and sparked scholarly interest in factors shaping attitudes and support for resettlement policies. Understanding these attitudes is vital for promoting social cohesion and designing effective integration strategies. This paper examines the determinants of attitudes towards refugees among Croats, focusing on two distinct groups: those from the Middle East and those from Ukraine. It explores how attitudes and prosocial intentions are connected to broader socio-political dynamics and psychological factors, including empathy, prejudice, and identification with refugees and their experiences.

The integration of refugees into a new society is a two-way process; therefore, the attitude of the domicile population towards refugees and their readiness to help them are important determinants of successful integration. These attitudes are largely shaped by the specific context of the receiving country. It is evident that countries in Europe have adopted opposing positions regarding refugees (Drewski and Gerhards, 2024). While most of them have expressed solidarity with Ukraine and have welcomed Ukrainian refugees, others have taken more cautious or restrictive approaches. This contrast was particularly pronounced during the 2015 refugee crisis, when some countries openly refused to accept relocated refugees, while others kept their borders open (Zaun, 2018).

Historically, neighbouring countries have been the primary destinations for refugees due to familial and social ties that offer community-based support in addition to government aid, thereby raising awareness of humanitarian needs. In 2015, while Europe received 1 million refugees from Syria, Syria's neighbours, particularly Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, took in far more. A similar pattern emerged in 2022, with Poland accepting over 2 million Ukrainian refugees at the onset of the crisis (Charlish and Badohal, 2022). Furthermore, data from 27 European countries that participated in the last waves of both MIPEX2020 and ESS2018 show that better-developed policies for political participation and immigrant inclusion foster more positive attitudes towards immigrants (Gregurović, 2021; McCann, Sienkiewicz and Zard, 2023). For example, countries such as Hungary and Poland have implemented stricter border controls and regulations compared to Germany and Sweden, which have generally been more welcoming. Notably, the EU's 2022 response to Ukrainian refugees included immediate temporary protection, granting access to work, education, and healthcare, which fostered widespread solidarity (McCann, Sienkiewicz and Zard, 2023).

Refugee policies are shaped by the dominant political discourse. Right-wing populist parties often frame refugees as a symbolic and economic threat, while pro-refugee discourse typically focuses on immigration volume and management (Fotopoulos and Kaimaklioti, 2016; Laubenthal, 2019). Numerous studies in Germany have demonstrated that hostile attitudes towards migrants can be linked to right-wing populism (Gründl, 2022; Nann, Udupa and Wisiorek, 2024; Paasch-Colberg et al., 2021; Puschmann et al., 2022). Esses, Hamilton and Gaucher (2017) highlight that fear of cultural and economic threats, particularly to the “Western way of life,” is central to negative attitudes towards refugees, while Wike, Stokes and Simmons (2016) showed that perceived threat is especially pronounced towards Muslims. Additionally, research by Verkuyten, Mepham and Kros (2018) found that public support for pro-refugee policies depends on the perceived legitimacy of migration. Specifically, situations where migration is assessed as forced elicit feelings of empathy and stronger support for newcomers, in contrast to perceptions of migration as voluntary, which lead to feelings of anger and reduced support. This voluntariness is often attributed to refugees from the Middle East, who are frequently viewed as migrants seeking better living conditions rather than individuals compelled to leave their homes. The question arises as to how and when the public adopts the belief that some migrants were forced to leave while others left voluntarily. It is precisely here that we assume the crucial role of authoritative figures and mass media.

The media play an important role in shaping the public perception and treatment of migrants and refugees through their choice of language, imagery, and emotional visual elements (D’Errico and Paciello, 2018). Media reports can affect political decisions concerning refugees (Matulić and Škokić, 2024) by adopting either a securitising or humanising discourse, often accompanied by the distinction between migrants and refugees (Popović, Kardov and Župarić-Iljić, 2022). For example, while Poland refused to participate in the distribution of Syrian refugees among EU member states, it accepted around 1 million Ukrainian refugees in line with the EU’s Temporary Protection Directive (UNHCR, 2024). On the other hand, Germany adopted a humanitarian orientation, resulting in minimal discrimination between different refugee groups (Drewski and Gerhards, 2024). The most frequently cited explanation for this paradox is that Ukrainian refugees are a “different kind of refugee” compared to those who constituted the majority of asylum seekers in 2015 (who primarily arrived in Europe from the Middle East and Africa). As such, they are perceived more as in-group than out-

group members by the receiving societies (De Coninck, 2020; Paré, 2022). Thus, an important factor influencing attitudes towards refugees is the degree of identification, shaped by cultural and ethnic similarity (shared social identity) and empathy with their experiences (common victim identity).

This aligns with social categorisation theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals categorise themselves and others into groups, forming the basis of social identity. Among host populations, this “us vs. them” distinction is more pronounced for culturally distant refugee groups, simplifying social perceptions but potentially fostering in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination, especially under conditions of intergroup threat or conflict. Emphasising shared experiences and downplaying intergroup differences can foster a common victim identity, which in turn can serve as a catalyst for forming a shared social identity, reducing biases, and promoting cohesion.

Research confirms that beliefs about the in-group’s historical victimisation are related to attitudes towards contemporary victim groups, including refugees (Szabó, Vollhardt and Mészáros, 2020). In Hungary, collective memories of Hungarian refugees from 1956 influence perceptions of present-day refugees, highlighting the role of historical context. Societies with recent intergroup conflicts and strong collective victimhood narratives are likely to be more supportive of refugees. However, Szabó, Vollhardt and Mészáros (2020) found that inclusive victimhood narratives, i.e., emphasising shared experiences across groups, promote empathy and pro-refugee attitudes, while exclusive narratives, which frame the in-group’s victimisation as unique, correlate with anti-refugee policies. In this regard, Croatia is an especially interesting context as the memories of the 1991–1995 war and the refugee experience remain very vivid and frame intergroup relations.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

We will present the Croatian context, focusing on similar refugee experiences from the recent past and a shared social identity as the main factors underlying attitudes towards two different groups of refugees.

In recent years, Croatia has transitioned from being primarily a transit country for refugees en route to Western Europe to becoming a provisional or permanent home for many, especially following the influx of refugees from Ukraine. This shift has highlighted stark differences in media and political discourse, which often frames the experiences of refugees based on their

country of origin. We focus on the two most prominent groups in Croatia – refugees from Ukraine and those from the Middle East. In both cases, civilians are fleeing the widespread destruction of their homelands caused by similar adversaries. However, the narrative surrounding Ukrainian refugees is frequently linked to Croatia’s own historical experiences of suffering and displacement, whereas refugees from the Middle East are often portrayed as a serious social and political problem rather than as people in need. Although some stories highlight local efforts to help, warnings about risks to the local population are much more common (Gregurović, 2023; Popović, Kardov and Župarić-Iljić, 2022). Conversely, the media has provided extensive coverage, frequently reporting from multiple Ukrainian cities and emphasising the difficult situations refugees face (Matulić and Škokić, 2024). This divergence raises critical questions about whether Croatia’s collective memory of victimhood will foster empathy and a more inclusive attitude towards all refugees or whether it will preferentially benefit certain groups over others, ultimately influencing public attitudes towards their integration and support.

Indeed, different responses to Middle Eastern and Ukrainian refugees have been observed. Research has highlighted challenges in Croatia’s asylum system and local communities concerning the acceptance and integration of Middle Eastern refugees, with the government meeting only the EU-mandated minimum requirements (Ajduković et al., 2019; Gregurović, 2023; Pandek and Župarić-Iljić, 2018). In contrast, Croatia demonstrated sufficient administrative capacity to provide effective reception and support for displaced Ukrainians, ensuring their rights were upheld (Koren and Lalić Novak, 2022). This swift response reflects solidarity with Ukraine, condemnation of Russia, the conflict’s proximity within Europe, and demographic similarities between Ukrainians and the local population.

Thus, in line with the principles of social categorisation theory, Croats are more likely to perceive Ukrainian refugees as an “in-group” due to shared European and Slavic roots, i.e., cultural and geographic proximity. This could lead to the inclusion of Ukrainians in a shared group identity. In contrast, Middle Eastern refugees may be viewed as belonging to a more distant out-group due to significant differences in cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds (e.g., non-Slavic, Muslim vs. Christian, or a different language group). This greater cultural distance can trigger stronger out-group bias, leading to more negative attitudes and a lower willingness to help compared to refugees from Ukraine.

## AIM OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to explore the predictive power of national identification level, empathy, event-specific inclusive victim consciousness, and prejudice towards refugees for three intergroup outcomes related to refugees from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. We conducted two online studies in Croatia examining attitudes towards refugees, willingness to help them, and support for pro-refugee policies among adult Croats living in Croatia. We were interested in some of the factors underlying these different integration experiences based on a shared social identity, i.e., a common victim identity, empathy, and prejudice. The first study examines attitudes and prosocial intentions towards Middle Eastern refugees, a demographic often subjected to negative stereotypes and misconceptions. In contrast, the second study investigates attitudes and prosocial intentions towards Ukrainian refugees, who have recently become a focal point of humanitarian efforts in Europe.

We hypothesised that the level of inclusive victim consciousness, empathy, and prejudice towards refugees would predict attitudes and willingness to help and support refugees, regardless of their ethnic background. However, based on social categorisation, we expected national identity to play an opposite role in predicting attitudes and prosocial intentions depending on the refugee group. Specifically, we anticipated it would positively predict attitudes and prosocial intentions towards Ukrainians, while negatively predicting those towards Middle Eastern refugees.

## STUDY 1

This study examines attitudes and behavioural intentions towards Middle Eastern refugees.

### Method

#### *Participants and procedure*

A total of 290 participants, ethnic Croats (34% male), aged between 19 and 63 years ( $M = 34.09$ ,  $SD = 11.30$ ) and residing in Croatia, participated in the first study, where the target group was Middle Eastern refugees. The majority of our sample consisted of highly educated individuals (52%), followed by those with completed secondary education (29%), and finally students (19%). When it comes to political orientation, an almost equal percentage



of participants positioned themselves around the centre (38%) and on the left of the political spectrum (35%), with a slightly smaller percentage identifying on the right (27%).

We collected data via an online questionnaire from late May 2020 to mid-February 2021, that is, four years after the mass passage of several hundred thousand refugees through Croatia on their way to other European countries.

### *Measures*

*National identification* was measured using a single item: "Being Croatian is an important part of who I am." Participants responded on a seven-point scale ranging from "Highly disagree" (1) to "Highly agree" (7). Higher scores indicate stronger national identification.

*Empathy* was initially measured using nine items, but since three items did not correlate with the other items and their KMO values were low, indicating poor sampling adequacy, they were excluded from further analyses. The final six items of the measure showed a unidimensional structure with a reliability coefficient of  $\alpha = .73$ . For example, "When I see someone being exploited, I feel protective towards that person." Participants responded on a seven-point scale ranging from "Highly disagree" (1) to "Highly agree" (7). Higher scores indicate stronger empathy.

*Inclusive victim consciousness* (also referred to as a common victim identity, as described by Shnabel, Halabi and Noor, 2013) was measured using nine items capturing perceived similarities between the in-group's (Croats) and out-groups' collective victimisation. For example, "Refugees are persecuted in similar ways to Croatian refugees during the 1990s." Participants responded on a seven-point scale ranging from "Highly disagree" (1) to "Highly agree" (7). The scale demonstrated high reliability ( $\alpha = .90$ ). Higher scores indicate stronger inclusive victim consciousness.

*Prejudice* was operationalised through the measure of criminalisation. *Criminalisation* was measured using seven items that assessed the level of treating migrants in an (ir)regular situation as criminals or as national or public security threats. Criminalisation means imposing criminal sanctions for actions related to migration. For example, "Refugees should be held in places surrounded by barbed wire." Participants responded on a seven-point scale ranging from "Highly disagree" (1) to "Highly agree" (7). The scale demonstrated high reliability ( $\alpha = .89$ ). Higher scores indicate stronger advocacy for criminalisation.

*General attitude* towards Middle Eastern refugees was measured using a single item: “Please indicate your general feeling towards refugees on a scale from 0 (extremely unfavourable) to 10 (extremely favourable).”

*Willingness to help* was measured using two items: “I would like to be actively involved in helping refugees” and “I feel a personal responsibility to help refugees.” The correlation between the two items was  $r = .86$ . Participants responded on a seven-point scale ranging from “Highly disagree” (1) to “Highly agree” (7). Higher scores indicate a stronger willingness to help.

*Support for pro-refugee policies* was measured using four items, which showed high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .92$ ). For example, one item stated: “We must provide financial support to refugees.” Participants responded on a seven-point scale ranging from “Highly disagree” (1) to “Highly agree” (7). Higher scores indicate stronger support for pro-refugee policies.

*Sociodemographic data*, such as age, sex, ethnicity, place of residence, highest level of completed education, marital status, and political orientation, were also collected. Political orientation was operationalised using a single item: “Regarding political attitudes, people categorise themselves into different groups. To which political orientation do you belong?” Participants responded on a 10-point scale (1 = left-leaning, 10 = right-leaning). Answer categories 1–4 represented left-of-centre, 5–6 represented the centre, and 7–10 represented right-of-centre.

## Results

For data analysis, we used IBM SPSS 29.0.0.0. and JASP 0.18.3.0. To address the research questions, we conducted three two-step hierarchical regression analyses, in which the criterion variables were attitudes towards refugees, willingness to help, and support for pro-refugee policies. In the first step of the analyses, predictor variables included age, sex, and national identification. In the second step, empathy, inclusive victim consciousness, and prejudice against Middle Eastern refugees, operationalised through the measure of criminalisation, were introduced as predictors.

The data presented in Table 1 show that attitudes towards Middle Eastern refugees are neutral. Croats, in general, do not express the willingness to provide help for refugees, showing only very mild support for pro-refugee policies. This suggests a relative indifference to the issue. Additionally, they do not perceive similarities between their past in-group war victimisation and the experiences of Middle Eastern refugees. Nevertheless, they express



empathy towards Middle Eastern refugees and do not adopt narratives portraying them as criminals or public security threats.

Table 1. Descriptive data for Study 1 (Middle Eastern refugees)

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>min</i>	<i>max</i>
National identification	290	4.50	2.19	1	7
Empathy	290	5.64	1.00	2	7
Inclusive victim consciousness	290	4.09	1.51	1	7
Criminalisation	290	3.44	1.73	1	7
Attitude	290	5.18	2.78	1	10
Willingness to help	290	3.08	2.05	1	7
Support for pro-refugee policies	290	4.40	1.92	1	7

Table 2 shows Pearson's correlation coefficients. As can be seen, all criterion variables are strongly correlated, with the percentage of shared variance ranging between 40 and 53%. Furthermore, all presumed predictors are significantly related to the criteria in the expected direction (except the sex variable, which does not exhibit a zero-order correlation with other variables in the model). More specifically, participants for whom national identity is a more pronounced component of their social identity, as well as those more inclined to criminalise Middle Eastern refugees, tend to hold more negative attitudes towards refugees. They also show less desire for personal involvement in providing assistance, and are less likely to support policies and civil society initiatives aimed at offering help and protection to refugees. In contrast, those with a more pronounced common victim identity and greater empathy exhibit a stronger tendency towards prosocial intentions and hold more positive attitudes towards refugees. Additionally, women view refugees more positively and are more willing to help them compared to men, who are more inclined to criminalise them, i.e., exhibit prejudice.

The results of the regression analysis with attitudes as the criterion show that having stronger inclusive victim consciousness and lower criminalisation predicted more positive attitudes. The model with this set of predictors explained 43% of the variance in attitudes towards refugees (Table 3).

The results of the regression analysis with willingness to help as the criterion show that being female, having a stronger inclusive victim consciousness and lower criminalisation predicted a higher willingness to help. Empathy was close to the significance level. The model with this set of predictors explained 50% of the variance in willingness to help (Table 3).

Table 2. Intercorrelations of measured variables in Study 1 (Middle Eastern refugees; N=290)

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Age	—								
2. Sex	-.03	—							
3. National identification	-.02	.00	—						
4. Empathy	.02	.18**	.14*	—					
5. Inclusive victim consciousness	.04	.12*	-.29***	.14*	—				
6. Criminalisation	.10	-.25***	.31***	-.21***	-.62***	—			
7. Attitude	.05	.14*	-.17**	.18**	.59***	-.57***	—		
8. Willingness to help	.03	.26***	-.14*	.25***	.56***	-.66***	.63**	—	
9. Support for pro-refugee policies	-.01	.31***	-.24***	.32***	.70***	-.79***	.66***	.73***	—

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Table 3. Results of three two-step hierarchical regression analyses in which age, sex, and national identification were entered in the first step, and empathy, inclusive victim consciousness and criminalisation in the second step, with attitudes, willingness to help, and support for pro-refugee policies as criteria in Study 1 (Middle Eastern refugees; N=290)

Predictors	Attitude		Willingness to help		Support for pro-refugee policies	
	1 <sup>st</sup> step ( $\beta$ )	2 <sup>nd</sup> step ( $\beta$ )	1 <sup>st</sup> step ( $\beta$ )	2 <sup>nd</sup> step ( $\beta$ )	1 <sup>st</sup> step ( $\beta$ )	2 <sup>nd</sup> step ( $\beta$ )
Age	.05	.07	.03	.07	.01	.05
Sex	.83 (b)*	.02 (b)	1.11 (b)***	0.39 (b)*	1.27 (b)***	0.49 (b)***
National identification	-.17**	.05	-.14*	.07	-.24***	-.01
Empathy		.04		.09 <sup>a</sup>		.14***
Inclusive victim consciousness		.38***		.24***		.33***
Criminalisation		-.35***		-.50***		-.52***
R <sup>2</sup>	.05	.43	.09	.50	.16	.73
F	5.03	35.67	9.09	47.11	17.89	128.11
p	.002	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
$\Delta R^2$		.38		.41		.57
F $_{\Delta R^2}$		63.03		77.81		200.85
p $_{FAR^2}$		<.001		<.001		<.001

Note. <sup>a</sup> p = .051, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001; sex: 1 = male, 2 = female; b – unstandardised regression coefficient;  $\beta$  – standardised regression coefficient; R<sup>2</sup> – coefficient of determination; F – F-ratio value; p – statistical significance of the F-ratio;  $\Delta R^2$  – change in the percentage of explained variance of the criterion; F $_{\Delta R^2}$  – F-ratio value for the change in the percentage of explained variance of the criterion; p $_{FAR^2}$  – statistical significance of the change in the percentage of explained variance of the criterion.

The results of the regression analysis with support for pro-refugee policies as the criterion show that being female, having a stronger inclusive victim consciousness and empathy and lower criminalisation predicted higher support for pro-refugee policies. The model with this set of predictors explained 73% of the variance in support for pro-refugee policies (Table 3).

Altogether, the criminalisation of refugees seems to play the most important role in predicting public attitudes towards Middle Eastern refugees, probably because it also reflects support for imposing criminal sanctions for actions related to migration. Even so, inclusive victim consciousness makes an independent, significant contribution, with those who perceive more similarities between the collective victimisation of Croats and Middle Eastern refugees also showing more positive attitudes and greater support for refugees from the Middle East (Tables 2 and 3).

## STUDY 2

This study examines attitudes and behavioural intentions towards Ukrainian refugees.

### Method

#### *Participants and procedure*

A total of 183 participants, ethnic Croats (44% male), aged between 18 and 63 years ( $M = 27.87$ ,  $SD = 13.38$ ) and living in Croatia, participated in the second study, where the target group was Ukrainian refugees. The majority of our sample consisted of those with completed secondary education (55%), followed by highly educated individuals (33%), and, finally, those with completed primary education (11%). The majority of participants are not politically aligned (47%), and of those who are, 27% are on the left of the political spectrum, 18% are on the right, and 8% are in the centre.

We collected data via an online questionnaire from late April 2022 to late October 2022, which corresponds to the beginning of the Ukrainian refugee crisis and the period immediately following the arrival of the first refugees from Ukraine to Croatia.

#### *Measures*

*National identification* was measured with a single item: "To what extent do you feel like a member of your nation?" Participants responded on a five-

point scale ranging from “not at all” (1) to “strongly yes” (5). Higher scores indicate stronger national identification.

*Empathy* was measured with 16 items from The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (Spreng et al., 2009), which represents empathy as a primarily emotional process or an accurate affective insight into the feeling states of another. The scale demonstrated satisfactory reliability ( $\alpha = .76$ ). An example item is: “It upsets me to see someone being treated disrespectfully.” Participants responded on a five-point scale ranging from “Highly disagree” (1) to “Highly agree” (5). After recoding eight items, higher scores indicate stronger empathy.

*Inclusive victim consciousness* was measured in the same way as in Study 1. In this sample, the scale demonstrated high reliability as well ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

*Prejudice* was operationalised through the measure of *perception of negative change*. *Perception of negative change* was measured using a scale from Ajduković and colleagues (2019), which contains five items and describes possible negative changes in the community that may occur due to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees. An example item is: “Refugees from Ukraine in my community should be placed in the outskirts of the town/city.” Participants responded on a scale from “Highly disagree” (1) to “Highly agree” (5). The overall score was calculated as the average of the scale values, which can vary from 1 to 5, with a higher score indicating higher expectations of negative changes in the community due to the arrival of refugees. The scale demonstrated high reliability ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

*General attitude* was measured with a single item: “What is your attitude towards refugees from war-torn Ukraine?” Participants responded on a scale from -3 (extremely unfavourable) to +3 (extremely favourable), with 0 being neutral. The scale was then recoded to range from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes.

*Willingness to help* was measured with four items covering various ways of providing assistance to refugees. The scale measured behavioural intention, not actual behaviour, with an example item: “I would take food and/or other necessities to refugees from Ukraine.” Unlike the method used to measure willingness to help in Study 1, the items here described more specific ways of providing assistance. Participants responded on a scale from “Highly disagree” (1) to “Highly agree” (5). The scale demonstrated satisfactory reliability ( $\alpha = .77$ ). Higher scores indicate a stronger willingness to help.

*Support for pro-refugee policies* was measured in the same way as in Study 1. In this sample, the scale demonstrated high reliability as well ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

*Sociodemographic data* such as age, sex, ethnicity, place of residence, highest level of completed education, marital status, and political orientation were also collected. Political orientation was operationalised with a single item in which participants were asked to indicate their political orientation by selecting an option on a scale from 1 to 6, where 1 represented *left-wing*, 3 represented *centre*, 5 represented *right-wing*, and 6 indicated *not politically oriented*.

## Results

The analytical approach was identical to that in Study 1. We conducted three two-step hierarchical regression analyses. In the first step of the analyses, the predictor variables included age, sex, and national identification. In the second step, empathy, inclusive victim consciousness, and prejudice against Ukrainian refugees, operationalised through the measure of perception of negative changes were introduced as predictors.

The data in Table 4 show that attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees are clearly positive. Croats also demonstrate considerable support for pro-refugee policies, as well as a moderate tendency to personally help refugees, such as providing accommodation, food and supplies, and investing time into helping them become a part of the community. Croats in this study perceive similarities between their past in-group war victimisation and the situation that Ukrainian refugees are facing and they feel empathetic towards them. Finally, they do not expect negative changes in their community due to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees.

Table 4. Descriptive data for Study 2 (Ukrainian refugees)

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>min</i>	<i>max</i>
National identification	183	4.30	0.75	2	5
Empathy	173	4.04	0.48	2.5	5
Inclusive victim consciousness	174	4.75	1.17	1	7
Perception of negative changes	174	1.77	0.87	1	5
Attitude	180	5.73	1.35	1	7
Willingness to help	175	3.64	0.80	1	5
Support for pro-refugee policies	174	5.63	1.24	1	7



As seen in Table 5, all criterion variables are strongly correlated, with the percentage of shared variance falling between 31% and 55%. Furthermore, the more participants identify as Croats, the more positive their attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees become, and they report a greater moral obligation and desire to provide assistance and support policies aimed at protecting Ukrainian refugees. Those with a more pronounced common victim identity and higher scores on the empathy scale exhibit a greater tendency towards prosocial intentions and hold more positive attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees. In contrast, those who perceive negative changes in their community due to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees are also the ones who hold more negative attitudes towards refugees, show less desire for personal involvement in helping refugees, and are less likely to support policies and civil society initiatives aimed at providing help and protection to refugees. Additionally, women are more empathetic and inclined to provide support for pro-refugee policies compared to men, who are more inclined to perceive negative changes in their community due to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees.

The results of the regression analysis with attitudes as the criterion variable show that having stronger national identification and inclusive victim consciousness, as well as a lower perception of negative changes, predicted more favourable attitudes. The model with this set of predictors explained 43% of the variance in attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees (Table 6).

The results of the regression analysis with willingness to help as the criterion variable show that stronger national identification, stronger empathy, stronger inclusive victim consciousness, and a lower perception of negative changes predicted a higher willingness to help. The model with this set of predictors explained 39% of the variance in willingness to help (Table 6).

The results of the regression analysis with support for pro-refugee policies as the criterion variable show that being female, having a stronger inclusive victim consciousness and empathy, and a lower perception of negative changes predicted higher support for pro-refugee policies. The model with this set of predictors explained 55% of the variance in support for pro-refugee policies (Table 6).

Altogether, perception of negative changes and inclusive victim consciousness have an equally strong effect on predicting public support for Ukrainian refugees, but with opposite valence. Empathy towards refugees also plays an important role in predicting public support, while national identification is important in predicting personal involvement in helping refugees and a generally favourable attitude towards them.

Table 5. Intercorrelations of measured variables in Study 2 (Ukrainian refugees; N=166)

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Age	—								
2. Sex	-.26***	—							
3. National identification	-.09	-.09	—						
4. Empathy	.14	.37***	.01	—					
5. Inclusive victim consciousness	.18*	.03	.10	.32***	—				
6. Perception of negative changes	-.09	-.23**	-.08	-.43***	-.60***	—			
7. Attitude	.08	.14	.21**	.28**	.53***	-.60***	—		
8. Willingness to help	.06	.15	.22**	.43***	.49***	-.51***	.56***	—	
9. Support for pro-refugee policies	-.08	.26	.16*	.45***	.62***	-.66***	.74***	.70***	—

\* p &lt; .05, \*\* p &lt; .01, \*\*\* p &lt; .001

Table 6. Results of three two-step hierarchical regression analyses in which age, sex, and national identification were entered in the first step, and empathy, inclusive victim consciousness, and perception of negative changes in the second step, with attitude, willingness to help, and support for pro-refugee policies as criteria in Study 2 (Ukrainian refugees; N=166)

Predictors	Attitude		Willingness to help		Support for pro-refugee policies	
	1 <sup>st</sup> step ( $\beta$ )	2 <sup>nd</sup> step ( $\beta$ )	1 <sup>st</sup> step ( $\beta$ )	2 <sup>nd</sup> step ( $\beta$ )	1 <sup>st</sup> step ( $\beta$ )	2 <sup>nd</sup> step ( $\beta$ )
Age	.15	.03	.14	-.02	.18*	.01
Sex	0.53 (b)*	0.16 (b)	0.34 (b)**	0.02 (b)	0.81 (b)***	0.33 (b)*
National identification	.24**	.16*	.25**	.18**	.20**	.11
Empathy		-.02		.24**		.13*
Inclusive victim consciousness		.27***		.25**		.35***
Perception of negative changes		-.42***		-.25**		-.35***
$R^2$	.09	.43	.10	.39	.13	.55
$F$	5.19	20.00	5.77	16.75	7.97	32.92
$p$	0.002	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
$\Delta R^2$		.34		.29		.43
$F_{\Delta R^2}$		31.79		25.16		50.56
$p_{\Delta R^2}$		.002		<.001		<.001

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; sex: 1 = male, 2 = female; b – unstandardised regression coefficient;  $\beta$  – standardised regression coefficient;  $R^2$  – coefficient of determination;  $F$  – F-ratio value;  $p$  – statistical significance of the F-ratio;  $\Delta R^2$  – change in the percentage of explained variance of the criterion;  $F_{\Delta R^2}$  – F-ratio value for the change in the percentage of explained variance of the criterion;  $p_{\Delta R^2}$  – statistical significance of the change in the percentage of explained variance of the criterion.

Although not the primary focus of this study, we conducted a series of one-sample t-tests and compared the results from both studies to the theoretical neutral values of the scales, yielding intriguing findings (Tables 7 and 8).

Table 7. Results of one-sample t-tests comparing the results to the theoretical neutral values of the scales used in Study 1 (Middle Eastern refugees)

	<i>N</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>M difference</i>	<i>Cohen's  d </i>
Empathy	290	27.77	289	<.001	1.64	1.63
Inclusive victim consciousness	290	1.03	289	.32	-	-
Criminalisation	290	-5.51	289	<.001	-0.56	0.32
Attitude	290	1.08	289	.28	-	-
Willingness to help	290	-7.64	289	<.001	-0.92	0.45
Support for pro-refugee policies	290	3.53	289	<.001	0.40	0.21

Table 8. Results of one-sample t-tests comparing the results to the theoretical neutral values of the scales used in Study 2 (Ukrainian refugees)

	<i>N</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>M difference</i>	<i>Cohen's  d </i>
Empathy	173	28.53	172	<.001	1.04	2.17
Inclusive victim consciousness	174	8.39	173	<.001	0.75	0.64
Perception of negative changes	174	-18.66	174	<.001	-.123	1.42
Attitude	180	17.24	179	<.001	1.73	1.29
Willingness to help	175	10.54	174	<.001	0.64	0.80
Support for pro-refugee policies	174	17.29	173	<.001	1.63	1.31

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our aim was to investigate the predictive power of national identification, empathy, event-specific inclusive victim consciousness, and prejudice towards refugees in relation to three intergroup outcomes concerning refugees from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Croatia, as a country with its own recent experience of war and displacement, provides a unique lens through which to understand the role of inclusive victim consciousness in shaping public attitudes towards refugees. Moreover, the inclusion of

two groups of refugees allows us to investigate how national identification and perceptions of cultural similarity or difference impact support for pro-refugee policies. Consistent with our expectations, the findings indicate that inclusive victim consciousness, empathy, and prejudice towards refugees significantly predict willingness to help and support both groups of refugees. However, national identification appears to be relevant only in the context of helping Ukrainian refugees.

The data from Study 1 (Table 7) suggest that Croats, although empathetic and not prejudiced towards Middle Eastern refugees, do not perceive similarities between the refugee experience of these groups and that of Croats during the 1990s. Our participants expressed a neutral attitude towards Middle Eastern refugees. There was a general expression of support for prosocial policies, but this support appears to reflect internalised prosocial values and a sense of social justice rather than a willingness or personal responsibility to help them. Regarding Ukrainian refugees (Table 8), the results point to strong identification with them, i.e., their plight is perceived as stemming from a situation (the war in Ukraine) that resonates with Croatia's own historical experiences during the 1991–1995 war. According to social categorisation theory, this shared victimhood may lead to empathy and support. Indeed, participants demonstrated a clearly favourable attitude, along with a strong sense of responsibility and willingness to help refugees from Ukraine.

This aligns with findings from previous research conducted between 2018 and 2020 (Ajduković et al., 2019; Gregurović, 2023; Kiralj et al., 2022). A potential explanation for this disparity is the lack of perceived similarities between the historical victimisation experienced by Croats and the challenges faced by Middle Eastern refugees, as well as the perception of them as a distant and potentially threatening out-group due to significant differences in cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds (Gregurović, Kuti and Župarić-Iljić, 2016; Gregurović, 2023; Kumpes, 2018; Wike, Stokes and Simmons, 2016). Conversely, attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees are predominantly positive, with widespread support for policies aimed at assisting them, as well as a tendency to personally engage in prosocial activities, such as providing accommodation or investing time in helping them integrate into the community (Koren and Lalić Novak, 2022).

This raises important questions: Why do we discriminate between the experiences of various refugee groups and compare one trauma to another? What informs these perceptions? The portrayal of refugees in the media, political

discourse, and the framing of public policies are critical factors shaping public attitudes towards refugees (D'Errico and Paciello, 2018). A possible underlying mechanism for the observed attitudes may be a lack of information regarding the current refugee situation or the ambiguous representation of specific refugee groups in the media. Refugees from the Middle East come from several different countries about which little information has been available in local media, so the reasons for their refugee status potentially remain unclear to most people. Research conducted in Croatia (Popović, Kardov and Župarić-Iljić, 2022), analysing the representation of migrants and refugees in Croatian media during 2018/19, revealed a pronounced security-oriented interpretative framework. Safety concerns were raised by the gender disparity, i.e., the fact that almost 75% of asylum-seekers from the Middle East were men, whereas an estimated 90% of Ukrainian refugees are women and children (Pew Research Center, 2016; UNHCR, 2022). Thus, Popović and colleagues (2022) conclude that the media creates the hegemonic discourse and the division into (bad) migrants and (good) refugees. Consequently, migrants from Middle Eastern countries are frequently perceived as migrants, while the discourse surrounding Ukrainian refugees emphasises their status and victimisation. Other European studies also show striking differences in reporting about Ukrainian refugees compared to other refugees, where Ukrainians are portrayed as well-educated, middle-class Europeans and perceived as superior to, for instance, lower-class refugees from Syria (Matulić and Škokić, 2024; McCann, Sienkiewicz and Zard, 2023). Additionally, the perception of effective coordination between state and non-state stakeholders in the refugee reception and care system plays a significant role in shaping public attitudes towards refugees, as it ensures that the arrival of refugees will not negatively impact the lives of the local population. The state appeared to be more competent in managing Ukrainian refugees (Koren and Lalić Novak, 2022) compared to those from the Middle East (Pandek and Župarić Iljić, 2018), which could have influenced the development of attitudes and behavioural intentions among citizens.

The finding that the strength of national identification correlates negatively with attitudes towards Middle Eastern refugees while correlating positively with attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees is particularly noteworthy. Although our study utilised slightly different measures of national identity, we believe that this contrasting relationship reflects fundamental differences in how individuals' national identities affect their perceptions of specific external groups (see Jelić and Mihić, 2024). From the perspective of social categorisation theory, the predictive power of national identificati-



on in the case of Ukrainian refugees suggests that they are perceived as an in-group. Therefore a stronger Croatian identity predicts more positive attitudes towards them. In the case of Middle Eastern refugees, the predictive power of national identification for attitudes and prosocial intentions diminished in the second step of regression analysis, probably due to being overshadowed by other variables introduced in that step. However, a negative correlation suggests that Middle Eastern refugees are seen as more culturally distant, which could activate exclusionary identity dynamics, as the social identity approach suggests. Thus, the differences in intergroup outcomes may reflect how Croats view the content of their own national identity relative to that of the two refugee groups.

This finding resonates with research from other European countries, suggesting that individuals are more receptive to refugees whose cultural and ethnic backgrounds closely align with those of the host society (Drewski and Gerhards, 2024; De Coninck, 2020; Paré, 2022). However, this raises further questions: Where do we draw the line? How similar must refugees be to be accepted as part of the in-group? We argue that these perceptions are largely shaped by “entrepreneurs of identity” (Reicher, 2004) or society’s “epistemic authorities” (Bar-Tal, 2004), who impose their definitions of national identity on the public. If these authorities frame certain groups as different – using metaphors such as “flood,” “invasion,” or “waves of migrants” – this will undoubtedly shape our national identity in a manner that seeks to preserve a perceived threatened in-group. On the other hand, a humanitarian approach in the discourse about refugees can foster an empathetic response and the potential for a common overarching identity. Indeed, when the national group is defined by authorities as welcoming, and refugees are represented as weak but relatable, such a discourse may pave the way for a more welcoming society (Koller, 2024).

Empathy was not a predictor of attitudes in our studies, but it did predict both willingness to help and support for pro-refugee policies, particularly in the case of Ukrainian refugees. This is consistent with the argument that positive portrayals of refugees can elicit higher levels of empathy, which in turn motivates supportive behaviours (Esses, Hamilton and Gaucher, 2017). However, we also observed empathetic distress among our participants regarding refugees from the Middle East, suggesting that people do not have to like or feel a connection to refugees to empathise with their distress and show general support for pro-refugee policies. Although this form of passive support lacks the assumption of personal responsibility, it is nonetheless

ss desirable as it establishes prosocial behavioural norms towards refugee groups, rather than fostering rejection or indifference.

## LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

We obtained our results using a correlational study design with an online convenience sample. This approach comes with certain limitations. Firstly, the design does not permit causal inferences to be made from the results. Future research employing experimental or longitudinal methods is needed to establish the direction and changes in any causal relationships. The causes of migration (specifically, the voluntariness of migration; Verkuyten, Mepham and Kros, 2018) and the perceived threat posed by refugees are particularly intriguing for manipulation in experimental research. Moreover, experimental manipulations of participants' national identity salience, as well as societal norms regarding the acceptance of refugees into Croatian society, also have the potential to significantly influence attitudes and behavioural intentions towards refugees and could provide valuable insights into the underlying mechanisms of intergroup relations.

Secondly, the reliance on self-reported data is a potential concern, particularly in contexts where participants may feel pressured to engage in impression management and give socially desirable responses. However, we did not observe an unusually high prevalence of overly positive attitudes and prosocial intentions towards refugees that would suggest social desirability.

Finally, our sample consisted predominantly of younger, more educated individuals, with a higher proportion of women. Gender differences in empathy and prosocial behaviour are well-documented in social psychology research, with women scoring higher on measures of empathy and readiness to engage in helping behaviours, particularly in situations involving humanitarian crises (Eagly and Crowley, 1986). Furthermore, research consistently shows that individuals with higher levels of education tend to have more positive attitudes towards immigrants and refugees (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007) as education often fosters critical thinking, openness to new experiences, and tolerance for diversity. The influence of education is especially relevant in the context of inclusive victim consciousness, as more educated individuals may be more adept at drawing connections between their own group's experiences of suffering and those of refugees (Noor et al., 2017). Younger people are generally more open to social change and diversity and tend to hold more progressive attitudes towards immigrants

and refugees compared to older individuals (Coenders and Scheepers, 2003). Although our sample demonstrated heterogeneity across relevant socio-demographic variables, these findings should be tested on a larger and more representative sample of the Croatian public that would ensure more statistical power and provide greater robustness to our conclusions.

Furthermore, the results of the two studies are not directly comparable because the data were not collected during the same stage of the crisis nor with the same measures. The varying operationalisations of constructs in these studies present a notable methodological limitation. In Study 1, attitudes towards Middle Eastern refugees were measured solely through their affective component, which may have resulted in pseudo-attitudes. While some argue that affect alone is as predictive of behaviour as affect and cognition combined (Dillon and Kumar, 1985), this unidimensional approach may be insufficient. In Study 2, attitudes were measured using suggestive phrasing (“refugees from war-torn Ukraine”), likely biasing responses towards positivity. Additionally, political orientation was measured differently across studies; unlike Study 1, Study 2 included an option for political nonalignment, potentially altering participant composition.

Future research should assess attitudes towards different refugee groups using consistent measures across the same participants and employ multi-item scales to capture all attitude components. Combining explicit and implicit measures (Anderson, 2018) is recommended, given their potential misalignment. Political orientation should be assessed alongside political importance and engagement to provide richer insights. A representative Croatian sample study found religiosity significantly linked to greater social distance from foreign workers (Kumpes, 2018). Thus, exploring the role of religiosity – its ties to national identity, political orientation, and implicit attitudes towards asylum seekers – warrants further investigation (Anderson, 2018; Gregurović, 2023).

Despite the shortcomings, we believe that our research has yielded several important conclusions that are relevant both in the context of previous and potential future refugee crises pertaining to Croatia.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings indicate that inclusive victim consciousness, empathy, and prejudice towards refugees significantly predict the willingness to help and support refugees regardless of their origin. Therefore, attitudes and

behavioural intentions towards refugees can be enhanced through targeted strategies that highlight shared experiences of war and displacement while simultaneously addressing and overcoming stereotypes and prejudices. It is important to sensitise and educate the public about refugees and their situation. Campaigns that develop accurate social narratives can improve intergroup relations and foster a more nuanced understanding of refugees arriving in Croatia.

The findings underscore the importance of competent authorities and public policies in shaping people's responses to refugee crises. Public policies that emphasise humanitarian values, inclusive victim consciousness, and empathy can foster more positive attitudes and greater prosocial intentions towards refugees. For instance, public campaigns promoting shared victimhood and the historical experiences of suffering may tap into inclusive victim consciousness and help mitigate negative attitudes towards refugees, regardless of their ethnic or cultural background. Moreover, policy initiatives that emphasise the humanity and individuality of refugees, rather than portraying them through a securitised lens, can help foster empathy and reduce prejudice.

The timing of these interventions is also vital. As demonstrated by the situation with Ukrainian refugees, early media and political framing that emphasises shared values and suffering can have a lasting positive impact on public attitudes and behaviour.

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## Razumijevanje stavova prema izbjeglicama: uloga podrijetla i zajedničkoga društvenog identiteta

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### SAŽETAK

Stav domicilnog stanovništva prema proizbjegličkim politikama i spremnost na pomoć izbjeglicama uvelike ovise o specifičnom kontekstu zemlje primateljice. Važan čimbenik koji stoji iza tih različitih stavova stupanj je identifikacije s izbjeglicama, koji ovisi o sličnosti kulturnog i etničkog identiteta, ali i stupnju identifikacije s njihovim izbjegličkim iskustvom. U tom je pogledu Hrvatska specifična jer su sjećanja na rat 1991. – 1995. i izbjegličko iskustvo još uvijek vrlo živa i oblikuju međugrupne odnose. Proveli smo dvije *online* studije u Hrvatskoj u kojima smo ispitali percepci-

ju izbjeglica među Hrvatima. U studiji 1 (N=290) ispitali smo stavove prema izbjeglicama s Bliskog istoka, spremnost na pružanje pomoći izbjeglicama te podršku proizbjegličkim politikama, dok smo u studiji 2 (N=183) ispitali iste konstrukte, ali s fokusom na izbjeglice iz Ukrajine. U oba su istraživanja sudionici bili u dobi između 18 i 63 godine, s većim udjelom žena. Rezultati studije 1 ukazuju na neutralan stav prema izbjeglicama s Bliskog istoka i nedostatak prosocijalnih namjera. Rezultati studije 2 ukazuju na jasno pozitivan stav prema ukrajinskim izbjeglicama, priličnu podršku proizbjegličkim politikama i umjerenu spremnost na osobno pružanje pomoći. U objema studijama regresijske analize potvrđuju da inkluzivna svijest o žrtvi i empatija pozitivno predviđaju, dok predrasude prema izbjeglicama negativno predviđaju stavove i prosocijalne namjere prema izbjeglicama. Nacionalna identifikacija pokazala se relevantnim pozitivnim prediktorom samo kad je riječ o pomoći ukrajinskim izbjeglicama. Rezultate smo raspravili iz perspektive teorija socijalne kategorizacije, socijalnog identiteta i dominantnog narativa o prošlim kolektivnim iskustvima i trenutačnoj situaciji s izbjeglicama. Također razmatramo važnost medija, nadležnih tijela i javnih politika tijekom trajanja krize na stavove i prosocijalne namjere prema izbjeglicama.

**KLJUČNE RIJEČI:** izbjeglice, stavovi, prosocijalne namjere, socijalni identitet