

RESEARCH

REPORTS

RECOMMENDATIONS

PIOTR KAŻMIERKIEWICZ

UNITED IN ANXIETY

POST-2015 PUBLIC ATTITUDES
TOWARDS ACCEPTING
REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS:
BULGARIA, CROATIA,
CZECH REPUBLIC, HUNGARY,
POLAND, ROMANIA, SLOVAKIA

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Overview

This report analyzes the findings of the desk and field research on the public attitudes towards accepting refugees and migrants in seven countries of Central and Eastern Europe: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.¹ The research was conducted in mid-2017, when three focus groups were set up in each of the countries under study to gauge the responses to arguments for admission of refugees, identify positions against reception of beneficiaries of protection and track the impact of personal experience as well as media coverage on the respondents' standpoints.² The analysis of the focus group results is complemented by a brief background study of the current migration situation, policy developments and public opinion in the areas of migration and asylum. This regional report seeks to identify the commonalities in the public attitudes among this diverse group of countries, focusing on the impact of the 2015 migration crisis and suggesting some long-term implications of a shift in the views among a substantial group of respondents for the national and European debates on the issue.

Background

General migration profile

With the exception of the Czech Republic, where non-EU nationals account for nearly 3% of the population, the countries under study (Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia) host very small numbers of residents who are citizens of non-EU states (from 0.3 to 0.9%). At the same time, the number of immigrants continues to rise in recent years. Between 2014 and 2017, the number of non-EU nationals in the seven countries rose by 205,000 and reached 723,000. Poland accounted for over half of the total increase due to the steep rise in labor immigration from neighboring Ukraine. At the same time, two countries which had so far hosted small populations of foreign residents

1 Country case studies were prepared within the EU-funded "Empowering Communities in Europe" project, carried out by seven non-governmental organizations in respective countries and coordinated by the British Council.

2 The focus groups were carried out in 2017 in the following locations: Bulgaria (24.6-8.7) – Belene, Harmanli, Sofia; Croatia (25.5-27.6) – Kutina, Zagreb (2); Czech Republic (15.8-18.9) – Prague (2), Ústí nad Labem; Hungary (8-18.9) - Győr, Szeged, Budapest; Poland (3.7-17.8) – Białystok, Lublin, Warsaw; Romania - Bucharest (3); Slovakia (25.7-21.9) – Bratislava, Námestovo, Nitra.

(Bulgaria and Croatia) experienced dynamic growth rates (42-58 per cent over three years).

Table 1. Non-EU nationals residing in the countries under study, 2014 and 2017

Country	1 Jan 2014	1 Jan 2017	% change (2014-2017)	% pop. (2017)
Bulgaria	40,614	64,074	57.8	0.90
Croatia	21,126	30,086	42.4	0.72
Czech Rep.	261,302	302,579	15.8	2.86
Hungary	59,335	71,414	20.4	0.73
Poland	71,543*	180,334*	152.1	0.47
Romania	52,529	60,600	15.4	0.31
Slovakia	12,476	14,687	17.7	0.27

Source: Eurostat, "Population on 1 January by age group, sex and citizenship" (<http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>)

*Eurostat estimate, data for 2017 provisional

Immigration is concentrated in urban centers, particularly in capital cities. Several of the countries (e.g., Bulgaria, Poland and Romania) have experienced significant out-migration.

The numbers of asylum applicants remained low in most of these countries until 2013, but starting in 2014 a strong differentiation emerged between two groups of countries (Table 2). Four of them (Croatia, the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia) received over the course of four years (2013-2016) a total of merely 3,240 applications. Asylum dynamics were different in the three other countries which were directly in the path of either the asylum-seekers from Ukraine, embroiled in the conflict in the Crimea and Donbas (Poland), or the largest group of asylum-seekers from the Middle East (Bulgaria and Hungary). The impact was different in all three countries: in Poland, the pressure was moderate (not exceeding the levels seen in 2013); in Bulgaria, it grew from 2014 to 2016, with a sharp spikes observed in 2014 and especially 2015 that leveled off in 2016 at still a much higher rate than in 2013. In effect, Hungary received the majority of all applications placed in the countries under study, and Bulgaria received nearly as many applications as the much larger Poland.

Table 2. First-time asylum applications in the countries under study, 2014-2016

Country	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total (2013-2016)
Bulgaria	2,195	3,305	5,475	6,530	17,505
Croatia	135	15	20	460	630
Czech Rep.	110	210	250	240	810
Hungary	1,375	11,670	45,315	8,455	66,815
Poland	6,975	2,145	4,780	4,810	18,710
Romania	375	375	295	525	1,570
Slovakia	60	50	90	30	230

Source: Eurostat, "Asylum and first-time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex. Annual aggregated data (rounded)" (<http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/>)

Recent trends in migration policy

The period since 2015 has seen significant developments in the migration policies of the countries under study in two respects. Firstly, the larger external challenges as well as the strong public reaction to perceived threats associated with uncontrolled immigration have spurred the authorities to define national policy priorities in this area. Secondly, the entry into force of the EU's relocation scheme demanded a response from each of the countries. Additionally, these processes took place in some countries against the background of strong internal political conflict, which additionally fueled strong polarization in the public forum. As a result of the interplay of these various factors, the national policies on migration and asylum have become further "securitized."³ However, while in the runup to EU accession and in its wake, many of the securitizing instruments were transferred as part of the implementation of the evolving acquis, at least some states in the region began to adopt national measures independently that aim to protect security of the state and society. These developments have resulted in the division most apparent in the rhetoric adopted by various governments as well as in their reaction to the relocation scheme.

The split may be generally observed between the four Visegrad group members, which are part of the Schengen area, and the three countries outside the zone (Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania). Of the total 898 persons who were

³ For an overview of recent developments in the debate on securitization of migration in the EU, see: C. A. Iov, C. Bogdan, *Securitization of migration in the European Union – between discourse and practical action*, Research and Science Today, No. 1 (13)/2017, pp. 12-19.

relocated from either Greece or Italy, the Visegrad countries, which all together are more populous, accepted 28 refugees (only from Greece) – the rest were admitted to Romania (728), Croatia (82) and Bulgaria (60) (Table 3). Two of the Visegrad countries (Hungary and Poland) denied entry to any relocated persons, while Slovakia came forward with a legal challenge questioning the grounds for the relocation scheme altogether – a challenge that was supported by the three other Visegrad states. The issue of relocation was a major issue in the countries’ internal political debates and it marked a break in the policy of Poland which had declared participation in the scheme but under a new right-wing government that was voted into power in late 2015 refused joining in. In October 2016, a referendum was held in Hungary on the obligatory relocation scheme in which 98% of the votes were against the compulsory character of the mechanism. Although the result was not formally valid due to insufficient turnout, the government referred to the outcome as politically binding.

Table 3. Number of persons relocated from Greece and Italy to the countries under study as of 16 February 2018

Country	Relocated from Greece	Relocated from Italy	Total relocated
Romania	683	45	728
Croatia	60	22	82
Bulgaria	50	10	60
Slovakia	16	0	16
Czech Republic	12	0	12
Hungary	0	0	0
Poland	0	0	0

Source: European Commission, 2018 https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/press-material/docs/state_of_play_-_relocation_en.pdf

While deciding not to participate in the relocation program, some countries nevertheless engaged in certain national efforts to express their solidarity with other EU member states and the EU as a whole. For instance, Slovakia hosted 1200 asylum seekers in 2015-2016 under the terms of a bilateral agreement with Austria. The Slovak presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2016 put forward on behalf of all the Visegrad countries an alternative concept to the relocation – flexible solidarity, in terms of which the member states could embark on the type and scale of contribution that would reflect their experience and capacity. In line with this approach, since 2016, the Polish

government opted for stepping up the humanitarian assistance to Middle Eastern refugees in the camps in Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon and established the post of the minister for humanitarian aid and refugees. In December 2017, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki declared that Poland “would not leave behind anyone, and in particular Italy, Greece or Bulgaria, the countries that were admitting so many refugees,” pledging an increased financial contribution and staff reinforcement.⁴

Meanwhile, the growing perception of migration as a threat has led to the “securitization” of national migration policies. Hungary, which lay in the transit path of a major refugee flow from southeastern Europe, proceeded to reduce migration pressure through a combination of operational and legislative measures. By April 2017, a double fence was erected along the 155 kilometers of the border with Serbia, and unauthorized crossing of the border was made into a criminal offense. Moreover, as the asylum seekers were sent to the transit zones in the vicinity of the border for the duration of the application process, some reception centers were closed down in the center of the country. A fence was also built along the Bulgarian-Turkish border with the argument of securing the borders of the EU territory. In December 2015, Slovakia adopted a series of anti-terrorist laws, granting wider powers to the judiciary and law enforcement.

Parallel developments – transposition of EU norms and elaboration of national migration policy instruments in response to countries’ needs – were observed in several countries. The Czech Republic passed amendments to both the Aliens Act and the Asylum Act, further restricting access to long-term residence and international protection. At the end of 2015, in response to an increasing number of migrants and to EU-wide changes, the asylum procedure was changed, making applications from safe third countries inadmissible and discontinuing the procedure in cases of non-cooperation from the applicant. At the same time, transposition of an EU directive on a single residence and work permit resulted in the introduction of an employment card, authorizing residence for the duration of a work contract. The Polish government that came to power in late 2015, on the one hand, broke with some elements of the migration policy of its predecessors (reneging on the pledge to take part in the relocation scheme and withdrawing the migration strategy, envisioning integration activities). On the other hand, the government maintained a liberal

⁴ Statement made at a press conference on 18 December 2017 as reported by TVN24 web portal.

policy on facilitating seasonal migration, declaring its willingness to further open up the labor market. In its amendment to the Aliens Act that was put forward in 2016, the Croatian parliament introduced in line with international legal standards the instrument of alternative detention. However, in July 2017, further amendments were made to the Act that, if approved, would penalize assistance provided to migrants illegally residing in Croatia.

Changes in public opinion

Generally, a majority of respondents in the investigated countries associate refugees with various types of threats. In a poll conducted in 2016, 60% of Bulgarians considered refugees a threat to the national security and as many as 78% viewed them as a burden on the national economy.⁵ In a 2013 survey, 63% of Croats believed that refugees would take away jobs from the local population.⁶ In 2016, 70% of Polish respondents surveyed believed that the admission of refugees would increase the risk of a terrorist attack.⁷ In a poll conducted in Hungary in September 2016, security concerns were voiced against illegal migration – it was considered the most important risk – believed to be the cause of terrorism (28% of the respondents), increased crime (26%), violence against women and children (14%) and a threat to Hungarian culture and identity (13%).⁸

Far more people are opposed to admitting refugees into the EU than are in favor. In February 2016, 47% of Bulgarians were against it⁹ and only 28% would agree to such a solution, while as many as 89% Slovaks agreed with the government position of denying admission.¹⁰ In the 2016 Gallup world poll on support for accepting Syrian refugees, in every country under study the option not to admit any refugees from Syria was chosen by the largest number of respondents, and 5% or fewer were willing to admit all of them (Table 3). The

5 I. Kopraveva, L. Slavkova, R. Tripalo. (2016). *The good, the bad and the Eastern European – refugees and the Communist past. A comparative study between Bulgaria and Croatia*, p. 3.

6 http://www.cms.hr/system/publication/pdf/26/Istrazivacki_izvjestaj_KNJIZNI_BLOK.pdf

7 *Europeans Fear Wave of Refugees Will Mean More Terrorism, Fewer Jobs*, Pew Research Centre, July 2016.

8 Migrációkutató Intézet, 2016.

9 Kopraveva, Slavkova, Tripalo, op.cit..

10 Sme.sk. Bezpečnosť hlása už aj opozícia, na predvolebné plagáty nasadzujú nové slogany. Available at: <https://domov.sme.sk/c/20070306/bezpecnost-hlasa-uz-aj-opozicia.html#ixzz57dH-HdYZR>

strongest opposition was found in Hungary and Slovakia where respectively 70 and 61% were against accepting any Syrian refugees at all.

Table 4. Support for admitting Syrian refugees, 2016

Country	% should accept all	% should accept a limited number	% should not accept any
Hungary	3	22	70
Slovakia	1	32	61
Bulgaria	1	33	56
Czech Republic	2	34	56
Romania	2	35	56
Poland	2	42	50
Croatia	5	39	40

Source: Gallup World Poll results, 2016 (http://news.gallup.com/poll/209828/syrian-refugees-not-welcome-eastern-europe.aspx?g_source=Refugees&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles)

The attitude toward admitting refugees changed in some countries dramatically between 2015 and 2017. If in 2015 nearly as many Czech respondents were for accepting refugees from countries affected by war and conflicts as were opposed (48% for and 50% against), the share of supporters dropped to 35% in 2017, while that of opponents rose to 61%.¹¹ The change in public attitudes was even more striking in Poland: the share of those decisively opposed to admission of refugees from such countries increased from 21% in May 2015 to 55% a year later.¹²

Opposition to the admission of refugees appears to reflect some deeper societal anxieties about the cultural distance and difficulties in integration of refugees. As many as 84% of the Hungarian respondents queried in 2016 viewed Islam and Hungarian tradition as incompatible (52% considering them altogether incompatible). In the same poll, 81% of the participants did not believe that the integration of Muslim migrants into Hungarian society was possible.¹³ A far lower, but still substantial, share of Bulgarian respondents

11 CVVM, March 2017: https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a4273/f9/pm170327.pdf

12 *Stosunek Polaków do przyjmowania uchodźców*, CBOS, January 2017, http://www.cbos.pl/SPI-SKOM.POL/2017/K_001_17.PDF

13 Migrációkutató Intézet, 2016.

(39%) surveyed in 2016 considered the integration of refugees impossible due to their different culture and religion.¹⁴ The difference of religion and culture was also viewed as a stumbling block for integration in other polls taken in some of the investigated countries. For instance, a February 2016 poll in Slovakia revealed a strong cultural distance toward the newcomers from the Middle East – 66% of the respondents would not want a Syrian Christian as their neighbor and 85% would resent a Muslim neighbor from Iraq.¹⁵ At the same time, it is worth noting that while Islam was a central issue of the debate on the admission of refugees in the Czech Republic in 2015, a March-April 2016 poll revealed that the religious background of refugees was among the least frequently raised objections to their acceptance (only 44% of the surveyed persons would accept only non-Muslim refugees).¹⁶

Public discourse, role of media and civil society

The wider developments across the Mediterranean, in Southeastern Europe and the EU at large, later subsumed under the term “migration crisis,” spurred national discussions on migration which in many countries had been either missing or limited in scope. Migration policy became in many countries a widely-discussed topic for the first time. The circumstances in which the issue became a matter of public debate were crucial for setting the main directions. Firstly, a sense of a threat to public order and security was palpable in much of the media coverage as well as in the statements made by politicians. In some countries, the perception of a crisis came on top of a deeper sense of loss of control by the state and a lack of confidence in the public (both European and national) institutions’ ability to cope with the imminent threat. Finally, the issue of compliance with the EU’s mandatory relocation scheme became closely intertwined with the political conflict over the understanding of

14 L. Kyuchukov (2016). Impact of the Refugee Crisis on Bulgarian Society and Politics: Fears but no Hatred. Available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sofia/12570.pdf>

15 Sme.sk. Moslima za suseda? Radšej homosexuála, ukázal prieskum Focusu. Available at: <https://domov.sme.sk/c/20103030/moslima-za-suseda-radsej-homosexuala-ukazal-prieskum-focusu.html#ixzz57dACGDQc>

16 Podmínky přijetí uprchlíků a důvěra v kompetence politiků. MEDIAN, March/April 2016 http://www.median.eu/cs/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/6516009_Vyzkum_migrace_MFD_v08.pdf

national sovereignty.¹⁷

In Hungary and Poland, and to a lesser extent in Slovakia, a strong political polarization appeared around the issue of the admission of refugees in the wake of the crisis of 2015. Split narratives emerged in the public sphere, with the governments taking a lead by framing the issue as a threat to public security and/or a set of European or Christian values. The Hungarian government since the summer of 2015 and the Polish government following the elections in the autumn of 2015 adopted the discourse of defense in the face of a crisis, blurring the distinction between refugees and economic migrants, questioning their willingness to integrate and calling for “helping at the origin” of the crisis. The Hungarian government disseminated this position both in public campaigns (e.g., in the runup to the referendum on the relocation scheme) and in the state media coverage, while the Law and Justice leaders made such claims during the parliamentary campaign in 2015 and in several public statements made already after coming to power. The media discourse in Poland became highly polarized as well, with the right-wing or conservative media viewing the issue in conflictual terms of the “clash of civilizations,” while the liberal and left-wing media tended to stress the moral obligation to admit refugees.

The pro-integration position was relatively less prominent in the public discourse in Poland, and to some extent in Hungary, despite a variety of efforts undertaken by human rights organizations and advocacy groups. Billboards carrying messages running counter to the discourse promoted by the Hungarian government during a referendum campaign were set up as a result of crowdfunding campaigns. Unlike the Law and Justice party, other parties did not take a consistent position on the issue of refugees during the electoral campaign in Poland. Instead, Polish civil society organizations and a segment of the mass media came to play a major role in promoting the principle of solidarity with refugees. For instance, an awareness-raising campaign was launched by over 40 Polish newspapers under the slogan of “more

¹⁷ The impact of increased mobility on the social reactions was tackled by A. Tsoukala in *Looking at Migrants as Enemies* in: E. Guild (2005), *Controlling Frontiers: Free Movement Into and Within Europe*, London: Routledge, pp. 161-192. Relevant analysis of the Polish media discourse on the 2015 migration crisis was offered by: M. Kopytowska, Ł. Grabowski (2017), *European Security Under Threat: Mediating the Crisis and Constructing the Other*, in Christian Karner, Monika Kopytowska (ed.) *National Identity and Europe in Times of Crisis*, pp. 83 – 112.

knowledge – less fear – refugees in Poland.” Grassroots organizations were also instrumental in running activities as part of the Polish Day of Solidarity with Refugees in October 2015. Another noteworthy type of initiative involved Slovak NGOs and grassroots organizations that established a support fund and a roster of volunteers for providing integration assistance. Many Slovak volunteers participated in assistance activities in the neighboring countries of Austria and Hungary as well as in the Balkans. To address the generally negative attitudes and attract positive attention to the topic, a four-day Multi-Kulti Solidarity Festival was organized in Sofia in 2017.¹⁸

Findings from focus group interviews

Sources of information

Limited credibility of information sources

Mass media were recognized in several countries under study as a crucial factor supplying information and in effect shaping public opinion on reception of refugees. The type of primary medium varied by location and by age group, reflecting on the one hand, the availability of certain media in these locations and on the other hand, general patterns of usage of various media by certain population groups. Although many respondents admitted to being influenced by media discourse in their own positions, they nonetheless often stressed that they needed to turn to various information providers and types of media in order to overcome what they saw as the serious shortcomings of any single source.

Television

Traditional electronic media – television and, to some extent, radio channels – were the main providers of information for respondents in the Czech Republic and Romania, and were among the top sources in Hungarian locations other than Budapest. The reliance on this category of media was particularly high among the vast majority of Romanian respondents who lacked access to Internet (16 out of 18) and among the elderly Czech participants.

However, the respondents tended to be critical of the coverage of the issues on television channels, identifying certain limitations of these media. Thus, for instance, among the Czech respondents, distrust was observed towards television coverage, which was seen as selective (especially the private-funded

18 <http://multikulti.bg/project/celebrating-solidarity>

media tended to be negative in their coverage of the issue) and lacking adequate depth, reflecting scarce financial and staffing resources. Some of the focus group discussion participants criticized the Czech television channels for merely copying foreign media coverage by, which were actually trusted more. Other problems that were raised were intentional misinformation or hoaxes, which induced some respondents to make recourse to alternative sources of information, such as websites. In turn, the elderly participants of focus group discussions in Romania would complement the information obtained from mainstream media (e.g., TV debates on the issue) by reading newspapers or talking to neighbors who had direct contact with refugees and migrants.

Various levels of mistrust regarding the objectivity of the coverage offered by the generally-available state TV channels were expressed in Hungary. These attitudes ranged from doubts about the credibility of the information (Győr) to outright charges of manipulation and passing on only the government's position (Szeged). It is difficult to assess the impact that the TV communication had on the respondents and the people they knew. On the one hand, some respondents in Szeged confirmed that their families watched only the state channel and analysis of the arguments advanced during many focus groups in several locations tended to reflect many of the themes encountered in the rhetoric used in the television programming. On the other hand, many participants who viewed TV coverage as slanted felt the need to consult other sources to gain a broader perspective. In fact, those respondents who were most sceptical about the veracity of the information supplied by the state media in Hungary would seek alternative sources to double check the facts. One participant from Szeged relied solely on Facebook posts as she reported trusting the authors of these posts because she had "known them for a long time."

Internet

While for many participants online sources were complementary to the information provided by the more traditional electronic media, they became the first point of reference for some who would opt out of watching TV coverage on the subject. This was particularly the case for the interviewed residents of Budapest or young people in Bulgaria. The latter group, however, would not just receive certain messages but would actively comment on the situation and offer their own interpretation. Most of the interviewed young residents of Belene would get their national news from information websites.

In turn, they tended to react to local issues on the dedicated city residents' Facebook page, which, for instance, offered them a chance to correct what they viewed as "distorted" coverage of the situation involving refugees in their town. Social networks were also mentioned by the young respondents in Slovak focus groups, especially those working in the field of information technology. Czech and Polish participants turned to various websites as a form of "alternative media" as they found the traditional electronic media in the country to be unreliable and in search of sensationalist impact. However, they realized that online resources could be misused for hoaxes or deliberate misinformation ("fake news").

In some countries, particularly in Hungary and Poland, the recourse to new electronic media was also motivated by the respondents' concern over what they perceived as political bias in the more traditional mass media. Most Polish respondents stressed that the mass media were not supplying them with reliable information that would allow them to understand the causes of the refugee crisis and work out their own balanced opinion. The mass media, in their view, tended to follow a partisan or ideological outlook on the issues so that they could be easily categorized as either the right-wing or left-wing, conservative or liberal. Although many Polish respondents accused web portals of slanted coverage, they nevertheless sought to work out a more objective understanding by consulting all kinds of media, both traditional and online.

The Hungarian case is most striking, as many participants who found state TV coverage of the issue to be "manipulative" would turn to online news sites that they recognized as having a certain ideological bent (contrary to that presented in the TV) to get the balanced view. Budapest respondents actually reported not watching state TV at all, relying solely on online resources. However, they recognized bias in online coverage as well, mistrusting both the selection of information and its interpretation.

Experience with refugees and other migrants

Limited contacts in the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania and Slovakia

Respondents in most of the locations reported no or very limited contacts with refugees or migrants. This was particularly evident in the countries which were less affected by the influx of asylum-seekers in 2015, such as the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania or Slovakia. In the three focus groups in the Czech Republic there were hardly any participants who had personal experience

with refugees or migrants, which was summed up by one respondent: “Mainly in small towns and villages no one has ever seen a live refugee.” Similarly, a majority of the participants of the three focus groups in Poland and in two out of three Romanian focus groups denied any previous personal contacts with migrants. Only one respondent in the Slovak focus groups reported personal experience in helping refugees, while the others had met foreigners who were either migrant workers or tourists.

The level of previous contacts was higher in some locations in those countries where certain specific categories of migrants had already resided. In the Czech Republic, foreign residents from other European countries were mentioned by respondents in Prague, while Vietnamese grocery store owners were encountered in smaller municipalities. While none of the respondents in the Polish city of Lublin had met any refugee, limited contact was claimed with Ukrainian migrant workers or exchange students from Ukraine and Asia. Residents of a Warsaw neighborhood merely took notice of some Indian and Ukrainian migrants but failed to strike personal acquaintance with them. Romanian respondents in two focus groups also lacked closer contact and reported that they could only tell migrants by their appearance.

A different picture emerged in those locations in Poland and Romania where refugee centers were found. Of the four respondents in the Polish city of Białystok, three admitted to making acquaintance, usually on more than one occasion, with refugees from Chechnya or Ukraine. However, these contacts were reported to be rather casual, and none of the respondents had established a permanent relationship with the refugees. Also, while they held positive attitudes towards their acquaintances, they also noted a certain cultural distance that limited opportunities for interaction. Romanian respondents in one of the focus groups only realized that some of their clients were refugees when they inspected their documents.

In Slovakia, a strong correlation between having one’s own experience of being a migrant and meeting foreigners while abroad and a lower sense of fear of foreigners in general could be observed. Most of the young people from focus groups in the capital city and the northern town of Namestovo had taken part in student exchange programs, an experience which they had found enriching. However, while some of these respondents reported greater openness to individual foreigners, this experience did not generally translate into positive attitudes towards admitting refugees into Slovakia. In fact, many

of the respondents who had migrated to Western Europe found concerns over immigration “understandable,” as expressed in this statement from Namestovo: “people who are working in Germany or France at the moment know what migration looks like these days.”

In the absence of direct contacts, many respondents in the Czech Republic, Poland and Romania referred more to their perceptions of the general societal attitudes towards migrants. They recognized that relations with the host society varied among different migrant groups. For instance, the Czech respondents distinguished between migrants from other European countries who did not “cause problems” and those toward whom wider cultural distance was experienced – such as the Vietnamese. In all three cities in Poland, the cultural and religious distinctiveness of migrants was underlined, and those communities’ attempts to preserve their identity were noted with some reservation. Focus group discussants in Romania found it difficult to distinguish between various legal categories of non-nationals, using such terms as asylum seekers, migrants or refugees interchangeably, and instead concentrated on the absence of traits they attributed to a typical Romanian.

Impact of relations with migrants and minorities on attitudes in Bulgaria, Croatia and Hungary

Past experience of individuals and communities with migrants and refugees appears to have played a role in shaping attitudes in several locations in Bulgaria, Croatia and Hungary, counterbalancing the general perception dominating the media portrayal.

In Bulgaria, the two smaller communities (Belene and Harmanli) had been exposed to the “otherness” in various ways: for example, the presence of multiple religious communities with their visible signs and symbols, as well as of immigrant groups integrated in the local labor market in the 1980s (Belene); personal contacts in the last several years with refugees from Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan hosted in a large local reception center, who are reported to be encountered “everywhere” (Harmanli). In contrast, although more numerous in absolute terms, refugees would be less noticeable in the capital city of Sofia due to their relative concentration in some parts of the city.

Similarly, individual and community experience predisposed respondents in some locations in Croatia to notice refugees more than in other locations. Two of the investigated communities in Croatia (the city of Kutina and the

neighborhood of Dugave in the city of Zagreb) were locations of reception centers for asylum seekers, and the respondents primarily assessed visibility of refugees through the prism of their personal contacts, which varied. In Kutina, the primary point of contact was a school attended by refugees' children, where the respondents worked. Although teaching gave them insight into some specific issues faced by refugee families, their awareness was still limited, as noted by one participant who concluded that to "be able to understand the person in the position of an asylum seeker," personal contact would be needed. The sense of distance from refugees was acutely felt in the Dugave neighborhood of the capital city, as demonstrated by the physical location of the reception center "on the fringe" of the community.

Hungary is a particular case in which the recent experience of a large-scale influx of asylum-seekers in 2015 served as a key reference point, framing respondents' current perceptions. While in none of the focus groups did the participants report any current personal contacts with refugees, a number of them referred to interactions during the 2015 crisis. As in the other countries, the lowest levels of contact were reported in the capital city, where only one respondent who had worked at a health care facility could give more extensive impressions, going beyond very brief interactions in the street.

Attitudes towards hate speech and violence against refugees

In general, the respondents did not participate in or witness protests against the admission of refugees. None of the participants in Hungary, Poland, Romania or Slovakia had personally witnessed demonstrations against the presence of refugees or violence directed at them. Only one focus group in the Czech Republic (Usti nad Labem) had direct exposure to an anti-Islam protest that had been organized by local political extremists.

When asked whether they would condone or approve of violence against refugees, the Romanian participants strongly denied any such possibility, and no Slovak respondents supported anti-refugee statements from extreme politicians, in turn expressing satisfaction at the conviction of perpetrators of a racist riot. In some locations, however, the respondents justified anti-refugee sentiments or protests, pointing to what they considered to be unacceptable behavior on the part of refugees themselves. For instance, in one Hungarian location the participants explained that the negative reactions did not target the refugees themselves but were rather expressions of anger at the

consequences of hosting them (“the mess and dirt that they were leaving behind”).

In other countries under study, the participants commented on protests or acts of violence that had taken place locally. While the Bulgarian respondents did not take part in them, they did comment on their roots and consequences. Regarding a protest of around 20 persons against an initiative to host the refugees, one participant concluded that the issue divided the entire local community (“There were no hesitant people, either you are for or against”). Referring to a fight that took place in a local bar and the rebellion of refugees in a camp, while the participants did not follow the details of the issue, they associated these problems with inadequate conditions (congestion) or frictions between ethnic groups. The cultural explanation was given at the focus group in Sofia: “They carry this from their countries; they do it there, come here and continue doing it.”

Hostile acts, ranging from verbal abuse to physical assaults, were reported in two cities in eastern Poland. The majority of the participants had heard of such attacks directed not only at foreigners but also at ethnic Poles with darker complexion. Significantly, however, the respondents’ condemnation of these individual acts of violence, treated as instances of hooliganism or the practice of subcultures, did not imply their acceptance for the admission of refugees. The participants in the focus group in Lublin, for instance, were critical of generalizing from these incidents to argue that the community was aggressive towards newcomers and considered themselves justified in holding critical opinions of refugees, in particular Muslim ones.

In fact, many respondents had witnessed multiple instances of hate speech, consisting of either direct verbal attacks against Muslim refugees – for instance, directed at women wearing a hijab – or slogans appearing in public. Some Czech respondents noted that there was little reaction in their society to increasingly harsh rhetoric and public behavior. The Bulgarian participants noted that while they had not observed the host society’s hostile activities towards refugees, they recognized “a feeling of aggression from the Bulgarians towards the refugees,” which, if taken to extreme, could lead to conflicts.

Respondents in several locations attributed greater hostility to refugees to misinformation, which could have resulted from exposure to the messages provided by the mass media. However, they did not agree as to the relation between the impact of the media and the public’s concerns. For instance, some Hungarian participants felt that the government’s messages stirred popular

sentiments, while others believed that they merely reflected and reinforced pre-existing anxieties. The former position views the mass media as harmful propaganda: “Those who watch only Hungarian state media, especially the elderly people, are brainwashed.” The latter view considers the role of mass media to be secondary; that the local population reacted to the large-scale movement of migrants with fear, which then was expressed in the public discourse.

Response to pro-refugee arguments

There was a wide range of responses to three arguments that could be put forth in favour of support for the admission of refugees (ethical, cultural and economic). The variety of responses reflected the diversity of age, local experience and exposure to national media and prompted in many instances counterarguments or reformulation of the original arguments. Many respondents reacted strongly to the original arguments, either relating to them or denying their validity. Personal experience (or its lack) seemed to be a decisive factor. On the one hand, some participants related to the arguments by referring to the real stories of vulnerable people. On the other hand, the opponents of admitting refugees in some locations claimed that they did not know anyone holding a view to the contrary, and rather than deal with the pleas for reception, they advanced argumentation for non-admission.

Ethical obligation to help those in need

The crucial distinction between those accepting and rejecting this argument depended on the respondents' ability to identify with the refugees and their plight. In one Bulgarian location, the participants found the refugees' flight from war and suffering close to their own concerns with personal and communal security. Young Slovak participants found openness to refugees a naturally human attitude, congruent with their values dictating help to victims of war. An even stronger sense of identification was evident in the case of a woman working in the school with refugees' children. She not only realized that she had changed her personal opinion once she came to know the children and their parents, but also believed that the wider public's reluctance to take care of the needy could be explained by the fact that others lacked such personal experience.

In contrast, opposition to the argument of an ethical obligation to receive the refugees was founded on a strong mistrust of their genuine needs and intents. Czech participants suspected that many asylum claims could be based on unconfirmed stories and were often sceptical of the refugees' motives of fleeing for their safety, instead seeing their motive as the desire to improve their economic lot. Some Hungarian respondents also questioned the assistance needs of asylum-seekers, referring to what they saw as evidence of the relative affluence of some of the newcomers who arrived in the country in 2015.

Another source of opposition stemmed from the denial of responsibility for the causes of the conflict. This was strongly voiced in Poland, as exemplified by a respondent in Warsaw: "I do not feel that it has been our fault, that we have to take them in and play host to them." Another participant in Lublin made the broader assertion that "Poland or, in fact, no other country of Central and Eastern Europe had anything to do with" the "difficult conditions" from which the refugees were fleeing. This position was not moderated by universal appeals to Christian values or European solidarity, and instead limited the obligation to own citizens, primarily to protect their security.

In fact, while the Polish respondents professed their adherence to humanitarian principles, they denied to a varying extent that this implied any obligation to admit refugees to Poland. As many as half of the respondents in the city of Lublin rejected the possibility of accepting refugees at all, while several others made admission dependent on the claimants' ability to meet several conditions that would allow thorough vetting (to screen out Islamic radicals) and to ensure their assimilation into the Polish society. The participants in the other locations in Poland acknowledged that under the current national legislation, persons fleeing war or persecution could apply for refugee status, but they opposed the reception of asylum-seekers from countries that were culturally and religiously alien, as that would, in their view, preclude effective assimilation. Instead, the majority supported delivering humanitarian and recovery assistance to the countries of the refugees' origin or shelter in the Middle East. The country report for Poland clearly identifies limits to the respondents' empathy: "We are ready to help only under certain conditions," concluding rather sadly that since these conditions presently "cannot be fulfilled," the country is not willing to accept any refugees from the war-torn regions of the Middle East or Africa.

Enrichment of the national cultures

In the countries where a significant majority of the population associated the arrival of newcomers with various threats, the arguments regarding enriching the culture were either generally viewed as of little relevance (Czech Republic) or met with very strong opposition (Hungary). Those participants in the Czech Republic, Poland or Slovakia who saw any possibilities for foreign cultures to complement their own limited any such contributions to issues such as cuisine. More generally, however, while recognizing the cultural differences, most Czech respondents reacted with anxiety.

In the countries where strong objections to the arrival of refugees were grounded in cultural arguments, the focus group participants stressed the non-inclusive character of their cultures. Some Polish and Hungarian respondents claimed that their national cultures had evolved over centuries and could not be enriched through contacts with what they perceived as the traditional or what they saw as even “backward” ways of the nations of refugees’ origin. Many respondents could not identify any particular aspects of the refugees’ cultural heritage that could be enriching and, in fact, pointed to several issues (such as the position of women) in Muslim culture that they found unacceptable. Some Hungarian participants were actually concerned over the threat that the presence of Muslim migrants would pose for Judeo-Christian civilization.

The cultural argument did not resonate as much in some other locations – most notably in the Southeast European countries, which had hosted refugees before. Croatian respondents stressed the need for the central authorities to take actions that would prepare local communities for the arrival of the newcomers and the challenges associated with their integration. Thus, they believed that if the process is properly managed and the issue is presented in an open manner, the host society could be receptive. In Bulgaria, a positive case of mutual benefits of learning about another culture was cited as a Syrian student taught local schoolchildren some Syrian dances and this gesture was reciprocated.

Economic contribution

The economic factor was highlighted in many respondents’ statements as a crucial criterion for making the decision to accept refugees. Arguments referring to the economic costs and benefits were made in two basic forms. A

significant number of participants in many locations expressed concerns about their communities' and countries' ability to sustain a large inflow of refugees. This line of reasoning was summarized by one of the Budapest participants, who argued that the country's economic and social standing needed to be improved first so that the country would be capable of accommodating refugees. A variation on the theme was the belief that the admission of a large number of refugees in the present conditions of the social, demographic and economic upheaval (as demonstrated by low birth rates, youth unemployment or large emigration) would actually worsen the situation. The proponents of this view argued that the refugees would not be able to integrate well into the local labor market (questioning their work ethic) and, in effect, would be a burden on the limited pool of welfare benefits. Such an argument was raised in the eastern Polish city of Lublin, where some participants called for barring immigrants from accessing the local labor market, as they saw various social costs associated with the presence of foreigners (cultural tensions, increased crime rate).

The opposite claim was made by some participants who perceived immigrants and refugees as necessary for resolving the problem of scarce labor resources in the low-skilled segment of the market. This argument came up in some of the countries experiencing a significant outflow of own workforce. About a half of the Polish respondents subscribed to the view that that it would be possible to stimulate economic development by attracting a foreign workforce to fill the positions that are currently not filled by the local workforce. Romanian participants, in turn, identified benefits to the national economy that would accrue if high-skilled professionals (doctors, engineers or teachers) joined the ranks of the country's workforce. The participants of a group in the Bulgarian community of Harmanli (which hosted refugees) could identify some specific economic opportunities for locals working in businesses serving the large population of the refugee camp, but were also alarmed at the growth of some illegal activities (fake marriages or apartment rentals).

Arguments against the reception of refugees

Security concerns

Fear was the feeling that was invoked frequently to describe the respondents' attitude to the reception of refugees. Fear was firstly associated with a sense of loss of control when faced with the arrival of what was seen as a "giant mass" of asylum-seekers, as noted in Slovakia. Croatian respondents acknowledged the widespread concerns in the country's regions, attributing them to the "fear of the unknown." In their view, they stemmed from the local residents' shock at the sudden immersion in the environment of so many different cultures and races that had been unknown in these localities. The Bulgarian participants were, in turn, anxious about what they saw as a snowball effect: "Others will definitely follow when they see the openness of the local people." In two locations in Bulgaria, the very fact that refugees arrived in groups caused anxiety as expressed in this statement: "In most cases people are afraid when refugees walk in groups."

Participants of one Hungarian group were particularly concerned about the difficulties in verifying the identity of people arriving in a large group and preventing the entry of potential terrorists. One participant emphatically stated that refugees should only be allowed if the process was under close supervision. Similar concerns were raised by the Romanian respondents, who argued that "it is impossible for the Romanian state to control and check up properly every refugee that comes in..." Bulgarian respondents were also uneasy about security concerns and the possibility of conflicts, as those "on the other side" could not be spotted easily while accompanying law-abiding families. In another small town in Bulgaria, young people argued that the local residents were afraid since they could not identify who the refugees were, "how they have come here, whether they are part of ISIL." The inability to discern the purpose of entry of the newcomers whom the local people do not know was specifically named as a problem in the context of possible terrorist threats. One respondent felt very uneasy not knowing whether the authorities were investigating the arriving refugees, suspecting the worst. Croatian participants thought these fears among the local population in several regions of the country were understandable, given the global concerns over terrorism prevalent in media messages.

Concerns about security were at the top of the list of arguments against the admission of refugees in many localities. In Romania, all the participants identified public or national security as the prime concern, as they believed that the arrival of refugees to Romania had a direct effect on raising crime rates in the country. Participants in a small Bulgarian town expressed anxiety at the rise of violence due to the arrival of a larger group of newcomers, drawing mainly on images carried over the mass media identifying refugees as a destabilizing factor in small localities.

In many groups, anxieties focused on the threat of terrorist attacks. Respondents in the Czech Republic were concerned about the greater likelihood of terrorist attacks if refugees were to be admitted, and advocated caution. One respondent expressed it as follows: “Why should we put our safety at risk, if we don’t have to?” When challenged with the argument that the majority of refugees were peaceful, the respondents pointed to the risk of spreading radical views at mosques even by a “handful of fanatics.” Similarly, a Hungarian respondent declared that if even a single refugee was proven to be associated with terrorist groups, the country should not admit any refugees. A parallel concern was expressed in Romania, in which a respondent pointed to the recent case of the apprehension of a young adult suspected of plotting a terrorist attack, and argued that refugees could be influenced by radical groups and become religious zealots capable of committing violent acts.

However, concern about the rising threat of terrorist attacks was prevalent even in the locations where such attacks had not affected the local residents directly. Participants of a focus group in a small Bulgarian town justified their apprehension by referring to the fact that such attacks had taken place in Western Europe and were featured in the national media: “It is normal to be afraid when you watch the news and in London you see a person with a knife.” In Poland, even if the respondents acknowledged that the fear might be “somewhat irrational,” they nonetheless identified the perpetrators of recent terrorist attacks in Europe as Muslims and argued that Poland so far had been spared such attacks on account of its refusal to take in Muslim refugees.

The admission of refugees was also seen as a security risk in the long run in a number of ways, as noted in particular by some of the Czech participants. On the one hand, they feared that the uncontrolled arrival of refugees could trigger a nationalist backlash, which could in turn destabilize the democratic system. In that context, some respondents pointed out the rising support

enjoyed by extremist groups in the country. On the other hand, some respondents were concerned about a possible long-term demographic growth of the Muslim population that would over time result in a higher ratio of foreigners in the Czech society.

Incompatibility of cultures and potential integration failure

One of the most prominent arguments against the admission of refugees was rooted in the belief that Muslims would not coexist peacefully with the local population. This conviction was grounded in either of the two following premises: the essential incompatibility of values and the negative reaction to the newcomers' behaviour.

The cultural argument stressed the perceived gap between the values and beliefs of Muslim refugees that, according to many respondents, could not be fundamentally bridged. An argument was advanced that the integration of Arab refugees would be difficult, as the "Islamic" culture was very different from the "ancestral Romanian traditions." Some Hungarian participants cited Western Europe's experience as evidence that Muslims would not be able to integrate into European societies. Respondents in Slovakia described a general sentiment in many local communities of resistance to any "difference" from what the majority is used to, both in terms of religion or race. The focus group participants in the town of Nitra summarized this attitude as "different is automatically wrong," attributing it to the limited mobility during the socialist period, which eventually produced a fear of the unknown.

Cultural distance played a major role, as many respondents differentiated their attitudes towards various categories of refugees depending on how they assessed their ability to assimilate into the national culture of the destination country. Bulgarian respondents were not opposed to admitting Slavic and Eastern Orthodox newcomers (Russian or Ukrainian), arguing that they had come to know these nationalities through personal contact. In contrast, they could not rule out security threats coming from Muslim refugees who, in their view, "see things differently," and one could not be sure whether a given person "is radical or not." They attributed the difference primarily to the different religion of Muslim newcomers. Czech participants were alarmed at one specific aspect of Muslim culture – the position of women – highlighting its incompatibility with the notion of equality accepted in Czech society. These reservations were shared by some Polish respondents, especially in the city

of Lublin, who stressed that the religious differences were insurmountable obstacles to integration and could, in fact, be detrimental to Christianity as the dominant religion in Poland. One participant described the conflict in civilizational terms between the “Christian-European” or “Latin” civilization and Islam, and concluded that such “cultural barriers are impossible to overcome.” Another respondent claimed that he came to oppose the entry of Muslims to Europe “after reading the Koran and the hadiths,” which he found to be a basis for religious intolerance.

Another set of grounds for believing that Muslim refugees could not successfully integrate involved the respondents’ assessment of the newcomers’ behavior. Many participants doubted the refugees’ willingness to assimilate. The sight of Muslim women wearing scarves was interpreted by a Hungarian female respondent as a sign of unwillingness to conform to the local customs. Other Hungarian participants pointed to Muslim communities’ attachment to their cultural and religious traditions as resistance to integration. The respondents who had direct contact with refugees pointed to specific differences in behavior, as in the case of the Bulgarian community of Harmanli, where the everyday conduct of the Afghan and other refugees evoked some negative reactions: “The way they have lived in their own countries does not have anything common with ours here.”

Questioning refugee status and opposition to the relocation scheme

In Hungary, the respondents adopted a selective approach to the admission of refugees, as the majority concurred with the statement that the country is not capable of accepting “everybody.” Thus, they generally distinguished between those asylum-seekers who were genuinely escaping conditions threatening their life and well-being (war, inhumane conditions) and those who were perceived as being de facto economic migrants. While the former category was considered to be entitled to assistance, there was strong opposition to accepting the latter.

In turn, some Polish respondents questioned the distinction between “refugees” and “immigrants,” invoking the cases of both the Ukrainian migrant workers whose motives might not be only economic (considering the ongoing conflict in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea) and the Syrians who were often believed to be predominantly economic migrants. These premises underpinned the opposition to the EU’s relocation scheme: some

respondents argued that the relocated refugees would not want to settle in Poland, as its welfare benefits were relatively limited compared to some Western European members of the Union. Other arguments against taking part in the scheme reflected resentment of perceived unfairness. On the one hand, some participants stressed that it would be an encroachment on the country's sovereignty, calling for a referendum on the issue. On the other hand, the opposition to relocation was rooted in the perception that Poland had not brought about the conditions that led to the migration crisis. The link to the question of national sovereignty was also made in the Czech Republic, as stated by one respondent: "We should have the right to choose which refugees we want."

Burden on public finance and sense of social injustice

In several locations, opposition to the admission of refugees had economic grounds. The specific formulation varied by country, reflecting the diverse concerns with the capacity of the national governments and local communities to sustain the burden of integration. In Croatia, the respondents argued that negative reactions to admission might come from groups that feared for their precarious welfare – the unemployed, concerned about the perceived negative impact on their employability, and pensioners, who were afraid that the increased pressure on the welfare fund might cut into their relatively low pensions. Such sentiment was palpable among the Polish participants, who felt that extending assistance to refugees would be unfair towards those citizens of the country who did not receive adequate aid from the state to deal with their economic vulnerability.

The economic argument according to which assistance should first of all be cost-effective resonated among some of the Czech and Polish respondents, who supported the position according to which aid to refugees should be provided in the countries of origin or in the neighboring countries rather than in Central Europe. They echoed the statements made by some politicians arguing that the cost of the support of refugees in Europe was much higher than the cost of assistance rendered in the Middle East.

The idea that providing assistance to refugees implies trading off aid to one's own citizens came up in some locations where the respondents believed

that aid to asylum-seekers had been offered.¹⁹ Young people interviewed in a Bulgarian town with experience in hosting refugees considered giving aid unfair to the local population and perceived the newcomers as competitors for scarce resources. According to one participant, “people were annoyed that everything was provided to the refugees and for them – there are no jobs, no one is provided with a free home.” The respondents acknowledged that this sense of social injustice produced negative reactions: “the local people are angry that the state helps them and does not help our pensioners.” Another participant reacted by calling on the government to channel funds that would be used for integrating refugees to other pressing social issues: “if you ask me, I do not want a single penny to go in that direction, I want my taxes to be used for education, health care.”

Key conclusions

Crucial impact of the 2015 crisis. The positions of the countries under question on the admission of refugees were to a large extent shaped by the impact of the wider crisis of 2015. There was a strong sense of societal insecurity in both the countries that were directly affected by the uncontrolled migrant flows (Bulgaria, Hungary and Croatia) and elsewhere, where public opinion was influenced by media coverage of the migrant crisis. This represented a turning point for defining national policies in the area of migration and asylum, which went beyond the transposition of EU norms. Some countries (Bulgaria or Slovakia) defined their migration strategies, while some others (Poland) made a dramatic shift in their policies in reaction to the perceived emergency.

Politicization of the issue. Another consequence of the crisis was a shift in which the questions of migration and asylum, hitherto remaining marginal in the wider debate, became central issues, dividing not only the political elites, but increasingly polarizing the public. This process was accelerated in some countries by two developments: the growing popularity of the political forces for whom non-admission of refugees was an important point of their agenda and the evolution of the media landscape, in which the electronic media (Internet, social networks) challenged the dominance of traditional media (TV and newspapers). Paradoxically, while the overwhelming majority did not

19 The Bulgarian researchers noted, however, that these reactions were often based on misinformation, as no dedicated integration services were being offered and the conditions in the reception centers were poor.

have personal contact with refugees, they nonetheless were gripped by strong concerns over the admission of refugees. The participants admitted to being influenced by the associations made in the various media, which tended to select facts and interpret them in a certain way.

Shift toward non-admission of refugees. Both the public opinion surveys and results of the focus groups in the seven countries under study show that three major arguments have become rallying points for opposition to the admission of refugees, especially those with a non-European or non-Christian background. In the short to mid-term, the fundamental source of resistance to admission stems from a deep sense of insecurity, evident on a number of levels. Firstly, many respondents associate the uncontrolled immigration of Muslims with a heightened risk of terrorism, and a significant part of them are suspicious of the motives of refugees from the Middle East. Secondly, insecurity is linked to the perception of the weakness of the national and European institutions in the face of a challenge. Such perceptions underlay the resistance of the Visegrad countries to the relocation scheme, which was characterized as ineffective by many politicians in the region.

In the long run, however, concerns over the incompatibility of the national cultures of the host countries and the values and mores of the refugees seem to be dominant. In some countries, the respondents argued that the admission of newcomers would be an existential threat to their religious or cultural heritage and essentially denied the possibility of a dialogue with persons subscribing to a different set of values. Many participants echoed their governments' and some of the mass media's assertions that resistance to the acceptance of refugees was an act of defense in a conflict of civilizations. The strength of this position can be seen in the fact that in some locations, participants who either had positive experience of contacts with refugees or believed that the presence of refugees could have beneficial economic effects were nevertheless opposed to the admission of refugees in a systemic manner out of fear of the cultural tensions. The cultural argument is likely to play an important role as a way in which the threat of the "other" could be used to build strong identities and generate support to those political and social actors who claim to defend the national sovereignty.

Resistance to arguments for reception. The double linkage made in the public discourse to security and identity could help explain why the ethical

argument of helping those in need seems to appeal to few of the respondents. Many respondents rejected outright the obligation to assist refugees, especially those of a different cultural or religious background as they challenged the notion of solidarity that would transcend such divides. Their resistance was reinforced by a contributing sense of social injustice which the East European countries were to be, in many respondents' view, subject to when asked by West European states and EU institutions to deal with the consequences of a conflict that they felt was not of their countries' making. In some countries, a strong focus on the need to protect national sovereignty further eroded calls to engage in activities going beyond the defense of particular national interest.

At the same time, the proliferation of civil society initiatives in several of the countries under study, which either contested the discourse of security or engaged volunteers in direct activities to assist refugees either domestically or abroad affirms the appeal that the ideal of solidarity with those in need still holds for many individuals. Its wider impact remains to be seen, however, as the polarization of the political and media discourse also brought about attempts to limit opportunities for engaging in such solidarity actions. In the long term, it appears crucial that a larger part of the wider public should be made aware of the objectives of these activities and that a space for a more fact-based debate of the issue, currently dominated by ideological discourse, opens up.

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