

'Keep Europe for the Europeans'. The Role of Threat Perceptions and Intergroup Contact for Explaining Attitudes towards Immigrants in Hungary

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In 2015, the inflow of immigrants to Europe increased dramatically. More than 1 million people fled from wars and conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, particularly affecting transit countries along the Western Balkan route. Of all the transit countries, the Hungarian government was particularly vocal in its negative attitude towards immigrants, launching several anti-immigration campaigns which had a detrimental effect on residents' hostility towards these immigrants. In this study, we focus on the mechanisms behind this increased hostility in a transit-country context by combining insights from integrated-threat theory and contact theory. We find that perceptions of realistic and symbolic threat increased negative attitudes towards immigrants. Importantly, these threat perceptions were shaped by people's positions in society and personal circumstances, in combination with their contact with immigrants. Specifically, in the harsh and negative Hungarian context, contact negatively influenced threat perceptions, especially amongst people who were at risk of experiencing negative consequences supposedly caused by the influx of immigrants. This in-depth country case study emphasises the importance of contextualising research findings on attitudes towards immigration in a broader social and political context.

Keywords: attitudes towards immigrants, Hungary, realistic threat, symbolic threat, intergroup contact, socio-demographic variables

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Introduction

In 2015, Europe experienced the greatest migration and refugee inflow since the Second World War. War and conflict in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, in particular, led to a significant increase in the number of forcibly displaced people. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than one million people reached Europe by sea in 2015, when the refugee crisis was at its peak (Metcalf-Hough 2015).¹ Following their arrival in Southern Europe, most migrants attempted to reach Western Europe through the so-called Western Balkans route. As a consequence, countries located along this route are often the most exposed to this mass immigration.

Despite a significant body of literature on attitudes towards immigrants (Davidov and Semyonov 2017; see, e.g., Ceobanu and Escandell 2010), we are just beginning to understand what this exposure to a mass influx of refugees means for attitudes towards immigration in those countries most exposed to these inflows. We already know that a blatant dehumanisation of Muslim refugees and hostile attitudes towards immigrants are particularly high in Central and Eastern European countries, where contact with refugees is low and political elites support an anti-refugee rhetoric (Bruneau, Kteily and Laustsen 2018). Large-scale European studies on attitudes towards immigrants, such as those based on European Social Survey (ESS) data, further suggest that these generally more hostile attitudes towards immigrants in Eastern European countries, combined with period effects such as the influx of refugees in 2015, can lead to a significant increase in negative attitudes towards immigrants (Heizmann and Huth 2021; Schmidt 2021).

Nevertheless, the mechanisms behind country-specific increases in negative attitudes are less clear, particularly in Central and Eastern European countries most affected by the 2015 refugee crisis. In the current study, we aim to investigate these mechanisms, focusing on perceptions of realistic and symbolic threat and intergroup contact in Hungary, a key transit country in 2015. Perceived threat, whether realistic (e.g., immigrants will steal our jobs) or symbolic (e.g., immigrants will take away our traditions) has long been recognised as a key driver of attitudes towards immigrants (Callens and Meuleman 2017; Ceobanu and Escandell 2010; Davidov and Semyonov 2017; Kende, Hadarics and Szabó 2019). Within the context of the 2015 migration crisis, experimental evidence suggests that anti-immigration attitudes are likely to lead to an increase in perceived threat, either realistic or symbolic (Schmuck and Matthes 2015). Conversely, however, the influx of immigrants can also facilitate intergroup contact, thereby reducing intergroup prejudice (Schlueter and Wagner 2008). It is thus crucial to investigate the relationship between perceived threat, intergroup contact and attitudes towards immigrants in the transit countries in light of the recent crisis. We provide, here, an empirical contribution by investigating these mechanisms in the Hungarian case, focusing on how perceptions of realistic and symbolic threat and intergroup contact are related to attitudes toward immigrants within this specific country context. Few studies have looked closely at attitudes towards immigrants in Hungary during this time, despite the country's strong anti-immigrant government campaign, with exceptions focused on glorification and attachment (Kende *et al.* 2019), anti-Muslim sentiment (Goździak and Márton 2018) and political-party preferences (Barna and Koltai 2019). We further contribute to the rich literature on attitudes towards immigrants by studying this important transit country, considering how key socio-demographic characteristics shape both perceptions of threat and, subsequently, attitudes towards immigrants. Specifically, using a mix of linear regression and ANOVA models on representative Hungarian data, we quantitatively study how perceptions of realistic and symbolic threat and intergroup contact are related to attitudes toward immigrants within Hungary as well as how socio-demographic characteristics shape these threat perceptions and, subsequently, attitudes toward immigrants.

Perceptions of threat and contact with immigrants

A wealth of studies have shown that negative attitudes toward immigration are fuelled by perceptions of threat (e.g., Callens and Meuleman 2017; Kuntz, Davidov, Schwartz and Schmidt 2015; Meuleman, Abts, Schmidt, Pettigrew and Davidov 2020). According to integrated-threat theory (Stephan and Stephan 2000; Stephan, Ybarra, and Bachman 1999), a distinction should be made between perceptions of *realistic* threat and perceptions of *symbolic* threat. Realistic threat perceptions are based on expectations that immigrants negatively impact on the physical or material well-being and political and economic power of the people in the host country (e.g., taking their jobs), whereas symbolic threat perceptions concern differences in worldviews between immigrants and host-country residents (i.e., in morals, values, norms, standards, beliefs and attitudes, such as threatening Hungarian culture – Stephan *et al.* 1999).

Research has shown that both types of threat perception contribute to negative attitudes toward immigrants. Not all studies conducted up to now explicitly distinguish between these 2 different types (e.g., Meuleman *et al.* 2020), while some focus on realistic threat (Hercowitz-Amir, Raijman and Davidov 2017; Kuntz, Davidov and Semyonov 2017) or on symbolic threat specifically (Davidov, Seddig, Gorodzeisky, Raijman, Schmidt and Semyonov 2020). When both types of threat perception are taken into account, the results are largely mixed, with realistic threat perceptions being a stronger contributor to some attitude indices and symbolic threat being more important for other indicators of negative attitudes (e.g., Callens and Meuleman 2017; Hellwig and Sinno 2017; Landmann, Gaschler and Rohmann 2019; Meltzer, Ebrl, Theorin, Lind, Schemer, Boomgaarden, Strömbäck and Heidenreich 2018). However, that both realistic and symbolic threat perceptions increase negative attitudes toward immigrants is indisputable.

While many studies have focused on the contribution of threat perceptions to negative attitudes towards immigrants, a few have tried to identify the conditions under which these threat perceptions arise or increase. Recent studies suggest that the sudden influx of migrants during the 2015 refugee crisis may have led to a convergence of realistic and symbolic threat, dependent on the policy context (de Coninck, Solano, Joris, Meuleman and d'Haenens 2021). Cross-national research on threat perceptions suggests, however, that the relative importance of realistic and symbolic threat perceptions is dependent upon the country context. Bell *et al.* (2022) show, for example, that – prior to the 2015 refugee crisis – particularly racist attitudes in Hungary were related to symbolic threat perceptions; realistic threat perceptions played no role. In comparison, realistic threat perceptions played a limited role in Poland and the Czech Republic.

It could also be that some people are more prone than others to experiencing threat when confronted with immigrants, due to their position in society or personal circumstances. The role of socio-demographic variables in shaping perceptions of realistic and symbolic threat has been understudied up to now (however, see Czymara 2020; Meuleman, Abts, Slootmaeckers and Meeusen 2019 for exceptions) although some insights have been revealed in studies focusing on anti-immigrant attitudes that included socio-demographic variables. For instance, employment status and educational level have been shown to contribute to anti-immigrant attitudes, such that people who are unemployed and those who have a lower educational level showed greater anti-immigrant attitudes (Marfouk 2019; Meuleman *et al.* 2019). Conservative political affiliation and mistrust in EU government has also been shown to predict more-negative attitudes towards immigrants, particularly during demographic shifts (Czymara 2020) although, in Hungary, mistrust in the EU appears to be more important for explaining racist attitudes than political trust (Bell *et al.* 2022). While it may be assumed that threat perceptions and anti-immigrant attitudes are positively related, the former were not directly measured in these studies. Other studies have included socio-demographic variables in their models but only looked at the indirect effects of these variables on threat perceptions (Meuleman *et al.* 2020).

In addition to threat perceptions being an important determinant for negative attitudes toward immigrants, intergroup contact is also an often-studied factor in research and theories on prejudice against minority groups. Based on seminal work on the effects of contact between members of different social groups and the subsequent introduction of intergroup-contact theory (Pettigrew 1998), ample studies have established that contact between members of minority and majority groups can lessen negative intergroup attitudes by reducing intergroup anxiety and feelings of threat and increasing empathy and perspective-taking (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; for overviews, see Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner and Christ 2011). Whether contact has a positive or a negative effect on intergroup attitudes is, however, dependent on the conditions under which contact is made (i.e., the equal status of the groups in the situation, having common goals, intergroup cooperation and authority support).

Previous studies on attitudes towards immigrants, in particular, have shown that positive contact decreases negative attitudes towards immigrants and negative contact contributes to negative attitudes (e.g., Laurence and Bentley 2018; Meleady, Seger and Vermue 2017; Neumann and Moy 2018). When looking at the conditions facilitating positive contact, most studies have focused on authority support (e.g., Green, Visintin, Sarrasin and Hewstone 2020; Panichella and Ambrosini 2018). Specifically, these studies have shown that direct contact with immigrants decreases negative attitudes towards immigrants (especially among more-highly educated individuals). In contrast, confrontations with immigrants through the mass media can increase hostility, especially among less-educated individuals (Panichella and Ambrosini 2018). Moreover, in countries with more-inclusive integration policies or institutional norms, positive contact with immigrants was facilitated and it more strongly reduced symbolic threat perceptions (Green *et al.* 2020) or helped to facilitate positive change in intergroup attitudes in contact-based interventions (Kende, Tropp and Lantos 2017). Mass-media reporting and integration policy measures could both be viewed as indicators of authority support.

Although most studies have focused on the conditions under which positive intergroup contact can be established, more recently studies have also looked into the factors contributing to negative intergroup contact (Aberson 2015; Barlow, Paolini, Pedersen, Hornsey, Radke, Harwood, Rubin and Sibley 2012; Graf, Paolini and Rubin 2014; Paolini, Harwood and Rubin 2010; Schäfer, Kauff, Prati, Kros, Lang and Christ 2021). These studies indicate that, whereas positive intergroup contact may be more frequent, negative intergroup contact may have stronger negative effects on intergroup attitudes. Moreover, recent work points to the importance of an individual's prior experience in shaping the effects of contact on attitudes. With the current study, we extend these findings by examining the effects of contact in an environment that is somewhat hostile towards immigrants – the Hungarian case. Schäfer *et al.* (2021) suggest that greater attention is needed for such real-world situations (outside experimental research) in order to understand the effect of contact on attitudes. In the Hungarian context, results from a quasi-experiment have shown that contact with Roma people can reduce prejudice (Kende *et al.* 2017). Results from Bell *et al.* (2022) suggest, in contrast, that contact with someone from a different race or ethnicity increased prejudice in Hungary prior to the refugee crisis.

The case of Hungary

Among the refugee transit countries, Hungary offers a particularly interesting case study in which to investigate attitudes toward immigrants in relation to mass immigration. Note that we focus on attitudes towards *immigration* here, not on refugees specifically, a point to which we return in the discussion. In 2015, over 390,000 migrants crossed the Hungarian borders and more than 177,000 migrants applied for asylum (Simonovits, Bernát, Sik and Szeidl 2016).² To put this in perspective, in 2015, Hungary received more asylum applications than in the previous 23 years combined (Juhász and Molnár 2016). Despite the large number of

asylum applications, most migrants only aimed to cross through Hungary on their way to other Western European countries such as Germany or Sweden (Török 2015).

Hungary was not a welcoming transit country, gaining attention for its unprecedented strict actions and inhumane treatment of refugees. As Prime Minister Orbán told the European Commission in 2015, ‘We Hungarians would like to keep Europe for the Europeans and we also wish to keep Hungary as a Hungarian country’, emphasising the symbolic threat posed by immigration. The negative rhetoric of the Hungarian government about refugees and asylum-seekers continued when, during his speech at the press conference of the European Council in September 2015, Prime Minister Orbán declared that a fence would be built at the Hungarian border to keep immigrants away (European Council 2015). Indeed, in September of that year, the fence was built on the Hungarian–Serbian border and extended to the Hungarian–Croatian border in October 2015, thus forcing refugees on the Western Balkans route to avoid Hungary on their way to Western Europe (Simonovits *et al.* 2016). The presence of the fence at the border led to a significant reduction in the number of asylum-seekers but the government continued its campaign against immigration.

In Hungary, intolerance towards minorities has a longer history (Bell *et al.* 2022; Hárs *et al.* 2009; Juhász, Hunyadi and Zgut 2015; Nyíri 2003). Hungarians overwhelmingly support restrictive immigration policies (Marfouk 2019) and researchers even found that Hungarian respondents were negative in their attitudes towards so-called ‘Pirezians’, a fictive nationality made up for the purposes of researching attitudes towards minorities (Juhász *et al.* 2015). A study of immigrant attitudes before and after the refugee crisis in Hungary using data from the European Social Survey (ESS) suggests that attitudes towards immigrants worsened following the migration crisis, dependent upon political-party preferences (Barna and Koltai 2019).

Previous research points to the importance of the political and policy context for understanding attitudes towards immigration (Ceobanu and Escandell 2010). Along with building a physical fence, political discourse helped to create anti-immigrant sentiment. Political-elite discourse showed signs of racism and hate speech (Bell *et al.* 2022) and the government emphasised the economic, cultural and security ‘threats’ posed by immigrants (Bocskor 2018), thus highlighting potential symbolic and realistic threats. Asylum-seekers were framed as economic migrants who were likely to take the jobs of Hungarian people (Bocskor 2018), serving to strengthen perceived realistic threats, grounded in fears about unemployment in a society recovering from the global financial crisis of 2008 but where unemployment was actually lower in 2015 than prior to the crisis (Hungarian Central Statistical Office 2016). Muslim asylum-seekers, in particular, were portrayed as ‘raiding’ Hungary, posing a threat to Hungarian culture and security (Bocskor 2018; Goździak and Márton 2018), placing emphasis on the symbolic threat posed by immigrants. At the time, the government introduced several interventions aimed at controlling the rights of incoming immigrants and asylum-seekers. Asylum laws enacted in 2015 enabled the authorities to place immigrants in detention for up to 12 months while they awaited the decision about their asylum application. The conditions in these detention centres were widely criticised by human-rights organisations, as they were originally built for criminals (Juhász *et al.* 2015).

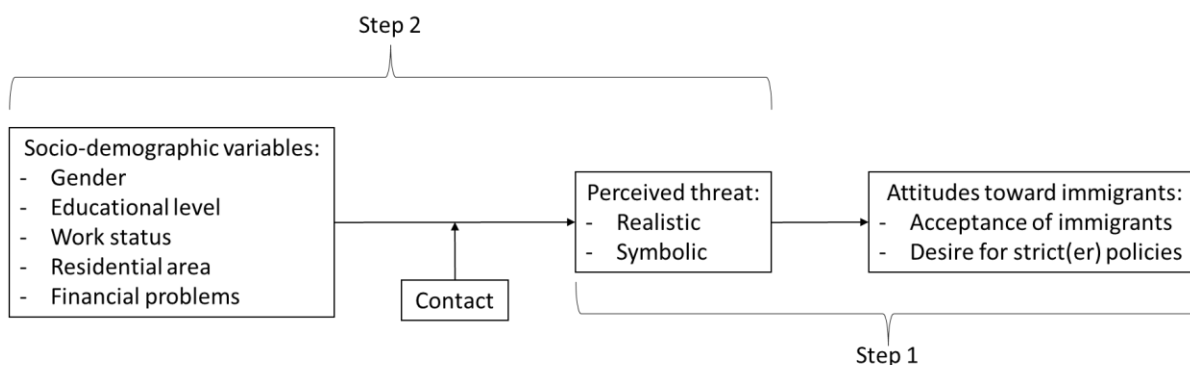
Alongside these measures, in June 2015 the government launched a billboard campaign with anti-immigration messages. Some examples of messages posted nationwide included: ‘If you come to Hungary, you can’t take the jobs of Hungarian people!’ and ‘If you come to Hungary, you have to respect our culture!’. Since all messages were in Hungarian, immigrants with no or little knowledge of the Hungarian language could not understand them. Accordingly, it is likely that these messages were targeted towards the Hungarian public rather than immigrants (Nolan 2015). Similarly, in another campaign linked to a referendum to oppose the EU’s proposal concerning the mandatory redistribution quota system (Harris 2016), people were exposed to messages such as ‘Did you know that, since the beginning of the immigration crisis, the harassment of women has risen sharply in Europe?’ and ‘Did you know that the Paris terror attacks were carried out by immigrants?’ (Gall 2016). Messages like these framed immigration as an economic threat and a threat to national safety and

to Hungarian culture (Bocskor 2018; Cantat and Rajaram 2019; Juhász *et al.* 2015). Even though volunteer organisations and pro-refugee activists challenged the dominant discourse (Kallius, Monterescu and Rajaram 2016) and the analysis of social-media outlets demonstrates the existence of a pro-refugee ‘counterpublic’ in Hungary (Dessewffy, Nagy and Váry 2017), negative political rhetoric and media campaigns dominated the public discourse about refugees in Hungary. Such anti-immigration campaigns can significantly affect attitudes towards immigrants by increasing perceived realistic and symbolic threats, although the effect of such campaigns can differ based on educational level or acquired knowledge (Dajnoki, Máté, Fenyves and Kun 2017; Schmuck and Matthes 2015).

The current study

The goal of this study is to combine insights from integrated threat theory and intergroup contact theory to better understand the increase in negative attitudes towards immigrants in Hungary during the refugee crisis of 2015. Using data from a representative survey conducted in Hungary at that time, we investigate how perceptions of realistic and symbolic threat and intergroup contact are related to attitudes toward immigrants within this specific context. Moreover, we study how important socio-demographic characteristics shape both perceptions of threat and, subsequently, attitudes towards immigrants (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Schematic overview of the relationships between socio-demographic variables, contact, threat perceptions and negative attitudes towards immigrants



Based on integrated threat theory, we expect that perceptions of realistic and symbolic threat will be negatively related to the acceptance of immigrants and positively related to the call for stricter immigration policies (H1). Moreover, these threat perceptions will be partially shaped by people’s position in society and personal circumstances (H2). As not much research has been done on the relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and threat perceptions, we will include gender, educational level, work status, residential area and experience of financial problems in our model and explore their relationships with the two threat perceptions specifically. While no concrete hypotheses can thus be formulated, some exploratory hypotheses can be put forward with regards to both realistic and symbolic threat perceptions. People’s position in society and personal circumstances may put some people more at risk of experiencing negative consequences in their physical or material well-being from the influx of immigrants than others (e.g., lower-skilled jobs are more likely to be filled by immigrants than higher-skilled jobs; waiting lists for social housing will possibly increase). As such, a lower educational level, experiencing financial problems or being part of the work force as opposed to being retired may increase realistic threat perceptions (H2a). Furthermore, encountering people with differing worldviews may be more or less likely based on personal circumstances. For instance, living in

an urban area, which is generally more diverse than rural areas, may increase the likelihood of encountering people with different worldviews. As such, symbolic threat perceptions may be higher in a rural residential area than in an urban one (H2b). Finally, based on intergroup contact theory, we expect that these effects will be moderated by whether or not individuals have had previous contact with immigrants, such that negative effects will be heightened with contact, as authority support is low in Hungary, therefore institutional norms are not conducive to positive effects of contact (H3).

Materials and methods

Data, sampling and respondents

We conducted a secondary analysis of data collected by TÁRKI Social Research Institute in October 2015 through face-to-face interviews, with computer-supported questionnaires. TÁRKI frequently collects data about the attitudes of Hungarian society on a variety of issues and the current dataset involves a broad range of questions about attitudes towards immigration.

Multi-staged national probability sampling was applied (Bhattacharjee 2012) and the sample was proportionately stratified, such that each subgroup (stratum) of the population was present in proportion to its size in the population. The final sample was representative of the adult Hungarian population and was weighted by gender, age, educational level and place of residence. It contained 899 respondents between the ages of 18 and 92, of whom 369 were men and 530 were women. The largest group of respondents (52.3 per cent) had finished secondary education, while the second-largest group (34 per cent) had vocational training. More than half of the respondents reported having financial problems (62.7 per cent), while 37.3 per cent reported no financial problems at all. A minority of respondents lived in the capital city of Budapest (18.8 per cent), while 81.2 per cent lived somewhere else in the country. An overview of all descriptive statistics is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variable		<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Range	<i>n</i>
Acceptance of immigrants		2.92 (2.63)	0–8	899
Strictness of immigration policies		4.79 (1.11)	1–6	891
Realistic threat		4.28 (1.33)	1–6	880
Symbolic threat		4.64 (1.19)	1–6	857
		Frequencies	%	
Contact	Yes	248	27.6	899
	No	651	72.4	
Gender	Male	369	41.0	899
	Female	530	59.0	
Educational level	Low	470	52.3	899
	Medium	306	34.0	
	High	123	13.7	
Work status	Working age	575	64.5	891
	Retired	316	35.5	
Residential area	Budapest	169	18.8	899
	Not Budapest	730	81.2	
Financial problems	Yes	561	62.7	895
	No	334	37.3	

Note: Sample sizes may differ slightly from weighted samples included in the analyses.

Measures

Although the survey was larger in scope, we only present here those questions relevant for our analysis.

- Attitudes towards immigrants

Attitudes towards immigrants were measured in two ways. First, respondents answered 8 yes/no-questions regarding which types of immigrant should be accepted into their country (i.e., those who flee wars, those who left their countries because of the Islamic State, because of unemployment, because of their political actions, because of their religion or because of their ethnic or national identity, those at risk of starvation or fleeing natural disasters or those arriving for family reunification). To create a continuous measure of acceptance of immigrants, we counted the number of times that respondents answered affirmatively to these questions, meaning that they think that Hungary should accept this type of immigrant. Second, respondents rated the desired strictness of immigration policies by reacting to 3 statements – ‘We should protect our borders from immigrants with armed forces’; ‘We should directly send those newcomers back who are not eligible for refugee status’; ‘Border control should be stricter within the European Union). Answers were measured on a 6-point Likert-scale (1 = totally disagree, 6 = totally agree) and were averaged to create a scale score ($\alpha = .66$).

- Feelings of realistic and symbolic threat

Feelings of realistic threat were measured on a 6-point Likert-scale (1 = totally disagree, 6 = totally agree) using a combined scale of 3 items (‘Due to immigration, the number of crimes committed in Hungary is increasing’; ‘Immigrants take jobs from people who were already living here’; ‘I am worried that immigrants may spread unknown diseases’; $\alpha = .85$). Feelings of symbolic threat were measured on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree, 6 = totally agree) with a combined scale of 4 items (‘I am afraid that the increasing number of immigrants will change our lifestyle in the wrong way’; ‘I doubt that Hungary’s interests will be a priority to immigrants’; ‘I am afraid that, due to the increasing number of immigrants, our culture will vanish’; ‘I am afraid that, in the case of war or other political conflict, immigrants will be loyal to their countries of origin’; $\alpha = .87$).

- Socio-demographic variables and contact

Respondents’ gender (male or female), educational level (low/primary education, medium/secondary education, high/tertiary education), work status (whether people were part of the working-age population or retired), residential area (whether people lived in Budapest or not) and whether they experienced financial problems (yes or no) were included in our analyses as our main socio-demographic variables. In addition, contact was measured by asking respondents whether they had met any refugees or immigrants in the past 12 months (yes or no).

Analysis

Multiple linear regression analyses were performed to test how perceptions of realistic and symbolic threat related to both measures of attitudes toward immigrants. All socio-demographic variables and previous contact were included as control variables in these models. Subsequently, ANOVAs were performed to test how the different

socio-demographic variables related to perceptions of both realistic and symbolic threat. Contact and interactions of contact with each of the socio-demographic variables were taken into account in both of these models.

Ethical considerations

None of the authors were involved in the collection of data for this study. Rather, the study relied on secondary data collected by TÁRKI Social Research Institute. The data protection and data security policy of TÁRKI Social Research Institute notes the requirement of obtaining informed consent prior to any processing of data, as well as explaining the voluntary nature of the research to participants (available on the website). This policy underlying data collection ensures that ethical requirements have been met. No separate ethical clearance was obtained for this study from the authors' (research) institutions, as it was neither necessary nor common practice to do so for the use of secondary data collected by a third party at the time of initial analysis (early 2016).

Results

Feelings of threat in relation to attitudes towards immigrants

An overview of the outcomes of the regression analyses can be found in Table 2. Our linear regression analysis showed that the acceptance of immigrants was negatively related to feelings of both realistic threat and symbolic threat. The relationship between symbolic threat and the acceptance of immigrants was slightly stronger than that between realistic threat and the acceptance of immigrants. With regards to the control variables, the acceptance of immigrants was related to educational level, experiencing financial problems and contact, such that people with low education levels (as opposed to those with high education levels), those that experienced financial problems or those that had been in contact with immigrants were less accepting of them.

A second linear regression showed that the desired strictness of immigration policies was positively related to feelings of both realistic and symbolic threat. Again, the relationship between symbolic threat and the desired strictness of immigration policies was slightly stronger than that between realistic threat and the desired strictness of immigration policies. With regards to the control variables, the desired strictness of immigration policies was related to gender, experiencing financial problems and contact, such that men and people who had been in contact with immigrants desired stricter immigration policies. Surprisingly, having financial problems seems to be related to a desire for less strict immigration policies.

Socio-demographic variables and previous contact in relation to feelings of realistic threat

An ANOVA with the five socio-demographic variables (gender, educational level, work status, residential area, financial problems), previous contact and two-way interactions of each socio-demographic variable with contact on realistic threat showed a significant main effect of gender ($F(1, 880) = 12.57, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .02$) and educational level ($F(2, 880) = 21.18, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .05$). Men ($M = 4.21, SD = 1.29$) experienced somewhat lower levels of realistic threat than women ($M = 4.38, SD = 1.35$). Moreover, *post hoc* pairwise comparisons for educational level showed that people with high levels of education ($M = 3.70, SD = 1.45$) experienced lower levels of realistic threat than people with either medium ($M = 4.37, SD = 1.32; p < .01$) or low levels of education ($M = 4.47, SD = 1.23; p < .01$). People with a medium level of education did not differ from those with a lower level ($p > .06$). No other significant main effects for realistic threat were found.

Table 2. Results of the regression analyses for feelings of threat in relation to attitudes towards immigrants

	Acceptance of immigrants				Strictness of immigration policies			
	Step 1		Step 2		Step 1		Step 2	
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β
Realistic threat	-0.524	-0.265***	-0.473	-0.239***	0.222	0.264***	0.232	0.277***
Symbolic threat	-0.759	-0.343***	-0.721	-0.326***	0.368	0.394***	0.355	0.379***
Education – Middle			0.178	0.031			0.023	0.009
Education – Higher			0.542	0.078*			-0.157	-0.053
Gender			-0.278	-0.052			-0.132	-0.058*
Work status			0.064	0.011			-0.027	-0.011
Residential area			0.243	0.036			0.018	0.007
Financial problems			-0.429	-0.079*			-0.206	-0.089**
Contact			-0.616	-0.105**			0.153	0.062*
R^2	0.329***		0.348***		0.386***		0.406***	
ΔR^2			0.019**				0.020***	

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

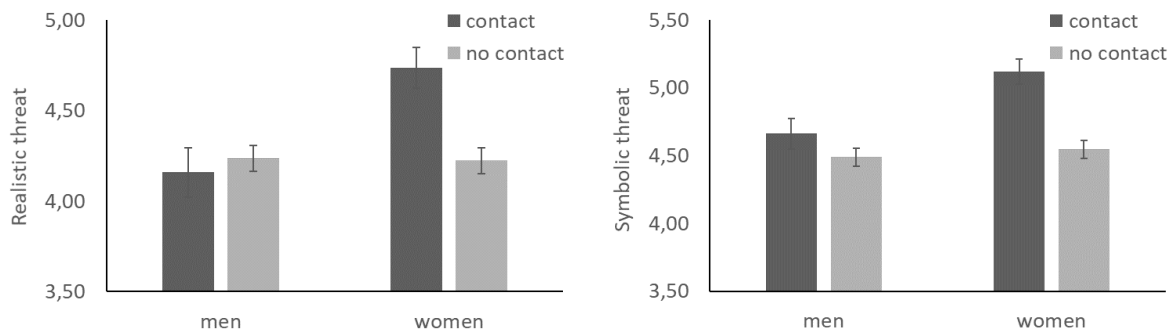
However, looking at the effects moderated by contact, the results showed that the main effect of gender was qualified by an interaction with contact ($F(1, 880) = 10.63, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .01$). An overview of all significant interactions for realistic threat is presented in Figure 2. Pairwise comparisons showed that, of the people who had previous contact with immigrants, women experienced significantly more realistic threat than men ($F(1, 880) = 16.13, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .02$). No such effect was found when there was no contact ($p > .78$). Moreover, contact had a significant effect for women ($F(1, 880) = 10.58, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .01$) but not for men ($p > .59$). Furthermore, work status ($F(1, 880) = 4.48, p < .04, \eta^2_p = .01$) also showed a significant interaction effect with contact. Pairwise comparisons for the interaction of work status and contact showed that compared to those not having had contact, having contact with immigrants made people experience higher levels of realistic threat only when people were employed ($F(1, 880) = 12.96, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .02$). All other pairwise comparisons were not significant ($ps > .06$). Finally, financial problems ($F(1, 880) = 17.22, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .02$) also interacted with contact. Pairwise comparisons for the interaction of financial problems and contact showed that when people had not had previous contact with immigrants, they experienced significantly more realistic threat when they had financial problems than when they did not ($F(1, 880) = 26.17, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .03$). Moreover, when people did not experience financial problems, having contact with immigrants led to significantly higher levels of realistic threat than having no contact ($F(1, 880) = 14.71, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .02$). The other pairwise comparisons were not significant ($ps > .11$).³

Socio-demographic variables and previous contact in relation to feelings of symbolic threat

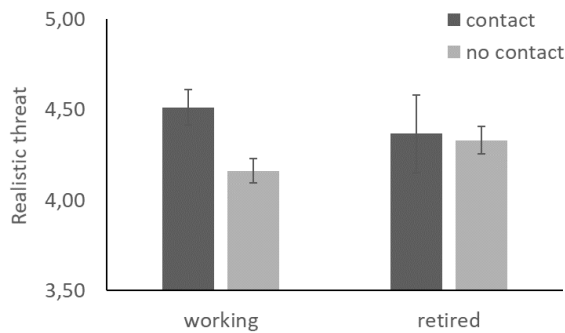
A similar ANOVA with the 5 socio-demographic variables (gender, educational level, work status, residential area, financial problems), previous contact and the two-way interactions of each socio-demographic variable with contact on symbolic threat was also conducted. This ANOVA showed a significant main effect of gender ($F(1, 880) = 10.56, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .01$), educational level ($F(2, 880) = 16.26, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .04$) and contact with immigrants ($F(1, 880) = 8.71, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .01$). Men ($M = 4.54, SD = 1.16$) experienced somewhat lower levels of symbolic threat than women ($M = 4.72, SD = 1.22$). Moreover, *post hoc* pairwise comparisons for educational level showed that people with high levels of education ($M = 4.17, SD = 1.28$) experienced lower levels of symbolic threat than people with medium ($M = 4.79, SD = 1.22; p < .01$) or low levels of education ($M = 4.70, SD = 1.11; p < .01$). People with a medium level of education did not differ from those with a lower level ($p > .89$). Finally, people who had previous contact with immigrants ($M = 4.92, SD = 1.18$) experienced higher levels of symbolic threat than those who did not ($M = 4.52, SD = 1.18$). No other significant main effects for realistic threat were found.

Looking at the effects moderated by contact, the results showed that the main effect of gender was qualified by an interaction with contact ($F(1, 880) = 5.21, p < .03, \eta^2_p = .01$). An overview of all significant interactions for symbolic threat is also presented in Figure 2. Pairwise comparisons showed that, amongst people who had previous contact with immigrants, women experienced significantly more symbolic threat than men ($F(1, 880) = 10.66, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .01$). No such effect was found when there was no contact ($p > .36$). Moreover, contact had a significant effect for women ($F(1, 880) = 15.95, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .02$) but not for men ($p > .26$). Furthermore, financial problems ($F(1, 880) = 10.99, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .01$) also showed a significant interaction with contact. Pairwise comparisons showed that, when people had not had previous contact with immigrants, they experienced significantly more symbolic threat when they had financial problems as opposed to when they did not ($F(1, 880) = 19.11, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .02$). Moreover, when they did not experience financial problems, having had contact led to significantly higher levels of symbolic threat than having had no contact ($F(1, 880) = 20.95, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .02$). The other pairwise comparisons were not significant ($ps > .29$).

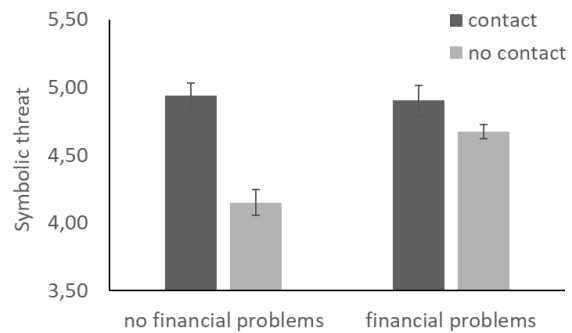
Figure 2. An overview of all significant 2-way interactions of socio-demographic variables with contact for both realistic (left-hand panel) and symbolic (right-hand panel) threat



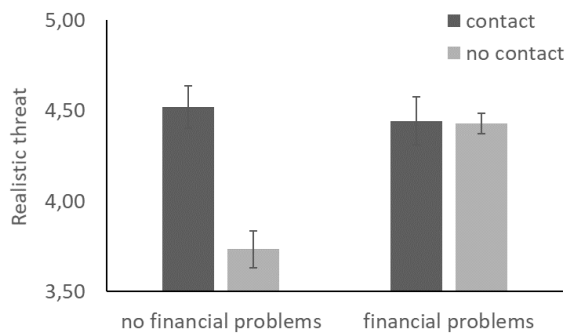
a. Sex by Contact



d. Sex by Contact



b. Work status by Contact



e. Financial problems by Contact

c. Financial problems by Contact

Note: Graphs A to C present the significant interactions for realistic threat and graphs D and E for symbolic threat. Error bars represent standard errors.

Discussion

The peak of the refugee crisis in 2015, combined with the hostile political context in Hungary, created an interesting case to study attitudes towards migrants in a transit country greatly impacted on by mass migration flows. The current study explored the mechanisms behind negative attitudes by investigating how threat perceptions, contact and demographic factors all shape the acceptance of immigrants and the desire for

strict(er) policy responses in such a transit country, with its history of negative attitudes towards immigrants. Our results showed that, while both symbolic and realistic threat were significantly related to both attitudinal measures, thus confirming our first hypothesis, symbolic threat perceptions decreased the acceptance of immigrants and increased the desire for strict(er) policy responses slightly more than realistic threat perceptions. Even though political discourse and media campaigns stressed both the symbolic and the realistic threat posed by refugees entering Hungary, overall attitudes towards immigrants were somewhat more affected by symbolic threat perceptions, although both are strongly related to anti-immigrant attitudes. This finding may point to a particular functioning of symbolic and realistic threat perceptions in refugee transit countries compared to European countries on average, where symbolic and realistic threat appears to have temporarily converged as a result of the 2015 migration crisis (De Coninck *et al.* 2021).

Our findings also provide insights into the mechanisms behind attitudes towards immigrants related to socio-demographic differences. Respondents' social position in society matters for their attitudes towards immigrants and their perception of threat. Both attitudinal measures were related to respondents' educational level and whether or not they had experienced financial problems. Being less highly educated and having trouble making ends meet increased negative attitudes towards immigrants. Furthermore, being male also increased the desire for stricter policy measures for immigrants specifically. Moreover, with regard to hypothesis 2, where we explored the relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and perceived threat, respondents' gender and educational level were related to perceptions of both realistic and symbolic threat, such that women and people who were less highly educated experienced greater levels of threat. Residential area did not have any effect on attitudes or threat perceptions. The absence of effects here might be due to the fact that the anti-refugee campaigns by the government impacted on all residents equally or because overall unemployment rates were relatively low in 2015, which may have cancelled out an important difference between urban and rural areas in Hungary.

Although we did not hypothesise a significant relationship between contact and perceived threat and attitudes towards immigrants, we found that contact negatively impacted on both attitudinal measures and also directly increased perceptions of symbolic but not realistic threat. These results indicate the need to study and understand the relationship between perceived threat, contact and attitudes within specific country contexts (e.g., Schäfer *et al.* 2021). One possible explanation for this finding in the Hungarian case is the fact that intergroup contact is more likely to result in positive attitudes when it is supported by the authorities (Green *et al.* 2020; Panichella and Ambrosini 2018). In the Hungarian context, this was most definitely *not* the case. To that end, our findings are in line with Kende *et al.* (2017), who suggest that institutional norms can play an important role in facilitating positive change in intergroup attitudes. A second potential explanation is that, in Hungary, there was not just an absence of support from the authorities, but the Hungarian political context was blatantly hostile, an institutional context which negatively impacted on the possibility of establishing positive contact with immigrants.

In addition to these direct effects and in line with our third hypothesis, contact also moderated the relationships of the demographic variables with threat perceptions. Specifically, the relationships between respondents' gender and their experiencing financial problems with both types of threat perceptions and of work status with realistic threat perceptions, were moderated by contact. It seems that, with regard to gender and work status, contact led to an increase in threat perceptions for groups that could be more vulnerable to experiencing negative effects resulting from the influx of refugees. When women indicated having contact with immigrants, they experienced higher levels of both realistic and symbolic threat as opposed to men. In addition, respondents in the working-age population experienced higher levels of realistic threat in comparison to retired people. With regards to experiencing financial problems, both contact with immigrants and experiencing financial problems seemed to be triggers for experiencing higher threat levels. Not having

financial problems and not having had contact with immigrants were the only factors that reduced threat perceptions compared to all other conditions.

Overall, our analysis showed clear evidence of perceptions of both realistic and symbolic threat negatively influencing attitudes towards immigrants in this refugee transit-country context. Moreover, these threat perceptions were partially shaped by people's position in society and their personal circumstances. People's educational level, work status, experience of financial problems and, in some cases, gender, influenced threat perceptions such that those with a higher risk of experiencing negative consequences by the influx of refugees experienced higher levels of threat. Importantly, except for educational levels, these effects were moderated by having had contact with immigrants and contact also had a direct effect on symbolic threat perceptions. A key contribution to the literature can be taken from these findings on the relationship between demographic variables and threat perceptions.

Moreover, these findings were further nuanced by the moderation effects of contact. In line with Berg (2015), our study confirms that, in studying negative attitudes towards immigrants, it is important to look at these more complex effects and interrelations. In all cases, contact had negative effects, increasing threat perceptions, especially amongst groups portrayed as vulnerable to the effects of the influx of immigrants. These findings counter some existing research, which suggests that an influx of immigrants facilitates intergroup contact, thereby reducing intergroup prejudice (Schlueter and Wagner 2008). They further extend findings on Hungary (e.g., Bell *et al.* 2022; Kende *et al.* 2017) and show the importance of accounting for the country context or other contextual variables necessary for establishing positive contact. In the Hungarian context, with its historically strong intolerance towards minorities (Bell *et al.* 2022; Hárs *et al.* 2009; Juhász *et al.* 2015; Nyíri 2003) and, in particular, the government framing of the 2015 refugee crisis as an economic, cultural and security threat (Bocskor 2018; Goździak and Márton 2018), an environment conducive to establishing positive contact was clearly lacking. Moreover, our findings suggest that, within the Hungarian country context, the potential for negative contact leading to heightened anti-immigrant attitudes is great and not just limited to contact with Roma people, as previously found (e.g., Bell *et al.* 2022; Kende *et al.* 2017). In the challenge of the ongoing refugee crisis, with the continued influx of refugees from outside Europe, such insights are particularly relevant. Further research is needed to better understand the role that demographic characteristics play in these relationships. For example, our findings on the effect of contact specific to women contrasts with pre-2015 Hungarian findings, where women were not more likely to show greater prejudice (Bell *et al.* 2022). Qualitative research on the valence of contact appears promising in this regard, allowing for a more in-depth exploration of different kinds of intergroup contact (e.g., Schäfer *et al.* 2021). Clearly Hungary is a case study where such an in-depth exploration of intergroup contact is needed.

It should be noted that the use of secondary data limited our analyses in some regards. Work status was coded in our study as being either part of the working-age population or being retired. The first category also included currently unemployed people, women on maternity leave and students. As these groups were represented by a limited number of respondents, we decided to opt for the parsimonious division of the working population vs the retired, as this aligns with the idea that some people could more likely experience the effects of the influx of immigrants than others. Moreover, contact was measured with only one item – asking respondents whether they had met any refugees or immigrants in the past 12 months. A more elaborate measure or one focused on refugees specifically, might have enabled us to look more closely at the effects of intergroup contact and the prerequisites for establishing positive contact. Nevertheless, even using just this 1 item, we showed several relevant effects. Furthermore, our measure of desire for strict(er) policy responses had limited reliability ($\alpha = .66$). Excluding one item ('We should protect our borders from immigrants with armed forces') would have increased reliability but, as our measure only consisted of three items and we considered this item to be important, we decided to conduct our analyses using the three-item scale. Future research studying

potential nuanced differences between measuring contact with immigrants versus contact with refugees would be particularly welcome in the Hungarian case, given the explicit and intended conflation of these terms in speeches by Orbán (e.g., Vékony 2016). Finally, histogrammes of our dependent variables showed some deviations from normality and variance was not always equal across groups. Nevertheless, despite not meeting all assumptions perfectly, we feel that the use of regression and ANOVA methods was acceptable to allow for the ease of interpretation they provide and given that ANOVAs are generally seen to be robust to some violations within large datasets.

Despite these limitations, this dataset gave us the unique opportunity to study in-depth both realistic and symbolic threat perceptions, contact and relevant socio-demographic variables related to anti-immigrant attitudes in the context of a highly trafficked transit country during the peak of the 2015 refugee crisis. Closer scrutiny of this context is needed to ascertain the scope of mechanisms such as realistic and symbolic threat for explaining attitudes towards immigrants in a context of mass exposure to immigration. By focusing on mechanisms in this setting, we were able to distinguish realistic threat from symbolic threat and show the varying effects of demographic variables and contact. As such, this study provides interesting avenues for future research. To better understand the relationships between government-led anti-refugee campaigns and the effects of mass influxes of refugees (in transit or otherwise) on perceived threats, more comparative perspectives with greater diversity in relation to government attitudes and/or migration influxes would be useful (Goździak and Márton 2018; see, e.g., Bell *et al.* 2022). In particular, comparative studies that focus on more-elaborate measures of contact in these societal contexts are needed, specifically with refugees. European societies continue to face high influxes of refugees from outside European borders (UNHCR 2023) but transit countries are shifting. Hungary, a key transit country during the 2015 refugee crisis, received just over 35,000 refugees and asylum-seekers in 2022 (UNHCR 2023). Continued scholarly attention is needed to understand the drivers behind the increasingly negative attitudes towards immigrants in these transit countries, in the broader political and policy context.

Notes

1. The number of refugees arriving by sea declined significantly and annually after 2015. Estimates from the UNHCR suggest that 1,032,408 refugees arrived in 2015; 373,652 in 2016; 185,139 in 2017; 141,472 in 2018; and 123,663 in 2019 (as of 21 December 2020; <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>).
2. The number of migrants applying for asylum has sharply declined since then, although statistics may not offer the full picture. According to the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, an NGO active in the region, the number of push-backs and denials of entrance at the border are much higher (asylumineurope.org). For an interesting ethnographic discussion on the initial presence and later absence of migrants in Hungary and the emerging political solidarities, see (Kallius *et al.* 2016)
3. Conducting similar ANOVAs on the economic and physical components of realistic threat separately yielded largely similar results for both components. For the interaction of contact and work status, the effect only seemed to be driven by feelings of economic threat in particular ($F(1, 826) = 4.87, p < .03, \eta^2_p = .01$) but not for the feeling of physical threat ($F(1, 826) = 2.76, p > .09$).

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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