

Welcoming Refugees from Ukraine in the European Union: Does Solidarity Matter?

OLGA CZERANOWSKA¹

ORCID: [0000-0002-3516-1563](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3516-1563)

SWPS University

JUSTYNA SALAMOŃSKA²

ORCID: [0000-0003-1268-342X](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1268-342X)

Kozminski University

Abstract

Full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 has triggered a large influx of refugees into the countries of the European Union. Against the backdrop of this new refugee crisis, we analyse the correlates of attitudes towards welcoming refugees from Ukraine in the EU. Theoretically, we draw on some of the main frameworks used to study attitudes. In addition, we examine the value of solidarity that is expected to positively influence the welcoming of refugees. Europeans appear to be overwhelmingly favourable towards accepting Ukrainian refugees, but the attitude is more positive in the “old” EU member states. Using multilevel binominal logistic regression on cross-national Eurobarometer data, we find that people who experience economic scarcity and those who are worse off in the labour market are more likely to be against accepting refugees. A key finding is that a commitment to solidarity as a personal value is associated with a more favourable attitude towards accepting Ukrainian refugees in the EU. At the country level, the border with Ukraine (or with a country directly bordering Ukraine) is associated with a more exclusionary attitude, reflecting the extent to which an actual and potential large influx of asylum-seekers can be seen as a threat.

Keywords: solidarity, refugee, Eurobarometer, European Union, migration and refugee crisis

¹ Contact: oczeranowska@swps.edu.pl

² Contact: jsalamonska@kozminski.edu.pl

1. Introduction

In the last decade, Europe has experienced major migration and refugee crises. In 2015 and 2016, European countries saw a large influx of migrants and refugees. Since February 2022, Europe has again experienced masses of people fleeing, this time due to Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. Migration and refugees have once again become part of the public debate, in which both emotional and rational arguments play a role.

Making clear distinctions between migrants and refugees may become a challenge. According to Griffith and Chan-kam "asylum and migration have become synonymous in the public's mind" (2002: 91) and surveys are meant to reflect this "public's mind". Similarly, Crawley's and Sakeparis' (2018) interviews with people who crossed to Greece in the second half of 2015 show that clear differentiation between who are "migrants" and who are "refugees" is not possible as individual decisions and trajectories are complex. People start their mobility because of various sets of reasons, and different motivations (political, economic, social and environmental) can be mixed in personal trajectories (Van der Klaauw 2009).

Obviously, defining who is a refugee and who isn't also has a political dimension; even before the so-called migration and refugee crisis of 2015, the "refugee" label has become politicised in a way that serves mostly Northern, developed countries' interests. Zetter argues that this happens "on the one hand, by the process of bureaucratic fractioning which reproduces itself in populist and largely pejorative labels whilst, on the other, by legitimising and presenting a wider political discourse of resistance to refugees and migrants as merely an apolitical set of bureaucratic categories" (Zetter 2007). Moreover, it is not only a question of semantics, because as Crawley and Skleparis put it, "[c]ategories have consequences" (Crawley, Skleparis 2018: 59). During the 2015 European so-called migration and refugee crisis, some political leaders were denying people reaching Greek islands rights to the refugee status, claiming that arrivals are economic migrants trying to use the situation in Syria to obtain entry to the European Union's labour market (Kuschminder, Koser 2016). Similarly, Bloch (2024) notices how the change from "refugees" to "migrants" marked the shift of attitudes in Polish media discourse.

Not only do the motivations of people who set off on the move matter, but so do the numbers of arrivals. Young (2016) argues that although refugees were traditionally received more positively than other immigrants, when numbers (and impact on admitting countries) had been growing, they ceased to be "exempt from anti-immigrant/immigration sentiment" (Young 2016: 2).

In this article, we aim to describe the public sentiment towards refugees from Ukraine to the EU at the outset of the Russian full-scale aggression. We were interested in describing the attitudes distinguishing between different European countries and their specific contexts. We were also interested in understanding the correlates

of the sentiments towards Ukrainian refugees, including the notion of solidarity as a personal value. Our article emphasises the importance of examining attitudes towards asylum-seekers as a specific group and discusses the differences in the factors that influence attitudes towards refugees, compared to attitudes towards migrants in general (see also De Coninck 2020; Findor et al. 2021). We use the Eurobarometer data, which gives us the opportunity to examine attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees in the EU to better understand the social impact of the ongoing military conflict on European countries.

Our analysis shows that although the general attitudes towards the reception of Ukrainians in the EU were positive, there were some differences on the country – and individual – level. The binomial logistic regression models (individual and multi-level) show that individuals, for whom solidarity was an important personal value, were more likely to be willing to welcome Ukrainian refugees to the EU. Realistic threat (conflict theory) was corroborated, as individuals who perceived their personal financial situation and/or their country's economic situation as bad were less likely to show welcoming attitudes. Moreover, the data were also consistent with symbolic threat theory, as individuals with right-wing political views were less willing to accept Ukrainian refugees in the EU.

2. Theoretical underpinnings in research on attitudes towards refugees

In the last ten years, interest and studies on attitudes towards refugees have greatly developed (Landmann 2024; Özdemir et al. 2023; Gönültaş, Mulvey 2023; Lutterbach, Beermann 2023). The explanatory framework in the case of attitudes towards refugees generally draws on the literature related to immigration-related attitudes, but in addition, the humanitarian need argument is invoked to support the acceptance of refugees (Fraser, Murakami 2022). According to Fraser and Murakami (2022: 58) “logic of humanitarianism operates rather independently from natives’ propensity to oppose immigration based on perceived threats”; thus, individuals motivated by humanitarian values want to help those they believe are most deserving of help, without considering whether the group is perceived as threatening. The attitudes of host country citizens (whether or not an inclination to help others) and the situation of refugees (victims of randomly occurring crisis events) play a role in predicting public attitudes towards refugees. The theory of humanitarian deservingness predicts that public support for accepting refugees depends on the extent to which these refugees are viewed by locals as non-threatening and vulnerable individuals deserving of protection (Fraser, Murakami 2022). In turn, Newman and colleagues (2015) examine the relationship between humanitarianism and government immigration policies and show how humanitarian attitudes are related to opposition to policies aimed at

reducing immigration, and support for policies aimed at providing services to immigrants. In general, this study focuses on the drivers of positive attitudes, in contrast to the extensive research looking at the opposition to immigration.

The degree of solidarity can be explained by Van Oorschot's deservingness theory, which uses five criteria:

- 1) Control: the extent to which needy people can control their situation (or the extent to which they are responsible for it), the less control/responsibility, the more deservingness.
- 2) Need: the greater the need, the more deservingness.
- 3) Identity: the closer those in need are to those who could help them and/or the more sympathetic they are, the more deserving they are.
- 4) Attitude: the more grateful/compliant needy people are, the more deserving they are.
- 5) Reciprocity: the more reciprocation is offered and/or the more help is somehow earned, the more deserving they are (Van Oorschot 2000).

Regarding Ukrainian refugees, the criterion of need is most pronounced against the background of the Russian war in the country. Moreover, as Ukrainian refugees are mostly women (and children or the elderly), they may be seen as more vulnerable and deserving of help and empathy (Bloch, 2024). Perhaps identity also plays a role, i.e. geographical and cultural proximity to the EU (which distinguishes this refugee crisis from the 2015 crisis).

This article focuses on solidarity from an ethical perspective and treats solidarity as an affective, positive attitude that is linked to the recognition of others and presupposes the experience of shared duties and responsibilities (Honneth 2001). Key questions about solidarity in the refugee context relate to how far it extends and, by implication, how general the groups are that people perceive as their own, in particular whether solidarity becomes "wider" as ethical norms become more generalised: "The relationship of recognition associated with solidarity involves the principle of egalitarian difference, which can unfold more strongly through the pressure of individualised subjects" (Honneth 2001: 50).

According to classical Realistic Group Conflict Theory, which is widely used to study migration attitudes, negative feelings towards members of an out-group result from a real clash between the interests of two groups (Campbell 1965, after Tajfel, Turner 1979). Intergroup conflict thus arises from a situation of rivalry over certain resources, when members of the out-group are perceived as a source of frustration over the needs of the in-group (Sherif et al. 1954).

The literature on "competitive threat" suggests that a sudden and large influx of refugees or a sudden increase in their population size can lead to a sense of threat and consequently to a more negative attitude. However, Gorodzeisky (2022) does not focus on the size of the outgroup population in a country but considers a high

influx of asylum-seekers (actual and potential) and finds that both a high influx and proximity to countries with a high influx of asylum-seekers are associated with stronger support for exclusionary policies. In Ceyhun's (2020) analysis based on the Arab Barometer, respondents' sense of security and safety was significantly negatively connected to attitudes towards immigrants (when Syrian density per 1,000 square kilometres was lower). However, Walczak and Lampas (2020) analysing data from the Pew Research Centre Survey of 2016 argue that there is no correlation between respondents' attitudes toward refugees and the level of actual threat of terrorism (measured as the number of terrorist attacks and arrests of Muslim extremists in the respondent's country).

Research on sentiment towards refugees suggests that it is the most vulnerable members of the host society (in-group) who may be most affected by a national government's decision to help refugees (out-group). This vulnerability can be based on several personal characteristics. Firstly, according to Amnesty International's Refugees Welcome Index study (Amnesty International 2016), people in a better economic situation are more open to accepting refugees and granting state aid than people with fewer financial resources. However, not only the respondent's personal economic situation should be taken into account. Bansak and colleagues (2016) report that general, sociotropic concerns have an influence on the options regarding the reception of refugees in Europe. Respondents in this study were more likely to accept asylum-seekers who were more employable and non-Muslim (but also those who were more vulnerable and had consistent asylum claims). Furthermore, Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014) argue that personal economic circumstances are not as important to attitudes towards refugees, in comparison to national-level concerns about the impact of the refugee on the host country (both economically and culturally).

Therefore, not only humanitarian concerns, but also the potential economic contribution of asylum-seekers and their deservingness (see: Van Oorschot 2000) characterise public attitudes. Consequently, citizens who are concerned about the state of the national economy and believe that helping refugees would overburden the welfare system are more likely to be against it. Furthermore, we should consider both objective and subjective measures of economic threat, as Young (2016) argues that people's feelings about their own economic situation (or that of their country) have a greater influence on refugee scepticism than actual income. Similarly, in Ceyhun's (2020) study, the respondents' perceived economic circumstances were more connected with their attitudes towards the Syrian immigrants than their employment status.

According to the similarity-attraction hypothesis (Byrne 1971), the similarity between the two groups (in-group and out-group) should in turn lead to a more positive attitude. This may explain the anti-Muslim bias in societies that are predominantly Christian or secular. This hypothesis has been tested and confirmed in numerous contexts, including attitudes towards refugees (Yitmen et al. 2022; Yitmen, Verkuyten 2017; Heath, Richards 2019). It could also play an important role in the context

of Ukrainian refugees in the EU, as Ukraine is culturally close to the EU countries (especially the eastern EU “new” member states), so the symbolic threat would be perceived as lower. De Coninck (2020) explains this in terms of social identity (though in the case of migrants, not asylum-seekers), where newcomers from Europe (as opposed to those outside Europe) may be perceived as less of a threat due to similar values, traditions, religious beliefs, language and shared history, which amounts to less social and cultural distance. For example, in the Polish case, Zessin-Jurek (2023) compares the Ukrainian situation with migrants and refugees from the Global South attempting to cross the Polish-Belarusian border. Analysing media discourses on migration, Zessin-Jurek argues that with many simultaneous crises, showing more loyalty to groups with shared identities may seem instinctive (albeit acquired by socialisation), but also notices that this “selective approach has been actively encouraged by political fearmongers and their warnings against strangers” (Zessin-Jurek, 2023: 106).

There are also control variables that need to be taken into account. Less educated people are more likely to express anti-refugee attitudes. In a study by Nowicka and colleagues (2017), less educated respondents were less likely to take action to support refugees. Additionally, in the study by Abdelaaty and Steele (2022), which is based on the 2014 European Social Survey, years of education were also associated with more support for refugees. Meanwhile, the analysis by McKay and colleagues (2012) shows that respondents who did not go on to further study after high school were more likely to say that Australia’s current asylum-seeker policy was too soft. Similarly, in the Refugees Welcome Index study by Amnesty International (2016), less educated respondents were less likely to agree with positive statements on refugee rights. In a study by Dustmann and colleagues (2016), in which the vast majority of respondents were in favour of accepting refugees fleeing war and civil war, the percentage of welcoming attitudes was higher among the most educated people. Higher education institutions in particular tend to inspire progressive ideas in their students (Gaasholt, Tog 1995; Hainmueller, Hiscox 2007), so respondents who never come into contact with these institutions have a lower possibility to adopt such a mindset. However, educated people are also more aware of what is politically correct (Byrne 2012) so they may choose to hide their opinions from the interviewer, should those opinions be extreme. In any case, interpreting the impact of education on attitudes towards migration remains a challenge as multiple mechanisms may be at play. It may be a measure of skills and exposure to competition with the influx of newcomers, but it may also capture different levels of tolerance, ethnocentrism and/or sociotropic judgements (Hainmuller, Hopkins 2014).

Attitudes towards immigration in general and refugees/asylum-seekers in particular are strongly linked to political decisions, as right-wing opinions are correlated with anti-immigrant and anti-refugee attitudes (Mayda 2006; Knigge 1998; Lubbers et al. 2002; Abdelaaty, Steele, 2022; cf. also Walczak, Lampas, 2020). Krasteva (2016) explains (in the Bulgarian case) that the refugee crisis has shifted the focus of

nationalist hate speech from minorities to refugees and immigrants. In particular, it has been shown that ideology (left-right position) is the lens through which people interpret the influx of refugees: right-leaning individuals saw greater numbers of refugees as a negative consequence of EU integration, which deepened their (pre-existing) Euroscepticism (see Hertevelde et al. 2018).

If we move to the macro level, the economic situation of the country (measured by GDP and unemployment level as indicators) can be seen as relevant to attitudes, because if there are fewer resources available to be shared at the national level, this could be associated with a higher sense of threat. However, it is not only the economic situation that is relevant, but also subjective views on the state of things. In a study by Hercowitz-Amir and colleagues (2017), the opinion that asylum-seekers are a burden on social welfare and public education, and that they take away available jobs and lower wage levels, was associated with a higher likelihood of disagreeing with granting rights to asylum-seekers. Especially in times of economic crisis, when competition for jobs and social benefits is more pronounced, the likelihood of negative attitudes towards foreign groups increases (Gang et al. 2013). Therefore, citizens of wealthy countries, as opposed to poorer countries, may feel less threatened by the influx of refugees and be more willing to help them (see also Van Oorschot 2008).

The evidence for the link between the labour market situation and attitudes remains mixed. On the one hand, the study by Rustenbach (2010) documents that unemployment (both nationally and regionally) is negatively correlated with anti-immigrant attitudes. The author gave two explanations for this, including the perception of the influx as a potential boost to the economy, and as an opportunity for the newcomers to take jobs that are not attractive to the native labour force (consistently with dual labour market theory – Piore 1979), and thus an opportunity to revitalise the economy. Similarly, in a recent study by Abdelaaty and Steele (2022), higher levels of unemployment were associated with more support for refugees.

3. Hypotheses

Our hypotheses relate to outgroup-ingroup conflict to explain attitudes towards refugees, but like Newman and colleagues (2015), we consider the values-based approach by examining humanitarianism as a contributor to more positive attitudes (see also Fraser, Murakami 2022).

Firstly, we propose to analyse on an individual level how individual characteristics and attitudes correlate with the welcoming attitudes towards refugees:

- H1. We expect that people, for whom solidarity is an important personal value, would be more likely to agree to welcome Ukrainian refugees.
- H2. It is expected that people who are better-off would be more open to accepting Ukrainian refugees.

H3. People, who consider their country's economic situation to be good would be more likely to think that the EU should accept Ukrainian war refugees.

Based on the data at the country level, we propose two further hypotheses on the differences between the various EU countries:

H4. It is expected that the reduced willingness to accept Ukrainians fleeing war in the EU is related to increased competition for resources (measured with lower GDP per capita and higher unemployment).

H5. Bordering Ukraine or another country bordering Ukraine (a measure of exposure to a high or potentially high influx of refugees) is related to a lower willingness to accept war refugees from Ukraine in the EU.

4. Context: Russian aggression in Ukraine

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Large-scale hostilities ensued, resulting in many deaths on both sides. The civilian population, especially women with children and elderly people (cf. Bloch (2023) on gender representations of refugees), fled the country to escape the bombing of civilian infrastructure by the Russian army. After the Ukrainian president declared martial law in Ukraine, most men between the ages of 18 and 60 were banned from leaving the country.

In the initial phase, the Ukrainian war refugees moved to the countries bordering Ukraine. In mid-July 2022 (when the Eurobarometer data we refer to in this article was collected), around 5.8 million Ukrainian refugees were registered in various European countries. Governments, civil societies and citizens in the countries they fled to have responded to them with incredible humanitarian aid. At that time, around 3.7 million people had registered for temporary protection (or a similar status) in the EU. Temporary protection (under the Temporary Protection Directive (Council of the European Union (2001)) was introduced in the EU in response to the mass influx of Ukrainian refugees immediately after the escalation of the war. Temporary protection is used in exceptional cases of mass influx of forced migrants from outside the EU who cannot return to their country of origin. Its implementation occurred to avoid overwhelming the EU countries' asylum systems. Once the Temporary Protection Directive was activated, Ukrainians fleeing war were immediately granted rights such as a residence permit, access to employment and housing, medical care and possibility to move to another EU member state, among others. Because of the continuing war, the protection, which was initially meant to last for one year, was further extended.

By mid-July 2022, Poland had received the largest influx of Ukrainians fleeing the war, followed by Germany and the Czech Republic. A large number of Ukrainians also found refuge in Moldova. Within the EU, refugees were free to travel to other member states and many did so, joining family and friends living there (there was

already significant labour migration from Ukraine in many EU countries before the outbreak of the full-scale war in 2022). Others preferred to stay close to Ukraine as they waited for the end of the conflict and wanted to return home (UNHCR 2022). Reception and integration of Ukrainian refugees had been subject of numerous country-specific studies (Brücker et al. 2023; Racko, Mikulcová 2024; cf. also Szeptycki 2024 for mapping of the literature on Polish help for Ukrainian refugees) and comparative analyses in different destinations (Kosyakova et al. 2024; Pędziwiatr, Magdziarz 2023; Zessin-Jurek 2023), as well as the comparative studies analysing attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees along other groups of refugees (De Coninck 2024; Sipahiöglu 2023)

According to the Eurostat (2026a) data at the end of November 2025, there were 4.33 million non-EU citizens who fled Ukraine, under temporary protection in the EU countries. The countries with the highest ratio of temporary protection beneficiaries from Ukraine relative to the population were Czechia (36.0 per 1000 people), Poland (26.5), and Slovakia (25.7). The mean ratio for EU countries was 9.6. In terms of absolute numbers, the most temporary protection beneficiaries from Ukraine were staying in Germany (1 241 000) and Poland (968 750). After the initial rapid growth in 2022, the numbers stabilised in the following years (Eurostat, 2026b)

What is important for the analyses in this paper is that we examine the general public mood after a few months of the war and before European countries were affected by the economic difficulties associated with the Russian war.

5. Data and methods

To analyse attitudes towards refugees, we used data from the cross-national Eurobarometer (EB) dataset, which is collected by various data collectors in European countries according to a harmonised methodology. Eurobarometer is widely used in the social sciences, including in studies on migration and refugees (e.g. Hartevelde, Van der Brug 2021; Cichocki, Jabkowski, 2020; Glorious 2018). In this article, we used the Eurobarometer 97.5. A total of 37,223 people, aged 15 and over, took part in the study between 17 June and 24 July 2022. Face-to-face interviews CAPI (Computer Assisted Personal Interviews), CAMI (Computer Assisted Mobile Interviewing) and web-based CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviews) were conducted with a questionnaire translated into different languages. A multi-stage (probability) sampling design was used to select the respondents.

We restricted the following analysis to EU countries and to respondents with the nationality of the EU country in which they resided (excluding respondents with dual nationality and people residing outside the EU). This left a total sample of 25,843 respondents. In addition to the EB dataset, we also used country-level data relating to the economic situation and the foreign-born population (from the Eurostat database).

5.1 Dependent Variable

To measure the welcoming attitude towards refugees, we have relied on the EB question: “The EU has taken a series of actions as a response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. To what extent do you agree or disagree with these actions taken?: Welcoming in the EU people fleeing the war.” We have converted the possible answers (Totally agree/ Tend to agree/ Tend to disagree/ Totally disagree) into a binary opposition: Agree/ Do not agree. Respondents who chose the don’t know option (2.1%) were included in the Do not agree category – we decided not to filter out the “don’t know” response so as not to reduce the sample size. We were also particularly interested in the characteristics of people who are willing to accept people fleeing the Russian invasion of Ukraine into the EU, and how these differ from the rest of the population (both unwilling and undecided). This dependent variable was used in binomial logistic regression modelling (individual and multilevel).

5.2 Independent Variables

We used a variable relating to solidarity as a personal value. Respondents were asked for a list of values that were most important to them personally, including solidarity. Their answers were recoded into a binary variable: Mentioned/ not mentioned.

We included characteristics related to economic vulnerability at the individual level. To measure economic standing, we used a question on difficulties paying bills, with responses recoded into two categories: Most of the time/ From time to time vs. Almost never/ Never. For other questions relating to the respondent’s country, the respondent’s assessment of the country’s economic situation was used (also recoded into a binary category: Very good or rather good vs. Very bad or rather bad).

We also controlled basic demographic characteristics, including gender (Man/ Woman) and age (in years), as well as the respondent’s community of residence (City/ Town/ Rural).

In addition, we included education (measured by the age at which respondents completed their education; for those still studying, we used their current age) and labour market status (recoded as employed/ student/ unemployed/ retired/ responsible for the household).

In the case of political views, we used the question: “On political issues, people talk about “left” and “right”. How would you categorise your views on this scale?” We recoded 10-point scale (with 1=left; 10=right) into three categories: Left (1–4), Centre (5–6), Right (7–10). Due to the high percentage of “don’t know” answers and refusals to answer (10.2% in total), we recognised this as a separate category and added these two options as a combined fourth category (No answer).

At country level, we have included two variables that relate to the economic situation: the unemployment rate (as a percentage of the active population in 2021, based

on Eurostat data [UNE_RT_AL]) and GDP (gross domestic product at market prices; in euros per capita for 2021, based on Eurostat data [NAMA_10_PC]). These should measure the state of the country's economy with a time lag of one year. In addition, following the logic applied by Gorodzeisky (2022) in a study on asylum-seekers in Europe, we analysed the effect of exposure to actual and potential high inflows of asylum-seekers. We decided to include not only countries with direct borders, but also countries with borders with countries neighbouring Ukraine, as the number of EU countries with direct borders is small (only Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania). To this aim we constructed a binary variable in which countries that have a border with Ukraine or with a country with a direct border with Ukraine were coded as 1 and countries without such a border were coded as 0.

6. To lend a helping hand or rather not? Unpacking attitudes towards the refugees based on the Eurobarometer data

We should emphasise that there is a general consensus in the EU on accepting Ukrainian refugees (almost 90% in favour). Even though the sample responses were positively skewed with respect to the dependent variable, the percentage of respondents in favour varies from over 97% in Portugal and Sweden to less than 80% in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Romania. On average, approval rates in the “old” EU countries (EU15, before the so-called “eastward enlargement” of the EU in 2004) tend to be slightly higher than in the “new” EU member states (ten countries that joined in 2004, plus Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia). In Ukraine's neighbouring countries (in the EU: Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia), attitudes are slightly more negative (on average 85% are in favour of accepting refugees). If we also include the countries indirectly bordering Ukraine (that is via another country, in the EU: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovenia), the percentage of positive responses remains at 85%. Countries that are geographically close to Ukraine have received a large influx of refugees after the outbreak of the war, which means that attitudes may be more exclusionary due to the “competitive threat” (see also: Gorodzeisky 2022).

Let us take a closer look at the descriptive statistics on the supporters and opponents of the EU welcoming people fleeing the war in Ukraine (see Table 1 below). The average age in the sample was around 50 years, and this measure did not differ between those who were in favour of the EU accepting people fleeing the war in Ukraine and those who were not. In terms of gender, the groups who were for and against the EU accepting war refugees were also similar, with a slightly lower proportion of women (51.7% and 55.6% respectively) in the group who were against. Respondents who were in favour of the EU welcoming people fleeing the war in

Ukraine had completed their education almost a year and a half later and therefore had a higher level of education; however, this difference was relatively small. Respondents who welcome people fleeing the war in Ukraine were slightly more likely to say that solidarity is one of their personal values (18.2% vs. 17.0%). The percentage of people living in big cities was higher in the group that agrees with welcoming war refugees (26.9% vs. 21.3%). Respondents with left-wing political views were more likely to agree that the EU should welcome people fleeing war (17.7% vs. 11.2% disagreeing). In contrast, respondents with right-wing views were more likely to disagree that the EU should welcome people fleeing the war in Ukraine (14.5% vs. 11.9% agreeing). Among respondents who disagreed, the percentage of those who chose the “don’t know/refused to answer” option in the question about political views was also almost twice as high (18.4% vs. 9.5%). In terms of the labour market situation, most respondents, both supporters and opponents, were employed (the percentage was slightly higher for supporters – 54.5% compared to 51.1%). Another difference in this regard was the higher percentage of students (9.6% vs. 7.1%) and a lower percentage of unemployed (4.7% vs. 5.9%), retired or responsible for the household (31.2% vs. 35.9%) among those in favour of the EU accepting people fleeing the war in Ukraine. There were fewer people who had difficulty paying bills in the group that agreed to accept war refugees. This tendency is very clear, with a difference of over twenty percentage points (53.6% vs. 32.8%). This pattern also appears to be relevant at country level (although the difference is smaller), as those who wanted to help refugees were more likely to perceive the national economic situation as good (36.1% vs. 25.2%).

Table 1.

Socio-demographic characteristics among respondents agreeing and not agreeing with the EU welcoming people fleeing the war in Ukraine (%)

Individual characteristics	Welcoming in the EU people fleeing the war in Ukraine		Total sample
	Disagree	Agree	
Age on finishing education (mean)	18.0	19.4	19.2
Working	51.1	54.5	54.2
Student	7.1	9.6	9.3
Unemployed	5.9	4.7	4.8
Retired/responsible for household	35.9	31.2	31.7
Difficulties in paying bills			
Most of the time/ From time to time	53.6	32.8	35.0
Almost never/never	46.4	67.2	65.0

Opinion on the situation of the national economy			
Very good/rather good	25.2	36.1	35.0
Very bad/rather bad	74.8	63.9	65.0
Political views			
Towards the right of the political scale	14.5	11.9	12.1
Towards the centre of the political scale	55.9	60.9	60.4
Towards the left of the political scale	11.2	17.7	17.0
No answer	18.4	9.5	10.5
Solidarity as important personal value	17.0	18.2	18.0
Age (mean)	50.3	49.6	49.7
Gender			
Male	44.4	48.3	47.9
Residence			
Rural	33.5	29.4	29.8
Town	45.3	43.8	43.9
City	21.3	26.9	26.3

Source: EUROBAROMETER 97.5, N=25 843, weighted data [w87]

The sample of EU member states included countries with varying types of economic situation (measured by GDP and unemployment levels). In terms of GDP at market prices (current prices, euro per capita), Luxembourg is visibly an outlier, being the only country where the value is higher than 75 000 euro. The next countries with the highest GDP per capita were Ireland and Denmark. The countries with the lowest values were Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia. In general, “new” EU countries were situated in the lower half of the hierarchy (except for Malta, which was around the middle).

As for unemployment rates, Greece and Spain were outliers with over 10%, while the level was lowest in the Czech Republic, Germany and Poland. No clear differences between “new” EU and “old” EU countries were visible in this regard.

We also created the variable of borders with Ukraine or countries that border Ukraine. Countries with at least one such border are being marked as “1” and those which do not have it as “0”. Full descriptive characteristics of the EU Member States are presented in the annex 1.

Correlates of Welcoming Ukrainian Refugees – Inferential Analyses

In order to understand how selected individual and country-level characteristics are related to attitudes towards welcoming refugees, we used binomial logistic regression modelling with welcoming Ukrainian refugees in the EU as the dependent variable. The binomial logistic regression model was chosen to predict the probability of

observations falling into each of the two categories, taking into account several individual-level independent variables (Model I, Table 2). In Model II (see Table 2), we added country-level characteristics to account for macro-level correlates.

We start with Model I, and in line with recent research findings on humanitarianism as a correlate of attitudes towards refugee, respondents who listed solidarity as one of their personal values were more likely to agree that the EU should accept people fleeing war (H1 is corroborated). Thus, our analysis confirms the findings of Fraser and Murakami (2022), who emphasise that more general opinions about helping those in need are key to understanding attitudes towards refugees.

Furthermore, we found that respondents who did not have difficulty paying bills (the reference category was those who had difficulty paying bills) were more likely to agree that the EU should take in people fleeing war. This is consistent with the threat hypothesis (H2 is corroborated), as those who suffer from financial scarcity in their household and those who are more vulnerable due to limited resources are more fearful of sharing their resources with the out-group. The effect of economic scarcity was also present in relation to the state of the country, as those with a negative opinion of the state of the national economy were less likely to agree that the EU should accept people fleeing the war in Ukraine than those with a positive opinion of the national economy (H3 is corroborated).

In terms of controls, the likelihood of welcoming attitudes increased with age and education level. Furthermore, left-wing and centre political views were positively correlated with the likelihood of respondents agreeing that the EU should accept war refugees (compared to right-wing political views). Interestingly, those with unspecified political views (“do not know/refuse”) were less likely (than those who selected the “right-wing” option) to agree that the EU should accept people fleeing the war in Ukraine. This could be due to the fact that the “do not know/ refuse” group is likely to be differentiated and includes people who refused to answer the question and were unwilling to show their extreme political leanings.

Table 2.

Individual (Model I) and multilevel (Model II) binominal logistic regression.
 Dependent variable: agreeing with the EU welcoming people fleeing the war in Ukraine
 (reference: “Disagree” and “Don’t know”)

	Model I	Model II
Independent variables	Coefficients (standard errors in parentheses)	
Labour market status (reference: employed)		
Unemployed	-0.145 (0.093)	-0.241* (0.097)
Inactive	-0.005 (0.062)	0.024 (0.063)

Student	0.139	0.501
	(0.095)	(0.098)
Difficulties paying bills – almost never/never	0.582***	0.628***
	(0.044)	(0.047)
Negative opinion on the situation of the national economy	-0.551***	-0.517***
	(0.049)	(0.053)
Solidarity (ref.: not reported among personal values)	0.188***	0.170**
	(0.059)	(0.060)
Political views (reference: right)		
Left	0.169***	0.074
	(0.078)	(0.080)
Centre	0.167**	0.103
	(0.061)	(0.064)
Don't know/refuse	-0.264***	-0.507***
	(0.079)	(0.083)
Age when finished education	0.026***	0.030***
	(0.004)	(0.005)
Gender: woman (ref: man)	-0.046	-0.041
	(0.043)	(0.044)
Age	0.006***	0.002
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Community (reference: rural)		
Small/middle town	-0.027	-0.042
	(0.051)	(0.054)
Large town	0.007	0.037
	(0.054)	(0.056)
GDP per capita		0.000
		(0.000)
Unemployment rate (%)		0.037
		(0.043)
Border with Ukraine/ country bordering Ukraine		-0.827***
		(0.281)
Constant	1.290***	1.793***
	(0.143)	(0.529)

***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

Source: EUROBAROMETER 97.5, N=24,355

There were some changes in the effects of the individual-level variables after the country-level variables were added (see Model II in Table 2). Labour market status became significant – unemployed people were less willing to help refugees (compared to employed people). At the same time, the effects of age and left and centre political views became insignificant. As for the country-level variables, we found no evidence in favour of the threat hypothesis, as GDP per capita and unemployment rate were not significant (H4 is rejected). The only statistically significant effect we found was less willingness to welcome refugees in countries directly bordering Ukraine or in countries bordering Ukraine via another country. The border variable, which refers to the countries that were most affected due to their geographical proximity after the outbreak of the full-scale war, is, as expected, related to a less open-minded attitude (H5 is corroborated), which is in line with other research examining the effects of “competitive threat” in the context of a high sudden influx of asylum-seekers (Gorodzeisky 2022). Remarkably, the effect of solidarity remained as an important personal value in the country-level model, meaning that solidarity remains one of the correlates of attitudes in favour of accepting Ukrainians into the EU when controlling for other variables in the model.

7. Conclusions

Following the all-out Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, Europe experienced a mass influx of Ukrainians seeking to flee the war. By and large, the refugee flows were welcomed in the various European Union member states. This article describes the social climate in various EU countries a few months after the Russian aggression against Ukraine. We do this first to understand the extent to which countries support the reception of Ukrainian refugees in the EU and the correlates of these attitudes.

In simple, descriptive terms, our research shows an overwhelmingly positive reaction to the reception of Ukrainians (around 90% of respondents are happy to welcome them to the EU). However, there are differences between countries, with the highest levels of approval in Portugal and Sweden (around 97 per cent) and the lowest in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Romania (less than 80 per cent), and generally more positive attitudes in the “old” EU compared to the “new” EU member states.

When we examined the question of the correlates of these attitudes, our research has corroborated some of the recent findings on positive and negative factors associated with feelings towards refugees. Fraser and Murakami (2022) have shown how humanitarian stances are related to attitudes towards refugees, and we have found that the individual value of solidarity plays a similar role in inclusionary attitudes towards Ukrainians in the EU. Our findings thus contribute to a better understanding of feelings towards refugees, which is the main theoretical contribution of our study.

We also find evidence in favour of the threat hypothesis (a poor personal financial situation and opposing views on the economic situation of the country are both related to less open-minded attitudes). These results are consistent with the realistic threat hypothesis (conflict theory), according to which less vulnerable individuals tend to feel less threatened by out-groups.

In addition, the symbolic dimension of the threat also played a role, as people with right-wing political views were less willing to accept Ukrainian refugees in the EU (although in the macro-level model, only the difference between right-wing voters and respondents who did not answer the political attitude question remained statistically significant).

Our analysis is not without limitations. The strengths of the Eurobarometer are that it enables cross-national comparisons and provides timely data to analyse the social climate in relation to the current influx of asylum-seekers. However, by using the secondary dataset, our analyses were limited to the available variables. Thus, we could not analyse the different attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees as dependent variables in more detail. The number of independent variables in the dataset was also limited, so some aspects were missed, e.g. the role of the media in the formation of attitudes. Additionally, we were able to only provide a cross-sectional overview of attitudes, whereas it would have been interesting to see how individual sentiments shift (or do not shift) over time; that is if the solidarity effect holds while the refugee crisis persists, and with a deteriorating economic climate in many countries with a Ukrainian refugee population.

Empirically, our analysis allows a better understanding of what the sentiments towards Ukrainian refugees were at the outset of the Russian aggression. Tracking attitudes towards refugees in various countries of destination makes it possible to understand the public opinion context in which political responses are embedded. It is the public opinion that provides the “important source of legitimation for political elites” (Dražanová, Geddes 2023: 137). Hence, public sentiments can inform policy actors in their decision making process around how to respond to the refugee crisis and how to support refugees. Theoretically, we provide a corroboration of frameworks which examine solidarity in relation to refugee attitudes, since existing literature calls for including humanitarianism among explanatory factors (Fraser, Murakami 2022).

Future research should examine the correlates of attitudes towards refugees in more detail and in particular explore the differences between these and feelings towards migration. Also, in line with research comparing attitudes towards Ukrainians with other refugee groups (De Coninck 2024; Sipahiöglü 2023), future research should also examine the limits of solidarity, namely how attitudes depend on who their subject is, i.e. refugees from which geographical areas, with which socio-cultural contexts and individual characteristics (such as gender, age, ethnicity, religion). Protracted conflict can also affect sentiments in the destinations, so it is

important to track how these sentiments evolve over time. The development of this area of research is all the more important as refugee crises continue to erupt, such as the ongoing humanitarian crisis on the Belarusian-EU (Polish) border (Grzeškowiak 2023; Bieńkowska 2023). Therefore, questions about attitudes towards refugees remain even more relevant and urgent.

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Data availability statement:

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