



Assessing Attitudes towards Asylum Seekers: Comparative Findings from Austria, Germany, and Slovakia

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ABSTRACT

Autochthon Europeans reacted inconsistently to rising numbers of asylum applications in 2015 and 2016. While some of them welcomed asylum seekers enthusiastically, others reacted with hostility. The objective of this study was to test a predictive model of these individual differences by Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Both, in a German-speaking (N = 349 Austrians and Germans) and in a Slovak (N = 307) adult sample, the perception of "cultural threat" was a strong predictor of attitudes towards asylum seekers, whereas perceived "economic threat" and "modern racism" did not explain additional proportions of the variance.

Keywords: Asylum Seekers, Attitudes, European Union, Structural Equation Modeling.

JEL Codes: I30, J11, J15, J61.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Rising numbers of asylum applications in the European Union

Rising numbers of asylum seekers and refugees continue to be reported since the beginning of the millennium (Ramantani, Karasavoglou, Polychronidou, Florou, & Batziou, 2015). The recent demographic development in the European Union has been addressed by the media as a so-called "refugee crises", a term pointing to an allegedly unmanageable influx of forced migrants. According to the [European Asylum Support Office \(2016\)](#) in 2015 a total of 1,349,638 asylum applications were received by the member states of the European Union, Norway and Switzerland. As compared to the preceding year, this number has more than doubled, which in the first place could be attributed to the unstable political conditions in the Middle East.

In Germany, during the year of 2015, a total number of 476,649 asylum applications, as compared to 202,834 applications in 2014 were filed. During the first six months of 2016, this number amounted to 396,947 applications, indicating a trend still increasing ([Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2016](#)). As a consequence of the country's geographical position, this trend initially was more pronounced in Austria, where an increase from 28,064 asylum applications during 2014 to 88,151 in 2015 was reported

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([Bundesministerium für Inneres, 2016a](#)). Following restrictive actions taken by the Austrian government, the numbers increased only slightly from January till May 2016. During this time period 22,435 applications were filed, as compared to 20,802 applications between January to May, 2015 ([Bundesministerium für Inneres, 2016b](#)).

The Visegrad Group of countries, named after a meeting at a small Hungarian town of that name in 1991, comprises the Czech and the Slovak Republic, Hungary, and Poland. These countries initially intended to promote European integration by joint effort of the member states. Today, in contrast to Germany and Austria, the Visegrad Group practices a strict anti-migration policy. The Slovak Republic, for example recorded only 331 asylum applications in 2014 and 330 such applications in 2015 (UNHCR, 2016).

1.2 Asylum seekers' reception by the autochthonous residents

Among the autochthon German and Austrian population reactions to the rising numbers of asylum applications are mixed. In early October 2015 for instance, more than 100,000 Austrians demonstrated in Vienna welcoming asylum seekers, demanding solidarity and humane treatment for them from the governmental institutions. Apart from NGOs, there were thousands of volunteers offering their assistance to newly arrived asylum seekers. Right-wing extremists, on the other hand, responded with open racism and violence to the increased numbers of asylum seekers.

In the following year, public opinion was influenced negatively by the Paris Attacks in November 2015 and by sexual assaults at the Cologne New Year's Eve in early 2016, which, in part at least were attributed to asylum seekers. In spite of such concerns, by June 2016, about two out of three Austrian communities had provided shelter to newly arrived asylum seekers. Twenty-six percent of their mayors reported positive attitudes towards the new residents, whereas 44% reported neutral and 31% negative attitudes, pointing to an approximate balance between favorable and unfavorable positions. Although, according to the mayors' report, initially the autochthon residents reacted with hesitation, attitudes towards the newly arrived improved after personal contacts between asylum seekers and locals came to pass ([Medien-Servicestelle Neue Österreicher/innen, 2016](#)). In 2016 the election campaign for the presidential elections in Austria showed that attitudes towards asylum seekers had become a politically charged topic. Elections resulted in a majority for Alexander Van der Bellen, a supporter of a liberal policy towards migrants and refugees – in contrast to his right-wing populist opponent. As the rise of extreme right-wing political parties is associated with negative attitudes towards immigrants, this outcome suggests that a majority of the Austrian voters probably were rather open-minded towards asylum seekers.

Representative data about discrimination of minorities in European countries are provided by the European Commission and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (e.g., [European Commission, 2012](#); [FRA, 2017](#)). These data reveal vast differences among EU member states with regard to integrative measures for newly arrived asylum seekers, refugees, and unaccompanied minors. For example, Austria, Denmark, France, Greece, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, and the Netherlands provide educational support as early as possible, i.e., already when children are admitted to reception centers. This support comprises language education and, in some countries, also courses on societal values and legal specificities. In contrast, the Hungarian government was unable to report any details about the implementation of educational support for children and adolescent refugees, although some private initiatives are providing language classes and are aiming at improving integration ([FRA, 2017](#)). For Slovakia, the evidence is inconsistent. Whereas [FRA \(2017\)](#) reported no introductory support provided to refugee children, according to the Slovak Education Act language courses for this target group are recommended. These courses for six- to 15-year old children are financed by the state and comprise e.g., two weekly language classes per two hours or an eight-week intensive course.

Still, in the Slovak Republic attitudes towards forced migration reflect the official governmental policy of the Visegrad member states. For example, in a recent public-opinion poll, 70% of Slovak respondents indicated to be "very afraid" or "rather afraid" of "refugees", indicating a pronounced reluctance to offer assistance by admitting higher numbers of asylum seekers to the country ([European Web Site on Integration - European Commission, 2016](#)). In contrast to this descriptive body of evidence, the present study draws on theoretical considerations in order to test a psychological model investigating possible predictors of such attitudes.

1.3 Literature review: Theoretical and empirical background

From the above mentioned reports it is obvious that reactions towards forced migration are very different in various European countries. Whereas attitudes towards the admittance of asylum seekers are clearly negative in the Visegrad countries, Germany and Austria have reacted with cautious readiness to help. However, fueled by populist politicians and unbalanced reporting in the yellow press, assaults by asylum seekers probably have unduly spurred perceptions about threats that may come from immigrants – at least in parts of the society. Still, the heated political debates in Germany and Austria suggest that citizens of these countries strongly differ in their attitudes towards asylum seekers. That is, attitudes towards asylum seekers may be related to country-level factors as well as to characteristics of the person. Taking the divergent positions of the political mainstream in German-speaking countries versus the Visegrad Group into account, the study has been conducted with respondents from Germany and Austria on the one hand and from the Slovak Republic on the other hand. In the following we will describe some structural (i.e., country-level) factors which may be associated with attitudes towards asylum seekers.

1.3.1 Structural factors

[Yakushko \(2008\)](#) has analyzed xenophobic attitudes from the standpoints of social psychology, sociology, and multi-cultural research. According to him, migrants "are often targeted as convenient scapegoats during difficult cultural and economic transitions" and

"prejudice against immigrants can offer an emotional outlet for fear when both the internal and external affairs of a country are unstable. Unlike other forms of prejudice, anti-immigrant discourse frequently focuses on justifying the legitimacy of prejudicial reactions [...]. Questions such as 'Should the needs and rights of the host country or the needs and the rights of its migrants be seen as primary?' and 'Are selective immigration policies discriminatory?' are common in both popular and scholarly debates [...]. Anti-immigrant sentiments are frequently accepted as justifiable because they are seen as based on the realistic concern of the host community" ([Yakushko, 2008, p. 45f.](#)).

Thus, different attitudes towards asylum seekers at the state and governmental level could be related to structural factors like the receiving country's economy, unemployment rate, or the number of migrants already being part of the country's population. Negative incidents with foreigners, like the above mentioned assaults on New Year's Eve at Cologne may further increase anti-immigrant attitudes and racism among the autochthon population (cf., for example [Barlow et al., 2012](#), in an Australian context).

Empirical results on the possible influence of structural factors are in part inconsistent. In a cross-national survey [Miller \(2012\)](#) found a small but significant positive correlation between a country's per capita gross domestic product (GDP) and favorable attitudes towards migration. [Gorodzeisky and Semyonov \(2015\)](#) as well as [McLaren \(2003\)](#) indicated that higher rates of immigrants among a country's population are related to negative attitudes towards them, but no such effect was found in comparison of European countries by [Sides and Citrin \(2007\)](#). [Schneider \(2008\)](#) found a curvilinear relationship between the relative proportion of migrants in a country's population and attitudes towards them, i.e., the negative effect levels off at higher degrees of immigration, probably as a consequence of inter-group contact and habituation on the part of the autochthon population.

The German-speaking countries are economically stable and thus, at the first glance do not support [Yakushko's \(2008\)](#) scapegoat thesis. However, several authors draw attention to anti-pluralist, xenophobic tendencies in European democracies, which may stem from fears triggered by EU membership, globalization, and common disenchantment with politics ([Flecker & Kirschenhofer, 2004](#); [Marks, 2012](#)). Reduced benefits offered by the welfare state accompanied by rationalization and demands for increased flexibility on the part of employees may have led to widespread uncertainty. Many German-speaking respondents feel confronted with "anxiety and confusion, the feeling of insecurity caused by a lack of appropriate cultural, social and material resources, by a lack of self-confidence to face globalization and the complexity of modern society" ([Flecker & Kirschenhofer, 2004, p. 35](#)). Such anxieties may facilitate "defensive attitudes, such as a 'reactive nationalism', and attempts to stabilize the 'self' by way of accession to imaginary communities" ([Flecker & Kirschenhofer, 2004, p. 34](#)). At the same time, perceived needs for increased consumption often go along with a high personal debt burden, which in turn increases the fear of unemployment or general economic decline. This climate of increased uncertainty has been instrumentalized by populist right-wing parties like the "Alternative für

Deutschland" (AfD) [Alternative for Germany] or the "Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs" (FPÖ) [Austrian Freedom Party] in Austria.

In Slovakia, as in other post-communist countries, slow rates of industrialization and skepticism towards open market economy have fostered national populism. Voting behavior is characterized by a high degree of volatility and political parties offer little stability to their potential supporters. The communist heritage promoted distrust towards political parties in the traditional sense. Thus, indifference towards them as well as low voter participation are common phenomena in the Slovak Republic (Marks, 2012). Such dissatisfaction with the political system not only promotes populist political groups but also increases insecurity and fear of the future among the country's population, resulting in extremely restrictive relocation schemes and the state's refusal to accept non-Christian refugees.

1.3.2 Individual differences

In the light of these contradictory findings, it is likely that structural factors like the receiving country's per capita GDP or the proportion of immigrants among the population have limited explanatory power for attitudes towards immigrants. Therefore, individual level variables should be considered in the prediction of attitudes towards asylum seekers (see Renner & Wertz, 2015 for individual differences in value orientations and moral decisions resulting from them).

Perceived threats to individual security and health or to prosperity and political stability in general may influence attitudes towards outgroups unfavorably (Barlow et al., 2012). According to findings by McLaren (2003), high levels of migration do not directly influence attitudes towards migrants but rather lead to increased threat perception, which acts as a mediator: threat perception is a powerful predictor of many native people's wish to exclude migrants from societal resources or even expel them from the country.

Starting from the "theory of integrated threat", proposed by Stephan, Ybarra, and Bachman (1999), in a Canadian study, Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, and Armstrong (2001) identified three crucial factors determining individual differences in attitudes against migrants: (1) the perception of competitive economic threat, (2) concerns about compromised national identity, and (3) prejudice against ethnic outgroups. This finding was confirmed for the European Union by Gorodzeisky and Semyonov (2015). Racial prejudice and the perception of competitive threat each predicted independently the attitudes towards migrants.

Perceived economic threat: Yakushko (2008) pointed out that immigrants can't do it right from some natives' point of view: when performing well economically, they may be perceived as dangerous competitors on the labor market; when performing poorly, on the other hand, they might become a burden to the social security system. Concerns about perceived competitive or economic threat in the European Union were reported for example by Esses et al. (2001), Gorodzeisky and Semyonov (2015), McLaren (2003), Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior (2004), and by Yakushko (2008). Gorodzeisky and Semyonov (2015) found that poorly educated, unemployed, or economically disadvantaged respondents, as a consequence of perceived economic threat, expressed more negative attitudes towards immigrants than respondents with high socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Esses et al. (2001) introduced their "Instrumental Model of Group Conflict", postulating that groups competing for limited resources will tend to denigrate or even fight each other as a result of their economically motivated endeavors. Especially members of social groups who see themselves as disadvantaged or underprivileged will be susceptible for such reactions and thus, will tend to perceive immigrants as competitors for economic resources. Frequently, such fears are accompanied by "zero-sum beliefs", i.e., the assumption that a fixed reservoir of resources is drawn on by a country's population; following this logic, an increasing number of inhabitants will reduce the share left for each individual. Applying zero-sum beliefs to migration issues leads to the notion that migrants will "take away" jobs, housing, and social security resources from the native population. Esses et al. (2001) propose that concerns about a lack of economic resources "and the salience of a potentially competitive outgroup encourage perceptions about group competition. This perceived group competition, in turn, motivates strategies to remove the source of competition" (p. 393f.). Alternatively, and more optimistically it may be argued that migration will encourage economic development, for example by starting new businesses and by compensating for the decline in the birthrate of the autochthon population.

Perceived cultural threat: According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) the members of a group (e.g., a nation) compare themselves with members of an outgroup (e.g., immigrants) to get a favorable view of themselves. In order to keep up their perceived positive distinctiveness, members of the ingroup may try to limit the outgroup's resources by denigration and hostility and may perceive members of the outgroup as a menace. An experimental study carried out in the Netherlands by Sniderman, Hagendorn, and Prior (2004) found that perceived cultural threat had a larger impact on negative attitudes towards immigrants than perceived economic threat. Similar results were obtained from an analysis of data from the European Social Survey by Sides and Citrin (2007). These authors suggest that increasing numbers of asylum seekers from the Middle East may have unleashed perceived cultural threat in potentially receptive European countries.

Modern racism: As opposed to "old fashioned" racism, modern or symbolic racism concedes that minority groups should be treated equally as members of the majority, insinuating at the same time that minorities already would be better off and get more support by governmental institutions: therefore, additional assistance to them should be limited. "Modern racists" claim not to be prejudiced and to hold fair opinions toward the minority. Although developed in the USA in the context of racism against Black Americans, the notion of modern racism has been extended for example by Pedersen and Walker (1997) to attitudes towards Australian Aborigines and can also be identified among parts of today's European native population. Current right-wing populism focuses on people's envy of "the rich", "the politicians" and "the foreigners" by assigning to the latter group the role of scapegoats, who have allegedly "already received enough assistance". Gorodeisky and Semyonov (2015) found that modern racism predicted anti-immigrant attitudes in respondents from 20 member states of the European Union.

Life satisfaction and optimism as possible predictors of perceived threat and modern racism: In summary, the literature suggests that structural factors like per capita GDP or the number of immigrants residing in the country are rather weak predictors of attitudes towards migrants; economic or socio-demographic facts can explain such attitudes only to a small extent. Previous research suggests that fears associated with the perception of economic or cultural threat, and by negative emotions associated with modern racism might be more powerful predictors of attitudes towards asylum seekers.

Considering that inter-individual differences in attitudes towards asylum seekers are huge, it is quite likely that concerns and negative emotions associated with threat perceptions and modern racism develop particularly in predisposed individuals. Neo-liberalism and post-communism have left part of the population with dissatisfaction about their living conditions and a pessimistic view of their future. Dissatisfaction, fears and subsequently also threat perceptions may be promoted by certain personality traits. McLaren (2003), for instance, suggested that individuals with low life satisfaction and with pessimistic expectations of their future may be vulnerable to both perceived economic threat and perceived cultural threat. According to Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin (1985), *life satisfaction* comprises the "cognitive-judgmental aspects" of subjective well-being (p. 71). The authors emphasize that "judgments of satisfaction are dependent upon a comparison of one's circumstances with what is thought to be an appropriate standard. It is important to point out that the judgment of how satisfied people are with their present state of affairs is based on a comparison with a standard which each individual sets for him- or herself; it is not externally imposed. It is a hallmark of the subjective well-being area that it centers on the person's own judgments, not upon some criterion which is judged to be important by the researcher" (p. 71). Following this definition, neo-liberalism may instigate excessive expectations and inflated personal standards in many individuals which cannot be achieved even under the conditions of current economic prosperity, e.g. in Germany and Austria. In the Visegrad countries, on the other hand, a comparison with other European countries can be expected to foster feelings of envy in individuals predisposed to dissatisfaction.

As opposed to the cognitive aspects accounted for by *life satisfaction*, perceived economic or cultural threat are probably also associated with emotional aspects. A generalized expectance of negative rather than positive outcomes is likely to increase threat perceptions. Scheier, Carver and Bridges (1994) suggested *optimism* as a personality trait indicative of habitual positive expectancies: "Optimists differ from pessimists in their stable coping tendencies [...] and in the kinds of coping responses that they spontaneously generate when given hypothetical coping situations [...]. A general characterization [...] is that optimists tend to use more problem-focused coping strategies than do pessimists. When problem-focused coping is not a possibility, optimists turn to more effective emotion-

focused coping strategies such as acceptance, use of humor, and positive reframing of the situation. Pessimists tend to cope through overt denial and by mentally and behaviorally disengaging from the goals with which the stressor is interfering, regardless of whether something can be done to solve the problem or not” (p. 1063). Correlational analyses have shown that optimism is substantially and positively correlated with self-mastery and self-esteem and negatively with trait anxiety and neuroticism, but at the same time is also distinguishable from these constructs. Individuals who are satisfied with their life circumstances and habitually expect positive outcomes are less prone to irrational fears; therefore, life satisfaction and optimism are proposed as predictors of a smaller degree of threat perceptions.

Individuals who are not satisfied with their own lives may be particularly likely to develop envy, and may perceive those who seek admission to a country’s resources as a potential threat. Moreover, individuals who are pessimistic will expect negative rather than positive changes from the admission of asylum seekers. Therefore, pessimism may lead to increased concerns and envy. Following these considerations, *modern racism* should also be predicted by life satisfaction and optimism.

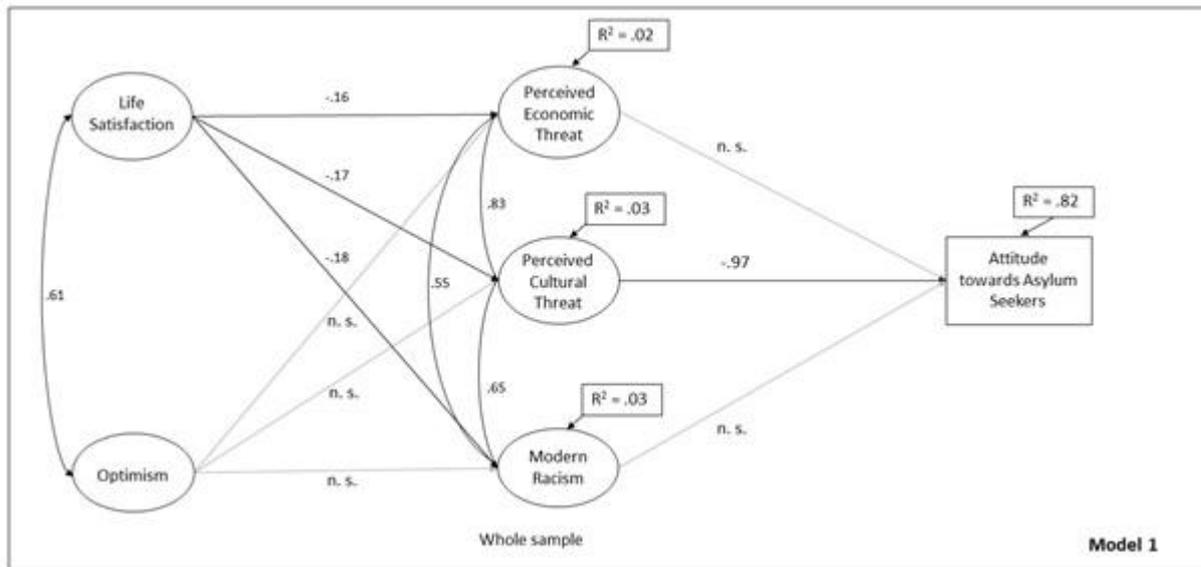
1.4 Research gap and research objectives

The current, unprecedented demographic changes in the European Union up to now have not been investigated with respect to their effects on the autochthon population’s psychological reactions. From media coverage, it has become obvious that individual reactions differ to a great extent, ranging from enthusiastic willingness to help to anxious, xenophobic rejection. The present study has been designed as a first, exploratory step towards filling this research gap and its objective was to find attitudes and personality traits which might predict these vast differences of attitudes towards asylum seekers in the European Union.

1.5 Rationale of the study: Hypotheses development

From the theoretical considerations outlined in Section 1.3, we derived the following research questions which are summarized in a hypothetical structural equation model (Model 1, Figure 1):

Figure 1: Estimates for the hypothesized model



(1) We expected that perceived economic threat, perceived cultural threat, and modern racism all predict the attitude toward asylum seekers. As outlined above, extant research indicates, however, that perceived cultural threat is a better predictor of attitude toward asylum seekers than perceived economic threat and modern racism.

(2) We hypothesized that life satisfaction and optimism are predictors of perceived economic threat, perceived cultural threat, and modern racism. If these personality traits account for substantial variance in perceived threat and modern racism, they may play an important role in explaining why individuals develop a negative attitude toward asylum seekers.

(3) To examine the impact of two potentially influential structural factors (the number of asylum seekers already admitted; per capita GNP), the hypothesized model will be tested separately in two subsamples (German-speaking vs. Slovakia) differing with regard to these factors. The subsamples consisted of German-speaking respondents from Austria and Germany (representing countries with a relatively high per capita GNP and relatively high numbers of asylum seekers already admitted) and respondents from Slovakia (representing the Visegrad countries, characterized by low per capita GNP and a low number of asylum seekers already admitted). According to extant research, we expected that attitudes towards asylum seekers will be more negative in Slovakia than in the German-speaking countries. As the evidence about the impact of structural factors is inconsistent, no predictions were made regarding the equivalence of the regression paths across subsamples.

Section 2 will give details on the sample and research methods and Section 3 will present and discuss the results. Finally, in Section 4, we will present the conclusions from these findings and important policy implications for future developments will be proposed.

2. Data and methodology

2.1 Sample

The participants were recruited on a snowball basis by students of psychology who had been instructed to fill in one questionnaire by themselves and to submit three more questionnaires to respondents without an academic background and of different age groups. The German-speaking subsample comprised 349 participants ($n = 198$ from Germany and $n = 151$ from Austria) with a mean age of 29.78 years ($SD = 14.91$, range 16 to 85 years) and on average 12.58 years of schooling ($SD = 2.57$, range 7 to 23 years). Of the German-speaking participants 174 were male, 146 were female, and 29 did not indicate their gender. The Slovak subsample consisted of 307 respondents (97 male, 194 female, and 16 who did not indicate their gender) with a mean age of 39.06 years ($SD = 15.77$, range 16 to 77 years) and an average of 12.91 years of schooling ($SD = 1.51$, range 9 to 15 years). There were significantly more women in the Slovak than in the German-speaking subsample ($\chi^2 = 27.340$, $p < .01$). Participants of the Slovak subsample were significantly older than those of the German-speaking subsample ($U = -9.273$, $p < .01$). With regard to the years of schooling we did not find a significant difference between the subsamples ($U = -1.821$, $p = .07$).

2.2 Measures

Life satisfaction was assessed by a German and a Slovak translation of the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985). The Satisfaction with Life Scale consists of five items to be answered on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). A sample item reads: "In most ways my life is close to my ideal". Cronbach's α was reported to be .87 by Diener et al. (1985).

Optimism was measured by the Life Orientation Test (LOT) in its revised version by Scheier et al. (1994), which comprises ten items, four of which are filler items, and three items are reversed. The items coded reversely were excluded from the analyses because confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) indicated that these items form a separate subscale. All items of this scale were to be answered on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (4). A sample item reads: "In uncertain times, I usually expect the best". In Scheier's et al. (1994) sample, Cronbach's α was .78.

Perceived economic threat was assessed using four items translated and adapted from a scale introduced by Bobo and Hutchings (1996). A sample item reads: "More good jobs for refugees mean fewer good jobs for members of other groups". Reliability was reported by the authors as ranging from $\alpha = .68$ to $\alpha = .81$ for various ethnic groups.

Perceived cultural threat was assessed by two items used by McLaren (2003). Originally the two items were: "People from these minority groups are enriching the cultural life of [Country]" (reverse scored) and "The religious practices of people from these minority groups threaten our way of life" ($p = .919$). After translating the items to German and Slovak, the wording was adapted to: "Refugees are enriching the cultural life of [country]" and to "The religious practices of refugees threaten our way of life". All items assessing either economic threat or cultural threat had to be answered on a five point Likert scale from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5).

Modern racism. Modern racists contend that refugees and other minority groups would be privileged by the public administration. This construct was measured by three items adapted from [Gorodzeisky and Semyonov \(2015\)](#). Item 1: "When asylum seekers need the assistance of local authorities, will they be treated better / equally / worse as compared to natives?" In items 2 and 3, the term "local authorities" was replaced by "medical institutions" and "social security institutions" respectively. Answers were scored from -1 ("asylum seekers treated worse") over 0 to +1 ("asylum seekers treated better").

Attitude towards asylum seekers. [O'Rourke and Sinnott \(2006\)](#) successfully used a one-item measure in order to assess attitudes towards migration in general and towards asylum seekers in particular. We adapted the original wording and asked: "Overall, my attitude towards asylum seekers coming to [country] is extremely positive (+3), mostly positive (+2), somewhat positive (+1), neutral (0), somewhat negative (-1), mostly negative (-2), extremely negative (-3).

2.3 Statistical analyses

As valid group comparisons require measurement invariance between groups, the first step was to examine invariance of all study variables between the two subsamples in a series of increasingly parsimonious models. Applying multi-group CFA we first tested for configural invariance, the invariance of the instruments' structure, which is a prerequisite for further invariance testing. Thereafter, weak invariance, the equivalence of item loadings for both groups, and strong invariance, the equivalence of the item intercepts, were investigated. Strong invariance is a prerequisite for valid interpretations of differences in group means. CFA model fit was evaluated using the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). A CFI $\geq .95$ and a RMSEA $\leq .05$ are indicating good model fit, a CFI $\geq .90$ and a RMSEA $\leq .08$ are indicating acceptable model fit ([Kline, 2010](#)). For the evaluation of measurement invariance, decreases of $\geq .01$ in CFI and increases of $\geq .015$ in RMSEA for the more parsimonious model are indicative of non-invariance.

Second, we used structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the validity of the hypothesized model (see Figure 1 above). In order to investigate the equivalence of the proposed model for both subsamples we applied multi-group SEM and restricted all path estimates to be equal across samples (German-speaking countries and Slovakia).

Missing values for the items assessing life satisfaction, optimism, perceived economic threat, perceived cultural threat, and attitude toward asylum seekers were between 0 and 2%, which is considered unproblematic with Maximum-Likelihood estimation. The items measuring modern racism had missing values between 7% and 10%. Those who had at least one missing value on an item assessing modern racism did not differ from those who answered all items of this scale in any of the other variables (attitude towards asylum seekers, perceived economic threat, perceived cultural threat, optimism, satisfaction with life, age). All CFAs and SEMs were computed with Mplus, Version 7.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Measurement invariance

In a first step we examined measurement invariance between countries. The results of these analyses are displayed in Table 1. The configural model for countries with all latent variables used in this study (perceived economic threat, perceived cultural threat, modern racism, optimism, life satisfaction) yielded good model fit. Restricting the loadings did not change the fit indices more than .01 and thus, factorial (weak) invariance can be assumed. The model with constricted item intercepts led to a meaningful decrease in model fit. Inspection of the modification indices showed that two items contributed to the deterioration in model fit: "In uncertain times, I usually expect the best" assessing optimism and "In most ways my life is close to my ideal" assessing life satisfaction. When the intercepts for these two items were estimated separately in each subsample, model fit did not differ from Model 2. That is, strong measurement can be assumed for perceived economic threat, perceived cultural threat, and modern racism, and mean differences between subsamples in these variables can be interpreted. For optimism and life satisfaction only partial invariance can be assumed and mean differences in these variables should therefore be interpreted with caution.

Table 1: Statistics for the evaluation of measurement invariance for all latent variables

| Parameters constrained to be equal across groups | df | χ^2 | CFI | RMSEA |
|--|-----|----------|------|-------|
| None | 218 | 346.26 | .968 | .042 |
| FL | 230 | 378.92 | .963 | .044 |
| FL, II | 242 | 485.39 | .939 | .055 |
| FL, partial invariance of II ^a | 240 | 423.54 | .954 | .048 |

Note. CFI = Comparative Fit Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; FL = factor loadings; II = item intercepts. ^a Partial invariance concerned free estimation of the intercepts of items Optimism 1 and Life Satisfaction 1 across groups.

3.2 Descriptive results

U-tests showed that the two subsamples differed significantly on all study variables⁴. German-speaking respondents scored significantly higher on life satisfaction, optimism and as was hypothesized, also had a more favorable attitude towards asylum seekers than respondents from Slovakia. Also in accordance with our hypothesis, the values for perceived economic threat, perceived cultural threat, and modern racism were higher in the Slovakian subsample. Attitude towards asylum seekers was weakly correlated with age ($r = -.180$, $p = .000$) and with years of schooling ($r = .106$, $p = .007$). Men on average scored -0.04 ($SD = 1.68$, range -3 to $+3$) and women on average scored -0.17 ($SD = 1.66$, range -3 to $+3$) on the seven-point scale assessing attitude towards asylum seekers. This difference did not reach statistical significance ($U = -.974$, $p = .330$). Therefore, age, educational level, and gender were not included as possible predictors in the Structural Equation Models.

As already mentioned, attitude towards asylum seekers was significantly more negative in the Slovak subsample. Accordingly, subsample membership significantly correlated with attitude towards asylum seekers, even when controlled for age and years of schooling (partial correlation $r = -.477$, $p = .000$). Thus, differences in attitude towards asylum seekers between the two subsamples cannot be attributed to differences in age and years of schooling.

3.3 Predicting attitude towards asylum seekers

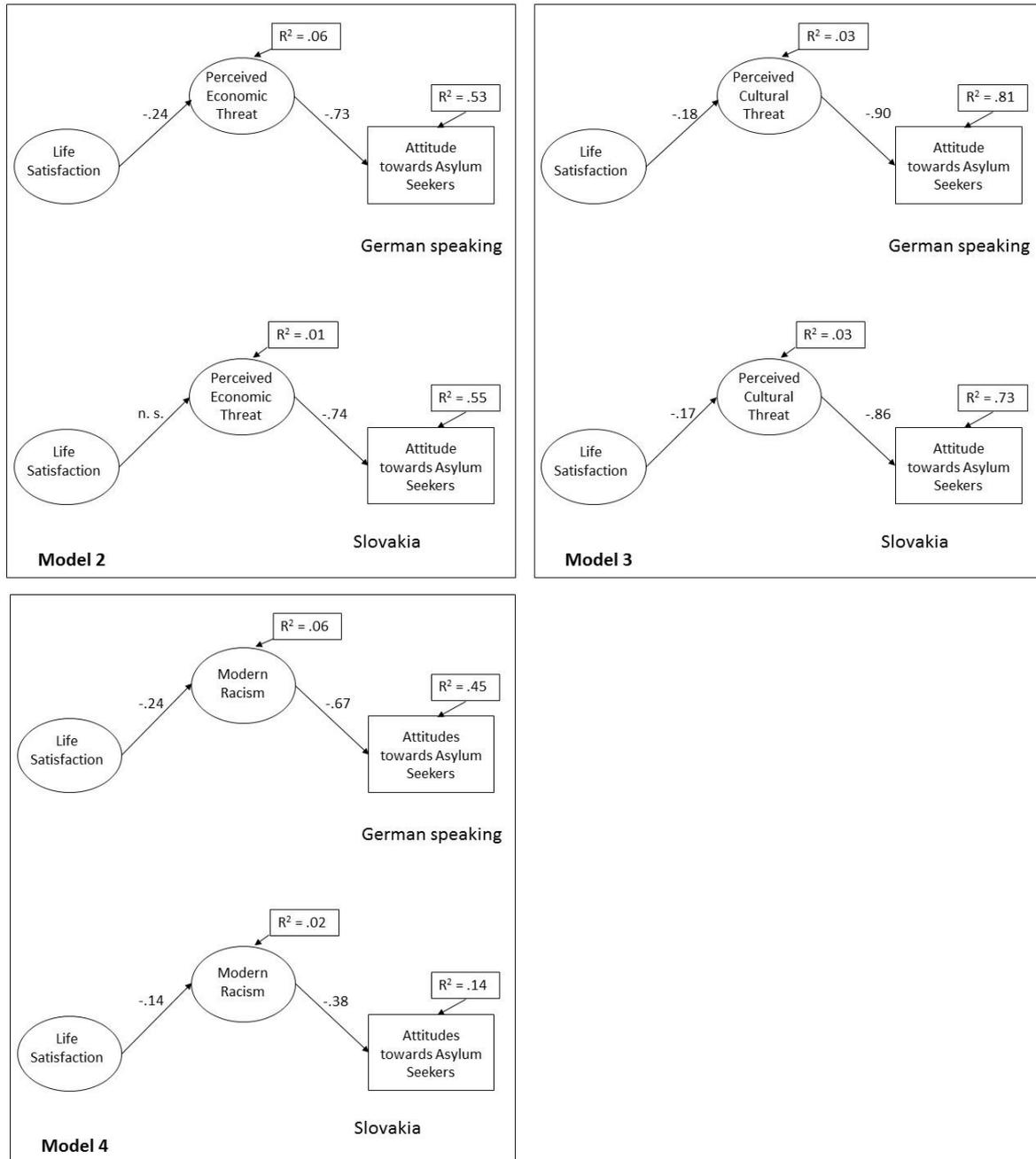
First, we applied SEM to address research questions (1) and (2) by investigating the validity of the hypothesized Model 1 (Figure 1). This model had good fit ($\chi^2 = 301.70$, $df = 123$, CFI = .964, RMSEA = .047). Results showed that perceived economic threat and modern racism did not predict attitude toward asylum seekers. The estimates for perceived cultural threat were significant and explained 82% of the variance in attitude towards asylum seekers. Note, however, that perceived economic threat and perceived cultural threat were highly correlated. Thus, although neither perceived economic threat nor modern racism explained any additional variance when perceived cultural threat was used as a predictor, the correlations suggest that – in the absence of perceived cultural threat – these variables may still be meaningful predictors of attitude towards asylum seekers. The nonsignificant results of perceived economic threat and modern racism must therefore be interpreted considering the relatively high intercorrelation of these variables.

Moreover, we were interested in the predictive power of individual characteristics (life satisfaction, optimism) for perceived economic threat, perceived cultural threat, and modern racism. While life satisfaction predicted all three variables, optimism predicted neither. The explained variances were, however, only between 2% and 3% and thus, the importance of these individual characteristics in the prediction of threat perceptions and modern racism is negligible.

Next, we investigated whether the path estimates were equivalent in both groups. Because of concerns regarding multicollinearity, we computed a separate model for each predictor variable. Moreover, as optimism did not predict perceived economic threat, perceived cultural threat, or modern racism this variable was excluded from these analyses. Multi-group SEMs where all paths were estimated separately for each group served as baseline models. The results of the baseline models are displayed in Figure 2.

⁴ With respect to limited space, descriptive statistics as well as the intercorrelations and internal consistencies (Cronbach's α) of the scales will be available upon request.

Figure 2: Group specific models with perceived economic threat, perceived cultural threat and modern racism as predictors



Model 2 shows that perceived economic threat is similarly associated with attitude toward asylum seekers in German-speaking countries and in Slovakia (Model 2: $\chi^2 = 244.53$, $df = 82$, CFI = .942, RMSEA = .078; Model 2 with path estimates constrained across countries: $\chi^2 = 247.61$, $df = 84$, CFI = .942, RMSEA = .077; $\Delta \chi^2 = 3.09$, $\Delta df = 2$, $p = .21$). Model 3 suggests that perceived cultural threat is a strong predictor of attitude toward asylum seekers in both groups (Model 3: $\chi^2 = 111.29$, $df = 48$, CFI = .967, RMSEA = .063). Constraining all path estimates to be equal across groups did not lead to deteriorated model fit ($\chi^2 = 115.77$, $df = 50$, CFI = .966, RMSEA = .063; $\Delta \chi^2 = 4.48$, $\Delta df = 2$, $p = .11$), indicating that the path estimates do not differ between these populations. The explained variance of Model 3 without perceived economic threat and modern racism as predictors was similar to that of Model 1.

Finally, we investigated the importance of modern racism as a predictor of attitude towards asylum seekers (Model 4: $\chi^2 = 135.82$, $df = 64$, CFI = .960, RMSEA = .058). For Model 4 path estimates differed between groups with higher estimates for the German-speaking group ($\chi^2 = 160.77$, $df = 66$, CFI = .942, RMSEA = .078; $\Delta \chi^2 = 24.95$, $\Delta df = 2$, $p < .001$).

= .948, RMSEA = .066; $\Delta \chi^2 = 25.95$, $\Delta df = 2$, $p < .01$). That is, modern racism is a better predictor of attitudes towards asylum seekers in the German-speaking group.

4. Conclusion and policy implications

The present study intended to take a first step towards filling the research gap which resulted from recent demographic changes in the European Union as a consequence of forced migration from the Middle East. In summary, we have found that perceived cultural threat is the most powerful predictor of individual differences in the autochthon population's attitudes towards forced migration. In comparison, perceived economic threat as well as racist attitudes contributes to the prediction to a clearly lesser extent. When trying to find out what makes people prone to perceived cultural threat, contrary to expectations, life satisfaction had only a small – though statistically significant – impact on anxious expectations or racist attitudes at the individual level and optimism has been found to have no predictive power at all. Probably because of structural differences at the national level, namely differences in GDP and the number of refugees already admitted, the attitude towards asylum seekers is more negative in Slovakia than in the German-speaking countries; apart from mean differences, however, the associations between perceived threat and the attitude towards asylum seekers do not differ between these countries; only the predictive power of modern racism is stronger in the German-speaking countries, which may be a result of the higher number of asylum seekers admitted there in the preceding years.

The main finding of the present study is that both in German-speaking countries and in Slovakia perceived cultural threat is a major predictor of attitudes towards asylum seekers. Social Identity Theory maintains that some members of a majority may denigrate minorities in an attempt to stabilize their own insecure cultural identities. During the past decades, cultural identity has faded and increasing cultural indifference among the native population of the European Union's member states could provide the breeding ground of such tendencies. A destabilized cultural identity may well contribute to delimitation and even hostility towards individuals from other cultures, but still we know little about the specific concerns that lead to perceptions of cultural threat.

The German chancellor Angela Merkel, who had been criticized by her right-wing opponents for her welcome policy towards asylum seekers (“Wir schaffen das” [We can manage this]) in 2015, argued along these lines in late 2016, when she suggested to return to traditional values in order to cope with the challenge of alleged “Islamization”, purported by some of the mass media and right-wing politicians.

Sides and Citrin (2007) maintain that negative attitudes towards members of ethnic minorities may be heightened in specific situations, for instance, through large populations of immigrants. In a similar way, recent terror acts will have an impact on many people's attitudes towards asylum seekers. In such a situation, it is of utmost importance to learn more about which situational characteristics affect these attitudes. The same authors also suggested that threat perceptions may concern different aspects of the minority culture, for instance appearances, customs, or values. Further research should investigate the specific concerns underlying cultural threat, because a thorough understanding of the concerns held by the majority may help policy-makers to take steps to facilitate the living together of individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds. The present research also shows that concerns about potential economic consequences and racist attitudes cannot explain additional variance in attitudes towards asylum seekers and it is not unlikely, that right-wing populists will adopt their propaganda to prevailing vibes and focus more on emphasizing cultural threats.

As far as predisposing factors at the individual level are concerned, the present predictive model did not yield convincing results. While in the case of optimism, the poor scale characteristics may be responsible for the negative results this does not apply to life satisfaction, which only accounted for a small part of the variance of perceived cultural threat. Though, in line with Social Identity Theory, insecure cultural identity may facilitate the perception of cultural threat in the face of current demographic changes, the determinants as well as the specifics of such insecurity are yet unclear and should be examined in more detail in future studies.

One limitation of the present study pertains to snowball sampling without any claim to representativeness and to some socio-demographic differences among the sub-samples. It should be noted, however, that we did not intend to compare the absolute values of attitudes between the sub-samples, but rather examined individual differences of possible predictors of attitudes towards asylum seekers on the basis of psychological mechanisms. Moreover, all socio-demographic variables were poor

predictors of attitudes towards asylum seekers. In spite of mean-differences among German-speaking and Visegrad countries, the sub-samples did not differ regarding the predictive validity of economic threat and cultural threat for attitudes towards asylum seekers.

It should be kept in mind, however, that current political change, e.g., the closure of the Balkan Route, or the more restrictive legislation put forward by the Austrian government in 2017 may foster changes in individual attitudes and their predictors. In the light of ongoing shifts in public opinion, continued research on the topic is strongly suggested.

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