Research Article

Perception of intergroup threat of Croatian receiving community in the context of integration of refugees

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ABSTRACT

Integration of refugees and receiving community members (RCMs) has been an expanding topic in research on group dynamics in the past fifteen years. A higher level of integration is indicated by lower levels of the perception of intergroup threat felt between refugees and RCMs. The Integrated Threat theory defines two types of threat – realistic and symbolic. Realistic relates to resources and interests such as socio-economic and physical safety, while symbolic relates to cultural and social elements such as norms, values, and way of life. The goal of this study is to explore whether some socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics and socio-psychological indicators of integration predict the levels of realistic and symbolic threat perception in Croatian RCMs.

A sample of 600 RCMs participated in the study, collected using the random walk technique. Data were analysed using SEM, and the two final models showed a good fit. More than a fifth of the variance of realistic threat and more than a third of the variance of symbolic threat was explained by the models. RCMs with lower levels of education, right-wing orientation, lower household income and less support for the rights of refugees showed higher levels of realistic threat. Higher levels of symbolic threat were shown by older RCMs, right-wing oriented, those who perceived refugees to be a part of the society in Croatia to a lesser degree, and showed less support for the rights of refugees. Political orientation and support for

the rights of refugees are particularly highlighted as predictors of both types of threat.

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Introduction

Integration of receiving communities and refugees is a dynamic and two-way process of mutual accommodation, multidimensional and with emphasis on responsibilities and challenges in both groups (European Commission, 2005). It is one of the forms of acculturation which is a process by which individuals learn about the norms characteristic of the other culture (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). Integration is characterised by the lowest levels of unpleasant socio-emotional consequences in comparison to other acculturation forms: assimilation, separation, and marginalisation (Berry et al., 1986; 1987). Within these three acculturation forms the responsibility for expected adaptation in behaviour and/or social norms and values lies exclusively on the newcomer group, while the receiving community remains passive. In contrast, integration presumes active and mutual accommodation of both groups. This results, theoretically, in boosting social harmony and stability, with the retention of respective social identities and cultural practices, and with the potential of expanding the social identity to include the members of both groups (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). Such social re-categorisation is one of the dimensions of integration, alongside the socio-economic and legal aspects of refugee integration, as well as facilitating factors such as language acquisition (Ager & Strang, 2008; Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019). It depends on both social and psychological factors and can be defined as a socio-psychological dimension of integration (Kiralj Lacković et al., 2023).

Throughout integration, the social and psychological well-being of the receiving community members (RCMs) and refugees (REFs) can be monitored by the indicators of integration - measures of constructs that are relevant in the study of intergroup relations in general, and in the context of integration in particular. These include attitudes, contact, social distance, social networks, discrimination, support for refugee rights in the receiving country, perception of intergroup threat, behavioural intentions, etc. (Kiralj Lacković et al., 2023). For each of these indicators, we can expect a direction and strength indicating a level of integration of the two groups. The perception of intergroup threat (sometimes also referred to as 'perception of threat' and 'threat perception') is

an uncomfortable and socially determined combination of emotions and reasoning that emerges in the context of intergroup interactions. Scholars have been trying to understand threat perception since the 1960s, starting with the Realistic group conflict theory (Sherif & Sherif, 1969), across Symbolic racism theory (Kinder & Sears, 1981), until the probably most influential theory of threat perception, the Integrated Threat Theory (ITT; Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Combining the premises of the former two theories, authors of ITT postulated that intergroup attitudes can be influenced by the perception of a struggle for resources and the difference in core values at the same time. Recently revised ITT defines two types of threat perception: realistic and symbolic (Stephan & Stephan, 2017). *Perception of realistic threat* is a sense that the members of the other group have the potential to harm one's palpable or impalpable interests such as access to socio-economic resources or political influence, or harm them physically. *Perception of symbolic threat* is a sense that the other group can harm one's system of values, norms, or way of life. In the context of integration, the perception of realistic threat is related primarily to the fear of unjust re-division of socio-economic resources and physical danger the other group might cause, while the perception of symbolic threat is related to the idea that other's different cultural values are opposed and dangerous to one's own.

The ITT suggests that there are several causes and effects of threat perception. Personal characteristics, attitudes and beliefs, past experiences, intercultural (intergroup) contact, and situational and societal factors are thought to be the antecedents of the threat perception which in turn impacts emotions, cognition, and behaviours (Stephan & Stephan, 2017). In other words, the ITT proposes that threat perception is related to the individual's interpretation of observable, i.e. social context and interactions, as well as the unobservable – their inner psychological processes.

Some studies considered personal characteristics influencing the threat perception of RCMs about asylum seekers and REFs. Of socio-demographic characteristics, age and level of education were negatively related to perceived threat (Hartley & Pedersen, 2015; Sunhan et al., 2012). Personality traits and cognitive tendencies were also related to the threat perception, such as right-

wing authoritarianism, conservatism, social dominance orientation, exclusivist belief systems, and political attitudes (Matthews & Levin, 2012; Newman et al., 2012). Along the same lines, those RCMs who were right-wing-oriented expressed more anxiety related to the "refugee crisis" than left-wing-oriented ones (Van Prooijen et al., 2018). Additionally, religious fundamentalism of RCMs was a predictor of the perception of symbolic threat related to REFs (Kang, 2018). These studies suggest that age, level of education, political orientation, and strong religious affiliation could help explain the threat RCMs perceive about REFs. With regards to attitudes and beliefs, intergroup contact, intergroup identification, differences in social status, and negative stereotypes were found to be significant predictors of intergroup threat (Aberson, 2019; Aberson & Gaffney, 2008).

The ITT suggests that the history of prior relations between the members of two cultures influences the anticipated valence of future interactions (Stephan & Stephan, 2017) which is in line with the contact hypothesis stating that intergroup contact can influence prejudice towards members of the other group (Allport, 1954). The evidence supporting this hypothesis is systematic and shows that intergroup contact reduces prejudice most effectively when it is deep, meaningful, voluntary, and pleasant (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew et al., 2011). Meta-analytic studies find that contact is associated with a decrease in prejudice and an increase in positivity towards the other group in various contexts (Van Assche et al., 2023). The same authors found that the effects of contact on prejudice are at least equally strong for persons experiencing low vs. high threat (Van Assche et al., 2023). Intergroup contact can be viewed in two dimensions: how often it occurs (frequency or quantity) and how it is perceived (valence or quality). The quantity of contact did not predict prejudice in RCMs towards asylum seekers, but the quality did (Barlow et al., 2012; Healy et al., 2017; Turoy et al., 2013). The interaction between frequency and valence was also significant, showing that frequent interaction with the asylum seekers and evaluating such experiences as pleasant had the strongest impact on reducing prejudice (Barlow et al., 2012). Interestingly, the RCMs do not have to interact with REFs directly to experience a prejudice

reduction – both personal and extended contact were negatively related to prejudice, discrimination, and negative group emotions towards REFs (Geschke, 2007).

The research focused on the external influences related to threat perception has shown that societal factors such as power relations could play an important role in its formation. Groups with higher social power were more likely to strongly react when feeling threatened, trying to prevent the loss of their power of influence (Corenblum & Stephan, 2001). This was further supported by evidence suggesting that the relation between threat perception and intergroup attitudes is stronger for groups with higher social power (Riek et al., 2006). In the migration context, RCMs are a group with a stronger social power in comparison to REFs. Perception of realistic threat also depends on the perceived motivation for migration of migrants. Threat was found to be higher in RCMs who were responding to questions about unauthorised immigrants versus the authorised ones (Murray & Marx, 2013). In another study, RCMs expressed higher levels of threat when asked to think about asylum seekers, as opposed to thinking about REFs (Hartley & Pedersen, 2015). They also dehumanised immigrants more than refugees (DeVaul-Fetters, 2014). Another factor that impacts threat perception is the perceived size of the other group, most probably due to the idea that larger groups have more influence and could make a greater impact (McLaren, 2003).

Croatian context

Croatia is a country with very limited experience of inward migration. During the migration from Syria and surrounding countries towards the north-west of Europe in 2015 and 2016, Croatia was primarily a transit country and a temporary location for REFs, with the current population of REFs mostly living in Zagreb, Sisak and Karlovac (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2022). Before being granted the legal status of a refugee (person under international protection), they are accommodated in shared housing in reception centres. Upon receiving refugee status, they relocate to state-owned housing or privately owned housing with rent covered by the state for a set period. The number of REFs in

Croatia is very small – a total of 1,085 persons were granted international protection between 2006 and 2023, which includes REFs from Syria as well as other countries (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2023). The integration process rests on the legal foundations of the EU and Croatia, further detailed in the local action plans (Office for Human Rights and Rights of Minorities, 2017).

Several studies explored the threat perception of RCMs from REFs, migrants, and asylum seekers in Croatia. At the end of 2015 and the start of 2016, RCMs expressed mixed feelings about migrants (Henjak, 2018). Their positive attitudes included viewing migration as a way to resolve demographic and workforce problems, and those expressing a positive stance supported an open society. Negative attitudes included perceiving migrants as a cultural and economic threat and were backed up by the preference to close the borders and fence out the source of the threat. In another study, asylum seekers were seen as a security and economic threat, putting more emphasis on the realistic threat (Gregurović et al., 2016). Croatian RCMs on average expressed neutral attitudes towards persons granted asylum and REFs, but also showed mid-levels of realistic threat and a bit stronger symbolic threat (Ajduković et al., 2019; Kiralj Lacković et al., 2023). RCMs also related the arrival of REFs from Syria to the increased competition in the job market and believed that they should not be helped by the government "too much" as there is "quite a lot of [Croatian] population that needs to be taken care of" (Kiralj & Ajduković, 2021; pp. 673). Some RCMs strongly believed that refugees should only practise their religion in their own homes and personal time, or pay a higher tax due to their religious affiliation (Kiralj & Ajduković, 2022).

Studies of integration in Croatia show a general lack of intergroup contact as experienced by the RCMs, which is not surprising considering the numerical ratio of REFs and RCMs (Ajduković et al., 2019; Kiralj Lacković et al., 2023). This creates a particular setting for integration, one in which contact doesn't have a systematic effect on other indicators of integration, mainly attitudes, prejudice, social distance, or threat perception. Though many refugees passed through Croatia on their way to their destination countries, only a small number of RCMs have interacted with them first-hand.

Goal of the study

Given the specificities of the Croatian context to study REF and RCMs integration and the documented influence that threat perception has on intergroup relations, we explored the potential predictors of threat perception to better understand what makes RCMs feel uneasy about the arriving group. The goal of this study was to test whether a set of chosen socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the RCMs and socio-psychological indicators of integration can predict the levels of realistic and symbolic threat perception. Based on previous research, we expected that lower levels of both types of threat would be predicted by younger age, higher level of education, left-wing political orientation, perception of refugees as a part of the community to a greater degree, and higher support for the rights of refugees. We additionally expected higher household income and a positive perception of the impact of migration to predict lower levels of realistic threat perception. Lastly, we expected that less importance of religion and less frequent religious practices would predict lower symbolic threat perception.

Research of threat perception often tests the assumptions of ITT regarding the antecedents (predictors), and effects of intergroup threat (Stephan & Stephan, 2017). Due to the complex nature of the phenomena, the authors of the theory postulated that the links between the antecedents, threat, and its effects are reciprocal. They emphasized that in many situations, antecedents such as intergroup attitudes can cause threat perception, with such perception further strengthening the initial negative attitudes, and creating a loop. Indeed, in the context of integration, threat perception was meta-analytically found to be the strongest predictor of negative attitudes of RCMs towards REFs, further supporting the reciprocity of the elements of the ITT (Cowling et al., 2019). Simply put, the ITT states that the relations between causes and effects of threat are not straightforward. Therefore, perceiving refugees as a part of the community, perceiving a positive impact of migration, and supporting the rights of refugees can be considered as types of attitudes and beliefs defined by ITT as antecedents of threat (Stephan & Stephan, 2017).

We, therefore, decided to further define them as predictors in our models and test their potential in explaining realistic and symbolic threat perception.

Method

The present study is a part of the international, multidisciplinary research project Forced Displacement and Refugee-Host Community Solidarity (FOCUS), financed by the European Commission (Horizon 2020 Programme for Research and Innovation[1]) to explain socio-economic and socio-psychological indicators of integration and the interrelations of dimensions of integration in REFs from Syria and RCMs in Sweden, Germany, Croatia, and Jordan. This study was approved by the Ethics Board of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb.

Participants

Participants were recruited based on the predefined criteria: had to be between 18 and 65 years of age, living in the country for at least six years and with a permanent residency or Croatian citizenship. They were approached face-to-face in three cities with the highest population of REFs from Syria at the time of the data collection – Zagreb, Karlovac, and Sisak. The sample was created using the Random Walk Technique, with 1228 households contacted and a 48% response rate.

A total of 600 RCMs participated in the study (55.2% women, compared to 52% in the national census; Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2024), with two-thirds living in Zagreb (66.7%). On average, RCMs were 44 years old (SD = 13.5; range 20 – 65, compared to 44.3 years based on the national census; Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2024), and most of them had a middle level of education (74.7%, compared to 54.6% compared to the national census; Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2024). A total of 93.7% of respondents declared as Christians, but only a small number stated that religion is "quite important" or "very important" to them (11.8% and 0.8%, respectively). A third of respondents stated that they

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[1] Dataset available upon request.

are not politically committed (35.5%), others declared as "Centre" (22.8%), and equally across left and right poles ("Left centre" and "Left" a total of 21.3%; "Right centre and "Right" a total of 20.3%). The average household income was 1.292 € (*SD* = 561,3€).

Instruments

Socio-economic and socio-demographic characteristics

Age, sex, importance of religion, frequency of practising religion, and political orientation were measured as socio-demographic characteristics, while level of education and household earnings were measured as socio-economic characteristics of RCMs. The importance of religion was measured with one item: *How important is religion in your life?* with participants responding on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very*). The frequency of practising religion was measured using one item: "*How often do you attend religious meetings?*" with a response format ranging from *never* (1) to *several times a week* (5). Political orientation was measured using one item: "*What is your political orientation?*" with the responses ranging from 1 (*left*) to 5 (*right*).

Perception of the socio-economic impact of migration scale

This scale was constructed for the study. RCMs estimated the degree to which they themselves believed migration impacts the socio-economic situation in the country using six items formed as statements regarding increase of competition in the job market, reduction of shortage of workers, general positive impact on the economic growth, ratio of cost and benefit of accepting refugees, risk of tax burden increase, and reduction of state financial support for Croatian citizens as a consequence of REF arrival. The responses on a Likert-type scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The sample was split at random, the scale was revised based on the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on half the sample, and the model was cross-validated by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the other half (see Supplementary materials). The first four items showed good factor loadings and impact on the reliability of the scale and were therefore retained. The modification indices and residual variances

indicated the necessity to respecify the model by including a covariance between the first two items, and because their content is related to the perception of the impact of migration on the job market, this covariance was introduced in the model. The reliability of the final format of the scale was adequate (k = 4, ω = .766, CI 95% [.736, .796]; α = .753, CI 95% [.719, .784]).

Support of rights of refugees scale

The scale was previously constructed and used in Croatia (Ajduković et al., 2019). Contains 11 items which state the rights of REFs when they receive asylum status, which are guaranteed by Croatian law. Participants chose the degree to which they agreed with each statement on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). An exemplary item is "*Refugees and their families should have the right to primary, secondary and higher education same as Croatian citizens*". The scale previously showed excellent reliability (α = .95; Ajduković et al., 2019), comparable to the present study (k = 11, ω = .918, CI 95% [.908, .928]; α = .918, CI 95% [.908, .927]). For this analysis, and due to the high number of items, the scale was reformed into three parcels of roughly equal factor loadings and means based on the results of EFA (Little, 2013; see Supplementary materials).

Community

RCMs were asked to estimate to what degree they feel REFs are a part of the community they live in Croatia, using one item "*How much do you feel refugees are a part of the Croatian community?*", with answering options ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a lot*).

Realistic and symbolic threat scale

The scale was previously constructed and used in a study in Croatia, showing good metric characteristics (α = .78 to .83; Ajduković et al., 2019). In the present study, a shortened version of six items with best metric properties was used. Three items measured realistic threat perception (e.g., "*Refugees take places at universities or jobs from Croats*"), and three measured symbolic threat perception (e.g., "*Refugees could endanger our values and our way of life*"). Each

item was assessed on a five-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Both sub-scales showed adequate reliability (Realistic: k = 3, ω = .779, CI 95% [.749, .810]; α = .741, CI 95% [.703, .775]; Symbolic: k = 3, ω = .804, CI 95% [.776, .831]; α = .792, CI 95% [.763, .819]).

Data analysis

Data were analysed using JASP v. 0.18.1.0. Structural equation modelling was used to test the hypotheses with a Maximum likelihood estimation method with robust error estimation, and a Full information maximum likelihood method of handling missing data. One variable showed missing data – household income, with N = 533 valid cases. Other variables had no missing cases.

The criteria for good model fit used in all analyses were TLI ≥ 0.95, CFI ≥ 0.95, RMSEA < 0.06 to 0.08 with a confidence interval, and SRMR ≤ 0.08 (Schreiber et al., 2006). For reliability, we interpreted the alpha reliability coefficients around .90 as "excellent", around 0.80 as "very good", and around 0.70 as "adequate" (Kline, 2011).

Results

Correlations between the variables are presented in Table 1, and detailed descriptive statistics of individual items and scales are available in Supplementary materials. On average, RCMs believed that migration impacts the socio-economic situation in Croatia to a lesser degree, as the mean of the sample falls in the bottom half of the possible range (M = 8.92; SD = 3.46; range 4 – 18). RCMs felt moderate levels of perception of realistic and symbolic threat (M = 9.49, SD = 2.78 and M = 10.27, SD = 2.88 respectively, range 3 – 15). They showed moderately high support for the REF rights (M = 37.18, SD = 9.73, range 11 – 55) and estimated that REFs are a part of the community to a small degree (M = 2.05, SD = 0.89, range 1 – 5).

Structural equation modelling was used to test the research hypotheses. Two separate analyses were conducted, one for each type of threat as a criterion. The sets of predictors per model differed and were chosen based on theory and previous research. The socio-economic characteristics of the RCMs

and the perception of the impact of migration were exclusive to the model predicting realistic threat, and the frequency of religious practices and the importance of religion were exclusive to the model predicting symbolic threat. The same socio-demographic and socio-psychological predictors were included in both models.

Table 1

Correlations between the variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	—									
2. Level of education	-.02	—								
3. Income	-.21***	.26***	—							
4. FRM	.04	.13**	.10*	—						
5. IRM	.12**	.01	.01	.66***	—					
6. Political orientation	-.07	-.08	.10	.32***	.39***	—				
7. Impact of migration	-.04	-.05	-.09*	-.09*	-.09*	-.16**	—			
8. Support REF rights	-.05	.15***	.08	-.04	-.05	-.11*	.32***	—		
9. Community	.05	-.03	.01	-.07	.01	.03	.06	.41***	—	
10. Realistic threat	.09*	-.20***	-.13**	.07	.05	.20***	-.12**	-.37***	-.21***	—
11. Symbolic threat	.10*	-.13**	-.11*	.08	.07	.18***	-.17***	-.53***	-.30***	.69***

Note. Income = Household income (in thousands); FRM = Frequency of Religious Meetings; IRM = Importance of Religious Meetings.

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

Realistic threat perception

The model predicting the realistic threat in RCMs was made up of two latent predictors with adjacent indicators (Impact of migration, and Support for refugee rights), and five observed predictors (Age, Level of education, Total household income, Political orientation, and Refugees as community members). Covariances between observed predictors were allowed. Model showed unsatisfactory fit (χ^2 (7, N = 600) = 501.746, p < .001; CFI = .859; TLI = .827; RMSEA = .096, CI 90% [.088, .104]; SRMR = .096). Residual covariances and modification indices showed that the model would fit better if Support for refugee rights and Refugees as community members covaried. Because such covariance is theoretically justified, it was included in the second model which showed a better fit (χ^2 (79, N = 600) = 329.637, p < .001; CFI = .917; TLI = .896; RMSEA = .073, CI 90% [.065, .081]; SRMR = .071). The model explained a total of 21% of the criterion variance (R^2 = .210). Age, Total household income, Political orientation, and Support for refugee rights were significant predictors of the Perception of realistic threat in RCMs (Table 1, Figure 1).

Symbolic threat perception

The model predicting the realistic threat in RCMs was made up of two latent predictors with adjacent indicators (Impact of migration, and Support for refugee rights), and five observed predictors (Age, Level of education, Total household income, Political orientation, and Refugees as community members). Covariances between observed predictors were allowed. Model showed unsatisfactory fit (χ^2 (7, N = 600) = 501.746, p < .001; CFI = .859; TLI = .827; RMSEA = .096, CI 90% [.088, .104]; SRMR = .096). Residual covariances and modification indices showed that the model would fit better if Support for refugee rights and Refugees as community members covaried. Because such covariance is theoretically justified, it was included in the second model which showed a better fit (χ^2 (79, N = 600) = 329.637, p < .001; CFI = .917; TLI = .896; RMSEA = .073, CI 90% [.065, .081]; SRMR = .071). The model explained a total of 21% of the criterion variance (R^2 = .210). Age, Total household income, Political orientation,

and Support for refugee rights were significant predictors of the Perception of realistic threat in RCMs (Table 1, Figure 1).

The model for the symbolic threat was defined with a single latent predictor and adjacent indicators (Support for refugee rights), and six observed predictors (Age, Level of education, Political orientation, Importance of religion in life, Frequency of practising religious customs and Refugees as community members). Covariances between observed predictors were allowed. The model showed satisfactory fit (χ^2 (38, N = 600) = 254.925, p < .001; CFI = .908; TLI = .876; RMSEA = .098, CI 90% [.086, .109]; SRMR = .092). In line with the tested model for perception of a realistic threat, residual covariances and modification indices for this model also showed that covariance between Support for refugee rights and Refugees as community members significantly improved the model fit, and such change is theoretically justified. The model with this addition showed a good fit (χ^2 (42, N = 600) = 148.849, p < .001; CFI = .955; TLI = .939; RMSEA = .065, CI 90% [.054, .077]; SRMR = .046) and explained nearly 38% of the variance of the criterium (R^2 = .378).

Age, Political orientation, Refugees as community members and Support for refugee rights proved to be significant predictors of the Perception of symbolic threat in RCMs (Table 2, Figure 1).

Table 2

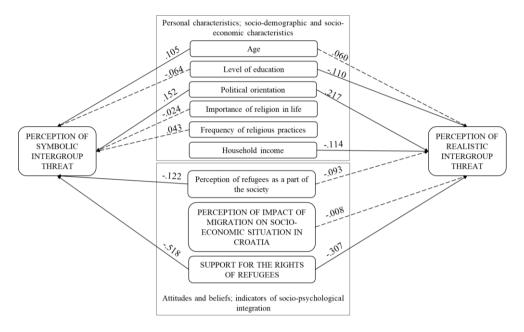*Regression coefficients in models predicting perception of realistic and symbolic threat in RCMs*

Perception of realistic threat	b	β	z	95% CI
Age	0.00	.06	1.45	[-0.00, 0.01]
Level of education	-0.08	-.11	-2.58**	[-0.01, -0.02]
Household income	-0.02	-.11	-2.32*	[-0.04, -0.00]
Political orientation	0.14	.22	4.26***	[0.07, 0.20]
Impact of migration	-0.02	-.01	-0.12	[-0.21, 0.18]
Support for REF rights	-0.29	-.31	-5.52***	[-0.39, -0.19]
REFs as community members	-0.08	-.09	-1.78	[-0.18, 0.01]
Perception of symbolic threat	b	β	z	95% CI
Age	0.01	.11	2.70**	[0.00, 0.01]
Level of education	-0.06	-.06	-1.73	[-0.13, 0.01]
Frequency of religious practices	0.05	.04	0.80	[-0.07, 0.16]
Importance of religion	-0.02	-.02	-0.43	[-0.13, 0.08]
Political orientation	0.12	.15	3.11**	[0.05, 0.20]
Support for REF rights	-0.62	-.52	-10.56***	[-0.73, -0.50]
REF as community members	-0.14	-.12	-2.52*	[-0.21, -0.03]

Note. CI = confidence interval.

*p < .05. ** p < .01. ***p < .001.

Figure 1

Conceptual overview of two models of predictors of the perception of realistic and perception of symbolic intergroup threat

Note. Latent variables are noted in capitals. Solid lines represent relations at *p* < .05 or lower, dashed lines represent non-significant relations

Discussion

Croatia is a country in which the integration of REFs from other countries, and specifically from other ethnical groups, is a relatively new process, intensified in the previous decade by the massive migration of REFs from Syria and surrounding countries in the mid-2010s. At the time, several studies captured the feelings of threat RCMs experienced concerning the arrival of REFs and asylum seekers. Guided by the premises of the ITT and the findings of the aforementioned studies, we tested a set of socio-demographic, socio-

economic, and socio-psychological predictors of perception of realistic and symbolic intergroup threat in RCMs in Croatia.

The two prediction models tested in this study described the data well and highlighted several predictors for each type of threat. Quite a large share of the threat perception was explained: more than a fifth of realistic threat, and more than a third of symbolic threat. RCMs with lower levels of education, politically right-wing oriented, who had lower household income and showed lesser support for the rights of REFs also showed higher levels of realistic threat. Older RCMs, those who were politically right-wing oriented, who perceived REFs to be a part of the society in Croatia to a lesser degree and showed lesser support for REF rights also showed higher levels of symbolic threat.

Age was significantly related to the perception of threat towards migrants and asylum seekers in other studies as well, and in the same direction as found here (Ajduković et al., 2019; Hartley & Pedersen, 2015; Korol & Bevalander, 2022; Sunhan et al., 2012). Here, age significantly predicted the levels of symbolic, but not realistic threat. It seems that RCMs of all ages were equally likely to feel that their job or education prospects were in danger, as well as their physical integrity and the possibility of rising criminal activities caused by REFs. On the other hand, symbolic threat was more prominent in older participants. During the Croatian Homeland War in the 1990s, both national and cultural belonging was strongly highlighted. The views of older RCMs may be shaped by their experience of the war which has now manifested in the eagerness to preserve the cultural, historical and religious homogeneity in the country. It was previously shown that both RCMs and REFs in Croatia see their shared experience of war as a topic which could promote empathy and understanding. Nevertheless, RCMs believed that this war fostered negative attitudes towards Muslim REFs, emphasising the differences between the local and Middle Eastern cultures (Kiralj & Ajduković, 2022). This is in line with ITT which states that the nature of previous interactions with members of the other group has the power to shape expectations of future encounters (Stephan & Stephan, 2017). It is also possible that younger RCMs are more culturally and socially open to other groups and therefore feel less of a threat to their own

norms and way of life, as it was shown that socio-cultural conservatism increases with age, via a decrease in the personality factor Openness to Experience (Cornelis et al., 2009).

Better educated RCMs showed lower realistic threat, with no difference in the levels of threat found for the symbolic threat. RCMs with lower levels of education may perceive REFs as a greater threat in the job market and believe they are competing for jobs of similar complexity. On the other hand, those with higher education possibly believe that the jobs they are aiming for (or have) are beyond the reach of REFs, and thus do not feel that they are competing for the same positions. Other studies also showed that the level of education is related to threat perception in the same direction (Ajduković et al., 2019; Hartley & Pedersen, 2015; Sunhan et al., 2012). Generally, the studies of negative social views such as anti-democratic attitudes, political attitudes, and authoritarianism, indicate that education and such views of social groups could be related (Feldman, 2021).

As expected, political orientation significantly predicted both types of threat perception with right-wing-oriented RCMs experiencing higher levels of threat than left-wing-oriented ones. These findings are in line with previous research which showed that those who identified as right-wing were more prone to perceiving asylum seekers as a threat, and in turn supported more exclusionary policies (Canetti et al., 2016), and had higher levels of intergroup anxiety and other types of threat (Koc & Anderson, 2018; Landmann et al., 2019). The importance of religion and adherence to religious practices did not significantly predict the levels of symbolic threat, contrary to our expectations. This might be because the items used to measure symbolic threat emphasised culture, values, and way of life more than religious beliefs. Additionally, political orientation as a strong predictor could have outshined the role of religion, as these variables showed high covariances between each other (see Supplementary materials), which has been also found previously (Ajduković et al., 2019, Koc & Anderson, 2018). Household income significantly negatively predicted the perception of realistic threat, in line with the previously found role of the standard of living (Ajduković et al., 2019), and perceived personal wealth

(Celikkol et al., 2022). Similarly to the significance of the level of education, a higher household income probably leads to more security that one's socio-economic position is safe regardless of the arrival of migrants.

Regarding the role of socio-psychological indicators of integration, we focused on three which we theorised might explain the variability in threat perception. We hypothesised that perceiving migration as harming the economy might predict a higher realistic threat. However, the results did not support this hypothesis. While perception of the impact of migration didn't predict realistic threat, it had a significant covariance with Support for the rights of REFs - the best predictor of lower realistic threat in the model (see Supplementary materials), which could have diminished the potential of the Perception of the impact of migration to predict realistic threat. Given the limited first-hand experience of intergroup contact of RCMs with REFs, at the time of data collection, most of the participants may have not felt a threat to their jobs, economic prosperity, or access to other resources. At the same time, their clear support for the rights of REFs who have been granted asylum and which are guaranteed by the government, reflect their humanistic position towards people who fled their country due to war and persecution. In a broader sense, this is consistent with the neutral attitudes towards REFs in the country, which were found in previous studies (Ajduković et al, 2019; Gregurović et al., 2011; Henjak, 2018).

Support for the rights of REFs significantly predicted lower threats and had the highest regression coefficients in both models. Support for humanitarian policy predicts lower threat perception (Hercowitz-Amir et al., 2017), and supporting migrant rights is related to perceiving migration as involuntary, perceiving people living in the receiving country as "real" citizens, and having a sense of common belonging (Verkuyten et al., 2018).

Perceiving REFs as a part of society was related to lower levels of symbolic threat, which is consistent with the social re-categorisation process (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). This indicates that the sense of who is a part of the society is more closely related to perceiving cultural closeness and similarities in the way of life, which is an important practical indicator of intergroup

integration. From a practical perspective, fostering openness of RCMs for the integration of REFs can be facilitated by providing various opportunities to meet, interact and get to know each other as individuals and group members in safe and pleasant circumstances, as argued by the intergroup contact hypothesis and the premises of the ITT.

Strenghts and limitations

Several characteristics of this study are crucial for the interpretation and generalisation of the findings on the population of RCMs in Croatia. The sample was formed randomly and in those cities in which the concentration of REFs from Syria was the highest at the time of the data collection. These cities were chosen because they represent the areas in which integration takes place and in which the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of RCMs are most relevant to the integration process. The majority of the instruments were adapted from previous studies in Croatia and were chosen due to their good properties which were replicated here. Data were analysed using advanced statistical and psychometric methods, with the structural models based on the pre-existing research and strong theoretical frameworks. The models fitted the data and pointed at several significant predictors of two types of threat. Because the ratio of parameters to sample size would be unfavourable, we were unable to test a single model specifying both types of threat as criteria. Instead, we defined two models based on prior knowledge and our expectations of the socio-demographic, socio-economic and socio-psychological predictors that could explain each type of threat individually. In future studies, larger samples should allow for testing of all these predictors in a single model, gaining further insight into the covariances of socio-economic, socio-demographic and socio-psychological predictors of intergroup threat in the context of integration. Moreover, the RCMs should have more first-hand and rich interaction experience with REFs who stay in the country which would allow further exploration of the role of contact in the dynamics of threat and other indicators of intergroup relations between RCMs and REFs.

Conclusions

Integration of REFs and RCMs is a process which poses many challenges to both groups, and those challenges which are related to establishing pleasant intergroup relations and sentiments between them can be viewed as a socio-psychological dimension of integration. With the arrival of REFs in the receiving country, the interaction or expectations of this interaction with the members of the two groups are influenced by psychological characteristics and social processes. Perception of threat is an unpleasant feeling based on personal characteristics, attitudes, experiences, history of intergroup relations and other factors. We showed that some socio-economic, socio-demographic, and socio-psychological characteristics of RCMs can predict the levels of perceived symbolic and realistic threat from the REFs. Two were particularly highlighted – political orientation and support for the rights of REFs, whereas more liberal political orientation and support for the rights are related to a lower perception of the threat due to the arrival of REFs. In a context of scarce intergroup contact, where breaking through prejudice and threat perception is more difficult, understanding their potential antecedents can be beneficial in detecting those subgroups of RCMs that might be particularly prone to negative sentiments.

Conflict of interest

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Data availability statement

Data used in this paper are available upon a reasonable request.

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Supplementary materials

Table A

Descriptive statistics of interval variables

| | N | | | | | | | |
	Valid	Missing	*M*	*SD*	Skew.	Kurt.	Min.	Max.
Age	600	0	44.14	13.48	-0.14	-4.09	20	66
Household income (in thousands)[1]	533	67	9.74	4.23	0.29	-3.17	0.8	25
Frequency of religious meetings	600	0	2.05	0.89	0.56	-3.21	1	5
Importance of religious meetings	600	0	1.44	1.05	2.06	-0.51	1	5
Political orientation	600	0	1.91	1.75	0.30	-4.28	0	5
Impact of migration	600	0	10.27	2.60	0.53	-3.06	4	19
Rights of refugees	600	0	34.09	8.75	-0.85	-2.54	10	50
Community	600	0	2.05	0.89	0.56	-3.21	1	5
Realistic threat perception	600	0	9.49	2.78	-0.13	-3.71	3	15
Symbolic threat perception	600	0	10.27	2.88	-0.10	-3.65	3	15

Note. Skew. – Skewness; Kurt. – Kurtosis; Min – Minimum; Max – Maximum.

[1] During the data collection, Croatia was still using HRK as a currency. The results presented here are in HRK, and in the main text the descriptives have been recalculated into Euro which is the current currency of the country.

Table B

Results of the exploratory factor analysis (Principal component analysis; Maximum likelihood factoring method) of Perception of the socio-economic impact of migration scale

Model	χ^2	df	p
	30.16	4	< .001

Items	Factor loadings[1]		
	1	2	Uniquity
In general, the refugees in /country/ will increase the competition on the labor market.	.47	.11	.75
In general, the refugees will reduce the shortage of labor in /country/.	.73	.04	.46
In general, the refugees will have a positive impact in economic growth in /country/.	.88	-.08	.25
The refugees in /country/ will bring more revenues that costs for the govermnement.	.65	-.11	.60
Due to the government spending for refugees, my taxes will have to be increased.	.17	.63	.53
Due to the government spending for refugees, there will be less government benefits for the other population.	-.23	1.02	.01

Factor characteristics	1	2	
Non-rotated solution			
Sum of factor loadings	2.05	1.36	
Proportion of explained variance	0.34	0.23	
Cumulative proportion of explained variance	0.34	0.57	
Rotated solution			
Sum of factor loadings	1.98	1.43	
Proportion of explained variance	0.33	0.24	
Cumulative proportion of explained variance	0.33	0.57	

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[1] rotation method = Promax

Table C

Fit indicators for the CFA model of Perception of the socio-economic impact of migration scale

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
N. of latent variables	2	1	1	1
N. of items	6	6	4	4[a]
χ^2	67.45	182.51	28.65	0.05
df	9	9	1	1
p	< .001	< .001	< .001	0.826
CFI	0.880	0.643	0.916	1.000
TLI	0.799	0.404	0.747	1.018
RMSEA	0.147	0.253	0.211	0
RMSEA CI 90%				
Lower	0.115	0.222	0.147	0.000
Upper	0.181	0.286	0.282	0.092
SRMR	0.076	0.123	0.054	0.002

Note. *N* = 300. CFI – Comparative Fit Index; TLI – Tucker-Lewis Index; RMSEA – Root mean square error of approximation; CI – Confidence Interval; SRMR – Standardized root mean square residual.
Estimation method: Maximum likelihood (ML); missing data handling: Full information maximum likelihood (FIML).
a – covariances between items 1 and 2.

Table D

Factor loadings and descriptive statistics of the items of the Support for refugee rights scale with the parcel forming method

Items	λ	M	SD	Parcel
Refugees should have access to health care same as Croatian citizens.	0.84	3.61	1.18	A
Refugees in Croatia should have the right to get a job.	0.81	3.64	1.12	B
Refugees should have access to employment incentives (e.g. training. retraining) same as Croatian citizens.	0.80	3.15	1.21	C
Refugees and their families should have the right to primary. secondary and higher education same as Croatian citizens.	0.80	3.58	1.11	A
Refugees should be helped to integrate in our society (e.g. by learning Croatia. learning about our culture. psychological and social support).	0.74	3.89	1.16	B
If refugees cannot pay for legal aid. it should be provided to them free of charge.	0.71	3.10	1.31	C
Refugees should in no case be returned to their country if it would endanger their lives or freedom.	0.67	3.62	1.12	A
If refugees do not have documents confirming their educational qualifications. they should be recognized if they meet the conditions of the relevant authorities.	0.62	3.22	1.27	B

	λ	M	SD	
Refugees who entered Croatia illegally should not be prosecuted if they were subjected to persecution in their own country.	0.62	3.20	1.34	C
The state should provide free housing to refugees who cannot afford it themselves.	0.61	2.78	1.24	A
Refugee families should be allowed to join them in Croatia	0.60	3.41	1.04	B
Refugees should have the right to raise their children according to their culture and beliefs. [a]	0.26	3.77	0.82	/
	Mean of items' λ per parcel	M	SD	
Parcel A	0.73	3.40	0.92	
Parcel B	0.69	3.54	0.90	
Parcel C	0.71	3.15	1.08	

Note. a – the item showed very low factor loading and was therefore excluded from the parcelling and further analyses.

Table E

Fit indicators for the SEM model predicting the perception of realistic threat in receiving community members (RCMs)

	Model 1	Model 2
AIC	27940.60	
BIC	28195.62	
χ^2	501.75	329.64
df	77	79
p	< .001	< .001
CFI	0.859	0.917
TLI	0.827	0.896
RMSEA	0.096	0.073
RMSEA CI 90%		
Lower	0.088	0.065
Upper	0.104	0.081
SRMR	0.096	0.071
R^2	0.189	0.210

Note. *N* = 600. AIC – Akaike's Information Criteria; BIC – Bayesian Information Criteria; CFI – Comparative Fit Index; TLI – Tucker-Lewis Index; RMSEA – Root mean square error of approximation. CI – Confidence Interval; SRMR – Standardized root mean square residual.

Estimation method: Maximum likelihood (ML); missing data handling: Full information maximum likelihood (FIML).

Table F

Factor loadings in SEM model for perception of realistic threat for final model (model 2) in RCMs

Latent variable	Latent variable indicator	λ	SE	z	p	95% CI	
						Lower	Upper
Perception of the impact of migration on the socio-economic situation in Croatia	Increase of competition in the job market	1.00	0.00			1.00	1.00
	Reduction of shortage of workers	1.77	0.21	8.38	< .001	1.36	2.19
	General positive impact on economic growth	2.73	0.36	7.49	< .001	2.01	3.44
	Positive ratio of cost-benefit	1.96	0.27	7.32	< .001	1.44	2.49
Support for the rights of refugees	Parcel A	1.00	0.00			1.00	1.00
	Parcel B	0.89	0.03	32.17	< .001	0.83	0.94
	Parcel C	1.09	0.03	38.06	< .001	1.04	1.15
Realistic threat	Fear of increased crime rates due to refugees	1.00	0.00			1.00	1.00
	Fear of terrorist attacks by refugees	1.33	0.09	14.31	< .001	1.15	1.51
	Refugees take places at universities or jobs	0.68	0.06	11.00	< .001	0.56	0.81

Table G

Regression coefficients in SEM model for perception of realistic threat for final model (model 2) in RCMs

Predictor	*b*	β	*SE*	*z*	*p*	95% CI	
						Lower	Upper
Age	0.00	.06	0.00	1.45	.147	-0.00	0.01
Level of education	-0.08	-.11	0.03	-2.58	.010	-0.14	-0.02
Household income	-0.02	-.11	0.01	-2.31	.021	-0.04	-0.00
Political orientation	0.14	.22	0.03	4.26	< .001	0.07	0.20
Refugees as a part of the community in Croatia	-0.08	-.09	0.05	-1.78	.076	-0.18	0.01
Perception of the impact of migration on the socio-economic situation in Croatia	-0.02	-.01	0.10	-0.17	.868	-0.21	0.18
Support for the rights of refugees	-0.29	-.32	0.05	-5.52	< .001	-0.39	-0.19

Table H

Variances and covariances of latent variables in SEM model for perception of realistic threat for final model (model 2) in RCMs

Variable	Parameter estimate	SE	z	p	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Realistic threat	0.51	0.06	9.27	< .001	0.41	0.62
Perception of the impact of migration on the socio-economic situation in Croatia	0.15	0.04	4.06	< .001	0.08	0.23
Support for the rights of refugees	0.73	0.05	13.90	< .001	0.63	0.84
Perception of the impact of migration – Support for the rights	0.01	0.02	5.57	< .001	0.06	0.13

Table I

Residual variances and covariances of observed variables in SEM model for perception of realistic threat for final model (model 2) in RCMs

Variable	Parameter estimate	*SE*	*z*	*p*	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Increase in crime rates[a]	0.46	0.06	8.31	< .001	0.35	0.57
Terrorist attacks by refugees[a]	0.36	0.07	5.09	< .001	0.22	0.51
Refugees taking places at universities or jobs[a]	0.94	0.06	16.22	< .001	0.82	1.05
Increase of competition on the job market[b]	1.06	0.06	17.41	< .001	0.94	1.18
Reduction in shortage of workers[b]	0.71	0.06	12.78	< .001	0.60	0.82
General positive effect on economic growth[b]	0.14	0.07	2.02	.043	0.00	0.27
Positive ratio of costs and benefits[b]	0.92	0.08	11.30	< .001	0.76	1.08
Parcel A[c]	0.10	0.02	5.32	< .001	0.07	0.14
Parcel B[c]	0.22	0.02	10.98	< .001	0.18	0.26
Parcel C[c]	0.27	0.03	9.91	< .001	0.21	0.32
Refugees as a part of the community in Croatia	0.80	0.04	18.33	< .001	0.71	0.88
Age	181.46	7.05	25.75	< .001	167.65	195.28
Level of education	1.25	0.07	17.39	< .001	1.11	1.39
Household income	17.92	1.04	17.16	< .001	15.87	19.97
Political orientation	1.63	0.09	18.79	< .001	1.46	1.80
Increase of competition on the job market – Reduction in shortage of workers	0.29	0.05	6.55	< .001	0.20	0.38
Age – Level of education	-0.32	0.60	-0.53	.594	-1.51	0.86
Age – Household income	-12.28	2.52	-4.87	< .001	-17.23	-7.33

Age – Political orientation	-1.24	0.83	-1.49	.138	-2.87	0.40
Level of education – Household income	1.20	0.22	5.47	< .001	0.77	1.63
Level of education – Political orientation	-0.11	0.07	-1.67	.096	-0.24	0.02
Household income – Political orientation	0.63	0.28	2.24	.025	0.08	1.18

Note. a – factor is Realistic threat; b – factor is the Perception of impact of migration on socio-economic situation in Croatia; c – factor is the Support for the rights of refugees.

Table J

Fit indicators for the SEM model predicting the perception of symbolic threat in receiving community members (RCMs)

	Model 1	Model 2
AIC	20582.92	20468.84
BIC	20811.56	20679.89
χ^2	254.93	148.85
df	38	42
p	<.001	<.001
CFI	0.908	0.955
TLI	0.876	0.939
RMSEA	0.098	0.065
RMSEA CI 90%		
Lower	0.086	0.054
Upper	0.109	0.077
SRMR	0.092	0.046
R^2	0.337	0.378

Note. *N* = 600. AIC – Akaike's Information Criteria; BIC – Bayesian Information Criteria; CFI – Comparative Fit Index; TLI – Tucker-Lewis Index; RMSEA – Root mean square error of approximation. CI – Confidence Interval; SRMR – Standardized root mean square residual

Estimation method: Maximum likelihood (ML); missing data handling: Full information maximum likelihood (FIML).

Table K

Factor loadings in SEM model for perception of symbolic threat for final model (model 2) in RCMs

Latent variable	Latent variable indicator	λ	SE	z	p	95% CI	
						Lower	Upper
Support for the rights of refugees	Parcel A	1.00	0.00			1.00	1.00
	Parcel B	0.89	0.03	33.11	< .001	0.84	0.95
	Parcel C	1.10	0.03	39.72	< .001	1.04	1.15
Symbolic threat	Refugees endanger our values and way of life	1.00	0.00			1.00	1.00
	Religious and moral beliefs are opposed to ours	0.64	0.04	14.52	< .001	0.55	0.73
	Beliefs of refugees about how society should function oppose ours	0.87	0.05	18.93	< .001	0.78	0.95

Table L

Regression coefficients in SEM model for perception of symbolic threat for final model (model 2) in RCMs

Predictor	*b*	β	*SE*	*z*	*p*	95% CI	
						Lower	Upper
Age	0.01	.11	0.00	2.70	.007	0.00	0.01
Level of education	-0.06	-.06	0.03	-1.73	.084	-0.13	0.01
Frequency of religious meetings	0.05	.04	0.06	0.80	.421	-0.07	0.16
Importance of religion	-0.02	-.02	0.05	-0.43	.670	-0.13	0.08
Political orientation	0.12	.15	0.04	3.11	.002	0.05	0.20
Perception of refugees as a part of the community in Croatia	-0.14	-.12	0.06	-2.52	.012	-0.21	-0.03
Support for the rights of refugees	-0.62	-.52	0.06	-10.56	< .001	-0.73	-0.50

Table M

Variances and covariances of latent variables in SEM model for perception of symbolic threat for final model (model 2) in RCMs

Variable	Parameter estimate	SE	z	p	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Symbolic threat	0.65	0.06	10.84	< .001	0.54	0.77
Support for the rights of refugees	0.74	0.05	13.67	< .001	0.63	0.85

Table N

Residual variances and covariances of observed variables in SEM model for perception of symbolic threat for final model (model 2) in RCMs

Variable	Parameter estimate	SE	z	p	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Refugees endanger our values and way of life[a]	0.73	0.08	9.70	< .001	0.58	0.88
Religious and moral beliefs are opposed to ours[a]	0.52	0.05	11.22	< .001	0.43	0.61
Beliefs of refugees about how the society should function oppose ours[a]	0.35	0.04	8.41	< .001	0.27	0.43
Parcel A[b]	0.11	0.02	5.50	< .001	0.07	0.14
Parcel B[b]	0.21	0.02	10.76	< .001	0.17	0.25
Parcel C[b]	0.27	0.03	10.04	< .001	0.22	0.32
Refugees as a part of the community in Croatia	0.80	0.04	18.33	< .001	0.71	0.88
Age	181.46	7.05	25.75	< .001	167.65	195.28
Level of education	1.24	0.07	17.40	< .001	1.10	1.39
Frequency of religious meetings	0.91	0.06	15.43	< .001	0.80	1.03
Importance of religion	1.24	0.06	20.05	< .001	1.12	1.36
Political orientation	1.62	0.09	18.71	< .001	1.45	1.79
Age – Level of education	-0.33	0.61	-0.55	.582	-1.52	0.85
Age – Frequency of religious meetings	0.44	0.59	0.74	.459	-0.72	1.59
Age – Importance of religion	1.76	0.66	2.65	.008	0.46	3.06
Age – Political orientation	-0.57	0.82	-0.70	.485	-2.18	1.03
Level of education – Frequency of religious meetings	0.13	0.05	2.63	.009	0.03	0.23
Level of education – Importance of religion	0.00	0.06	0.05	.960	-0.11	0.11

Level of education – Political orientation	-0.11	0.07	-1.67	.096	-0.24	0.02
Frequency of religious meetings – Importance of religion	0.70	0.06	12.48	< .001	0.59	0.81
Frequency of religious meetings – Political orientation	0.37	0.06	6.22	< .001	0.26	0.49
Importance of religious meetings – Political orientation	0.54	0.08	7.00	< .001	0.39	0.70

Note. a – factor is Symbolic threat; b – factor is the Support for the rights of refugees.