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## DYNAMICS OF REFUGEE-HOST COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIP. UKRAINIANS IN CLUJ NAPOCA

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### Abstract

The topic of communication and relationship between refugees and the local communities that host them is a complex and dynamic one, having been extensively approached in specialized literature. It involves socio-psychological, economic and cultural factors, each of them contributing to the way this relationship develops and changes over time. The research presented in this paper builds on information obtained in interviews with local key informants and focus groups with members of the Ukrainian refugee community and of the host community in the city Cluj Napoca, in Romania, with the aim of better understanding the complex relation between these two groups. The analysis explores several themes that emerged in the responses of the research participants, such as "solidarity fatigue", negative perceptions, the role of churches and other organizations, integration problems and the shifting nature of these relations over time.

**Keywords:** *Refugees, Romania, host community, communication, solidarity fatigue.*

### 1 Romanian context

The significant influx of individuals requiring aid and protection necessitates a structured response from institutions. The Romanian government, collaborating with civil society and bolstered by international organizations, has risen to meet this challenge. The innovative public-private partnership utilized in this effort has been unparalleled. It began with Romanian citizens generously offering housing and sustenance to refugees and has extended to the engagement of non-governmental organizations (Porumbescu, 2023). Furthermore, the conflict in Ukraine stands out as a unique form of warfare, distinct from any previous armed confrontation. Beyond the physical invasion and bombings, it has introduced a new dimension known as hybrid warfare, characterized by a pervasive dissemination of misinformation. Similar to traditional battlefield tactics, this information warfare seeks to destabilize societies by amplifying emotionally charged narratives (Stanescu, 2022). In this context, observing and understanding the evolution of the refugees-host community relationship is essential.

### 2 Literature review

The topic of communication and relations between refugees and the host community is a complex and dynamic one, which has been extensively explored in the literature. This involves socio-psychological, economic and cultural factors, each contributing to how these relationships develop and transform over time. A frequently observed phenomenon in host community–refugee relations is the waning of initial enthusiasm, also known as "solidarity fatigue" (Figley, 1995). At the beginning of refugee crises, host communities tend to show a high level of solidarity and support. However, as the crisis drags on and resources are depleted, this enthusiasm wanes and communities become increasingly fatigued and reluctant to provide continued aid. This dynamic can be observed in many international contexts and significantly affects the quality of relations between refugees and their hosts.

Other studies discuss the importance of community resilience for Ukrainian refugees, focusing on the role of the host community in supporting their recovery from forced migration. The various traumatic experiences faced by refugees, such as violence, loss, social isolation and unemployment, which contribute to mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and PTSD, are highlighted. The authors emphasize the need for community-centered interventions that promote resilience through social support, cultural exchanges, and empowerment

programs. These measures can help reduce the psychological impact of forced migration and promote better integration and well-being for refugees in host countries (Migliorini, Olcese, Cardinali, Prestia, 2023).

The literature also highlights the ethical and economic dilemmas that arise within host communities. In the context of Romania, for example, there are voices complaining that national resources should go to its own vulnerable citizens, such as the poor and the elderly (Betts & Collier, 2017). This perception of unfairness can amplify tensions and lead to resentment towards refugees, who are perceived as receiving disproportionate support. Intergroup conflict theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains how perceptions of unfairness and discrimination can escalate tensions between refugees and the host community. Refugees may feel that the regulations and policies imposed are unfair, while members of the host community may develop feelings of resentment and frustration, wanting the refugees to leave the area. These negative perceptions of each other can fuel conflict and hinder social integration. As emphasized in previous studies (Pogan, 2020), a multidimensional approach is needed to understand the situation of immigrants, by bringing together individual and country-level factors.

In many communities, churches and other organizations play a critical role in conflict mediation and refugee support, providing both moral and practical support (Appleby, 2000). However, the absence of a formal entity responsible for mediating relations between refugees and the local community can complicate the management of these relations. Studies show that the presence of formal mediation structures can facilitate the integration of refugees and reduce social tensions (Ager & Strang, 2008).

The economic integration of refugees and migrants in host societies (Porumbescu, 2022) is considered essential to reduce social tensions. Host communities emphasize the need for refugees to become self-sufficient and contribute to the local economy, as resources are limited (Bloch, 2008). Integration into the labor market not only reduces the strain on the resources of the host community, but also facilitates positive interaction and mutual understanding between refugees and hosts.

Stereotypes and misinformation play a significant role in exacerbating tensions. Rumors of refugee criminality, although unfounded, can amplify fears and resentments (Pickering, 2001). Combating stereotypes through fair and transparent information is essential for maintaining social harmony.

The perception of ingratitude on the part of refugees can lead to cognitive dissonance among hosts, who expect recognition of their efforts (Festinger, 1957). The feeling that the support provided is not appreciated can diminish the willingness to continue helping, heightening social tensions.

Aid programs, although well-intentioned, can create opportunities for abuse and exploitation if not properly managed (Betts & Collier, 2017). Effective monitoring and management of these programs is crucial to prevent such problems.

Informal mediators play an essential role in facilitating intercultural communication and understanding by reducing linguistic and cultural barriers (Ager & Strang, 2008). They can significantly contribute to the social integration of refugees and reduce tensions.

### **3 Research design**

The methodology for this sociological research on Ukrainian refugees in Cluj Napoca and their relationship with the host community involved organizing two focus group discussions conducted in Romanian, Ukrainian, and Russian. One focus group included refugees, while the other comprised members of the host community. The primary objective of these discussions was to gather qualitative data on the economic impact of the refugees' arrival, its effects on access to services, and the interactions between the refugees and local residents. Each discussion followed a semi-structured interview format and consisted of six to eight participants from various socio-demographic backgrounds. A facilitator conducted the discussions, with the assistance of a note-taker. The sessions were both recorded and accompanied by written notes. The collected data were then transcribed and translated for in-depth analysis.

Furthermore, ten key informant interviews were conducted in Romanian and English with stakeholders involved in the refugee response in Cluj Napoca. These interviews aimed to understand the impact of the refugee crisis on specific services, assess the response efforts, and examine the collaboration among different stakeholders. A semi-structured questionnaire guided these interviews. The selection of key informants was intentional, based on an initial assessment of local stakeholders. All interviews were recorded, and the transcriptions were used for detailed analysis.

### **4 Interview analysis**

The research highlights the complexity of relations between refugees and the host community in Romania. Although initial support was strong, it declined over time, but there are examples of successful integration and

friendships formed. Resentments and negative perceptions are fueled by economic hardship and stereotypes, but can be combated through education and information. The role of organizations and churches remains essential in mediating relationships and supporting integration. Effective communication and reducing language barriers are crucial to the long-term success of refugees in the host community.

In the first phases of the crisis, Romanians showed considerable support for the refugees, offering material and moral help. One respondent noted: "In the beginning, the Ukrainians were well received and many people came to help, but their numbers decreased over time." This decrease in support is not unique to Romania, but is a phenomenon observed in other host countries as well. Studies show that as the refugee crisis drags on, initially strong support from the host community tends to wane (Bansak, Hainmueller & Hangartner, 2016). At the beginning of the refugee crisis, the Cluj-Napoca community showed a high level of enthusiasm and support for the Ukrainian refugees. However, this enthusiasm waned over time, a phenomenon known as "solidarity fatigue" (Figley, 1995). Solidarity fatigue occurs when host communities become emotionally and physically exhausted from ongoing efforts to assist refugees, resulting in a diminishing of available resources and willingness to provide additional support.

Several respondents noted that when Ukrainian refugees initially arrived in Cluj Napoca, the local population had a highly positive response, displaying significant interest and involvement in the refugee situation. However, this perception appears to have shifted over time, with multiple key informants attributing the change to the host population growing accustomed to the ongoing war and the presence of refugees. Questions about the length of stay of refugees reflect the uncertainty and anxiety of the host community (Betts & Collier, 2017). These feelings can lead to a decrease in empathy and increased social tensions.

Over time, resentment arose among the host community. Some locals feel that refugees benefit from preferential treatment: "There are voices complaining about injustice because Romania also has its own poor and elderly who need assistance." Other negative perceptions include suspicions of criminality: "Some locals have heard about crimes committed by Ukrainians, although there have been no such cases." These feelings of inequality and suspicion are common in refugee crisis situations and can lead to tensions between refugees and host communities (Betts & Collier, 2017). An important aspect is the perception of injustice among the host community, which faces its own economic and social challenges. Complaints about the fact that Romania has its own problems, such as poverty and the needs of the elderly, reflect ethical dilemmas and difficulties in redistributing resources (Betts & Collier, 2017). Tensions can rise when host communities feel their resources are insufficient to simultaneously address local and refugee needs.

Furthermore, some participants in the refugee focus group discussion reported that there are problematic experiences with landlords due to financial instability and delays in the payments in the housing program, while similar issues were reported in the host community FGD, in regard to Ukrainian tenants who were using house utilities improperly or took away things as compensation for the delayed governmental financial assistance. Relief programs, such as the one mentioned in the quote (50/20 program), can have mixed effects. Although the intention is to provide support, their implementation can create opportunities for abuse and exploitation (Betts & Collier, 2017). It is crucial that these programs are monitored and managed effectively to prevent such problems.

Another important aspect is the language barrier and cultural integration. "Romanian-Ukrainian relations would improve if the language barrier were reduced and if there were fewer judgments." Studies show that language integration is crucial to the long-term success of refugees in the host community (Berry, 1997). Effective communication can reduce tensions and facilitate the formation of positive relationships. Across the qualitative data, the language barrier emerged as one of the most frequently mentioned issues. Communication difficulties were the primary source of tension for refugee respondents and the second most common concern for the host community. The language barrier creates a sense of distance between refugees and hosts, as they often struggle to understand each other and lack a shared language for effective communication.

Organizations and churches play a crucial role in mediating relations and supporting refugees. "The churches try to calm the contentious voices", and "Patrir and the Ukrainian House mediate the relations between the refugees and the local community". The role of these entities is essential to ensure continuous and equitable support. The literature emphasizes the importance of religious organizations and NGOs in supporting the integration of refugees by providing material and moral support (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Ager, 2013).

The integration of refugees is a significant challenge. One respondent noted: "Romanians think Ukrainians are ungrateful, but they know that the hosts' kindness came at a cost." Negative perceptions can be fueled by stereotypes and a lack of accurate information about refugees (Esses, Hamilton, & Gaucher, 2017). For example, some locals notice "what cars" refugees have and judge them for it. Such perceptions can be combated through adequate education and information of the host community. Stereotypes and misinformation play a significant

role in fueling tensions. Rumors of refugee criminality, although unfounded, can amplify fears and resentments among the host community (Pickering, 2001).

Initial support was strong, but it gradually waned: "Community support has waned, but it's not as necessary as it was at the beginning." However, there are examples of successful integration and the formation of positive relationships: "Over time, the relationship became better, because many people managed to make friends." These positive interactions are essential for better integration and mutual understanding (Allport, 1954).

Economic problems were a significant factor in the relations between the refugees and the host community. Government delays in 50/20 program payments have created tensions between Ukrainian tenants and Romanian hosts: "Government delays in 50/20 program payments are creating tensions between Ukrainian tenants and their Romanian hosts". These economic hardships can exacerbate feelings of discontent and inequality.

Informal mediators play an essential role in facilitating intercultural communication and understanding. They help reduce language and cultural barriers, contributing to the social integration of refugees (Ager & Strang, 2008). Mediating relationships is essential to maintaining peaceful coexistence. "Casa Ucraineana Cluj mediates the relationship between refugees and the host community, but also the local authorities". Such initiatives can serve as a model for other communities facing similar challenges. Ongoing support from NGOs and community centers is vital to the long-term success of refugee integration (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Ager, 2013). Churches and religious organizations often play a crucial role in mediating conflicts and supporting refugees by providing moral and practical support (Appleby, 2000). However, the absence of a formal entity responsible for mediating relations between refugees and the local community is a significant problem. The presence of formal mediation structures can facilitate the integration of refugees and reduce social tensions (Ager & Strang, 2008).

The analysis of the quotes reveals a complex dynamic between the refugees and the host community in Cluj-Napoca. Although there were initially significant displays of solidarity and support, these have diminished over time amid compassion fatigue and tensions caused by perceived inequities and limited resources. Perceptions of unfairness and discrimination can amplify tensions between refugee groups and the host community (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For example, Ukrainian refugees may perceive the imposed regulations as unfair, while Romanians may develop feelings of resentment and a desire for the refugees to leave. These negative mutual perceptions can fuel latent conflicts and hinder social integration. Moreover, the perception of ingratitude on the part of refugees can lead to cognitive dissonance among hosts, who expect recognition of their efforts (Festinger, 1957). The feeling that the support provided is not appreciated can diminish the willingness to continue helping, heightening social tensions. In this context, the economic integration of refugees is essential for reducing social tensions. The host community in Cluj-Napoca emphasizes the need for refugees to be self-sufficient and contribute to the local economy, as the community's resources are limited (Bloch, 2008). Integrating refugees into the labor market not only reduces pressure on local resources, but also facilitates positive interaction and mutual understanding between refugees and members of the host community.

## 5 Limitations

The research encountered several limitations. Recruiting participants from the general population in Cluj Napoca for focus group discussions proved to be a considerable challenge, leading to the involvement of only six representatives from the host community in face-to-face discussions. This limitation was addressed by ensuring that the discussions were thorough and that each participant's views were meticulously recorded and analyzed. On the other hand, in the focus group discussion with Ukrainian refugees, nine participants were involved. The moderator played a crucial role in this setting, ensuring that every participant had an opportunity to speak and that their contributions were fully captured. The session was recorded to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of all the information shared.

For the key informant interviews, most were conducted online via video calls due to the limited availability of participants to meet in person. This limitation was mitigated by leveraging technology to conduct in-depth interviews, ensuring flexibility for the participants while still gathering essential insights. Despite these challenges, the research team employed strategies to maximize the quality and reliability of the data collected, such as thorough documentation and the use of recordings for accurate analysis.

### 1. Conclusions

The analysis of relations and communication between refugees and the host community in Cluj-Napoca reveals a complex dynamic, influenced by solidarity fatigue, perceptions of inequity, stereotypes, and the lack of formal mediation structures. The economic integration of refugees, combating disinformation and the role of informal mediators are essential to promote a harmonious coexistence. The involvement of churches and the effective management of aid programs can significantly contribute to reducing tensions and supporting the integration process. Several interviewees remarked that upon the arrival of Ukrainian refugees in Cluj Napoca, the local

community initially responded with great enthusiasm, demonstrating significant interest and involvement in addressing the refugee situation. However, perceptions have gradually shifted over time. According to multiple key informants, this change can be attributed to the local population becoming acclimated to the ongoing conflict and the presence of refugees. Host community members also noted a decline in their initial eagerness to assist, contrasting with the early days of the conflict. Furthermore, participants in the refugee focus group discussions recounted difficulties with landlords due to financial instability and delays in government housing payments. Similar challenges were echoed in discussions with the host community, where some locals reported issues with Ukrainian tenants misusing utilities or taking items as compensation for delayed financial assistance from the government.

Among the qualitative findings, the language barrier emerged as a significant concern. Refugee respondents frequently cited communication difficulties as a primary source of tension, while the host community also expressed concerns about effective communication, ranking it as their second most common issue. This language barrier creates a notable sense of disconnect between refugees and hosts, hindering their ability to establish effective communication and mutual understanding.

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