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INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES IN CROATIA – A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE INTEGRATION PROCESS AND INTERGROUP RELATIONS OF REFUGEES FROM SYRIA

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Based on the theoretical model of multidimensional, two-way, dynamic integration of refugee and host community, a qualitative study was done determining views on and experiences with integration of refugees from Syria and the host community in Croatia. Five focus group discussions were held, three with host members ($N = 21$) and two with refugees from Syria ($N = 11$). Four overarching themes emerged from the data in both groups: "Perspectives on integration", "Socioeconomic integration", "Intergroup relations", and "Culture, language and social obstacles to integration". They appeared consistently throughout discussions, with hosts and refugees providing a consensual view of refugee integration. They understood integration in the same way and recognised the need for both groups to adapt as part of the integration process. Croatia was perceived as a transit country and a temporary solution for refugees, which is an obstacle to integration. Emphasis was placed on the intergroup relations and the responsibility of the host society in providing tools and mechanisms that foster socio-economic and socio-psychological integration, overcome structural barriers and promote pleasant social contexts.

Keywords: refugees, asylum seekers, integration, attitudes, intergroup contact



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INTRODUCTION

Refugee integration is a multidimensional, dynamic two-way interaction process between refugees and host community members. The most notable theoretical framework of refugee integration, Indicators of Integration Framework (Ager & Strang, 2008) was developed based on a qualitative study that aimed at "identifying local understandings of the experience of integration" in the United Kingdom (Ager & Strang, 2004, p. iv). The framework was further revised and elaborated by Ndofor-Tah et al. (2019) and defines four core dimensions of integration: "Foundation" (rights and responsibilities), "Facilitators" (language and communication, culture, digital skills, safety and stability), "Social connections" which represents the socio-psychological component of integration (bonds, bridges and links), and "Markers and means", the socio-economic aspects of integration (employment, housing, education, health and social care, and leisure). This comprehensive model guides the researchers to study all dimensions and approach integration from different angles.

The 2015 and 2016 migration of refugees and migrants from Syria towards Europe highlighted a need to better understand the challenges of integration of refugees and host communities, resulting in the increased popularity of integration research. A recent systematic review of literature on socio-psychological integration shows that the number of scientific publications ranged between 25 and 50 per year from 2001 to 2014, thereafter spiking to over 200 publications in 2019 (FOCUS, 2020).

Even though qualitative research can answer questions regarding the experience of integration in both the refugee and the host group, only a small number of studies used a qualitative or mixed-methods approach (e.g. Anabtawi & Al Amad, 2019; de Anstiss et al., 2019; Parker, 2018). The dominance of quantitative and host-oriented research of intergroup relations shows a gap in the literature and a need to investigate the integration processes on a deeper level, with both groups.

"Social bridges" in the Ager and Strang framework describe intergroup relations. We use the term "socio-psychological dimension of integration" as a broad term describing the relations between refugees and hosts, with emphasis on the intergroup thoughts, sentiments and behaviour represented by attitudes, perceptions, social distance, contact and social networks, etc., the points of interest of social psychology. The socio-economic aspect of integration and exercising rights and entitlements do not occur in a social vacuum, but are linked to interrelations between the two groups. More emphasis should be placed on the study of the interplay between the socio-eco-

conomic and socio-psychological dimensions in the integration process.

Reflecting recent trends in the socio-psychological study of refugee integration, in the current paper we highlight two aspects of methodology needed to enlighten this process: firstly, the study should include participants from both groups. Secondly, a deeper, phenomenological understanding of integration is needed with emphasis on the impact of intergroup relations on all dimensions, as attitudes of hosts and refugees towards each other, and integration in general, have the power to guide their behaviour (Glasman & Albarracín, 2006). This is present in formal and informal settings: in institutions and services, when refugees seek jobs or accommodation, in the educational context, neighbourhood, public places and events, etc.

So far, stand-alone qualitative research of socio-psychological integration that tapped the refugee perspective focused mainly on their experience and understanding of integration (Ager & Strang, 2004), social connections and social capital of refugees (Anabtawi & Al Amad, 2017; de Anstiss et al., 2019) and their experiences of discrimination (Demir & Ozgul, 2019; Parker, 2018). In Croatia, qualitative and quantitative studies addressed the attitudes of the Croatian hosts towards immigrant workers and asylum seekers (Gregurović et al., 2016), the refugee perspective of socio-psychological integration and the hosts' attitudes towards the asylum beneficiaries (Ajduković et al., 2019). The most comprehensive was the study of socio-economic, cultural and interactive dimensions of integration (with 'interactive' corresponding to the socio-psychological dimension) of asylum beneficiaries (Jurković & Rajković Iveta, 2016, 2019).

The present study¹ aims to explore the views and experiences of the integration process of both recently arrived refugees from Syria and the Croatian hosts, particularly focusing on the intergroup relations, defined in the Indicators of Integration Framework as 'social bridges' – relations of the refugee and hosts, 'social bonds' – relations within the refugees, and 'social links' – relations of the refugees with the institutions and services (Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019).

METHOD

Participants

Three host and two refugee focus groups were held with a total of 21 host and 11 Syrian refugee participants. Their socio-demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Purposeful sampling with maximum variation approach (Patton, 1990; Tracy, 2013) was used to ensure a wide diversi-

ty of phenomena under study. Thus, the specific selection criteria (Kuzel, 1999) that included: (1) age between 18 and 65 years; (2) both genders and aiming at no less than a third of one gender among the overall sample; (3) diverse socio-economic status (education and job situation); and (4) informed participation. The host participants were purposefully recruited according to the selection criteria through the social networks of researchers, while the refugee participants were recruited through interpreters' social networks of refugees. In this way we were able to access the sources that reflect the range of the criteria, as suggested by Crabtree and Miller (1999). The study focused on refugees from Syria as their forced migration to Europe marked the mid-2010s, posing numerous political, social, health and labour market challenges in host countries.

All contacted individuals were presented with an invitation letter providing information on the study and the aim of the focus group discussion. Those who agreed to attend were invited to the discussion groups.

↪ TABLE 1
Socio-demographic
characteristics of the
focus group
participants

Participants	Total	Host 21	Refugee 11
	Male	8	5
	Female	13	6
Residential duration (months at the time of data collection)	(Range)	-	9 - 36
Education	Primary	1	2
	Secondary	7	6
	Tertiary	13	3
Labour status	Employed	13	4
	Unemployed	8	7

Research team

The focus groups were moderated by a female and male psychologist with experience in qualitative research, work with refugees and interpreters. The specifically trained interpreter, a native speaker of the Arabic language, also participated. The methodological background of the researchers relevant for the present study was a phenomenological inquiry and thematic analysis.

Data collection, instrument and analysis

The study received ethical approval from the Ethical Board of the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. The focus groups were held in January and February 2020, in Zagreb, the city that hosts the largest number of asylum beneficiaries (EMM, 2020), presenting a back-

ground on which intergroup relations between the hosts and refugees are most likely to develop. Implementation of five focus groups followed the same structure: presentation of the study, details of the group discussion process and soliciting written informed consent to participation. All participants agreed to the audio recording of the discussion. The discussion guide was used together with the probing questions which arose during the meetings. In the refugee groups, the interpreter facilitated communication by consecutively translating from Croatian to Arabic and vice-versa. The meetings ended when no new information was brought to light. In the end, the participants received a modest incentive in form of a food coupon.

The focus groups discussion guide included introductory and guiding questions. The introductory questions for the hosts were: "For you personally, how did the integration of the host and refugee community from Syria in Zagreb and Croatia evolve so far?", "What do you think about the relations between the host and the refugee community?", "What is the dominant mood towards each other?" The refugee participants were asked: "How integrated do you feel in Zagreb and Croatia?" The same guiding questions were then used to facilitate the discussion in both groups: "What does 'integration' mean to you?", "What would 'perfect' integration look like?", "What are the barriers to this?", "For you and the city/country as a whole, what impact do you think the integration of refugees from Syria will have?"

Audio recordings were transcribed and anonymised, removing any identifiable information which could reveal the identity of the participant. Timestamps were added, and the material was coded. The coding frame was developed and refined during an iterative process based on all five transcripts. The approach to coding was inductive thematic analysis, as the codes (categories and themes) emerged from the data and have not been previously defined by the researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The content of individual codes was reviewed and interpreted over a series of joint sessions of researchers which led to the re-coding of transcripts if needed. Data were analysed using NVivo 12 Plus software. Matrix coding was used to inspect co-occurrences between codes, creating overarching categories. Each code was analysed individually and with other codes and categories, creating common themes following the logic of a thematic analysis of qualitative data.

FINDINGS

Four themes emerged from the data and are presented in Table 2 along with the categories which comprise them. Some categories were more prominent in the host, while others in the refugee focus groups, but the participants in all focus groups

TABLE 2
Categories and over-
arching themes that
emerged in host and re-
fugee community groups

touched upon a great majority of topics. Each theme will be described separately, with emphasis placed on intergroup relations present in each theme, and their meaning for the integration process.

Theme 1: Perspectives on integration	Understanding of the integration process Feeling integrated How integration evolved so far Effects and images of future relations Responsible actors
Theme 2: Socio-economic integration	Barriers to integration Facilitators of integration Individual, social and economic resources Legal and structural barriers
Theme 3: Intergroup relations	Attitudes towards and perception of the other group Behaviour and behavioural intentions Intergroup contact Perception of intergroup threat Self-perception
Theme 4: Culture, language and social obstacles to integration	Culture Religion Language Locality Racism and discrimination

Perspectives on integration

The theme "Perspective on integration" includes categories that describe different ways people understand and experience integration, see the process as it unfolded, and anticipate how it may proceed in the future. Participants touched upon different actors responsible for integration and offered opinions regarding contribution thus far. The analysis revealed that the hosts do not know about the regulations and programmes in Croatia and have mixed beliefs about the success of refugee integration. Some believed that Croatia was unsuccessful in integrating refugees, while others described examples of refugee children in schools who showed good adaptation and were accepted by others.

When thinking about the core of the integration process, a great majority of participants in all focus groups agreed that integration includes changes in both groups, cultural understanding and freedom of expression, thus tapping into the dimension of "Facilitators" of integration (Ager & Strang, 2008). Ideal, or 'perfect' integration, as described by the participants, was seen as a state in which no differences are made between the members of the two groups. These views can be described as a two-way integration in which the differences between the groups do not matter, and are therefore not perceived.

Conversely, they could indicate a notion of assimilation of the refugees into the host society to a degree of disregarding their cultural origin, which has negative consequences for the social identity of refugees. Still, the sentiment during the discussion indicated the first, integrative position, particularly emphasising that refugees should not be seen as "others". It is not surprising that the refugees expressed wishes to remove the label "asylee" from their ID card, signalling problems in approaching statutory services leading to the feeling of being discriminated.

Participants of all focus groups highlighted the crucial issues for which they believed that, when resolved, lead to successful integration: Croatian language acquisition, having a job that provides liveable income, access to education and housing accommodation. These elements are in line with the theoretically posed "Markers for and Means of" achieving integration. Participants in all focus groups believed that socio-economic autonomy serves as an indicator of successful integration. Refugees further emphasised the importance of positive relations with the hosts in achieving integration, showing that intergroup relations are seen as crucial in the understanding of a functional integration process.

Participants recognised that the integration process depends on the activities and decisions of different actors, such as the governmental systems, the NGOs and the media. The host community was seen as responsible for accepting, helping and being open to refugees, while refugees were expected to show interest in staying and integrating into the host country.

HC7:² *First, it would be to show goodwill, readiness to learn a new language and new culture into which they are coming.*

RC7: *Mainly, they should treat us the same as anybody else. (...) As someone living in this society, I must accept the customs that are important here and I also think that they should accept me and my customs.*

Hosts also discussed the role of the media in the integration process. The media was seen as influential in forming public opinions both positively and negatively, and participants recognised the role of political orientation of some media outlets in modelling images of refugees, noting that the right-wing portals promote negative images of refugees.

Socio-economic integration

This theme included several categories and codes related to individual, social and economic resources, as well as the potential barriers and facilitators of the integration process.

Thinking about potential barriers to integration, the hosts assessed the programmes and procedures that are meant to facilitate refugee integration as poorly planned and even worse executed. Even though they did not know about the latest national strategy of integration (Office for Human Rights and Rights of Minorities, 2017), they strongly believed these services were insufficient, and emphasised the importance of a systematic approach to integration – a process universal to all asylum seekers and beneficiaries, transparently provided and monitored financially. Interestingly, the refugee community participants portrayed this disorganisation through their experiences with the administrative services, work, access to accommodation and the duration of subsidised housing.

RC5: *I think doctors don't know the system, that Croats pay for their insurance and the Ministry [of health] pays for our insurance. When I go to the doctor, they don't know who pays for it and they tell me that they can't register me.*

Issues with the health sector were mentioned multiple times in the refugee focus groups, and these experiences show that the Croatian health system was not well prepared for the arrival of refugees. Refugees believed that the health service providers were not sufficiently informed about the rights of asylum beneficiaries and therefore were reluctant to register them as patients into their general practice. But, the issue could be related to the system itself. Based on reports and interviews with key informants, Jurković (2021) concluded that the asylum beneficiaries in Croatia experience difficulties accessing public health services because they are not "registered in the information system", and are unable to get medical assistance or medicine in the pharmacy (p. 83; translated by authors). This systematic oversight negatively impacts 'social links' between the refugees and institutions and services, possibly leading refugees to have negative expectations from healthcare services.

Work and language were seen by both groups as both facilitators and barriers to integration – if available, work, learning and practising the language allowed for easier integration into the host country, not only due to the increased socio-economic stability but also as they promote social interaction with the hosts. Refugees also described very positive experiences with hosts at work.

RC6: *First of all, it's work [that helps me feel good]. (...) Having friends at work who help you and make you feel like it doesn't matter who's a Croat and who's a foreigner.*

RC4: *My experience is the same; when I was working at the beauty salon, I had different people coming and who knew about Syria. For example, some people don't know about Syria. Late-*

ly, a lot of people do know. And it's nice, they empathise with us and talk and it's a nice experience for me. They even tipped me more. (Laughs)

RC11: *To break these barriers that exist between refugees and Croats, it can happen through work, through collegial relations. I have a lot of friends among my co-workers, we go out and hang out.*

Work was strongly emphasised as important by both host and refugee participants. Given that it plays such an important role for refugees, it is concerning that they had negative experiences with finding a job, seeing their cultural markings as a barrier, and with the available job positions typically below their qualifications.

RC10: *It's very hard to find a job. (...) And it's a problem also when you wear a hijab, then you have that problem of finding a job. (...)*

Even though hosts recognised housing as an important aspect of the independence of refugees and access to affordable housing an important indicator of integration, refugee participants described their experiences of rejection by the landlords who were reluctant to rent apartments/houses to them:

RC10: *When it comes to finding a house, they know you're Syrian, but as soon as they see you look like this and that you're with children, they immediately reject you.*

The educational context is closely related to the capacity for socio-economic integration. Refugee children and young adults see difficulties with mastering the Croatian language as a major barrier to their educational and professional perspectives. Education was seen as a very important aspect of integration, not only because of the socio-economic element (acquiring competencies and qualifications necessary for the job market later on) but because it is a meeting point of hosts and refugees, and a place where language and culture are learnt about (by both groups). From the socio-psychological perspective, not only is school important for forming relationships between children and young adults but it also brings together parents, thus facilitating the integration process in both generations. Interestingly, education among the host participants was seen as a vehicle for raising openness to others which was assessed as lacking.

The socio-economic dimension of integration was often referenced in relation to the socio-psychological one, particularly in the context of intergroup contact at work, in school, while looking for accommodation and in interaction with governmental services. These elements are the markers (clear indicators) of the integration progress and are at the same time the means of achieving integration.

Intergroup relations

The role of intergroup relations was especially highlighted for the integration of refugee and host communities. Positive relationships are a building block for successful integration in the local community and are related to safe and pleasant contact, mutual tolerance and respect, positive attitudes and general openness towards other people and experiences. Relationships are relevant not only in the context of "Social connections" but also for the socio-economic benefit of refugees, as they promote building social capital through sharing information regarding work opportunities, and may influence job satisfaction through the pleasantness of co-worker relations. Under this theme, a series of categories representing different aspects of the socio-psychological integration arose from the focus group discussions: attitudes, social acceptance and rejection, intergroup contact and feelings, perception of intergroup threat, and perception of one's group.

Host participants believed that attitudes of their group towards refugees are neither positive nor negative, which is supported by the findings of a recent study conducted in four regions in Croatia showing that the attitudes of hosts towards refugees were indeed neutral (Ajduković et al., 2019). Host participants also believed there is a lack of interest in the integration process on their behalf. This could explain the lack of knowledge on the integration policies and processes established in Croatia thus far.

HC21: *I don't think people have an attitude towards that because they didn't have any direct contact with them. I think that even when we had the toughest time with the immigration crisis here, people still didn't feel it. It was bombastic in the media, but I think people simply didn't have any connection with it. I think most Croats did sympathise with them and I think that, if Croats had to choose whether they felt positively or negatively about asylees, the prevalent experience of Croats would be positive.*

Meta-analytic research shows that attitudes more strongly predict behaviour when the persons had direct experience with the attitude's object and reported their attitudes frequently, indicating more clearly formed and salient attitudes (Glasman & Albarracín, 2006). These findings add to the explanation of the neutrality of Croatian hosts towards refugees.

Some individual characteristics were seen as related to attitudes, mainly the age of the local people, political orientation and urban-rural residence: younger, of leftist orientation and people living in the cities are considered more likely to accept refugees. This is in line with the recent meta-analysis of quantitative studies which found that right political orien-

tations and stronger religious affiliations are associated with negative attitudes towards refugees (Cowling et al., 2019).

Interestingly, both host and refugee focus groups participants recognised that historical experiences of war and forced displacement seem to bond Croats and Syrians, and may encourage the hosts to sympathise with refugees:

HC5: *Well, I think that some of it [negative attitude towards migrants] has to do with the war.*

RC5: *So, Croatia has given emigrants to other countries. Currently, the process is the other way around.*

RC4: *I would say that Croats understand our situation. They also had their war.*

The perspective of shared experience has the potential of promoting empathy, acceptance and positive thoughts about arriving refugees. However, host participants emphasised that the war in the 1990s could still have a negative influence on attitudes towards refugees who are viewed as Muslims because that conflict included three nations (Serbs, Bosnians and Croats) and three religions (Orthodox, Muslims and Catholics).

With regard to behaviour and behavioural intentions, participants mostly referred to examples of acceptance and help provided to refugees. All focus groups touched upon the help which refugees receive from the host community, mostly in the context of education and activities of non-governmental organisations (NGO). An interesting relationship between codes "Acceptance" and "Age" (part of the theme "Socio-economic integration") emerged with host participants holding strong beliefs that younger people are more prone to accepting new cultures and experiences and explaining this through the mechanisms of globalisation and fast-changing living conditions that youth is more accustomed to.

Croats believe that their society is generally closed-off to foreigners and that members of their group are more likely to reject other cultural groups than to accept them. In contrast, refugee participants described mostly positive experiences with the Croatian community, but also shared experiences in which they were rejected, predominantly by the healthcare workers. Some had mixed experiences and believed this depended on the person they interacted with. Feeling rejected from accessing their legal rights by individuals representing structures is a social determinant of mental health in a post-migration context, and a risk for psychosocial wellbeing that could be demotivating for refugee integration (Hynie, 2018), but could also compromise their safety and access to rightful services.

The majority of host participants did not have direct experiences with arrivals from Syria. This is in line with previ-

ous research which found that the hosts rarely have contact with refugees, and they value this contact as neutral (Ajduković et al., 2019). Some have been in contact with Syrians during their college years, in the 1970s. Among those participants who had any contact with the refugees, this was mostly indirectly through their children in school, or through someone working in an NGO helping the refugees. One host community participant described her contact with refugees:

HC10: *Since I live in an area where there are so many of them, half the houses in the street where I live have never had any bad relationships with them. They are even well-behaved and nice. For example, they have never attacked me; I even saved two refugees from death, my daughter did the same. The other half of that street and my neighbours have a lot of problems with them. They break into houses, steal, take other people's things in broad daylight, they come into yards, they may get drunk and throw bottles around.*

This quote indicates that intergroup experiences are mixed, adding to the perception of the quality of intergroup contact as neutral. Another participant, a school teacher, shared a story of a negative atmosphere in the teacher's room upon mention of refugees. Because schools are crucial for the integration of refugee children, it is concerning that the teachers expressed negative experiences. The positive influence of the school was mentioned earlier, with both hosts and refugees mentioning school as crucial for the integration of refugee children and youth. It seems that there are differences not only in the way health providers relate to refugees but this could be true for educational staff also.

Perception of intergroup realistic threat is an experience posed by members of another group to political or economic power, or physical wellbeing (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Perception of symbolic threat includes perceiving differences in morals, values, standards, beliefs and attitudes between one's group and an out-group (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). In the context of integration, realistic threat is related to competition for socio-economic resources, while symbolic threat is related to maintaining own values, culture and religion. The recent meta-analytic research shows that the persons who feel their resources and culture are endangered are likely to show strong prejudicial attitudes towards refugees (Cowling et al., 2019), which can disrupt the forming of positive social connections between the two groups. Host participants often referred to the job market competition as a barrier to positive relations between Croats and Syrians:

HC4: *They're now competing with the rest of Sisak citizens for a few jobs that are there... Relations cannot be good if Syrians and Croats are competing for a limited number of jobs.*

Having a prosperous socio-economic situation was seen as a factor that could influence how local people relate to refugees, probably stemming from the idea that financially well-established individuals are less, if at all, impacted by the employment incentives and financial assistance for refugees. Interestingly, the hosts did not recognise that the number of asylum applicants in Croatia is very small in comparison to the general population. This is illustrated by the fact that the third country nationals who have received work permits vastly outnumber asylum beneficiaries: from 2006 until 30th September 2021, a total of 922 persons received international protection in Croatia (Republic of Croatia, Ministry of the Interior, 2021) while 6578 work permits were granted in 2019 alone; EMM, 2020). Additionally, the host participants argued that refugees must be helped, but also believed that help should not be withheld from the locals in need:

HC5: *If we teach them the language, these people can get their bearings that way, but the job competition... Some basic education, especially in language, that's something everyone should get... They should have the same rights as we do, to education... and to find work and accommodation... but they should not be helped out too much with subsidies, apartments, benefits, because we also have quite a lot of our own population that needs to be taken care of.*

The statement of one refugee participant shows that refugees are aware of the threat the hosts perceive:

RC11: *To break the fear that exists between us [would be "perfect" integration]. The main opinion Europeans have is that if you're from Syria, you might be carrying a gun.*

This example shows that refugees are well aware of elements of the negative image the locals have about them, relating this to their low motivation to stay and integrate in Croatia. On the other hand, hosts explained their perception of intergroup threats: poor socio-economic status of the country and cultural differences. However, the participants emphasised that more between-group contact could change the opinion of Croats and reduce their fear, thus confirming the postulates of the contact hypothesis stating that bringing members of the opposing social groups together in non-threatening and pleasant circumstances will improve intergroup relations and reduce prejudice and discrimination (Allport, 1954). One refugee participant shared her view on the development

of relationships with the hosts, indicating that the initial distance of hosts towards refugees may be bridged after establishing positive contact.

RC4: *I have lots of friends and at the beginning, they used to have boundaries with me, but everything was fine later. There are always boundaries with people, but when they get to know each other, everything gets all right. I've met a lot of people in the kindergarten and they were very kind to my daughter. My daughter didn't know anything at first, but everybody helped her once they'd seen we were normal people who lived normally. So far, I've had no troubles. And I like Croats.*

Culture, language and social obstacles to integration

Integration is a process that brings into interaction members of two groups which, apart from geographic origins, differ in language and culture. The way these groups interpret such differences can lead to enrichment for both groups through intercultural learning. But, if differences lead to discrimination because of race, religion, culture or language, this hinders the integration process for both groups. This theme encompasses five categories: culture, religion, language, locality, and racism and discrimination.

Host participants expressed a strong belief that the host and refugee cultures are significantly different.

HC5: *As far as culture goes, it is different, but it's normal that we also learn about other cultures and that they learn about ours.*

HC4: *I think your question implies an exchange of cultures, and I don't think it's that important that we learn about Syrians and their culture. It's important that we understand that they are different and that we help them. They are the ones who should learn to live in our culture. We need to give them a chance for it, but we don't need to become half-Syrians or 10% Syrians for it to be successful. We only need to give them a chance, but we don't need to explore their culture, it is back there in Syria.*

The second quote implies that the responsibility for intercultural exchange lies only with the refugees, strongly emphasising an assimilationist view and a passive position of this participant. In contrast, refugee participants believed that the way of life in Croatia was quite similar to that in Syria.

RC5: *For me, it's not hard because my lifestyle here is not that different from the one I had in Syria.*

RC2: *I think the way of life here is not very different than in Syria. That helps me.*

Refugees from Syria described positive experiences with hosts, citing examples of their care for the dietary customs of

Muslims. However, they were very clear in their belief that cultural and religious markings such as wearing a hijab reduce their chance of getting a job, which indicates they experience or expect to experience discrimination from the host community.

RC10: *It's a problem when you wear a hijab, then you have that problem of finding a job.*

RC5: *I think that it's very important for her (RC1*) not to wear things to look like she's not from here. That's very important.*

While the hosts see their and Syrian cultures as very dissimilar, religion is not seen that way. They describe Syrian refugees as Muslims who are different from the Muslims from other countries, making a distinction between groups of migrants from the Middle East. They implied a lesser difference between the hosts and Syrians.

Language competence is uniformly considered the prerequisite for all other levels of integration. Refugees believe that the Croatian language courses are not adequately organised and find it difficult to learn the language.

RC5: *Here, the language is really difficult. (...) They [Croatian government] need to identify those [among refugees] who are seriously willing to learn the language. Sometimes it happens that they organise a language class for 9 people, and only 2 of them are serious... others don't come and then they decide to dismiss the class. Then even those who do want to progress actually don't have a chance to. (...) That's the first thing by which you can identify foreigners.*

It is alarming that the refugees do not have reliable access to language courses, even though this is defined by the Croatian Action plan for integration of asylum beneficiaries (Office for Human Rights and Rights of Minorities, 2017), which places a strong emphasis on language acquisition for all age groups, in schools and during vocational training.

Host participants differentiated between urban and rural areas in their openness to others, with urban areas perceived as more open to multiculturalism and the integration of refugees. They also highlighted a difference between Croatia and Western European countries which have a long tradition of immigration and integration. They shared their view of Germany as a long-time destination of Croatian economic migrants, similarly to Ireland in recent years. Still, they did not provide examples of integration practices in Germany or compare them to those implemented in Croatia. What is interesting is that Germany and Sweden were seen by the participants as rich countries with a long tradition of incoming migration, but nevertheless were not able to integrate some mi-

grants, and consider them as an example of good and bad practice at the same time.

Refugee participants mostly consider Croatia as a transit country, not appealing as an integration destination, being focused on moving on to other European countries:

RC3: *I think that no one wants to come and stay here in Croatia. Most of the people [refugees] think of Croatia as a transit country through which they will someday go to some western country.*

These notions were countered by other refugee participants who expressed their content with living in Croatia, proving that the view of Croatia as a transit country is not universal to all refugees.

Hosts in a few statements showed racist sentiment and were discriminatory towards refugees:

HC4: *And of course, they [refugees] should be allowed to be whatever they choose to be in private. (...) I think that the ideal scenario includes the Croatian side stopping the emigration of Croats, i.e., that the living and work conditions are such that Croats want to stay. And then, when we ensure that, then we can accept immigrants to fill in parts of Croatia that are empty.* [emphasis by the researcher]

HC9: *If you have a sufficient number of refugees who integrate perfectly into society, so they contribute to the economy and then, say, because of their culture they should pay a higher tax.*

HC10: *They are even well-behaved and nice. For example, they have never attacked me.* [emphasis by the researcher]

Even when they are not expressing racist and discriminatory thoughts directly, some host participants express stereotypes and wishes to set boundaries to refugees' freedom of choice (e.g. restricting expression of their cultural identity only to private life and home quarters, considering their reallocation to small communities, wearing a hijab in public, limiting employment).

Refugees describe some negative experiences with hosts when they have felt discriminated or were harassed by the hosts due to displaying cultural and religious markers. Revisiting the socio-economic discrimination, refugees previously expressed their experiences of discrimination while looking for a job, accommodation or accessing healthcare services.

RC7: *I'm looking for a job, but I haven't found a job because I wear a hijab. There are also people here who are afraid when they see I have a hijab and that I'm a Muslim. I don't know why. I was once on a bus with a bag and one man came and looked at my bag as if I had a bomb. People have said things about my hijab.*

(...) *Someone spat on me [while wearing a hijab]. (...) Once I was in an [administrative] office and the service provider asked me if I knew how to sign the papers or if I should sign them with a fingerprint.*

RC10: *I was in a hospital and someone said "hey, hey" to me and when I looked at the guy, he pointed at my hijab and did this [makes a throat cut gesture].*

These examples show that refugee participants had negative experiences not only due to their appearance and origins but were also threatened and harassed. Refugees evidently have a variety of experiences which could in part be attributed to the tendency of some local people to discriminate against newcomers because of being Muslim. Refugee participants are aware of such stereotypes and discrimination:

RC5: *A lot of people have a stereotype of immigrants... that we're Muslims that we don't allow our women freedom... but they don't understand that there are also different Muslims. I don't know why they have a stereotype that all Muslims are the same...*

CONCLUSIONS

This study revealed consensus points among the host and refugee community that can strengthen the contents of action plans aimed to foster integration as a two-way dynamic interaction and ongoing process. The current study also supported the Indicators of Integration Framework (Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019) by providing further empirical support for the three-level social connection theoretical model of bonding within communities, bridging between communities and linking with services. The data support the understanding of multidimensionality of the integration process, but we would place a stronger emphasis on the interplay between the socio-economic and socio-psychological integration, as these dimensions were intertwined throughout discussions of both groups.

The main limitation of this study is the number of refugee participants. Only two refugee focus groups were held due to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak during the data collection. Nevertheless, there was clear indication of information saturation since the variety of views in the second focus group corresponded to that in the previous one. In the host groups, half of the participants were highly educated, leading to a potential bias due to underrepresentation of participants with a primary and secondary level of education. However, no systematic relation with particular views of the more and less educated participants was identified. The majority of host participants had some background in humanities and social

sciences, which reflects their increased interest in the topic, and were more likely to volunteer for this study. Still, there were also a few participants with background in the technical area. Again, no consistent relation between the work background and views on integration were identified.

Both hosts and refugees understand the goal of integration in the same way: as the state in which no differences are made between the members of the two groups. Although at first sight this may be understood as an assimilationist position, upon closer inspection this sentiment is in essence positive, as the hosts emphasise the responsibility for an active role of their community, alongside the expressed view of the refugees that their own desire to integrate is needed for this process to succeed. The universality of rights should be reflected in the free exercise of legal rights and access to resources and services under the same conditions. Dimensions of integration previously identified in the literature were often referenced, showing that both groups in Croatia are aware of the complexity of integration and the need to address multiple aspects of refugee life to achieve integration.

Hosts and refugees also recognise the need for both groups to adapt in order to facilitate integration: the Croatian community is seen as responsible for structuring fair integration practices, ensuring help and assistance to refugees, along with the need to foster openness towards and acceptance of the refugees within the in-group. Refugees are aware that they should adapt to the customs of the hosts, but also require intercultural understanding, especially with regard to their cultural and religious markings. In practice, public campaigns should acknowledge that being different does not threaten the host culture. Experts should be engaged on this issue, and managing differences should not be left to chance or ignored.

Both groups recognise that the image of Croatia as a transit country on the path to Western Europe does not facilitate integration. They agree, rightfully or not, that for the vast majority of refugees this is only a temporary solution and not the preferred destination. The refugees recognise that the desire to stay in Croatia is an important prerequisite for integrating into the host society.

Both groups also agree that the host society should invest more effort into tools and mechanisms that foster socio-economic and socio-psychological integration, such as easier access to services in relevant information databases (Croatian Institute of Public Health, Croatian Employment Service), tracking the outcomes of activities and programmes fostering the integration process, transparently reporting to the general public. Ensuring that the interpreters and cultural mediators that are available in institutions and services can help in clear

communication between refugees and service representatives. Overcoming structural barriers to integration and fostering opportunities for viable and pleasant contacts among members of the host and refugee groups was seen as imperative. This is in line with the list of recommendations for policy and practice provided by Ajduković and colleagues (2019).

Both groups acknowledge instances of discrimination against refugees. However, the hosts are much less aware of this issue than the refugees testify through their experiences. This calls for systematic de-stigmatisation policies and continued efforts for which the host society bears responsibility. Participants recognise intergroup contact as a way of reducing negative sentiments and discrimination, believing that programmes of positive and frequent contact are needed and can be organised in schools, work or public settings promoting intercultural exchange and understanding.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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NOTES

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² HC refers to the host community, while RC refers to the refugee community. The number indicates the participant in the focus group.

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Integracija izbjeglica u Hrvatskoj: kvalitativno istraživanje integracijskoga processa i međugrupnih odnosa izbjeglica iz Sirije

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Na temelju teorijskoga modela multidimenzionalne, dvosmjerne i dinamičke integracije izbjeglica i domicilnoga društva provedeno je kvalitativno istraživanje s ciljem ispitivanja mišljenja, percepcija i iskustava s integracijom izbjeglica iz Sirije i domaćina u Hrvatskoj. Održano je pet fokusnih grupa, tri s domaćinima ($N = 21$) i dvije s izbjeglicama iz Sirije ($N = 11$). Utvrđene su četiri široke teme zajedničke objema grupama, a koje se podudaraju s multidimenzionalnim karakterom integracije: "Perspektive o integraciji", "Socioekonomska integracija", "Međugrupni odnosi" te "Kultura, jezik i društvene prepreke integraciji". Teme su identificirane u svim fokusnim grupama i u obje skupine sudionika, a domaćini i izbjeglice slagali su se u pogledima na integraciju. Članovi obje grupa razumiju dvosmjernost i dinamične integracije na isti način te prepoznaju potrebu za prilagodbom obje skupina. Hrvatsku vide kao privremeno rješenje za izbjeglice, što znači zapreku njihovoj integraciji. Naglasak je stavljen na međugrupne odnose i odgovornost domaćina u pružanju mogućnosti i mehanizama koji olakšavaju socioekonomsku i sociopsihološku integraciju, premošćuju strukturne zapreke i promiču ugodan međugrupni kontakt.

Ključne riječi: izbjeglice, tražitelji azila, integracija, stavovi, međugrupni kontakt



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