

## **Inclusion, Interaction, and Perception: Mapping Social Relations Between Refugees and Host Communities**

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### **Abstract**

*The conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which escalated in February 2022, generated the largest migration flow in Europe since the Second World War, placing Romania, traditionally an emigration country, at the forefront of an unprecedented humanitarian and institutional challenge. This article examines how the arrival of refugees impacted the host community, focusing on patterns of interaction, solidarity, perceived threats, and community adaptation. Concentrated on one of the major entry and support hubs, Suceava, our paper uses a mixed-methods design, combining household surveys with refugees and members of the host community, and key-informant interviews.*

*The findings show that initial solidarity and civic mobilisation coexisted with structural vulnerabilities and medium-term concerns regarding resources, public services, and social cohesion. By integrating several theoretical approaches regarding contact, social distance, threats and solidarity, the article offers a comprehensive theoretical approach to the refugee-host relationship in a context with limited experience in managing a large-scale forcibly displaced population. The study contributes to the broader literature on migration and community response, providing an analytical framework applicable to other Eastern European contexts facing similar challenges.*

**Keywords:** *refugees; social relations; host community; social relations; inclusion; Ukrainian crisis.*

### **1. Introduction**

The conflict situation in Ukraine has generated, since 2022, one of the most significant humanitarian crises in contemporary Europe, reshaping political, economic, and social dynamics across the region. As a directly neighbouring country and EU eastern external border, Romania became one of the main corridors for evacuation, assistance, and a provider of temporary protection. Given the circumstances, cities such as Suceava, situated near the border crossing, and Constanta, Romania's main maritime gateway and also close to the border, became central nodes of transit, hosting and coordination. Such an abrupt transition from an emigration country to a frontline host and transit state generated structural pressures on public institutions, exposed gaps in pre-existing integration mechanisms, and required rapid responses from local authorities and civil society.

These developments raise pertinent questions about how host communities react when confronted with sudden demographic and social changes. The arrival of

Ukrainian refugees brought new dynamics into local social structures: forms of solidarity quickly emerged, although concerns about resources, public services, and labour market competition also surfaced over time. While existing literature on forced migration emphasises integration, legal frameworks and security aspects, fewer studies explore how refugee inflows transform host communities and how social relationships between locals and refugees evolve. Against this backdrop, this article investigates the following research questions:

1. How are the changes in the social dynamics of the host community following the arrival of Ukrainian refugees experienced and interpreted, from the perspectives of local actors and refugees?
2. What experiences of tension, solidarity, and adaptation are manifested in everyday interactions, institutional initiatives, and integration projects between refugees and locals?
3. How do perceptions, attitudes, and narratives constructed at the local level shape processes of social inclusion, economic integration and community cohesion?

The study contributes to the literature by proposing an integrated analytical approach that combines structural factors (institutional response, local capacity, policy frameworks) with cultural and community-level dynamics (attitudes, perceived threats, intergroup contact, solidarity acts). By focusing on Suceava, a main center for the refugee response, the article offers insights applicable to other areas navigating similar pressures. Nonetheless, the research aims to advance understanding of how host communities negotiate change and reconfigure social relations in contexts marked by uncertainty and humanitarian need.

## **2. Describing the context**

The armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, starting in February 2022, has generated the largest flux of forcibly displaced people in Europe, after the Second World War, with over eight million people moved inside the continent in the first eighteen months after the beginning of the confrontations (UNHCR, 2023). Romania, as a neighbouring state and member of the European Union, became one of the main corridors for evacuating civilians. The dimensions and rapidity of the forced migration flux exerted a significant burden on the logistic infrastructure, institutional, and social, especially in the frontier zones. Compared to other migratory waves, the Ukrainian exodus simultaneously animated state institutions, civil society, international organisations, and spontaneous voluntary networks (Incălțărău & Mocernac, 2024). This rapid mobilisation shows how forced migration becomes more than a demographic phenomenon, bringing social, political, and community complex implications.

Romania has been, for the past three decades, mostly defined as an emigration country, not as a destination for immigrants or refugees. Many Romanians left the country after December 1989, generating one of the most ample immigration processes in Central and Eastern Europe (UN DESA, 2017). Such aspects profoundly shaped how the state and the local population perceived and managed migration: institutions, public policies, and administrative structures were calibrated to manage emigration, not for integrating massive refugee flows. Studies previous to 2022 have emphasised that Romania's institutional infrastructure remained, until recently, a

minimal one regarding immigration, and the practical experience in handling the phenomenon was rather limited, mostly based on isolated situations and not on consistent fluxes (Pogan, 2020; Porumbescu, 2019a)

Given such a fragile institutional context regarding Romania, the Russian invasion of Ukraine generated a systemic challenge, Romania suddenly becoming one of the main transit and sometimes even host country for Ukrainian refugees. Such an abrupt transition brought pressure for institutions lacking experience in managing massive population influxes in search of international protection (Porumbescu, 2019b). More than that, Romanian legislation regarding asylum seekers and integration was prepared for a low volume of requests, while local structures had a limited operational capacity.

Lacking a consolidated institutional infrastructure, the civil society and the local authorities became the main actors in the refugee crisis response. Thus, municipalities like Suceava or Constanta had to rapidly adapt their resources and administrative mechanisms to face multiple challenges, like the logistical pressure, hosting the humanitarian Hub, community centres, spaces for transit, translation services, and coordinating with international organisations.

The temporary protection regime activated in 2022 has generated a much more accessible and better-funded institutional framework for refugees from Ukraine, in contrast to the more restrictive procedures applied to other categories of migrants. In the specialized literature, this phenomenon is conceptualized as a “two-speed” integration system: “a flexible and well-supported regime for beneficiaries of temporary protection, in parallel with a bureaucratic, more rigid and under-resourced regime for migrants from Asia, Africa or the Middle East” (Porumbescu, Cosciug, Mihaiu, 2025, 60).

### **3. Theoretical framework**

To understand the interplay between refugees and the host community, a conceptual framework is needed to explain variations in perceptions, interactions, and social reactions. Sociological and psychological literature offer a series of relevant theoretical approaches, including contact, social distance, threat, and solidarity. Such models propose complementary perspectives on how host communities interact with new-coming groups, especially in the cases of forced migration, as is the case of Ukrainian refugees in Romania. Contact theory (Allport, 1954) assumes that direct interactions between the members of the majority group and the members of the minority group will reduce prejudice, under some circumstances: egalitarian status, cooperation, common objectives, and institutional support. Following studies confirmed the robustness of this theory, demonstrating that a positive and regulated contact between locals and immigrants contributes to diminishing stereotypes and increases social acceptance (Pettigrew & Troop, 2006). In the case of refugees, direct contact through voluntary and communal activities, schools, and living spaces might facilitate integration and reduce initially perceived tensions. Nevertheless, when such ideal conditions are lacking, such as a lack of institutional support, for example, the beneficial effect of contact is diminished.

The social distance theory (Bogardus, 1925) sees the degree of social acceptance of a foreign group by evaluating the social proximity that individuals are willing to tolerate, for example, between accepting a foreigner as a neighbour or as a

family member. This framework may explain variations in community attitudes towards refugees based on cultural similarities, religious or linguistic differences, and historical experiences of the local population. Previous studies have shown that Romanians are described by a smaller distance from refugees considered as “culturally closed” or in need of immediate humanitarian assistance, but have not investigated long-term relationships (Pogan, 2020). On the other hand, negative attitudes towards minority groups are also determined by threat perception, whether realistic threats (economic competition, workplaces, housing, public services) or symbolic ones (the fear that cultural norms, values, and national identity are in danger).

The success of integration processes depends not only on the legal framework, but on the capacity of the local communities to mobilise resources, on local population attitudes, and on how institutions manage to cooperate in a crisis context. Lacking a long tradition in receiving refugees, the reactions of local communities in Romania oscillated between massive solidarity and concerns regarding institutional capability, the labour market, and access to public services (Porumbescu & Cosciug, 2024).

Besides structural vulnerabilities, Romania is also confronted with cultural and psychological challenges. Being a society relatively recently exposed to the phenomenon of immigration, public representation about refugees is shaped by perceptions of economic or symbolic threats (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010; Gorodzeisky, 2011). Although in the first month after the outbreak of the Ukrainian conflict, Romanians' solidarity was visible, in the long term, subjects like the pressure on social services, housing aspects, or social protection started to be more visible in the public discourse. Given such aspects, the integration of Ukrainian refugees developed in Romania in a tense context by exemplary civic mobilisation and the historical limitations of a state lacking systematic experience in managing migration.

Romanians' attitudes regarding the Ukrainian refugees evolved in the above-described particular context, being marked by two main dimensions: (1) the lack of a historically consistent experience in receiving immigrants and (2) the emotionality of the Ukrainian crisis, generated by the geographical proximity, cultural similarity, and the aggressiveness of the attack. Nonetheless, the outbreak of the conflict in 2022 generated an unprecedented phenomenon, a massive social mobilisation and a significant increase in solidarity behaviours towards refugees. Studies and reports issued in 2022-2023 showed that Romanians manifested one of the most positive attitudes compared to other countries in the region towards Ukrainian refugees, perceived more as “neighbours in need” and less as “cultural outsiders” (European Digital Media Observatory, 2023). A key factor for such a response might be the contact theory (Allport, 1954; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014), according to which frequent contacts, in railway stations, hubs, transit centres, and schools, have reduced the social distance, favouring acceptance.

Nevertheless, in the medium term, tension may also arise, in line with the literature regarding perceptions of economic and symbolic threats (Raijman et al., 2008). More than that, disinformation was also emphasized in public reports and acknowledged in most of the neighbouring countries, like Poland, Slovakia, Hungary or Romania (European Digital Media Observatory, 2022), contributing to the increase of concerns referring to access to public services, labour market and housing (typical

threats in the context of limited resources), leading thus to less solidary attitudes and behaviours regarding the Ukrainian refugees.

Building on the theoretical and empirical findings aforementioned, Romania is expected to present a dual profile, described by a high level of immediate solidarity, doubled by a potential of emerging socio-economic concerns in the long term. The following sections aim to investigate these possibilities employing a mixed-methods approach in exploring the relationship between the local population and the Ukrainian refugees in Suceva, a major municipality, the closest to the border crossing between the two countries.

#### **4. Methodology**

Aiming to investigate the social relations between refugees and the host community, the research used a mixed design, with a quantitative component based on a household-level survey and a qualitative component focused on key informant interviews. This approach allowed for both the quantification of main trends and a nuanced understanding of the processes of integration, interaction and perception.

The quantitative component included the face-to-face application of a structured questionnaire at the household level among 132 refugees accommodated in both private housing and collective centers. The instrument aimed to outline the socio-demographic profile of refugees, identify priority needs, assess access to essential services, and explore dimensions of social cohesion, mobility and interaction with the host community (Fuior, 2021). Face-to-face administration was used to limit non-response errors and to support participants in clarifying any terminological or cultural misunderstandings.

In parallel, a quantitative household survey was conducted among the host community population, based on a structured questionnaire applied to a sample of 101 respondents. The main objective was to capture perceptions regarding the arrival and presence of refugees, especially in terms of social cohesion, the perceived impact on the local economy and access to public services (Putnam, 2007). The structure of the instrument included both items regarding attitudes towards refugees and the level of intergroup contact, as well as questions about changes felt at the community level. The standardised format of the questionnaire allowed for the systematic comparison of perceptions between different socio-demographic subgroups in the host community.

The qualitative component consisted of nine interviews with people considered to be key informants. Relevant actors for the local response to the refugee crisis in Suceava County were included (representatives of local authorities, public service personnel, and non-governmental organisations). The selection of respondents was based on purposive sampling and was carried out following a preliminary mapping of local actors involved in supporting refugees.

The aim of the interviews was to capture how the arrival of refugees influenced the functioning of specific services, to document the institutional and civic responses developed up to the time of the research, and to explore the forms of inter-actor cooperation in support of integration and social cohesion. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured guide, which combined open-ended questions with pre-established themes, allowing both comparability between cases and flexibility to delve deeper into emerging topics.

All interviews were audio-recorded, with the prior consent of the participants, and subsequently transcribed in full for analysis. The qualitative data were analyzed thematically, aiming to identify patterns of perception, mechanisms of cooperation between actors and factors that favour or obstruct integration and social cohesion. The data collection process respected ethical norms, ensuring respondents' confidentiality and voluntary involvement in the research, and it took place in September-October 2024.

## 5. Results and data analysis

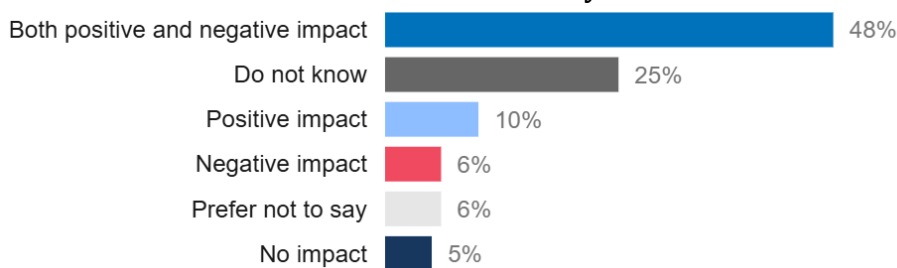
### 5.1. Impact on host community

The analysis of the impact of the arrival of Ukrainian refugees on the host community in Suceava reveals a series of complex economic effects, highlighted both in the qualitative data from the interviews and in the quantified results of the surveys.

Qualitative statements highlight multiple barriers for refugees in the local labour market: difficult recognition of qualifications, language barriers and low wages. Many end up depending on the available aid, *“many choose to rely on the available aid, instead of looking for a job”* (interview participant), which fuels the perception among locals of a certain reluctance to work. At the same time, there are difficulties in integrating refugees into the jobs for which they are qualified: *“Refugees look for jobs in the fields for which they are qualified, but they face the non-recognition of their diplomas”* (interview participant).

The local housing market has been significantly affected, with rent increases and housing availability decreasing: *“There has been a visible effect on the housing market, with higher rent prices”* (interview participant). The economic effects felt by the community also include rising prices and additional competition in the labour market: *“their integration creates additional competition”* (interview participant), aspects also illustrated in the survey data.

**Figure 1. Assessment of the impact of the arrival of refugees on the local economy**

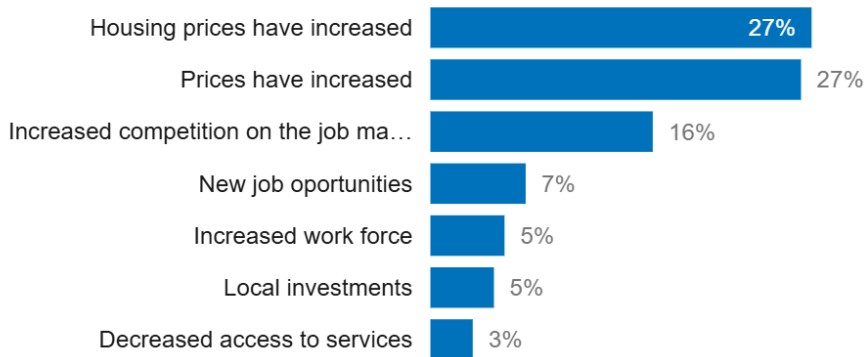


Most members of the host community perceive the economic impact of refugees as ambivalent, recording both positive and negative effects, as indicated in the Figure 1 above. 48% of respondents believe that the presence of refugees simultaneously generates economic opportunities and challenges, reflecting the complexity of the phenomenon: on the one hand, there is the recognition of benefits – new services, increased demand for local consumption or complementing the workforce, on the other hand, problems arise such as pressure on the real estate market and increased competition for jobs. Only a minority (16%) associate the

impact exclusively positive or negative (10%, 6% respectively), while a quarter of respondents cannot assess the direction of this impact (25%), which denotes the persistent uncertainties and the diversity of experiences lived at the community level. This result also supports the qualitative observations from the interviews, outlining a nuanced picture of the economic adaptation generated by refugees.

Moreover, the survey data illustrate the concrete effects: 27% of respondents have observed increases in rents and general prices, and 16% perceive increased competition for jobs. Only 7% see the emergence of new employment opportunities, and the effect on local investment and the workforce is perceived as minor.

**Figure 2. Effects of refugee arrival on the local economy**



The data in this figure highlights that the main economic tensions felt by the local community following the arrival of refugees are closely associated with the increase in housing costs and the dynamics of the labour market. Thus, 27% of respondents have observed an increase in rental prices, respectively general prices, which indicates a direct pressure on the standard of living for local residents. Increased competition on the labour market is perceived by 16%, reflecting the difficulties of integrating refugees, but also the concerns of locals regarding access to jobs, in the context of a market frequently dominated by workers from outside the EU. On the other hand, only a small proportion of respondents (7%) mention the emergence of new employment opportunities, and the effects on the local workforce and investment are perceived as limited, below 5%. These results outline a mixed picture of the economic impact: specific benefits for certain sectors, but also the amplification of tensions that revolve, predominantly, around housing and access to jobs.

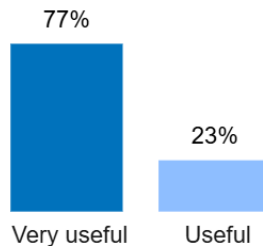
Despite the difficulties, refugees have made a positive contribution to certain sectors, such as care or beauty services, but bureaucracy maintains a significant share of their activity in the informal economy: *“Ukrainian women have managed to establish themselves on the local market, but they are reluctant to work formally because of bureaucracy”* (interview participant). This dual dimension of integration – benefits and challenges – is also confirmed by the fact that almost half of the local community recognises both positive and negative effects of the arrival of refugees.

## 5.2. Inclusion of refugees

The inclusion of Ukrainian refugees into the host community in Suceava is perceived by interview participants as a complex process, marked by different developments over time and influenced by socio-economic, cultural and institutional factors. The interviews indicate the existence of divergent strategies among refugees: some attempt to integrate through employment and education enrollment, while others prefer to maintain their refugee status in order to continue to benefit from assistance. As one participant noted, *“Some refugees attempt integration through employment and education enrollment, but there is also a preference among others to maintain their refugee status and benefit from aid. The doctor observed a lack of initiatives from refugees for building reciprocal relationships with the host community.”* (interview participant). This duality is also influenced by the temporal orientation of the refugees, many of whom desire stability but choose to remain close to the border in the hope of an eventual return: *“Many want stability and plan to remain close to the border, with the hope that one day they will be able to return to Ukraine.”* (interview participant). This perspective partly explains the reluctance of some individuals to invest in long-term local integration.

A significant role in the dynamics of inclusion is played by non-governmental organizations, whose intercultural activities – workshops, diversity celebrations and recreational events – are perceived as having positive effects on the relations between refugees and the host community. As one respondent points out, *“Intercultural activities organized by Save the Children, such as diversity celebrations and workshops, have fostered positive interactions between refugees and the host community.”* (interview participant). Similar activities conducted by local NGOs are evaluated in a comparable way, being described as having a direct impact on reducing social distance: *“Cultural celebrations and integration workshops had a positive impact.”* (interview participant). However, a recurring element in the informants’ narratives is the need for more consistent institutional involvement, explicitly summarized in the statement *“Increased involvement from local authorities would further support integration efforts.”* (interview participant). In this sense, the quantitative data support the qualitative perceptions: non-formal initiatives are evaluated significantly more positively than formal ones.

**Figure 3. Contribution of non-formal initiatives to promote inclusion**

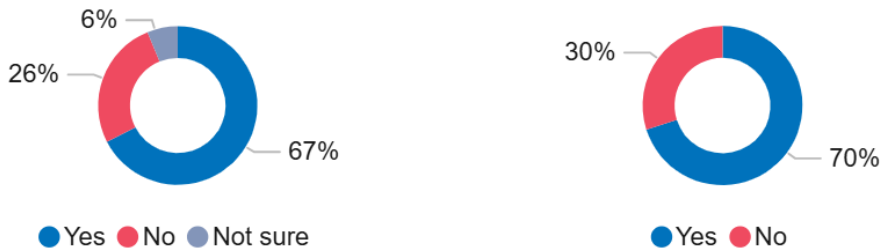


The figure above shows that 77% of respondents consider these activities "very useful", while only 23% consider them "useful".

Integration is also hampered by structural barriers, especially linguistic and access to the labor market. Several interviewees emphasize the difficulty of refugees in adapting to a new socio-cultural environment, in the absence of the necessary

linguistic skills: “Efforts have been made to integrate refugees through social and cultural programs. However, challenges such as language barriers and limited job opportunities hinder the integration process.” (interview participant), as well as the fact that “The challenge is adapting to the new social environment and accepting diversity.” (interview participant). Romanian language courses and vocational training programs are perceived as useful, but insufficient without consolidated institutional support and without expanding economic opportunities.

**Figure 4. Awareness vs. participation in inclusion activities**



From the refugee perspective, the level of awareness and participation in inclusion initiatives is high, as shown in the figure above. Approximately two-thirds of respondents are aware of formal initiatives and 70% have participated in activities, which confirms the willingness of refugees to get involved. However, the presence of a substantial minority that is not informed or does not participate indicates uncovered areas of these programs, which could represent opportunities for expanding inclusion.

The integrated analysis of qualitative and quantitative data thus shows a significant coherence between the perceptions of informants and the assessments made by respondents in the surveys. Non-formal initiatives are distinguished by an immediate and visible impact, while formal initiatives are evaluated positively, but with a lower degree of enthusiasm. The main tension results from the disjunction between the relatively high participation of refugees in activities and the persistence of structural barriers, as well as the deterioration of host community attitudes.

### **5.3. Evolution of the refugee-host community relationship**

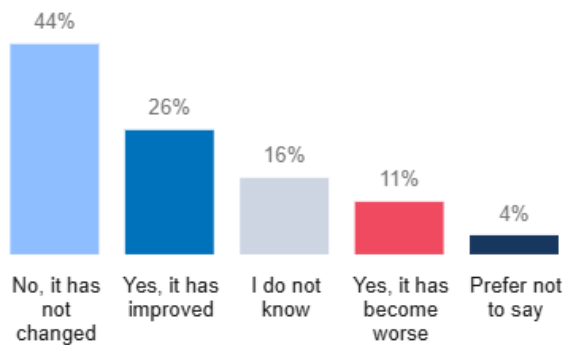
The analysis of the evolution of the relationship between the host community and refugees in Suceava, Romania, in the context of the war in Ukraine, reveals a complex dynamic, influenced by socio-cultural and economic factors that shaped the attitudes and interactions between the two groups.

Initially, the relationship was marked by a pronounced solidarity and empathy. As mentioned, “Initially, there was more empathy, but now the daily interactions have normalised the situation” (interview participant). This openness favoured a first stage of integration, even if, in parallel, the first tensions related to the perception of sacrifices and access to resources were also reported. For example, “There is a harsher attitude if I see a Ukrainian license plate... tensions that did not exist at the beginning of the war” (interview participant) indicates the emergence of social frictions in everyday contexts, such as trafficking, and of a suspicion related to the allocation of resources.

As the number of refugees increased, tension also increased, fueled by the perception of their favouritism. Thus, *“Romanians sometimes see refugee status as a ‘privilege’, which creates tensions”* (interview participant), reflecting dissatisfaction with preferential access to services such as free healthcare or other subsidised benefits. This generated a state of tension, partly amplified by misinformation, as mentioned in the discussions *“misinformation contributed to negative attitudes”* (interview participant), which negatively influenced mutual perception.

For a quantitative perspective on these perceptions, the survey data processed from the host community indicate that 44% of respondents consider that the relationship between the local community and refugees has not changed significantly, while 26% have observed an improvement and 11% a deterioration. A proportion of 16% could not assess the change, and 4% preferred not to answer (see figure 5 below). These results confirm the existence of a diversity of perceptions, reflecting both the persistence of initial solidarity in some segments of the population and the emergence of tensions in others.

**Figure 5. The evolution of the host-refugee relationship from the perspective of the local population**



However, in the medium and long term, the relationship has evolved towards mutual accommodation and a better understanding of the benefits of integration. Statements such as *“Refugees are an important resource, with many special skills”* (interview participant) underline the renewed positive image of the contribution of refugees to the community. Social interactions have diversified, alternating between making friends and keeping distance: *“Relationships are varied. Some community members have made friends, while others keep their distance”* (interview participant), which reflects a social dynamic typical of an ongoing integration process.

As a way to alleviate tensions, participants recommend increasing communication and community involvement. Thus, *“Community engagement and information sessions may help reduce these misunderstandings”* (interview participant) and *“Tensions can be alleviated by organising intercultural activities”* (interview participant) indicate the need for proactive initiatives to facilitate intercultural dialogue and correct misperceptions.

## 6. Conclusions

The results of this study show how the arrival of Ukrainian refugees in Suceava reshaped the social fabric of the host community through a mix of solidarity, emerging tensions, and gradual adaptation. The initial massive humanitarian mobilisation, mainly driven by emotion, proximity to the conflict, and civic engagement, demonstrated the capacity of the Romanian communities to mobilise and respond to a crisis context, despite structural limitations and lack of institutional inexperience. At the same time, concerns related to economic threats, like rising housing costs, labour market pressures, and misinformation, reveal that integration is not only a legal and administrative challenge but also a social and community one.

As interactions between locals and refugees became more frequent, the relationship evolved towards a more balanced dynamic. Positive contact reduced social distance, while community actors increasingly recognised the potential contributions refugees may bring to the local economy and cultural life of the community. The findings underscore the need for more coherent institutional coordination, sustained communication efforts and community-based initiatives that strengthen cohesion and mitigate tensions.

In conclusion, the relationship between refugees and the host community in Suceava went through stages of initial solidarity, later strained by perceptions of preferential treatment and competition for resources, to ultimately evolve towards a more balanced relationship and a perspective of integration beneficial to both parties, if communication and community involvement efforts are strengthened.

Limitations of this study include the fact that, due to the lack of pre-existing data on the number of refugees living outside collective centers in Suceava, as well as the total number of households that hosted them, the sample selection process was intentional and targeted during data collection. Therefore, the results obtained cannot be considered representative of the entire population of interest, but rather indicate trends and aspects relevant to understanding the phenomenon.

Regarding the quantitative questionnaires applied, the research was conducted in an area already involved in other studies related to the situation of Ukrainian refugees, which generated a reluctance of some potential respondents to participate in the study. This situation limited the accessibility and complete availability for data collection and may influence the extension of the generalizability of the conclusions obtained.

Such limitations are common in research involving vulnerable groups, such as refugees, where ethical and contextual considerations impose constraints on the methodology for selecting and engaging study participants (Block, Warr, Gibbs & Riggs, 2013; Davidson, 2023). Vulnerability and prior experiences can also generate suspicion and reluctance, affecting responses and the dynamics of participation (Deps, 2022). Addressing these challenges requires increased attention to methodological design, as well as strategies for recruitment and building trust in the community.

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