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Law Students and Social Distance towards Migrants and Some Other Relevant Groups in Croatia

Increased migration and the effects of the 2015/16 European migration/refugee crisis are reflected in changes in the attitudes towards migrants and members of certain religions. Law students, who are thought to come into contact with the issue of migration in their work, are of greater concern. This paper presents the results of a survey conducted in 2019 among 1st and 4th year law students at four law schools in Croatia. The study aims to determine how close a relationship (on Bogardus' social distance scale) law students would achieve with the various types of migrants, Roma, and members of different religions. The results show that law students are likely to have the closest relationship with immigrants from North America and Western European countries and express the greatest average distance towards asylum seekers. They associate the greatest social closeness with Catholics. The analyses of the effects of sociodemographic characteristics, contextual indicators, and value orientations and attitudes on social distance imply that nationalism has the strongest effect on all groups.

Keywords: migrants, religious groups, social distance, law students, Croatia.

Študenti prava in socialna distanca do migrantov in nekaterih drugih skupin na Hrvaškem

Povečan obseg migracij in vpliv evropske migracijske/begunske krize v obdobju 2015–2016 se odražata v spremembah odnosa do migrantov in pripadnikov nekaterih verskih skupin. Zaskrbljenost vzbujajo predvsem študenti prava, ki se bodo z migracijami srečevali pri svojem delu. V prispevku so predstavljeni rezultati raziskave, izvedene leta 2019 med študenti 1. in 4. letnika prava na štirih pravnih fakultetah na Hrvaškem. Namen raziskave je ugotoviti, kako tesen odnos (po Bogardusovi lestvici socialne distance) bi študenti prava vzpostavili s posameznimi vrstami migrantov, Romi in pripadniki različnih verskih skupin. Rezultati kažejo, da bi študenti najtesnejši odnos vzpostavili s priseljenci iz Severne Amerike in zahodnoevropskih držav, največjo povprečno distanco pa izražajo do prosilcev za azil. Največjo socialno bližino izkazujejo do katoličanov. Analize vpliva družbeno-demografskih značilnosti, kontekstualnih kazalnikov ter vrednostnih usmeritev in stališč na socialno distanco nakazujejo, da ima pri vseh skupinah najmočnejši vpliv nacionalizem.

Ključne besede: *migranti, verske skupine, socialna distanca, študenti prava, Hrvaška.*

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1. Introduction

In recent years, two situations have led to two concepts grounded in sociology becoming ubiquitous elements of political and public discourse and debate throughout Europe.

The first one relates to the issue of migration, which became an unavoidable topic in the EU and many of its member states during and after the migration/refugee crisis. The latter is a geopolitical term frequently used by the media and the political and general public to describe the arrival of large numbers of refugees to the EU in 2015 and 2016 (Rogelj 2017). According to Eurostat (2022), the number of immigrants who applied for asylum in the EU for the first time in 2015 (1,216,860) and 2016 (1,166,815) more than doubled compared to the pre-crisis period in 2014 (530,560). This influx of migrants posed major challenges to the Union's common asylum policy and pointed to the need for its reform. Accordingly, the European Commission presented the first package of proposals for the reform of the common asylum system in May 2016 and the second one in July, both aimed at a better and fairer distribution of applications among member states (Bježančević 2019). However, these ideas and the Brussels policy were not endorsed by all political options in all member states. Rather, citing the climate of the Brexit referendum, the migration/refugee crisis issue revealed the weaknesses of the European project and became a fertile ground for the Eurosceptics and the sovereigntists. By rejecting the EU's proposed migrant quotas, they sought to change the European political scene (cf. Petrović et al. 2021; Lončar 2020). The Visegrad Group (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) – which calls itself the "protectors of Europe from foreign invaders" – opposed Germany's policy of "welcoming" migrants and the "Brussels" reform of the common asylum system (Strnad 2022, 73). By placing the migration issue at the centre of the EU political arena, a sharp cleavage emerged in public and political discourse between the Visegrad vision of a nationalist Europe and the Brussels vision of an open, multicultural, and cosmopolitan Europe. The politicization of the migration issue crystallized anti-migrant attitudes and fuelled cultural insecurities among some people. This allowed the Visegrad Group to counter the Brussels idea of greater European integration with its notion of defending national sovereignty (Strnad 2022, 73).

Regarding Croatia's experience with the migration/refugee crisis, it should be noted that an estimated 650,000 migrants transited through Croatia on what is known as the Balkan route during the aforementioned period, but only a small number of migrants applied for asylum in Croatia.[1] Moreover, it is important to emphasize that in the mentioned period, Croatian citizens were confronted for the first time with the phenomenon of mass migration of people from a significantly different socio-cultural background. Although the influx of migrants started at the time of the highly polarized 2015 parliamentary election campaign

dominated by ideological issues and significant polarization between the left and the right, the issue of migration did not significantly influence the dominant political discourse of this election campaign (Henjak 2018). Moreover, state actors and the media portrayed migrants as having similar experiences to Croatian citizens during the Homeland War in the 1990s and therefore sympathized therewith while also assuring that the ultimate goal of migrants was to reach the developed countries of Western Europe and not to stay in Croatia (Henjak 2018, 3–4). In the campaign for the 2016 early parliamentary election, the issue of the migration/refugee crisis had relatively little significance. However, considering the extent and duration of migrations on the Balkan route and the reactions of some politicians and political options thereto, it appeared that this situation and the reactions to it negatively affected citizens' attitudes both in the mentioned period and in the following years (Henjak 2018; Vuksan-Ćusa 2018; Ajduković et al. 2019).

The second situation relates to the use of the term "social distance" in the context of discussions on the containment of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the term has become more popular than ever, in most public discussions it is used diametrically opposite to its use in sociology and other social sciences. In their media appearances, numerous actors used this term when referring to the maintenance of physical distance between people in everyday face-to-face social interactions. Experts, media commentators and policymakers incorrectly used the term social distance instead of simple and precise terms such as "physical distance" or "separation" when discussing the measures needed to contain the spread of infections (Rukavina 2020). Another problem related to the use of the aforementioned term in the general public and the professional community is that the concept of distance is sometimes equated with the concept of closeness. This is in contrast to Simmel's original conceptualization (as well as Bogardus' operationalization of the concept, 1925b; 1933) of the term in the context of reflection on the nature of social relations because he believed that "the unity of nearness and remoteness" i.e., closeness and distance, is integral to any relationship between people (Simmel 2001, 152). Another problem is the *ad hoc* revisions (changes or additions) of the categories, either of the original or the revised versions of Bogardus' social distance scale. Numerous studies conducted in Croatia in an attempt to revise the categories of this scale usually did so by changing or adding individual categories without providing an explanation of the methodology used for this purpose (Ivković 2010). Finally, the problem with Bogardus' social distance scale is that its applicability under contemporary social conditions differs from the time when Bogardus constructed the instrument, as does its precision and sensitivity as a measurement tool in general (Parrillo & Donoghue 2005; Mather et al. 2017), or temporality (Tusini 2022).

Considering the above challenges and the first results of the research study presented herein, focusing on different aspects of attitudes of law students to-

wards Middle East migrants (see Mrakovčić & Gregurović 2020), the paper aims to investigate the level of social distance expressed by law students towards different groups of immigrants to Croatia, both in terms of the geographical and socio-cultural background of immigrants and in terms of their religious affiliation, as well as the level of social distance towards asylum seekers and asylees/refugees in general and towards Roma – a social group towards which the greatest distance is usually expressed. We also wanted to investigate whether members of certain groups are perceived as potentially desirable and potentially undesirable immigrants in our country, and how good a predictor of social distance towards these immigrant groups are the different value orientations, attitudes and socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The reason for choosing law students is related to the fact that they, as future experts, are more likely to come into contact with the analysed groups and to ensure the implementation of specific rights that different types of migrants have in Croatia. Therefore, it is important to determine whether they perceive the issue of migration and migrants' rights primarily through the prism of national and international legal norms or whether they experience these phenomena in the same way as legal laymen. Finally, the paper also aims to present the initial ideas and assumptions of the authors responsible for the development and operationalization of the concept of social distance to stimulate a professional discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of using this concept/scale in the research of social phenomena.

2. Theoretical-Conceptual Framework

Unlike many concepts used in sociology that are "children of many parents", the concept of social distance has a very clear origin. It comes from the "fertile mind of Georg Simmel", while its original meaning was partially reduced but also popularized by the work of Robert E. Park and finally operationalized in the work of Emory S. Bogardus (Ethington 1997, 2). Simmel argues that social distance (i.e., closeness/remoteness) is one of the fundamental properties of space, which in turn is one of the fundamental aspects of sociality in general (Ivković 2010). In his discussions, he distinguishes between the geometrical and metaphorical aspects of distance (Rukavina 2020, 1). Simmel's remarks (2001) on the "geometry of social life", on the differences and connections between the spatial and symbolic distance between people, can be better understood through the example of the "stranger-merchant". This social actor is a synthesis of the two aforementioned features of sociality: he is at once geometrically close to the group with which he trades through exchange interactions, but at the same time he is symbolically distanced from it because he is experienced as a stranger and outsider (Ethington 1997, 3–4). Simmel (2001, 152) believes that the sociological form of the "stranger" makes it clear that "spatial relations are only the condition, on the one hand, and the symbol, on the other, of human relations." The "unity

of nearness and remoteness involved in every human relation" is thus specific to the social relationship with the stranger-merchant and can be expressed as follows: "in the relationship to him, distance means that he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who also is far, is actually near" (Simmel 2001, 152). Nevertheless, it is immanent to the stranger's position within that group and the social order in which that group exists and operates that he is perceived and in certain cases treated as someone who is "being outside it and confronting" that group and that order (Simmel 2001, 152).

Park (1924, 339) considers that the concept of social distance, as distinct from spatial distance, can be useful to sociologists because it enables them to analyse and explain the grades and degrees of understanding and intimacy that characterize personal, as well as social, relations in general. He believes that people not only have a sense of distance towards the individuals with whom they come into contact but that they have almost the same sense towards entire classes and racial groups. In his view, the terms "race consciousness" and "class consciousness" actually describe a state of mind in which people become aware of the distance that separates them (or at least that they perceive as separating them) from other classes and races that they do not fully understand (or that they regard as different from their own) (Park 1924, 340). Racial and class consciousness, Park argues, as well as prejudice and social distance towards those considered different and other, intensify when members of a group feel that members of other groups threaten their economic interests or social status. Consequently, prejudice can be understood as "forces" that tend to "preserve the existing social order" and the desirable "social distances upon which that order rests" (Park 1924, 344). If the members of different social groups are "all right in [their] place" and maintain a "proper distance" from each other, then "everyone is capable of getting on with everyone else" (Park 1924, 341). The analysis of the perceived appropriate distance between different actors in a social order is useful for the study of social relations because it reveals the "subtle taboos and inhibitions" on which the social organization of that order is based (Park 1924, 344).

Bogardus (1925a, 216–217), in his attempt to find out how and why the "grades of understanding and intimacy" that characterize pre-social and social relations, i.e., social distance, vary, asked the research participants to classify different groups according to whether they harboured friendly, neutral feelings towards them or feelings of antipathy and dislike. He found that friendly feelings were most often directed towards groups to which the participants themselves belonged, that neutral feelings were directed towards groups they did not know, and that tradition and accepted opinions about particular groups were the most common reason for antipathy and dislike towards them, with personal negative experiences with members of those groups being another reason generalizing such feelings to the entire "despised" groups (Bogardus 1925a, 226). Further on, the operationalization of the social distance concept yielded a measurement that

serves as a means of ensuring adequate interpretation of the various degrees and grades of understanding and feelings that represent the character of social relations between members of different groups in different social situations (Bogardus 1925b, 299). This evolved to the final version of the social distance scale (Bogardus 1933, 369) which included seven categories for assessing the closeness/distance to different groups (racial, professional, and religious) and measured whether the respondents would agree to 1. marry, 2. have as regular friends, 3. work beside in an office, 4. have several families in their neighbourhood, 5. have merely as speaking acquaintances, 6. have live outside their neighbourhood, 7. have live outside their country. He believed that by using the social distance scale at different time intervals, it would be possible to determine changes in the attitudes (distance) of an individual respondent or group of respondents towards different social groups (Bogardus 1933, 270).

Ever since its operationalization, the concept of social distance has become a frequently used tool for analysing attitudes, prejudices, and possible/desirable relationships with various social groups, especially those perceived as deviating from the dominant socio-cultural matrix or threatening the social order. The concept has proven useful for at least two reasons. First, as Pehlić (2019) points out, according to the social identity theory (Triandis 1994; Tajfel & Turner 1979), people generally tend to classify themselves and other people into different categories. As part of this process and as a result of their own need to create and maintain a positive social identity, people are often simultaneously positively biased towards the group they consider their own and negatively biased towards groups they consider different. Second, the above bias has been shown to be strengthened in situations of conflict exacerbation. In such situations, individuals tend to identify more strongly with their social group and adhere more closely to its norms and standards, while expressing more negative attitudes and behaviours towards the social group or groups they consider to be on the opposite side (Pehlić 2019).

In Croatia, the concept of social distance has been most frequently used to analyse closeness or distance to different national/ethnic groups (Katunarić 1991; Malešević & Uzelac 1997; Malenica 2003; Banovac & Boneta 2006; Boneta et al. 2013). Sometimes the concept has been used to analyse distance towards different religious groups (Previšić et al. 2004; Mrnjaus 2013), sometimes only towards Roma (Šlezak & Šakaja 2012; Kalebić Maglica et al. 2018), and sometimes against groups characterized as different from the dominant social matrix for some reason (i.e., drug addicts, alcoholics or criminals, people with health, physical or mental limitations etc.) (Lotar et al. 2010; Vučković Juroš et al. 2014; Baloban et al. 2019). Finally, the concept has also been used, albeit very rarely, for the analysis of the attitude towards refugees and exiles in the context of migrations related to the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bulat 1995; Čolić & Sujoldžić 1995) and towards migrants, refugees, and asylum seek-

ers in the context of the European 2015/2016 migration/refugee crisis (Medlobi & Čepo 2018; Ajduković et al. 2019).

Although the social distance scale has so far not been widely used in the context of research on the (un)desirability of different groups as potential immigrants to Croatia, the results of the aforementioned research on ethnic and religious distance have produced multiple findings that can be used to conceptualize and operationalize research on the aforementioned topic.

First, research studies have found that people exhibit varying levels of distance towards members of various other social groups and that prejudice and this distance can be affected by the social context (situational factors and prevailing social and (sub)cultural norms) (cf. Vučković Juroš et al. 2014) or can change parallel with the changing social circumstances and over time (cf. Šiber 1997; Malenica 2003; Previšić et al. 2004; Baloban et al. 2019). Further on, studies have shown that influential social actors (especially the political elites) and the media can affect the degree of social distancing towards members of certain social groups by shaping discourses in which members of those groups are portrayed in a negative light (cf. Katunarić 1991; Malešević & Uzelac 1997; Medlobi & Čepo 2018). Finally, they have found that the degree of distancing from groups perceived as other may be related to various socio-demographic and socio-cultural characteristics of people, their contacts and experiences with members of these groups, and the values, political orientations, and attitudes they support or hold (cf. Bulat 1995; Šiber 1997; Malenica 2003; Banovac & Boneta 2006; Vučković Juroš et al. 2014; Medlobi & Čepo 2018; Baloban et al. 2019).

3. Main Aim and Research Questions

Following the above theoretical-conceptual framework and the results and conclusions of the cited empirical research studies, the main aim of this research is to determine the level of social distance expressed by students of law faculties of Zagreb, Rijeka, Osijek, and Split towards various national/ethnic and religious groups of immigrants to Croatia, and how the distance towards these groups is related to the socio-demographic, contextual-experiential, and value-attitudinal characteristics of respondents. The research questions with which we begin our analyses are:

1) Do law students perceive different ethnic and religious groups as more or less (un)desirable in the context of their immigration to Croatia, and do they position (distance) themselves differently from them?

2) Are and to what extent are different socio-demographic, contextual-experiential (e.g., acquaintances with migrants and/or asylum seekers) and value-attitudinal characteristics of the respondents good predictors of their social distance from different ethnic and religious groups?

4. Method

4.1 Respondents

The paper is based on a research study conducted in mid-2019 among law students at four law schools in Croatia: Zagreb, Rijeka, Split, and Osijek.[2] This group of respondents was selected because law students, as future experts, may come into contact with asylum seekers, refugees, and other migrants in their work, and it is important to determine their attitudes towards vulnerable migrant groups (cf. Mrakovčić & Gregurović 2020). The survey was conducted in a class setting among 1st and 4th year students. The aim was to include between 100 and 150 students from each selected cohort in each faculty to allow comparisons between younger and older students and between different faculties. A sample of 667 respondents was obtained, whose detailed characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample structure

Variable	Categories	N	%
Location of the Law Faculty	Zagreb	265	39.4
	Rijeka	193	28.7
	Split	119	17.7
	Osijek	95	14.1
Year of study	1	352	52.4
	4	320	47.6
Gender	Female	494	73.5
	Male	173	25.7

Source: Own data.

The largest proportion of students comes from Zagreb (almost 40 %). Slightly more than a quarter comes from Rijeka, 18 % from Split and 14 % from Osijek. The sample is balanced in terms of the year of study – slightly more than a half (52 %) are first-year students. The gender distribution is clearly skewed in favour of female students, who make up almost three quarters of the sample. In addition to the above characteristics, it is important to note that almost half of the respondents (48.7 %) estimate their family's financial situation to be neither better nor worse than that of the majority, but on average they estimate their family's financial situation to be slightly better than that of the majority (M = 3.54, SD = .692). The sample is markedly ethnically homogeneous (93 % Croats) while 5 % of respondents did not answer this question.

4.2 Measuring Instruments

The dependent variable used in the study was Bogardus' social distance scale (Bogardus 1933), which was modified and evaluated for several immigrant groups. Students were asked to rate the closest relationship they are willing to have with different migrant groups and with members of selected ethnic and religious groups using a seven-point scale: 1 – Marital relationship; 2 – Personal friend; 3 – Immediate neighbour; 4 – Colleague at work; 5 – Resident in my country; 6 – Visitor to my country; 7 – To exclude from my country. Migrants towards whom social distance was assessed were grouped according to their historical and geographical background, while relations with asylum seekers, asylees/refugees, and Roma were additionally analysed. Members of the Roma ethnic group are included in this instrument to further investigate the hypothesis that refugees and asylum seekers represent the new Roma, i.e., a group with which there is (the greatest) social distance (Miočić 2018, cf. CMS 2017). Another ethnically unspecified group was added to the questionnaire due to the often-mainstream perception of economic immigrants as foreign workers in Croatia (cf. Čačić-Kumpes et al. 2012). The result on the scale was considered summative, meaning that the marked closest relationship also implies all less close relationships.

The independent variables are divided into three groups. The first group consists of socio-demographic characteristics: gender, size of place of residence, highest parents' education level, family socio-economic status, and nationality. The place of residence was determined by the students on the following scale: 1 – Village, 2 – Small town (10,000 to 35,000 inhabitants), 3 – Large town (over 35,000 inhabitants), 4 – Zagreb. The socio-economic status of the family was determined using 5 categories from 1 – significantly worse than the majority to 5 – significantly better than the majority. The nationality of the respondents was divided into two categories: 1 – Croatian, 2 – other. The second group consists of contextual variables related to experiences with migrants and asylum seekers/refugees and personal/family exile or refugee experience. Students were asked if they had friends in the Republic of Croatia who were non-Croatian citizens or foreigners, if they had ever met a refugee or an asylum seeker, and if they or someone in their immediate family had an exile or refugee experience in their lives. The third group of independent indicators refers to value orientations and attitudes based on several sociological studies. Propensity to political concepts was examined using 15 out of 24 items of the original scale constructed by Čulig et al. (2007). The latent structure of the analysed items is almost identical to the original: in addition to the extracted items on the original factors clericalism (3 items, Cronbach's α = .892), expertocratism (3 items, Cronbach's α = .729), and Europeanism (3 items, Cronbach's α = .582), items that originally formed two conceptually opposed factors (nationalism and multiculturalism) were com-

bined into a single factor nationalism (6 items, Cronbach's α = .812). In addition to the political concepts analysed, students were also asked about their values using the authoritarianism (5 items, Cronbach's α = .740) and conservatism (3 items, Cronbach's α = .512) scales (Sekulić & Šporer 2006). Higher scores on all factors indicate a stronger acceptance of the attitudinal constructs analysed. In addition to the stated attitudes, the respondents' political orientation was examined on a five-point scale: 1 – left to 5 – right, and religious self-identification on a six-point scale: 1 – convinced believer to 6 – non-religious, opposing religion (Marinović Jerolimov 2005).

4.3 Analyses

The paper uses a series of univariate, bivariate, and multivariate analyses conducted using the SPSS 18.0 software package. Univariate analyses first describe dependent variables, which are then related to selected independent indicators. In addition, the latent structure of the dependent variables is checked using factor analysis, and the identified factors are considered as dependent constructs – criteria in multiple regression analysis. The relationship between each dependent construct is tested with paired samples t-test.

5. Results

As indicated earlier, the evaluation of social distance towards a particular group can serve as an indicator of prejudice, hostility, and even discrimination towards that group. Looking at the types of relationships that law students are willing to form with certain immigrant groups and with members of the Roma ethnic group, it appears that they are ready for the closest (friendly) relationship with immigrants from North America – more specifically from the United States and Canada – and from Western European countries (Figure 1). They are somewhat less favourable on average to immigrants from the countries of the former Yugoslavia and are as willing to have neighbourly relations with them as they are about immigrants from Asian countries such as China, Korea, etc., Africa, and unspecified foreign workers. It is worth noting that most of the immigrant workers and migrants, in general, come to Croatia from neighbouring countries (i.e., ex-Yugoslavia countries), especially from Bosnia and Herzegovina (Podgorelec et al. 2019). On average, they are willing to accept members of all other groups as work colleagues, with the greatest average distance expressed towards asylum seekers. They estimate an equally close relationship with refugees and Roma.

The distance that law students estimate in relation to members of different religions is fairly consistent. Apart from the lowest average distance towards Catholics with whom they are on average willing to maintain the closest rela-

tions (marriage), respondents are on average willing to maintain friendly relations with Orthodox, Protestants, and atheists or neighbourly relations with Jews, non-Christians, and Muslims.

Figure 1: Frequency distribution on the social distance scale towards migrant, ethnic, and religious groups
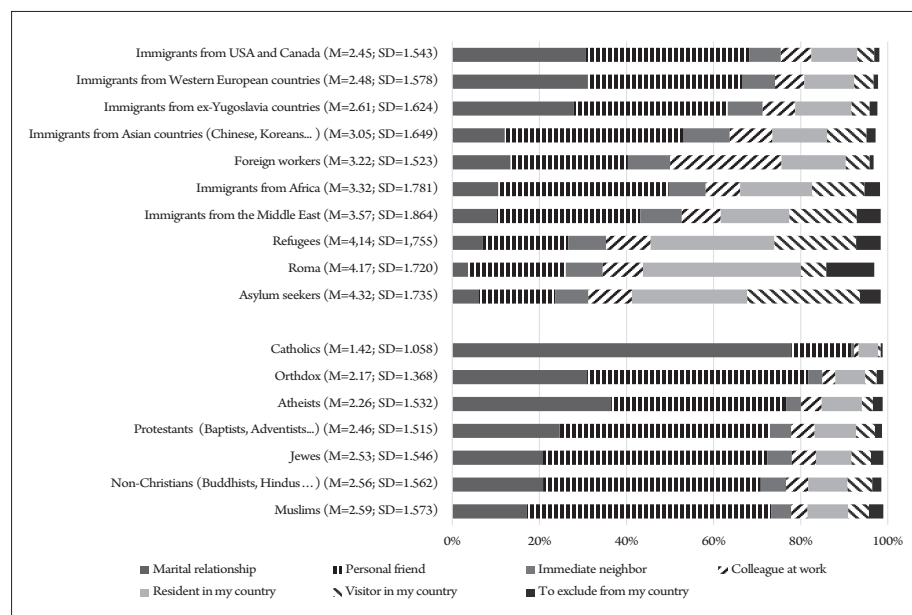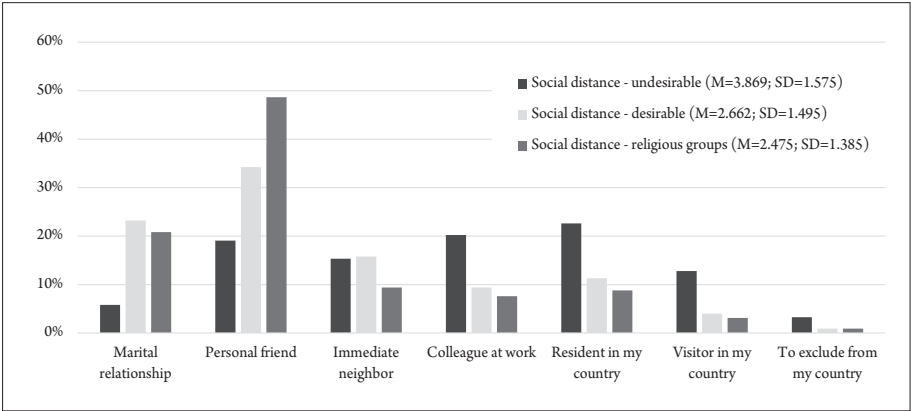

Source: Own data.

Factor analysis was used to test whether there is a latent structure behind the expressed distance towards migrant, ethnic and religious groups.[3] It was determined that migrant and ethnic groups form two latent dimensions, i.e., two factors that together explain 80.95 % of the variance. The first dimension comprises groups towards which a greater social distance is expressed (asylees, asylum seekers, Roma, immigrants from the Middle East, and immigrants from Africa), while the second dimension comprises groups towards which a lower social distance is expressed (immigrants from the United States and Canada, immigrants from Western European countries, immigrants from the countries of the former Yugoslavia, and immigrants from Asian countries). Foreign workers are excluded from this analysis. Both factors have high internal reliability (Cronbach's α1 = .920; Cronbach's α2 = .928) and are used as dependent indicators of desirable and undesirable immigrant groups in further analyses. Factorization of social distance towards members of other religions yielded a single-factor solution with high internal reliability (Cronbach's α = .947). This factor did not include the item used to measure social distance toward Catholics.

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The values of the composite variables created based on the factors obtained show that the lowest social distance is expressed towards members of other religions, with the largest grouping of responses to the first two categories of social distance: marital relationship and friendship (Figure 2). The values of the two composite variables based on the factors of social distance to more or less desirable immigrant groups are also consistent with the previously analysed frequencies of each variable. Comparing all three composite variables, law students associate marriage primarily with desirable immigrants, and friendship with members of other religions. They are most likely to accept undesirable migrants as residents of their country, although about one fifth of respondents are open to friendly and cooperative relationships. Similar conclusions also emerge from the statistically significant differences between means of the composite variables: the lowest average distance is expressed towards religious groups – on average at the friends level, and the greatest towards the undesirables – at the level of associates at work.[4] It is important to note that the most exclusive category of social distance is chosen by an extremely small number of law students: about 3 % of them would like to exclude undesirable migrant groups from Croatia, and less than 1 % would exclude desirable migrants and members of other religions.

Figure 2: Distribution of the composite variables of social distance towards migrant, ethnic, and religious groups based on factor analysis

Source: Own data.

Furthermore, an analysis of variance was conducted to check the differences in the evaluation of social distance towards migrant, ethnic, and religious groups among students from different universities (Table 2). Statistically significant differences between law students from four Croatian universities were found for all three composite variables of social distance, with law students from the universities of Zagreb and Rijeka showing on average a lower social distance towards

all analysed groups than law students from Osijek and Split. At the same time, students from Zagreb and Rijeka are on average willing to establish a cooperative relationship with undesirable migrants (students from Osijek and Split on average accept them as residents of their country), a friendly and neighbourly relationship with desirable migrants (students from Osijek and Split are willing to establish a neighbourly and collaborative relationship), and a friendly relationship with members of other religions (students from Osijek and Split are willing to establish a neighbourly relationship).

Table 2: Average differences in the expressed social distance towards migrant, ethnic, and religious groups between law students from four universities

		N	M	SD	F (p) post hoc*
Social distance – undesirable	Zagreb	264	3.602	1.494	20.867 (.000) ZG≠ST, OS RI≠ST, OS
	Rijeka	192	3.500	1.548	
	Split	116	4.491	1.607	
	Osijek	94	4.617	1.329	
Social distance – desirable	Zagreb	264	2.288	1.236	32.822 (.000) ZG≠ST, OS RI≠ST, OS
	Rijeka	191	2.319	1.352	
	Split	115	3.409	1.632	
	Osijek	94	3.521	1.605	
Social distance – religious groups	Zagreb	264	2.303	1.176	20.063 (.000) ZG≠ST, OS RI≠ST, OS
	Rijeka	193	2.109	1.152	
	Split	116	2.836	1.609	
	Osijek	94	3.255	1.646	

Source: Own data.
* Tamhane T2 post hoc test was applied due to the determined inhomogeneity of the variables

Finally, hierarchical multiple regression was used to test the effect of the three models on the expression of social distance towards migrant, ethnic, and religious groups (Table 3). The first predictor model includes the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics: gender, size of the place of residence, family socio-economic status, highest parents' education level, and nationality. The second consists of contextual indicators that point to personal and/or family exile or refugee experience and familiarity with foreigners and refugees/asylum seekers. The third predictor model introduces value orientations and political attitudes, describing the propensity towards nationalism, clericalism, expertocratism, and Europeanism as political constructs, authoritarianism and conservatism as value constructs, with respondents' political orientation and religious self-identification additionally included.

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Table 3: Hierarchical regression analysis of the assessment of the effects on social distance towards migrant, ethnic, and religious groups

	Social distance towards undesirables			Social distance towards desirables			Social distance towards members of other religions		
	Model 1 (β)	Model 2 (β)	Model 3 (β)	Model 1 (β)	Model 2 (β)	Model 3 (β)	Model 1 (β)	Model 2 (β)	Model 3 (β)
Gender	-.010	-.014	-.022	-.016	-.016	-.010	-.049	-.048	-.040
Size of the place of residence	**-.099***	-.089	-.034	-.085	-.082	-.077	**-.108***	**-.105***	-.078
Highest level of parents' education	-.006	-.003	-.022	-.042	-.040	-.041	-.059	-.056	-.067
Family socio-economic status	.058	.062	.041	-.028	-.025	-.042	-.020	-.017	-.034
Nationality (1 – Croats; 2 – other)	**-.115***	**-.118***	**-.088***	-.032	-.029	-.020	**-.091***	-.086	-.072
Personal/family exile/ refugee experience (1 – yes)		.013	-.01		.040	.023		.056	.033
Friends – foreigners in Croatia (1 – yes)		-.031	.024		-.073	-.051		-.084	-.036
Met an asylum seeker or refugee (1 – yes)		**-.119***	-.052		-.038	-.006		-.034	.030
Attitude towards religion (convinced believer → opponent of religion)			-.073			-.049			-.047
Political orientation (left → right)			**.113***			.015			.017
Nationalism			**.362***			**.107***			**.302***
Clericalism			.010			.111			**.184***
Expertocratism			-.012			-.060			-.027
Europeanism			-.028			.046			**.104***
Authoritarianism			**.119***			.014			.041
Conservativism			**.165***			.081			**.204***
	R²=.025 F=2.383 p=.038	R²=.041 F=2.462 p=.013	R²=.335 F=14.302 p=.000	R²=.015 F=1.442 p=.208	R²=.024 F=1.427 p=.183	R²=.084 F=2.616 p=.001	R²=.033 F=3.315 p=.006	R²=.045 F=2.802 p=.005	R²=.307 F=13.054 p=.000

* p<.05; ** p<.01; ***p<.001
Source: Own data.

The results in Table 3 show that the analysed models interpret social distance towards undesirable migrant groups and members of other religions almost the same, while they interpret social distance towards desirable migrant groups as somewhat weaker. Place of residence and nationality were found to be the only statistically significant predictors in the first model, explaining between 2.5 % and 3.3 % of the variance of the dependent variables. Croats, compared to

members of other ethnic groups and residents of less urban areas, were found to have greater social distance towards undesirable migrant groups and members of other religions. Nationality remained a significant predictor of social distance towards less desirable migrants in models 2 and 3. Most of the contextual variables proved not to be statistically significant. Only personal contact with refugees/asylum seekers proved to be statistically positive in assessing social distance towards the undesirables, the group that includes these two types of migrants. In other words, students who had the opportunity to meet a refugee or an asylum seeker showed lower social distance towards the group of migrants defined as less desirable. Finally, when respondents' values and political orientations are included, the effect of the third model increases to a prominent 33.5 % of the variance of social distance towards undesirables and 30.7 % of social distance towards members of other religions. This model is the only significant model in predicting social distance towards desirables, accounting for 8.4 % of the variance. Nationalism has the strongest effect on all three dependent variables. Those who endorse this construct to a greater degree, i.e., those who are more inclined towards national exclusivity, national homogeneity, and lack of openness towards cultural differences, show greater social distance towards all three groups. In addition, a tendency towards conservatism is significantly associated with greater social distance towards the undesirables and members of other religions. Greater distance towards the undesirables is also expressed by law students who are more right-oriented politically and those who are more inclined towards authoritarian values. At the same time, in the third model, no significant positive effect of contextual contact with refugees or asylum seekers can be attributed to this dependent variable anymore. On the other hand, students who are more inclined to clericalism, but also Europeanism, show greater social distance towards members of other religions, i.e., students who attach greater political importance to the Catholic Church and students who advocate European unity show greater social distance towards members of other religions.

6. Discussion

In general, law students have been found willing to establish varying levels of distance towards members of different ethnic groups and towards undefined foreign workers, refugees, and asylum seekers. On average, they are willing to maintain the closest relationships with immigrants from North America and Western European countries, followed by immigrants from the countries of the former Yugoslavia. The aforementioned groups are followed by immigrants from Asian countries and Africa, and foreign workers in general. Finally, on average, students show the greatest distance towards immigrants from the Middle East, refugees and asylum seekers, and Roma. Factor analysis confirmed that, in terms of social distance, students perceive some groups as somewhat more desirable im-

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migrants to Croatia (immigrants from the U.S. and Canada, Western European countries, countries of the former Yugoslavia, and Asian countries) and other as somewhat more undesirable (immigrants from the Middle East and Africa, refugees and asylum seekers, and Roma). The inclusion of Roma in the same group as asylum seekers and the fairly even expression of social distance towards asylum seekers and Roma suggests that the thesis of asylum seekers as the new Roma is justified even among law students in Croatia, according to which asylum seekers become the group towards which the greatest distance is expressed – a place previously occupied by the Roma ethnic group (cf. CMS 2017).

Since ethnic prejudice, including prejudice against immigrants, is usually linked to the perceived threat that a foreign group may pose to the host society and its residents (Vučković Juroš et al. 2014), it is reasonable to assume that our respondents perceive some groups as a more serious threat and others as a less serious threat, either to the existing social order or to their interests and identities. Thus, whether it is the fear of losing their social, economic, or political power with the arrival of some immigrants (cf. Berg 2009; Rustenbach 2010) or the fact that some groups, in addition to the aforementioned threats, also pose a symbolic threat that may threaten their cultural and social identities (cf. Pereira et al. 2009), it is evident that our respondents show lower social distance towards potential immigrants from the West and neighbouring countries than towards those coming from the Middle East and Africa, for example, or towards refugees and asylum seekers in general. Although the relationship between social distance towards different migrant groups and the perception of these groups as a real and/or symbolic threat in Croatia needs to be further investigated, the results of some studies support the thesis that prejudice towards immigrants is related to the perception of these groups as a potential threat to the host country (especially to the ethnic majority) and the perception of the justification/legitimacy of one's own (im)migration.

For example, the results of research by Mrakovčić and Gregurović (2020) on the law students' attitudes towards Middle East migrants and asylum seekers in Croatia show that students who perceive asylum seekers as a threat to Croatia's culture, identity, economy, and security or as disguised economic migrants in search of a better life, rather than as genuine refugees, tend to have more negative attitudes towards Middle East migrants and the possibility of their residence in Croatia. Similarly, Gregurović et al. (2019) showed that residents of the Zagreb city quarter where the shelter for asylum seekers is located express, compared to residents of the control city quarter, a greater social distance towards asylum seekers and perceive them as a health and economic threat rather than seeing them as genuine refugees. Medlobi and Čepo (2018) found in their research that respondents with stronger national pride were more likely to express a sense of threat from the arrival of refugees and that the respondents' basic personal willingness (at the attitudinal level) to help people who have come through/to

Croatia as part of the migration/refugee crisis depends on whether they perceive these people as refugees, asylum seekers, or migrants. Greater willingness was expressed if they were perceived as refugees and less if they were perceived as migrants in general. Although this needs further investigation, it suggests that people are more likely to distance themselves from those groups of migrants that they perceive as posing a realistic and/or symbolic threat and as economic opportunists, rather than as refugees fleeing from war-torn areas (cf. Ajduković et al. 2019; Verkuyten et al. 2018).

Further on, the level of social distance towards the analysed migrant and religious groups differs considerably between students from the four largest Croatian universities. Law students from Zagreb and Rijeka show, on average, lower levels of social distance towards all groups studied than those from Osijek and Split. For example, while the former are on average willing to establish a cooperative relationship with undesirable migrants, the latter are willing to accept them only as residents of their country. Students from Zagreb and Rijeka are also ready for friendly relations with desirable migrants and other religious groups, while students from Osijek and Split are ready to establish a neighbourly and collaborative relationship with them. Although their results are not directly comparable to ours, some studies have also pointed out the importance of analysing regional differences in social distance towards other ethnic groups and asylum seekers in Croatia (cf. Bullat 1995; Banovac & Boneta 2006; Malenica 2003; Ajduković et al. 2019), indicating more positive attitudes towards different ethnic groups and asylum seekers in the contexts of Istria-Primorje and Central Croatia opposed to more negative attitudes in the contexts of Eastern Croatia and Dalmatia. The findings and conclusions of these research studies suggest that in order to adequately understand and explain social distance, as well as regional differences in this matter, it is necessary to examine the social and cultural characteristics from which meanings can be derived to interpret social reality and how influential actors and institutions use these meanings to shape and legitimize the desired social order and the desired social relations with different social groups.

Looking at the effects of respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, contextual indicators, value orientations and attitudes on social distance, it is clear that the effect differs significantly depending on which group it refers to.

Of the socio-demographic variables, only the respondents' size of the place of residence and nationality proved to be significant predictors of distance towards undesirable migrants and religious groups. Respondents belonging to the majority group (Croats) and respondents from less urban areas showed greater distance towards undesirable migrants and members of other religions than members of ethnic minorities and respondents from more urban areas. Of the contextual variables, only the experience of meeting a refugee or asylum seeker proved to be a significant predictor of distance, but only in the case of undesirable migrants. In addition, it seems interesting to point out that socio-

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demographic and contextual variables do not have predictive power for distance towards the desirable migrant groups. Finally, it is important to point out that the above socio-demographic and contextual characteristics are no longer significant predictors of distance towards undesirable (except for belonging to a majority or minority ethnic group) and religious groups when value and attitudinal constructs are included in the model. This certainly suggests that the problem of students' social distance towards others is, for the most part, actually some kind of worldview issue.

Many studies in Croatia (Banovac & Boneta 2006; Katunarić 1991; Malenica 2003; Medlobi & Čepo 2018) show that the tendency towards national exclusivism is usually associated with greater social distance towards others. The results of our study show that national exclusivism, which is in the background of (ethno)nationalism and anti-multiculturalism, is the only statistically significant predictor of distance towards undesirable and desirable migrants and religious groups. Although it does not have the same predictive power in all three cases, it is evident that those respondents who support the idea that the ideal state is one in which only one (ethno)nation lives and reject the idea that the state should help preserve the culture and customs of all ethnic groups exhibit a kind of universal lack of openness towards members of all groups perceived as other, regardless of the degree of situational threat they may feel from them at a given moment.

Moreover, conservatism proved to be a significant predictor of distance only in the case of undesirable migrants and religious groups. Since the effect is larger in the case of distance towards religious groups than towards undesirable migrants, we assume that this is more a matter of a certain ethnocentric suspiciousness towards diversity that rejects any significant change in the existing cultural and social order rather than a universal closeness towards all outsiders. This is supported, albeit indirectly, by Bulat's (1995) research findings showing that there is a correlation between the level of social distance towards different refugee groups and the perception of their socio-cultural difference from the host society. Considering that, according to the 2011 Croatian census (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2011), 86.28 % of the citizens identified themselves as Catholics and that Catholicism is often highlighted in public discourse as a fundamental component of Croatian national identity, there is a strong case for arguing that distance towards religious groups can be explained as part of the conservative suspiciousness towards diversity due to resistance to change in the existing national identity, while support of clericalism has been shown to be a significant predictor of distance only toward religious groups. Indeed, students who support the idea that society should be organized according to the principles and norms of the Catholic Church have shown to simultaneously express greater distance towards religious but not to other groups analysed.

Furthermore, it is somewhat surprising that respondents who support the idea of a Europe without borders and believe that European countries can pro-

tect their economic and political interests only in a united Europe also show greater distance towards other religious groups. Although we cannot determine with certainty why this is so, it is possible that law students view the affiliation with both Catholicism and the EU as a sign of belonging to the West rather than the East, and therefore those who are more religious support the idea of a united Europe. The above statement is partially confirmed by Petrović et al. (2021) who found that before the outbreak of the migration/refugee crisis in 2015, higher frequency of church attendance was a statistically significant, albeit weak, predictor in many CEE countries of the support for the idea that their country should follow EU decisions, even if one does not fully agree with them. In addition, the PEGIDA movement (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident) bases its position on preserving borders and strengthening Fortress Europe on a religious foundation and is considered a defender of Western civilization and Christianity (Murariu 2017), which can also be linked to the results of this research.

Additionally, authoritarianism proved to be a statistically significant predictor of social distance towards undesirable migrants. The fact that more authoritarian respondents express greater distance only towards the group of undesirable immigrants suggests that the latter group, towards which the greatest social distance is expressed, is perceived as a significant realistic and/or symbolic threat. Namely, according to the assumption of the theory of authoritarian dynamics (Stenner 2005), the difference in intolerance between authoritarian and non-authoritarian individuals occur only in situations of normative threat. In such a situation, actors with authoritarian predispositions react with increased intolerance towards those they hold responsible for this threat.

It was also shown that the political orientation of respondents is related to the level of their distance only towards undesirable migrants. That is, it seems that the attitude towards this group has become an important political issue that distinguishes those who identify with the left from those who identify with the right. Those who are more politically oriented to the right tend to have a greater distance towards the aforementioned group, and those who are more oriented to the left tend to have a lower distance. It is important to look at this relation in terms of the relationship between political orientation and nationalism because it often turns out that those on the right tend to support authoritarian political actors and aggressive nationalism, which often implies that migrants are held responsible for various economic and social problems (Medlobi & Čepo 2018, 64). The fact that political orientation is only related to the distance to the mentioned group and not to the other analysed groups supports Šiber's (1997, 24–25) conclusion that when analysing social distance towards others, it is necessary to distinguish between "traditional/cultural" and "political" distance. The latter is important for understanding the dynamics of political attitudes towards others since their (non)acceptance in a society depends significantly on both

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personal political attitudes and orientations of its citizens and the messages sent out by influential social and political actors and the media. The interplay of the above factors has a significant effect on the expression of (in)tolerance towards others at the level of personal action as well as on the support to discriminatory policies directed towards them at the systemic level.

7. Conclusion

Law students as future experts who are likely to come into contact with different aspects of lawbreaking and provide for the rights of specific groups of migrants in Croatia (immigrant workers and asylum seekers and refugees alike) are willing to establish varying levels of distance toward members of migrant and religious groups. A striking result of the study is the greatest social distance expressed towards asylum seekers, the group which could be included among the most sensitive and vulnerable groups (along with Roma). Placing this result in the post-migration/refugee crisis period, one keeps wondering about the effects of this crisis on students' attitudes. Even though we do not have comparable data from the pre-crisis period, we can only presume that the larger proportion of migrants coming from significantly different cultural and religious settings (including asylum seekers and refugees) as well as negative media portrayals (emphasizing the threat posed by those groups) of the migration/refugee crisis led to a shift in attitudes and greater social distance expressed towards migrants described in this paper as undesirable.

We also find it worth pointing out that Bogardus' social distance scale is the basis for a discussion about its applicability in today's context (see, e.g., Mather et al. 2017; Parrillo & Donoghue 2005). This is also suggested by the results of this study, which showed relatively weak differences in the expressed distance towards individual groups – although they can still ultimately be defined as desirable or undesirable. It would therefore be advisable to initiate a scholarly discussion on how to improve the sensitivity of the scale because it is an open question whether the difference in mean values between desirable and undesirable (friends/neighbours for the former and colleagues at work for the latter) is substantively and realistically too small.

Finally, it should be noted that due to the limitations of this study in terms of the sample adequacy and specificity of the population analysed, the results of our research should be additionally confirmed in a new study, preferably on a representative sample of the entire student body or the general population. In future research, more attention should also be paid to the analysis and explanation of regional specificities and differences in social distance towards different migrant groups, and the effect of political and media discourse on the social distance of different social groups towards migrants should be further investigated.

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Notes

[1] According to EUROSTAT (2022), the number of people applying for asylum for the first time in the Republic of Croatia increased from over 100 in 2015 (140) to over 2,000 in 2016 (2,150).

[2] The approval of the Ethics Committee of the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies was obtained to conduct the research (April 2019).

[3] Two factor analyses were performed using the principal component analysis method, with varimax rotation and the G-K criterion for stopping factor extraction. The first was applied to items assessing social distance towards migrants and ethnic groups, and the second to items assessing distance to members of different religions. Conditions for implementation were met for both factor analyses: FA1) Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy = .890; Bartlett's Test of Sphericity = 5747.661; FA2) Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy = .907; Bartlett's Test of Sphericity = 3817.722. The saturations of each item on the factor are shown in Appendix 1.

[4] The above results were obtained using the paired samples t-test, which tested the significance of the mean differences for all three pairs of social distance: 1) undesirable – desirable: t = 26.225; df = 663; p = .000, 2) undesirable – religious groups: t = 26,234; df = 664; p = .000, 3) desirable – religious groups: t = 3.810, df = 662, p = .000.

Appendix 1

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Factor analysis of social distance towards members of migrant and ethnic groups

	Factor	
	1	**2**
3.2. Social distance: Refugees	**.888**	.283
3.1. Social. distance: Asylum seekers	**.887**	.229
3.4. Social distance: Roma	**.796**	.230
3.9. Social distance: Immigrants from the Middle East	**.710**	.526
3.10. Social distance: Immigrants from Africa	**.658**	.568
3.7. Social distance: Immigrants from the USA and Canada	.213	**.916**
3.6. Social distance: Immigrants from Western European countries	.258	**.911**
3.5. Social distance: Immigrants from ex-Yugoslavia countries	.332	**.818**
3.8. Social distance: Immigrants from Asian countries (Chinese, Koreans ...)	.528	**.719**

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis;
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization;
80.952 % of interpreted variance;
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy = 0.890;
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity = 5747.661

Factor analysis of social distance towards members of religious groups

	Factor
	1
4.5. Social distance: Protestants (Baptists, Adventists ...)	**.929**
4.6. Social distance: non-Christians (Buddhists, Hindus ...)	**.913**
4.4. Social distance: Jews	**.901**
4.3. Social distance: Muslims	**.883**
4.2. Social distance: Orthodox	**.868**
4.7. Social distance: atheists	**.845**

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
79.239 % of interpreted variance
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy = .907
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity = 3817.722