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Factors Influencing the Attitudes of the Majority Population of Slovenia towards Immigration

The article presents the results of a study on the attitudes of the majority population of Slovenia towards immigration and the factors influencing such. The factors examined included: socio-demographic characteristics of the members of the majority population, contacts between the majority population and immigrants, and perceived economic, security, and cultural threats. We took as our premise two theoretical frameworks – group threat theory and intergroup contact theory. The results show that the majority population has a rather reserved attitude towards immigration and mostly believes Slovenia should tighten immigration conditions. The influence of individual factors on the majority population's attitudes was tested using hierarchical multiple regression analysis. Perceived threats, especially cultural threat, and to a lesser extent economic and security threats, emerged as the strongest predictors of attitudes towards immigration.

Keywords: immigration, attitudes towards immigration, perceived threats, Slovenia.

Dejavniki, ki vplivajo na odnos večinskega prebivalstva Slovenije do priseljevanja

V prispevku predstavljamo izsledke raziskave o tem, kakšen je odnos večinskega prebivalstva Slovenije do priseljevanja ter kateri dejavniki vplivajo nanj. Proučevali smo naslednje dejavnike: socialno-demografske značilnosti pripadnikov večinskega prebivalstva, stike med večinskim prebivalstvom in priseljenci ter percepcije ekonomske, varnostne in kulturne ogroženosti. Izhajali smo iz dveh teoretskih okvirov – teorije skupinske ogroženosti in teorije medskupinskih stikov. Rezultati kažejo, da ima večinsko prebivalstvo dokaj zadržan odnos do priseljevanja. Večina meni, da bi morala Slovenija zaostriti pogoje priseljevanja. Vpliv posameznih dejavnikov na oblikovanje odnosa večinskega prebivalstva smo preverjali s pomočjo hierarhične multiple regresijske analize. Kot najmočnejši napovedovalci odnosa do priseljevanja so se pokazale percepcije ogroženosti, zlasti kulturne, nekoliko manj pa ekonomske in varnostne ogroženosti.

Ključne besede: *priseljevanje, odnos do priseljevanja, percepcije ogroženosti, Slovenija.*

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1. Introduction

Research conducted in European countries shows that public reactions to immigration range from reluctant acceptance to rejection, irrespective of a country's historical development and immigration policy (Citrin & Sides 2008; Ceobanu & Escandell 2010). While in the 1980s and 1990s the majority population's reluctance to immigration grew at a steady pace, this trend seems to have come to a halt in the past two decades. Although the attitudes of the majority population in Europe remain relatively negative (Meuleman et al. 2009; Ceobanu & Escandell 2010), the salience of immigration as an issue has risen sharply over the last decade (Dempster et al. 2020, 11). Likewise, the difference in the attitudes towards immigration between Eastern European countries – which are traditionally non-immigrant countries and continue to record fewer immigration flows – and Western Europe has become more pronounced. In Eastern Europe, attitudes towards immigration are generally more negative than in the West (Coenders et al. 2009; Ceobanu & Escandell 2010).

The studies carried out in Slovenia (Komac & Medvešek 2005, 215–236; Zavratnik et al. 2008; Toš & Broder 2014) confirm that the ethnic and cultural diversity of a society is not always perceived as something positive. Immigrants, regardless of how long they have lived in Slovenia, are likely to be considered foreigners whose loyalty to the nation is questionable. A part of the majority population sees them as a potential threat to society, the welfare state, national security, Slovene culture and language. Research on immigration and integration conducted since 1990 confirms that the receiving country – together with the opinions and attitudes of the majority society towards immigrants – plays an important role in the integration of immigrants (Penninx 2013; Unterreiner & Weinar 2014, 2). Anti-immigration sentiments and attitudes that have lately re-emerged in many European countries (Esipova et al. 2015; Esipova et al. 2020) are considered to be an important constraint on migration policy and an obstacle to the successful integration of immigrants (Finseraas et al. 2016). The reverse is also true, though. As noted by Naveed and Wang (2021), there is a significant positive correlation between the majority population's favourable attitudes towards immigrants and social integration. In such regard, it is good to know the attitudes of the majority population towards immigration and the factors shaping such.

The article focuses on the analysis of a wide range of factors that influence the attitudes of Slovenia's majority population towards immigration. The presentation of the theoretical and methodological background underpinning the research is followed by a description of the majority population's attitudes towards immigration to Slovenia. The central part of the article deals with the factors that influence the formation of such attitudes. Finally, the results of the analysis used to test the impact of individual variables on the majority population's attitudes towards immigration are discussed.

2. Theoretical Background

The existing literature shows that people's attitudes towards immigration are shaped by several factors associated both with individual characteristics and experiences and the social context. Much of the debate on the factors shaping the attitudes towards immigration is based on the group threat theory (or group conflict theory), on the one hand, and intergroup contact theory, on the other.

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The group threat theory assumes that the negative opinions of the population, the natives, are the result of a perceived threat that they see in the presence of immigrants and/or permissive integration policies that give immigrants access to resources (Blumer 1958; Blalock 1967; Quillian 1995). With the development of the group threat theory, the study of the formation of prejudices, stereotypes, and attitudes as a result of individual characteristics and experiences has shifted to the study of the formation of prejudices, stereotypes, and attitudes as a result of intergroup relations. An individual identifies with a particular group (the ingroup), forms an image of the other group (the outgroup), and develops an understanding of the relationships between them. When this is combined with a perception of threat – the belief that the outgroup is taking over the resources that the individual believes belong to the ingroup – prejudices or negative attitudes are formed (Blumer 1958). This means that even if members of the majority community do not perceive immigrants as a threat to their personal interests, they may still perceive immigrants as a threat to the ingroup's interests (Schlueter & Davidov 2011). Feelings of threat relate to different aspects of life, meaning that there are different types of threats: economic (Mayda 2006; Ben-Nun Bloom et al. 2015), political, cultural (Stephan et al. 2005; Lucassen & Lubbers 2012; Ben-Nun Bloom et al. 2015), and security (or criminal) threats (Lahav & Courtemanche 2011), as well as threats to social welfare (Mayda 2006). It is thus important to distinguish between the different types of threats as each of them, depending also on the social context, leads to different attitudinal and behavioural consequences (Lahav & Courtemanche 2011; Ben-Nun Bloom et al. 2015). However, as Kleider (2021, 8–9) points out, the impact of these types of threat perceptions can be interrelated or complementary. It is important to note that perceived group threat and anti-outgroup attitudes represent two closely related, yet theoretically and empirically distinct concepts (Blalock 1967; Quillian 1995; Schlueter et al. 2008). The concept of perceived group threat is commonly defined as anticipation of negative consequences due to the presence of some outgroup and is understood as a direct predictor of more explicit, discriminatory anti-outgroup stances. To what extent such perceived threats induce such discriminatory attitudes towards the outgroup is, in fact, an empirical question (Schlueter & Scheepers 2010, 286). Previous research clearly supports the assumption that perceived group threat increases anti-outgroup attitudes (Esses et al. 2001; Riek et al. 2006; Stephan et al. 2005; Schlueter et al. 2008).

The conclusions of group threat theory are contradicted by the findings of the studies relying on (intergroup) contact theory. Contact theory assumes that, under the right conditions, increased proximity and regular contact between different ethnic groups, or interpersonal interactions between the majority population and immigrants, may effectively reduce the majority population's prejudice against immigrants and induce positive attitudes towards diversity. The two dominant measures of intergroup contact are context (i.e., size of a minority group within a specified geographical area) and individual behaviour (i.e., personal contact between members of the majority and minority groups). Intergroup contact occurs in a particular context, which may or may not encourage it (Stein et al. 2000). The size of the immigrant group in the receiving country is indeed an important factor that shapes the attitudes of the majority population towards immigrants. While group threat theory predicts a negative relationship between outgroup size and the ingroup's attitude towards immigrants, the contact theory mainly assumes a more positive relationship between the two. The larger the outgroup, the more opportunities there are to establish positive intergroup contacts, which contributes to a more positive attitude towards immigrants (Schlueter & Scheepers 2010). In this regard, Barceló (2016, 104) notes that the positive effect of the number of immigrants in a given country on the attitude of the natives towards immigrants is more likely due to the country's historical experience as a recipient of immigrants than due to the sheer size of the immigrant group. As he writes, tolerance is not increased by a short-term increase in the share of immigrants but, instead, by the long-term share of immigrants in the country, that is the reception of immigrants over a long period of time. He adds that the more positive attitudes towards immigrants in countries with a longer immigration tradition could also be shaped by different past policies in relation to immigrants in these countries (for example, policies aimed at improving the image of immigrants) (Barceló 2016, 109).

Lately, more complex structural models have been developed to identify the effects of intergroup contact, taking into account both positive and negative factors, together with the individual, structural, and normative context of contact (Durrheim & Dixon 2005, 21; Pettigrew & Tropp 2006). These studies are somewhat more cautious in validating intergroup contact theory, but there is still a large body of research in the psychological and sociological literature that confirms that intergroup contact contributes to the reduction of prejudice and negative attitudes towards outgroup members (Pettigrew et al. 2011).

3. Methodology

The data were drawn from an empirical survey conducted in 2020 on a sample of the majority population of Slovenia within the framework of the project Challenges of Immigrant Integration and Development of Integration Policy in

Slovenia (hereinafter: The Challenges of Integration project). The survey was conducted between June and September 2020 on a representative sample of 5,000 Slovene residents aged between 18 and 70. The sample was prepared by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SORS) using a random sampling method. Following the SORS definition of resident, the sample included persons, irrespective of their nationality, with a registered permanent and/or temporary residence in the Republic of Slovenia, residing or intending to reside in the country for a year or more and not temporarily absent for a year or more. The survey was sent by regular mail and was returned by 952 residents. To analyse the attitudes of the majority population towards immigration, we only took into account the responses of Slovenia-born residents (855).

Table 1: Selected socio-demographic characteristics of the population surveyed under the Challenges of Integration project (2020)

	Challenges of Integration – a survey among residents of Slovenia (only Slovenia-born residents)	
Gender	**Number**	**%**
Men	395	46.2
Women	460	53.8
Total	855	100.0
Age		
Young adults (18–35 years)	239	28.0
Middle-aged adults (36–55 years)	337	39.4
Older adults (56–70 years)	279	32.6
Total	855	100.0
Education		
Basic education (primary school or less)	47	5.5
Secondary education (short and upper secondary vocational or general education)	405	47.4
Tertiary education (college, university, postgraduate studies)	399	46.7
N/A	4	0.5
Total	855	100.0
Degree of urbanisation of the place of residence		
Urban/suburban area	487	57
Rural area	364	42.6
N/A	4	0.5
Total	855	100.0

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Immigrant background		
No immigrant background (both parents born in Slovenia)	740	86.7
With an immigrant background (one or both parents are foreign-born)	114	13.5
N/A	1	0.1
Total	855	100.0

Source: Data from The Challenges of Integration project.

Among the respondents, 46.2 % were men and 53.8 % were women. Most of them (39.4 %) were middle-aged adults between 36 and 55 years of age, followed by older adults (32.6 %) aged 56 to 70, and young adults aged 18 to 35 (28 %). The respondents largely (47.4 %) attained secondary education; a similar share (46.7 %) had a university degree and a few (5.5 %) had basic education. The majority of respondents reported living in an urban or suburban area (57 %) while 42.6 % reported living in the countryside. 86.7 % of respondents had no immigrant background and 13.5 % had an immigrant background.

In terms of gender and age structure, the sample was fairly representative of Slovenia's total population (according to 2020 data), the only exceptions being education and the degree of urbanisation of the place of residence. The share of respondents with tertiary education was significantly higher than in the country's population as a whole. As regards the degree of urbanisation of the place of residence, according to SORS data (SORS 2021a, 2021b), the actual proportions of residents living in urban (49.9 %) and residents living in rural (50.1 %) areas are much more balanced than in our sample.

4. Attitudes of the Majority Population towards Immigration

The results of the survey showed that the respondents expressed a rather reserved attitude towards immigration and immigration policies. The majority (59.6 %) thought that Slovenia should tighten immigration conditions and (65 %) that the demographic situation and economic needs in Slovenia did not provide sufficient grounds to support greater immigration. A considerable share (58.1 %) of respondents also disagreed that Slovenia should be more open to receiving refugees. The majority population supported the restrictions on immigration, yet they also acknowledged that it was immigrants who made it possible for some sectors of the Slovene economy to prosper by taking on jobs that others refused. The views of the majority population reflected support for selective immigration management, with more than half of the respondents agreeing that Slovenia should pursue a migration policy aimed at attracting high-skilled and highly educated foreign nationals.

The general opinion among the respondents (55.3 %) was that immigrants do not make Slovenia a better or a worse country to live in. Nevertheless, the share of those who thought that Slovenia had become a worse country to live in because of immigrants (28.3 %) was higher than the share of those who thought that Slovenia had become a better country for living (16.3 %).

A significant share (66.7 %) of respondents thought that immigrants in Slovenia abused the social support system. A considerable proportion (44.2 %) thought that immigration increased the number of crimes recorded in Slovenia, and a similar share (44.4 %) felt that immigrants undermined Slovene culture.

5. Factors Influencing the Attitudes of the Majority Population towards Immigration

In line with group threat theory and intergroup contact theory, we built a model to determine whether the predicted factors (perceived economic/cultural/security threats, intergroup contact and socio-demographic factors) have an impact on the formation of the majority population's attitudes towards immigration.

Proceeding from group threat theory, we hypothesised that the perceived group threat is an important factor shaping the attitudes towards immigration among the majority population, and tested whether residents who feel economically, culturally or security threatened hold a more negative attitude towards immigration than those who do not perceive these threats. Given the inconsistent research results regarding which type of threat has a stronger impact on the attitudes towards immigration, we wanted to see how strongly the impact of each perceived threat reflects in the attitude towards immigration in our sample. Building on intergroup contact theory, we also wanted to test whether individuals who have more contact with immigrants and those who have more immigrants in their circle of friends have a more positive attitude towards immigration. We explored how strong a predictor of attitude towards immigration are the socio-demographic characteristics of the majority population compared to perceived economic/cultural/security threats. Based on the findings of some previous research, we hypothesised that socio-demographic characteristics would prove to be less a predictor of the majority population's attitude towards immigration than the perceived economic/cultural/security threats.

The suitability of the model and the relative contribution of each factor (independent variable) to explaining total variance and our hypotheses were tested using hierarchical multiple regression. To determine the attitudes of the majority population towards immigration, we created an index of attitudes towards immigration (dependent variable) that consisted of three variables: Q9a – Slovenia should tighten the conditions for immigration to Slovenia (1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree), Q9c – Slovenia should be more open to receiving refugees (1

– strongly agree, 5 – strongly disagree), and Q9d – Slovenia needs more immigrants due to its demographic situation and economic needs (1 – strongly agree, 5 – strongly disagree). The index of attitudes towards immigration (1 – strongly in favour of immigration, 5 – strongly against immigration) has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.835 ensuring good reliability of results.

The independent variables included in the model were those that had been identified as relevant by previous research and are considered to be important predictors of the attitudes towards immigration. One such variable is the perceived economic threat, i.e., the perception of competition between the majority population and immigrants for scarce resources such as employment, social services, and housing. These perceptions are triggered by fear and suspicion that immigrants will deprive the majority population of certain privileges and benefits (e.g., jobs, social support). The perceived economic threat was measured by the Economic Threat Index consisting of three variables with a five-point scale of possible responses: Q17b – Immigrants take jobs away from Slovenes (1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree), Q17v – Wages in Slovenia are lower because of immigrants (1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree), and Q30e – Immigrants take advantage of the social support system in Slovenia (1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree). The economic threat index has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.782 ensuring good reliability of results.

The second independent variable was the perceived cultural threat, i.e., the perception that the different cultures, value systems, attitudes and moral values of immigrants pose a threat to the culture and values of the majority society. The perceived cultural threat was measured by the Cultural Threat Index, also composed of three variables: Q32 – Do you think that immigrants generally undermine or benefit Slovene culture? (1 – strongly benefit, 5 – heavily undermine), Q30j – Immigrants need to have religious facilities where they can practice their religion (1 – strongly agree, 5 – strongly disagree), and Q30d – With their way of life, immigrants undermine Slovene culture (1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree). The cultural threat index has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.775, which ensures good reliability of results.

The third independent variable was the perceived security threat, i.e., the perception that immigration jeopardises physical integrity and public safety. The perceived security threat was measured by the security threat variable Q30c – Immigration increases the number of crimes (1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree).

Intergroup contact between the majority population and immigrants was measured by two variables. The first one was the frequency of contact with immigrants, which we called contact: Q20 – How often do you have contact with immigrants in your daily life, for example on public transport, on the street, in a shop or your neighbourhood (1 – never, 7 – every day). The second variable was circle of friends: Q22 – How would you describe your circle of closest friends?

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(1 – there are many immigrants in my circle of friends, 2 – there are some immigrants in my circle of friends, and 3 – there are no immigrants in my circle of friends).

For the socio-demographic characteristics of the majority population, the following variables were used: gender, age (expressed in years), education (1 – primary and vocational school, 2 – upper secondary school, 3 – vocational college, 4 – university, 5 – master's degree and PhD), immigrant background[1] (with or without an immigrant background), and the degree of urbanisation of the place of residence (urban/suburban or rural areas). For the nominal and categorical independent variables, we created dummy variables as 0/1 values.

Table 2: Variables included in the regression analysis

Indexes and variables	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	Number
Attitude towards immigration (dependent variable)	3.64	1.078	770
Economic threat	3.11	1.037	770
Cultural threat	3.00	0.984	770
Security threat	3.22	1.086	770
Contacts	4.84	1.919	770
Circle of friends – many immigrants[1]	0.10	0.297	770
Circle of friends – some immigrants[2]	0.53	0.499	770
Gender – men[3]	0.46	0.499	770
Age	45.02	15.089	770
Education	2.70	1.243	770
Background – with an immigrant background[4]	0.14	0.347	770
Urbanisation of the place of residence – urban/suburban area[5]	0.58	0.493	770

Source: Data from The Challenges of Integration project.
[1] Dummy variable: circle of friends – many immigrants (0 or 1 value).
[2] Dummy variable: circle of friends – some immigrants (0 or 1 value).
[3] Dummy variable: gender – men (0 or 1 value).
[4] Dummy variable: background – with an immigrant background (0 or 1 value).
[5] Dummy variable: urbanisation of the place of residence – urban/suburban area (0 or 1 value).

Before running the hierarchical multiple regression, we checked that the required assumptions were met. The sample (N = 855) was large enough to include in the analysis ten independent variables (Tabachnick & Fidell 2001). The conditions of homoscedasticity and multicollinearity were met (the values of the variance inflation and tolerance coefficients were appropriate). We did not detect outliers or units that were significantly different from the others in the sample considered. The variables included in the analysis had few missing values, so we decided not to replace them but rather to exclude them from the analysis.

Table 3: Summary of the results of the hierarchical regression analysis to determine the impact of selected factors on the formation of the majority population's attitudes towards immigration

Variables	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4			Model 5		
	β	Beta	sr²	β	Beta	sr²	β	Beta	sr²	β	Beta	sr²	β	Beta	sr²
Age	.002	.022	.0004	.002	.032	.0009	-.001	-.017	.0002	-.001	-.016	.0002	.000	.005	.0000
Background – with an immigrant background	-.210	-.068	.0044	-.100	-.032	.0009	.018	.006	.0000	.036	.012	.0001	.061	.020	.0003
Education	-.168***	-.194	.0357	-.159***	-.184	.0320	-.079**	-.091	.0075	-.031	-.036	.0011	-.015	-.018	.0002
Gender – men	.180*	.083	.0069	.188*	.087	.0073	.057	.027	.0006	.080	.037	.0013	.076	.035	.0012
Urbanisation of the place of residence – urban/suburban area	-.121	-.056	.0030	-.095	-.044	.0017	-.076	-.035	.0010	-.054	-.025	.0006	-.052	-.024	.0005
Circle of friends – many immigrants				-.837***	-.230	.0408	-.439***	-.121	.0108	-.329**	-.091	.0061	-.238*	-.065	.0031
Circle of friends – some immigrants				-.422***	-.195	.0317	-.245***	-.114	.0104	-.136*	-.063	.0031	-.086	-.040	.0012
Contacts				.024	.043	.0016	-.002	-.004	.0000	-.020	-.035	.0010	-.011	-.019	.0003
Security threat							.533***	.537	.2560	.291***	.294	.0488	.159***	.160	.0123
Economic threat										.427***	.411	.0942	.287***	.276	.0361
Cultural threat													.385***	.351	.0566
Adjusted R	.058			.108			.366			.460			.517		
R Squared	.064			.118			.373			.467			.524		
Δ R Squared				.053			.256			.094			.057		

Source: Data from The Challenges of Integration project.

N = 770
* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

The variables age, immigrant background, gender, education, and degree of urbanisation of the place of residence added in the first stage (Model 1) together make a statistically significant contribution to the regression model ($F(5.764) = 10.501$, $p < .001$) and explain 5.8 % of the variance of the dependent variable attitude towards immigration. Age, immigrant background, and degree of urbanisation of the place of residence do not appear to have a statistically significant or unique impact on the variable attitude towards immigration in our model and sample, although they proved to be – especially age – important factors shaping the formation of attitudes towards immigration by several previous studies (Huber & Oberdabernig 2016; Javdani 2020, 3). In Model 1, only two variables – education and gender – emerged as having a statistically significant impact on

the attitudes towards immigration. Men have a more negative attitude towards immigration than women. Respondents with a higher level of education have a less negative attitude towards immigration than respondents with a lower level of education.

The other two variables – contacts and circle of friends, which explain inter-group contact – included in Model 2 explain the additional 5.3 % of the variance in the variable attitude towards immigration, making the model statistically significant, $F(8.761) = 12.678$, $p < .001$. The education and gender of the respondents and their circle of friends also have a statistically significant impact on the variable. Respondents who have immigrants among their friends and respondents with higher education have a less negative attitude towards immigration, and men have a more negative attitude towards immigration than women.

In Model 3, we added the variable security threat, which explains a new 25.6 % of the variance in the variable attitude towards immigration – the model is statistically significant, $F(9.760) = 50.267$, $p < .001$. In addition to the statistically significant impact of education and the respondents' circle of friends, there is a positive and statistically significant association between perceived security threat and the majority population's attitudes towards immigration. Respondents who feel their security is being threatened have a more negative attitude towards immigration.

In Model 4, we added the independent variable economic threat, which explains an additional 9.4 % of the variance in the variable attitude towards immigration – again, the model is statistically significant, $F(10.759) = 66.603$, $p < .001$. In Model 4, only perceptions of security and economic threats and the circle of friends have a statistically significant impact on the shaping of attitudes towards immigration. The variable circle of friends is negatively correlated with the variable attitude towards immigration, which means that respondents who have more immigrants among their friends have a less negative attitude towards immigration. The variables security threat and economic threat are positively correlated with the variable attitude towards immigration, which means that respondents who perceive immigration as a security or an economic threat have a more negative attitude towards immigration.

In Model 5, we added the independent variable cultural threat, which explains an additional 5.7 % of the variance in the variable attitude towards immigration – again, the model is statistically significant, $F(11.758) = 75.913$, $p < .001$. In this model, only four variables have a statistically significant impact: circle of friends – many immigrants, which explains only 0.3 % of the variance ($sr^2 = .0031$), security threat, which explains 1.2 % of the variance ($sr^2 = .0123$), economic threat, which explains 3.6 % of the variance ($sr^2 = .0361$), and cultural threat, which explains 5.7 % of the variance ($sr^2 = .0566$) in the variable attitude towards immigration. The last three variables also record the highest absolute values of the standardised beta coefficient, particularly the variable cul-

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tural threat (beta = .351), followed by the variable economic threat (beta = .276) and the variable security threat (beta = .161). This means that in our model the cultural threat factor is the most important factor shaping the attitudes of the majority population towards immigration. The independent variables included in Model 5 together explain 52.4 % of the variance of the dependent variable attitude towards immigration.

6. Discussion of Results

The socio-demographic characteristics of the majority population have been shown to have some influence on the formation of attitudes towards immigration. This is particularly true for education. In our analysis, the education of the respondents had a statistically significant impact on their attitude towards immigration in Models 1, 2 and 3. Respondents with higher education showed a less negative attitude towards immigration. Education appears to be a stable factor in shaping the attitudes towards immigration or immigration policy also in many other studies (Hello et al. 2002; Gang et al. 2002; Hainmueller & Hiscox 2007). People with higher levels of education tend to have a more positive view on immigrants and immigration (Wright et al. 2012; Freeman et al. 2013) and are more optimistic about the economic benefits of immigration (Citrin et al. 1997). There are two types of theoretical arguments for this kind of impact of education on the opinions about immigration: arguments related to labour market integration and arguments unrelated to labour market integration. The first assume that immigrants are not in direct competition with the more highly educated majority population and that the more highly educated benefit more from employing lower-paid, less skilled immigrants. As a consequence, more educated members of the majority population do not develop a negative attitude towards immigration (Barceló 2016, 89; Callens & Meuleman 2017). Arguments unrelated to labour market integration refer to the fact that higher education is associated with greater openness and cosmopolitan outlook, which results in a more tolerant attitude towards cultural diversity, a greater capacity for reflexivity, better-developed critical thinking, and greater exposure to other cultures as a consequence of a broader, international network of acquaintances (Hainmueller & Hiscox 2007, 400; Ceobanu & Escandell 2010, 319; Barceló 2016, 89).

A statistically significant relationship was also found between gender and attitudes towards immigration (Models 1 and 2). Compared to education, the impact of gender on shaping the attitudes towards immigration of the majority population is less well explored. Classical gender theories expect men to be more opposed to immigration than women. This is usually attributed to men's greater tendency towards authoritarianism which is associated with more negative attitudes towards immigrants and immigration. For example, Peresman et al. (2021) suggest that a perceived need to protect the ingroup from potential

cultural threats can serve as a key mechanism by which authoritarian predispositions manifest as hostility towards immigration. The results of empirical studies on the impact of gender on attitudes towards immigration are mixed, even contradictory (Valentova & Alieva 2013), yet a large body of research confirms a greater aversion to immigration among men than among women (Ponce 2017, 2). Ponce (2017) points out that recent debates on immigration (especially concerning Muslim cultures and the roles of women within them) question this relationship between gender and anti-immigrant attitudes. Ponce's analysis of data from the European Social Survey suggests that women are no less likely than men to show anti-immigrant attitudes. Contrary to traditional patterns regarding gender and attitudes towards immigrants, his study even shows that women are more likely to hold negative attitudes, but only towards a certain group of immigrants – i.e. Muslims. As Ponce suggests, a possible explanation for this is that women perceive Muslim culture – which is increasingly demonised in the Western world as gender inegalitarian – as a threat to gender equality. In our research, women hold more favourable attitudes towards immigration than men. This may be at least partly related to the higher proportion of highly educated women than men. On the other hand, based on some economic indicators, one would expect to find more pronounced perceptions of economic vulnerability on the female side, and thus more opposition to immigration. Indeed, our sample featured a higher proportion of unemployed women than men, and as some studies have found, unemployment is associated with significantly stronger perceptions of economic threat (Callens & Meuleman 2017) and (consequently) with a more negative attitude towards immigration (Lancee & Pardos-Prado 2013).

The perceived security, economic, and cultural threats emerged as stronger predictors of the majority population's attitudes towards immigration than socio-demographic variables. Respondents manifesting stronger perceptions of economic, cultural, and security threats had a more negative attitude towards immigration.

As expected, the strongest predictor of attitudes towards immigration among the majority population was the perceived cultural threat. The Slovene nation is based on an ethno-cultural conception of national identity (Nećak 1997, 20). It is assumed that this conception tends to foster more negative attitudes towards immigration than the civic conception of national identity because the immigration of foreigners of a different ethnicity or culture is perceived as a threat to national identity which is deemed to be ethnic in its essence. In contrast, the civic conception of national identity, which is rooted in an understanding of the national community as a political rather than ethno-cultural formation, tends to foster more positive attitudes towards immigrants, as cultural diversity is not perceived as a threat (Dixon 2019, 18; Wright et al. 2012). What exactly it is about culturally different groups that is perceived as dangerous and threatening is still a matter of debate. As Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014, 242) note,

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[not] all of the ostensibly cultural attributes operate in the same way. For instance, the fact that immigrants' language use influences immigration attitudes but that their skin tone does not suggests the value of differentiating among cultural traits based on their perceived immutability. Immigrants are rewarded or penalised for how they speak and the education they obtain, attributes over which they are perceived to have control.

Less important seem to be the traits that immigrants cannot or find difficult to change, such as skin colour or religion. The results of our survey also show that the majority Slovene population gives preference to acquired traits (education, language knowledge, skills, acceptance of the Slovene way of life) over ascribed traits (religion, skin colour) when deciding which immigrants are welcome (Medvešek et al. 2022, 121).

The perceived economic threat emerged as the second strongest factor influencing the attitudes of the majority population towards immigration. The perceptions of economic threat are largely shaped by the perceived labour-market competition (Kessler 2001; Mayda 2006; Scheve & Slaughter 2001) or by perceptions that immigrants represent a burden for the welfare state (Facchini & Mayda 2007). It is worth noting here that perceptions of economic threat are often based on an overestimation of the total number of immigrants and their proportion among the lowest earners, the less educated, the unemployed, and the recipients of fiscal transfers (Goldin et al. 2018, 126–127), leading to the perception that immigrants take more from the welfare system than they contribute to the economy of the receiving country. In Slovenia, respondents expressed a greater sense of threat based on perceptions that immigrants take advantage of the social support system than based on labour-market competition. Respondents do not see immigrants as competitors in the labour market, since immigrants often take on jobs that others do not want, thus playing a complementary role in the labour market and enabling some sectors of the Slovene economy to prosper.

A further potentially important co-shaper of attitudes towards immigration is contact between the majority population and immigrants. The structure of the respondents' friendship circle was more important than the frequency of contacts. The analysis confirmed our hypothesis that individuals with many immigrants in their circle of friends have a more positive attitude towards immigration than those who do not have immigrants among their friends. However, our data do not support the assumption that individuals who have more contact with immigrants have a more positive attitude towards immigration.

7. Final Remarks

The attitudes of the majority population towards immigration can have an impact on migration policymaking and the integration of immigrants. In a situation

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where much of Europe is facing an ageing population, unfavourable demographic projections and labour shortages, immigration seems like a practical necessity, and negative attitudes towards immigration among the majority population can be a barrier in this respect. The same applies to negative attitudes towards immigrants already residing in the receiving countries, which hinder or prevent successful integration. If we are to change the attitudes of the majority population, we need to know the factors that shape such attitudes.

When examining the attitudes of the majority population in Slovenia towards immigration, the perceived cultural threat emerged as the strongest predictor thereof, followed by perceived economic and security threats. The stronger impact of perceived cultural threat can perhaps be linked to the fact that the Slovene nation is based on the concept of ethnic, not political, community. The presence of immigrants and multiculturalism in everyday practices challenges the myth of national cultural homogeneity. From this perspective, the ethnic conception of national identity is arguably more prone to perceiving immigrants of a different culture as a threat than the civic conception of national identity (Dixon 2019, 18; Wright et al. 2012). Nevertheless, as Bajt (2016, 51) points out, in no way should nationalist exclusion be understood as associated only with so-called ethno-cultural nations, for it permeates all nation-states. This is confirmed by the results of recent international surveys showing that the majority of people in different countries favour relatively strict immigration policies that restrict further immigration, especially immigration from countries that are ethnically or culturally very different (see e.g. Javdani 2020).

Most research considers perceived cultural, economic and security threats as independent factors. Further research should focus on the possibility that the effects of different types of threats on people's attitudes towards immigration are complementary or interrelated. An analysis of the processes shaping the attitudes towards immigration that assumes that individuals' perceptions of different kinds of threats are clearly separated and independent of each other may lead to a false simplification of their impact (Kleider 2021, 8–9). Moreover, the influence of some other factors related to the individual characteristics of the members of the majority society – such as political and ideological orientation, religiosity and values – as well as the influence of the social context (e.g. the number of immigrants, media coverage of immigrants, etc.) on the formation of attitudes towards immigration should also be examined.

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Notes

[1] Immigration background means one or both parents are foreign-born.

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