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Re-examining public opinion preferences for migrant categorizations: "Refugees" are evaluated more negatively than "migrants" and "foreigners" related to participants' direct, extended, and mass-mediated intergroup contact experiences

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ABSTRACT

Although migrant categorizations (e.g. "migrants", "refugees") are often conflated in political and academic discourse, they may be ascribed to different people and inspire different preferences in public opinion. Previous research in Western Europe has identified more positive attitudes toward "refugees" than toward "migrants" due to the legitimate need for international protection of "real refugees" compared to the perceived illegitimate claims by "economic migrants". However, little evidence suggests that the same preference also exists in Eastern European countries that have historically received smaller numbers of refugees and had fewer frequent experiences with migrants and foreigners compared to West European countries. Moreover, the term "refugee" was intensively recategorized as "bogus" and de-legitimized in East European political discourse. To provide new evidence, we conducted a pre-registered comparative survey-based study with a sample of young Slovak adults ($N = 873$) to compare evaluations of three commonly used migrant categorizations in Slovakia – "refugees", "migrants", and "foreigners" – on multiple attitudinal and behavioural measures. In addition, we also tested the intergroup contact hypothesis about the relationship between participants' evaluations and their experiences of direct, extended, and mass-mediated contact with these target groups. We found that "refugees" invoked less favourable feelings, attitudes, trust, and greater social distance compared to "migrants" and "foreigners". These evaluations related to the valence (and less to the quantity) of participants' experience of intergroup contact. These results challenge previous findings about public opinion preferences for "refugees" over "migrants", support the intergroup contact hypothesis, and make a case for a more contextualized research.

Introduction

It may not be a trifle distinction to be categorized as either a "migrant", a "foreigner", or a "refugee". Rather than being neutral and objective terms of legal reference, "migrants", "foreigners", and "refugees" are politically loaded migrant categorizations that impose

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identities, define expectations, and legitimise policies aimed at members of these categorized target groups (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Sajjad, 2018; Sigona, 2018; Zetter, 1991). The construction of migrant categorizations is sensitive to sociocultural and historical contexts, preventing them from acquiring single, fixed, and universal meanings that would allow for easy cross-country comparisons (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010; Goodman et al., 2017; Goodman & Speer, 2007; Lynn & Lea, 2003). Evidence suggests that certain migrant categorizations (e.g. "refugees") gain legitimacy for receiving help when they are perceived as morally deserving, i.e. their situation is seen as involuntary compared to those (e.g. "migrants", "economic migrants") whose situation is perceived as a matter of their own choice, i.e. voluntary and thus undeserving of assistance (Bansak, Hainmueller, & Hangartner; 2016; Echterhoff et al., 2020; Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Verkuyten, Altabatabaei et al., 2018; Verkuyten, Mepham et al., 2018). Consequently, a number of studies conducted in Western European countries show preference in public opinion for "refugees" over "migrants" (or "economic migrants") (De Coninck, 2019; O'Rourke & Sinnott, 2006; Wyszynski et al., 2020). However, the emerging practice of recategorizing "refugees" as "bogus" can effectively de-legitimize their perceived deservingness for assistance and weaken supportive public opinion (Esses et al., 2013; Goodman & Speer, 2007; Lynn & Lea, 2003). This could be most visible in Eastern European countries (e.g. Slovakia) where, due to a lack of colonial past and strict policies limiting the number of refugees and asylum seekers in recent years (Kaczmarczyk & Okólski, 2007), opportunities for contact with "refugees", "migrants", and "foreigners" (due to their low numbers) are less frequent than in the Western Europe (International Organization for Migration, 2019). Moreover, in these countries, public opinion concerning migrant target groups is one of the most hostile in Europe (European Commission et al., 2018) and "refugees" are intensively recategorized as "bogus" and de-legitimized in political discourse (Kissová, 2018; Naxera & Krčál, 2018). These factors make Slovakia a particularly suitable case for re-examining public opinion preferences (i.e. feelings, attitudes, trust, social distance, attitudes towards integration policies, and behavioural intentions) for "refugees" over "migrants" and for testing the intergroup contact hypothesis: the potential relationship between these evaluations and participants' experiences of direct, extended, and mass-mediated contact with migrant target groups.

Immigrant labels and categorizations

To be recognised, referred to, and treated as a "migrant", a "foreigner", or a "refugee" can have far-reaching consequences for the individuals labelled or categorized as such. Originally, this idea was put forth by Zetter (1991) who scrutinized the public policy practice of imposing a "refugee" label on different kinds of people on the move by governments, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. He found that these labelling and categorization practices instrumentally define and prescribe who these people are, whether they should be helped, and the conduct expected of them. However, these people do not participate in the construction and formation of their bureaucratic and institutional identities, which makes them powerless and vulnerable to these imposed labels and categorizations. For Zetter (1991), refugee labelling "is an inescapable part of public policy making and its language: a non-labelled way out cannot exist" (p. 59). Zetter (2007) later revisited this concept to show how the increasingly complex and globalized migration landscape, the national interests of the "global north" countries, and the "fractioning" of bureaucratic categories and instruments transformed the eligibility and entitlement of people labelled as refugees. He also makes plain how the refugee label became politicized "by the process of bureaucratic fractioning which reproduces itself in populist and largely pejorative labels" and "by legitimizing and presenting a wider political discourse of resistance to refugees and migrants as merely an apolitical set of bureaucratic categories" (Zetter, 2007, p. 174).

Similarly, Sigona (2018) argues that the choice of migration-related labels and categorizations differentiating between refugees, forced migrants, economic migrants, asylum seekers, and vulnerable migrants "has enormous implications on the kind of legal and moral obligations receiving states and societies feel towards them" (p. 1). For example, a discursive analysis of the labels "illegal immigrants", "asylum seekers", and "boat people" in Australian mass-media between 1996–2001 showed how these different social categorizations of people seeking asylum in Australia legitimised different marginalising governmental policies such as mandatory detention or sending the asylum applicants home (O'Doherty & Lecouteur, 2007).

Although the concepts "labelling" and "categorization" are often used in the literature interchangeably, "labelling" means referring with different terms (labels) to the same target group (Ommundsen et al., 2014), while "categorization" involves referring with different terms (categories) to different target groups (De Coninck, 2019). Both naming processes can carry different connotations that influence evaluations of the target groups. Yet, "categorization" recognises the assumption that, aside from naming target groups with differently connoted terms, "refugees", "migrants", and "foreigners" have distinct legal definitions that denote individuals with sometimes different and sometimes overlapping legal and social characteristics (De Coninck, 2019).

The role of sociocultural and historical context in the construction of migrant categorizations

The migrant categorizations of "refugees", migrants", and "foreigners" are "intermittently distinguished and conflated in political, popular, and media discourse" to describe the same people or demarcate different migration-related identities (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016, p. 16). Crawley and Skleparis (2018) critically scrutinize accounts of "categorical fetishism" when "the seemingly neutral and objective category of 'refugee' is in fact being constantly formed, transformed and reformed" (p. 4) as a reaction to changing legislation and policies engendered by migration-related political grievances and electoral competition. Numerous studies provide evidence that the legal and policy categories of "refugees" and "migrants", supposedly neutral and fixed, are on the one hand discursively used for instrumental political purposes and on the other, poorly reflect the complex realities of people on the move (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; Goodman & Speer, 2007; Lynn & Lea, 2003).

As Ceobanu and Escandell (2010) point out, there is no universally applicable understanding of who is an "immigrant" and what

"immigration" is. Their observation likewise applies to the categories of "foreigners" and "refugees". Since populations of different countries experienced different migration events and policies, what people understand by these terms varies not only across and within countries and events, but also over time. Along with Card, Dustmann, and Preston (2005, p. 12), Ceobanu and Escandell (2010) note that, in response to the term "immigrant" connoting different categories of people in different countries, the European Social Survey (ESS) module on attitudes toward immigrants uses the more nondescript formulation of "people who come to live in [Country] from abroad" (p. 314). However, even such a formulation poorly reflects the racialised notion of the "migrant" categorization in many European countries, which is mostly applied to non-Christian and non-white labour migrants from former colonies and their children (El-Tayeb, 2008). El-Tayeb draws attention to how the "hereditary" character of "migrants" redefines their "newcomer" or "on the move" status: even those persons who were born and raised in a European country are frequently identified as "third generation migrants", alluding to their inherited "position outside the community of citizens" (El-Tayeb, 2008, p. 652). In the United Kingdom (UK), a critical analysis also revealed gendered and racialized categories of "migrant" and "asylum seeker" with people being ascribed these categorizations even after attaining formal citizenship (Anderson, 2013). The term "foreigner" can be ridden with racial, ethnic and cultural connotations as well, aptly demonstrated in the Dutch term "allochtoon" representing the non-white, alien, "not-quite-Dutch" residents of the Netherlands (Essed & Trienekens, 2008, p. 57). Just like in the case of "migrants", the status of "allochtoon" is "hereditary" - it can apply indefinitely to "never quite Dutch" residents, no matter whether they themselves or generations of their ancestors were born or have lived in the Netherlands (Essed & Trienekens, 2008, p. 58).

The meaning of the categorizations "migrant", "foreigner" and "refugee" is also shaped by linguistic idiosyncrasies that can become invisible when these terms are translated to English. For example, the term "refugee" in English refers to a person seeking refuge (and implied safety) while the identical term in Slovak, *utečenec,* or in German (*der Flüchtling*) refers to a person running away (from implied danger). The implied positive (safety) and negative (danger) connotation of the term "refugee" in different languages can subtly influence perceptions and evaluations, despite it being translated and used as a single, identical term with a universal, cross-cultural meaning.

Migrant categorizations are also subject to temporal and sociocultural dynamics. Different categorizations are used in different countries to refer to the same immigration-related event or phenomenon. Berry et al. (2015) observed major differences in the use of collective labels (migrant, immigrant, refugee) in press coverage of the 2015 "refugee and migration crisis" in five EU countries. The press in Germany and Sweden most frequently used the terms "refugee" and "asylum seeker". Newspapers in the UK and Italy most often used the term "migrant", while the term "immigrant" predominated in the Spanish print media. Discursive analysis of UK news outlets revealed temporal dynamics of migrant categorizations including both underlying connotations of threat (migrants) and sympathy (refugees): from January 2015 to May 2016 "Mediterranean migrant crisis" evolved to "Calais migrant crisis", "European migrant crisis", and "refugee crisis" just as its protagonists were first categorized as "migrants", later as "refugees", and then recategorized as "migrants" (Goodman et al., 2017).

Evidence indicates that the migrant categorizations of "migrants" ("immigrant"), "foreigners", and "refugees" do not have single, fixed, neutral, objective, and universal meanings that apply across countries and historical events. Instead, these terms are dependent on sociocultural and historical context and the shifting societal dynamics in which their meanings are constructed, contested, and reconstructed (Goodman et al., 2017, Goodman & Speer, 2007; Lynn & Lea, 2003).

Public opinion preferences for "refugees" over "migrants" re-examined

The literature on the immigrant label effect suggests that migrant labels (e.g., "illegal aliens", "undocumented immigrants", "illegal immigrants", "undocumented workers", "refugees", "asylum seekers", and "noncitizens") and their different connotations can influence evaluations of the people they represent (Augoustinos & Quinn, 2003; Knoll et al., 2011; Merolla et al., 2013; Ommundsen et al., 2014; Pearson, 2010; Rucker et al., 2019).

The construction, perception, and social evaluation of different migrant categorizations has been predominantly based on how "perceived forcedness and associated perils" diminish the ability to resist coercive "push" factors for migration (e.g. war, persecution), as well as related concerns about legitimacy and moral deservingness: "involuntary" and "deserving" refugees versus "voluntary" and "undeserving" migrants (Echterhoff et al., 2020; Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). Such concerns play an important role in shaping Europeans' immigration preferences. Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner (2016) found that asylum seekers' reasons for migrating play an important role in shaping the immigration preferences of participants in 15 European countries: respondents were significantly less likely to grant asylum to applicants who were seeking economic opportunities than to participants who were seeking refuge from political, religious or ethnic persecution. Similarly, a national sample of Dutch citizens expressed stronger support (and espoused weaker concerns about impacts on the host society) for the accommodation of involuntary, rather than voluntary, migrants (Verkuyten et al., 2018). Moreover, Verkuyten, Mepham, and Kros (2018) showed that Dutch adults were more willing to support policies assisting immigrants (and felt more empathy with them) when they perceived that their reasons for migration were involuntary as opposed to when they perceived them as voluntary (which caused resentment). A sample of German university students expressed more negative stereotypes, emotions, and behavioural tendencies towards "economic refugees" than towards "refugees" and "war refugees" (Kotzur et al., 2017). In a convenience sample of German adults, Wyszynski, Guerra, and Bierwiaczonek (2020) experimentally examined differences in helping intentions for displaced persons respectively labelled as "refugees", "migrants" or "economic migrants". They found that "refugees" elicited stronger dependency-oriented helping intentions than "economic migrants" while "economic migrants" evoked stronger opposition to helping than "refugees" and "migrants" (Wyszynski et al., 2020). In a correlational study, conducted in Belgium, France, Netherlands, and Sweden, De Coninck (2019) found that, after being prompted with the UN-definitions of migrant categorizations, participants expressed more negative attitudes towards "immigrants" than towards "refugees". In the 1995

International Social Survey Programme module on national identity, a quota-representative sample of the general Slovak population expressed more negative attitudes towards immigrants (when asked by how much the current number of immigrants in Slovakia should be increased or decreased) than towards refugees (when asked about the extent to which they agree or disagree that refugees, who were politically persecuted in their home countries, could stay in Slovakia) (ISSP Research Group, 1998; O'Rourke & Sinnott, 2006).

Evidence indicates a prevalent public opinion preference for "refugees" over migrants. However, recent discursive practices leading to the de-legitimation of "refugees" suggest that the findings about "good refugees, bad migrants" (Wyszynski et al., 2020) should be re-examined. Esses, Hamilton, and Gaucher (2017) point out that during the global "refugee crisis" many people in (potential) host countries had "real or imagined" reasons (e.g., high numbers of refugees, terrorism, infectious diseases, burden for the health-care and welfare system, cultural incompatibility) to feel threatened by refugees (p. 80). Even before the "refugee crisis", security concerns regarding refugees were frequently voiced in the mass media. Besides a fear of terrorists disguised as refugees and concerns about the spreading of infectious diseases, apprehensions also included "that refugee claimants are often bogus" (Esses et al., 2013, p. 518). Juxtaposing "real" refugees who are involuntarily fleeing from political, religious or ethnic persecution, and "bogus" or economic refugees who are voluntarily seeking economic advantage in the absence of threat emerged in late 1990s as a popular discursive strategy for delegitimizing refugees, rejecting their entitlement, and declining to provide assistance (Goodman & Speer, 2007; Lynn & Lea, 2003). More recently, in August 2015 Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico declared that refugees "are in 95 % cases economic migrants. One must clearly distinguish between economic migrants who must be returned to the countries they came from and those who really need protection" ('Fico', 2015). Using the then frequently employed political delegitimation framing strategy (Kissová, 2018), he instrumentally dismissed "real refugees" as "economic migrants". Similarly, Czech President Miloš Zeman's quipping about refugees "who are 90 % young men, with an iPhone in one pocket and Euros or dollars in the other" (Naxera & Krčál, 2018, p. 14), fed into popular perceptions of refugees as bogus, masked voluntary economic migrants who did not possess valid claims concerning involuntary migrations. By recategorizing "refugees" as "bogus", these discursive practises questioned the deservingness of "refugees", and thus their ability to seek protection in EU countries, while also challenging the compulsory EU fixed-quota scheme opposed by the Slovak and Czech governments. Thus, in this context, it remains to be seen whether "refugees" could be evaluated less positively than "migrants" and "foreigners" because, unlike the latter two, the "refugees" categorization became contaminated with sham and deception concerns. The present research attempts to answer this question.

Intergroup contact and evaluations of immigrants, foreigners, and refugees

According to intergroup contact theory, contact that occurs between members of an in-group and members of an out-group can lead to more positive intergroup attitudes and behaviours when optimal conditions of cooperation, common goals, equal social status, and institutional support are met (Allport, 1954; Paluck et al., 2019; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The quantity (how often) and valence (positive or negative) of intergroup contact determine its relationship with intergroup attitudes - participants more frequently report positive contact with out-group members, but negative contact, which occurs less often, has a stronger effect on outgroup attitudes (Graf et al., 2014; Kotzur et al., 2018). Intergroup contact can transpire as direct, personal contact between members of different groups, as extended indirect contact between a friend or an acquaintance and a member of an out-group, or as indirect contact with out-group members through mass-media.

Positive direct contact with immigrants is associated with decreased intergroup anxiety (Ward & Masgoret, 2006), decreased perceptions of threat (Schneider, 2007), weaker opposition to immigration (Thomsen & Rafiqi, 2019), reduced willingness to expel legal immigrants from the country (McLaren, 2003), more positive attitudes (Rodon & Franco-Guillén, 2014), stronger tendencies to be more welcoming and feel more welcomed (Tropp et al., 2018), more positive stereotype content perceptions of warmth, more positive intergroup emotions and greater support for solidarity-based collective action (Kotzur et al., 2019). In addition, Graf and Sczesny (2019) found that both positive (and negative) direct contact with migrants in Switzerland is associated with more positive (or more negative) attitudes and stronger (or weaker) intentions to support this group. Evidence from Britain suggests that negative direct contact with immigrants leads to increased prejudice towards and avoidance of immigrants and other out-groups (Meleady & Forder, 2019).

When direct personal contact is difficult to accomplish, *extended contact* - knowing an in-group member who has had positive personal contact with a member of an out-group - can positively influence perceptions, emotions, attitudes, and behavioural intentions towards out-groups (Vezzali et al., 2014; Wright et al., 1997; Zhou et al., 2019).

Even in the absence of personal contact (positive or negative) with an out-group, an individual's attitudes towards said out-group can still be affected through *mass-mediated contact.* In cases of mass-mediated contact, the quantity (how often) and the valence (positive /negative) of mass-media coverage of out-group members determine how favourably the out-group is evaluated (Mazziotta et al., 2011; Schiappa et al., 2005). A number of observational studies conducted in Italy (Visintin et al., 2017), Germany (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009), and the Netherlands (Wojcieszak & Azrout, 2016) found that both the amount and the degree of positivity or negativity of an individual's media exposure to immigrants is related to how positively or negatively participants perceive immigrants. An experimental study conducted in the United States demonstrated the positive effect of exposure to a positively valenced media depiction of intergroup interaction between an illegal immigrant and a US citizen on the attitudes toward illegal immigrants (Joyce & Harwood, 2014).

The available evidence suggests that direct, extended, and mass-mediated intergroup contact play a role in shaping perceptions and evaluations of immigrants, foreigners, and refugees.

The case of Slovakia

In Slovakia, common usage of migrant categorizations – "refugees", "migrants" and "foreigners" – results in overlapping meanings and, in the case of "refugees" and "migrants", even interchangeable terms of reference for different categories of people seeking a new place or country to live in.

A refugee (*utečenec/utečenka* in Slovak) is a person who was forced to leave his/her country of origin because of imminent persecution or threat of persecution and who, due to this situation, is not able to return to his/her country. The reasons for which a person may be granted asylum are stated in the Convention on the Status of Refugees (United Nations General Assembly, 1951). In Slovakia, the legal term refugee is no longer used. Instead, this category of persons are referred to as asylees (asylum status holders) (Ministerstvo práce, sociálnych vecí a rodiny Slovenskej republiky, 2019).

According to Slovak legislation (Act No. 404/2011 Coll. on the Residence of Aliens) a foreigner or an alien (*cudzinec/cudzinka* in Slovak) is a person who is not a citizen of the Slovak Republic; thus, the term foreigner or alien is a general umbrella term for anyone who does not possess Slovak citizenship, including EU citizens, third-country nationals, asylum status holders, and persons with subsidiary protection status. These diverse groups are all foreigners under Slovak law.

A generally accepted definition of a migrant (*migrant/migrantka* in Slovak) in international law is still missing, but common understanding identifies a migrant as a person moving from a place of origin or usual residence, to another place within or outside the country of origin. Migrant is another umbrella term that covers "a number of well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers; […] smuggled migrants; […] and international students" (International Organization for Migration, 2016).

However, it must be noted that the legal definitions of "migrant", "foreigner", or "refugee" do not have to always align with their popular use and perception. For instance, depending on a societal context, the terms "migrant" and "foreigner" can gain highly racialized connotations, with any person of darker skin tone routinely perceived as "foreign" and "non-European", irrespective of their citizenship status (El-Tayeb, 2008).

Feeling unwelcome and being subjected to hostile public opinion can be a challenging experience for many immigrants, refugees or foreigners coming to or living in Slovakia (Mesežnikov & Bútorová, 2018). Considered "primarily a country of transit" (International Organization for Migration, 2019), Slovakia has one of the highest rejection rates for asylum applications and, in relative terms, one of the smallest numbers of foreign-born inhabitants in the EU. From independence in January 1993–2019, out of 58,947 applications, Slovakia has granted asylum to only 858 applicants (1.5 percent) (Ministerstvo vnútra Slovenskej republiky, 2019). In 2018, with 121, 264 registered foreign nationals, Slovakia had the sixth lowest share (2.2 percent) of foreigners as a percentage of the total population amongst all EU countries (International Organization for Migration, 2019; Úrad hraničnej a cudzineckej polície, 2018). In addition, the integration of migrants in Slovakia lags behind most other countries in and outside of Europe - it was ranked 34th out of 38 countries in the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), reflecting local and national authorities' priorities and attitude towards migrants residing in Slovakia (Slovakia/MIPEX 2015, n.d.).

Correspondingly, public opinion polls document negative attitudes towards immigration and refugees (Bustikova, 2019). In December 2015, 70 percent of a representative sample of the Slovak population expressed considerable worries about the arrival of refugees in Slovakia, 49 percent stated that refugees should be helped 'only when absolutely necessary' and 19.4 percent declared that refugees should not be helped at all (Bahna & Klobucký, 2015). In March 2018, the Standard Eurobarometer 89 survey found that the 'immigration of people from outside the EU' elicits negative feelings for 83 percent of Slovak respondents, indicating that attitudes towards refugees in Slovakia are some of the most negative in Europe (European Commission et al., 2018).

The low number of "refugees", "migrants" and "foreigners" living in Slovakia determine both the quantity and quality of intergroup contact opportunities as well as hostile public opinion against these migrant categorizations. This, when combined with a political discourse that recategorizes "refugees" as "bogus", makes Slovakia a particularly interesting case for re-examining public opinion preferences for "refugees" over "migrants" and for testing the relationship between these evaluations and the quantity and valence of intergroup contact.

The present research

In the present study, we conduct a pre-registered comparative survey-based study[1] to explore whether a sample of young Slovak adults will express different feelings, attitudes, trust, social distance, attitudes towards integration policies, and behavioural intentions towards three migrant categorizations commonly used in Slovakia – "migrants", "refugees", and "foreigners". In addition, we also test the hypothesis that participants' more positive evaluations are related to more frequent and more positive experiences of direct, extended, and mass-mediated contact with these target groups. The distinct properties of our sample (students of similar age and education level from 15 Slovak universities) allowed us to explore the potential relationship between participants' gender, place of residence, and their evaluations of three migrant categorizations.

[1] Pre-registration protocol as well as data, R code, and materials used in this research are available at: https://osf.io/jq8f9/?view_only=87fe7e583a474a0e8587573de42f5bab. This pre-registration also includes a conjoint experiment that constituted the first part of data collection with the survey reported here following after the conjoint experiment. Results of the conjoint experiment are reported in a separate article.

Method

Participants and recruitment

We used a convenience sampling technique to recruit participants among undergraduate and graduate students at 15 universities across Slovakia in order to obtain a regionally balanced sample. We approached student participants via their course lecturers, and thus had no control over how many students were enrolled in the classes or over how many decided to participate. We encouraged the lecturers to offer course credit to students for their participation in the study, though not all participants received this compensation. In line with the pre-registration plan we sought to recruit a minimum of 800 student participants. 1664 participants started the online survey, out of which 742 were excluded for failing the attention check (either not answering correctly or not providing any information). Additionally, 43 participants were excluded for not providing their demographic information, as were three participants for exceeding 50 years of age and three participants for not being of legal age (17), resulting in 873 participants included in the analysis (*M* age = 22.8, *SD* age = 3.85, 66.43 % female; no information about immigration background of participants was collected). Since the sample size was co-determined by conjoint tasks[2], we had not planned for a specific final sample size. A post-hoc sensitivity analysis for main effects in ANOVA using G*Power with $\alpha = .05$, numerator df = 2 and three groups showed that we had an 80 % chance of detecting a main effect as small as $f = 0.1$. Data collection took place between December 3rd, 2018 and March 20th, 2019.

Materials and procedure

After completing conjoint tasks, participants were randomly assigned to answer questions about either "migrants", "refugees", or "foreigners", using these different target group categorizations as a part of the instructions they received. All participants answered the questionnaire on their smartphones, tablets or laptops using the Qualtrics research platform. Participants expressed their feelings towards either migrants, refugees, or foreigners on a thermometer scale ranging from 0 to 100. Afterwards, they answered four questions covering attitudes towards the target group. Responses were made on a scale from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). To counterbalance their polarity, we included two positively (e.g., "Migrants/foreigners/refugees contribute to the development of Slovakia.") and two negatively (e.g., "Migrants/foreigners/refugees are a burden for Slovakia") formulated questions. Negatively formulated questions were recoded prior to analysis and the mean score of the four questions was used in the analysis (Cronbach's $\alpha = .9$). The four attitudinal questions were followed by two items measuring the trust of respondents towards the target group, using the same 7-point scale, e.g., "In general, I trust migrants/foreigners/refugees to the same degree as people from Slovakia". The mean score of the two questions was used in the analysis (Cronbach's $\alpha = .9$). Next, respondents answered five questions regarding their opinions about integration policies, e.g. "It is important to support the teaching of the Slovak language to migrants/foreigners/refugees living in Slovakia". Responses were made on a scale from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*) and a mean score was used in subsequent analysis (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$). Furthermore, respondents answered four questions measuring their social distance to the target group, e.g. "To what extent would the following situation be or would not be acceptable to you? If a migrant/foreigner/refugee would become a member of your family?". Responses were made on a scale from 1 (*completely unacceptable*) to 7 (*completely acceptable*) and a mean score was used in subsequent analysis (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$). This section was followed with three items measuring the behavioural intentions of respondents, e.g. "How would you react if a new neighbour, a migrant/foreigner/refugee, would move next to you? I would like to spend some time with him/her". Responses were made on a scale from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*) and a mean score was used in subsequent analysis (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$).

Subsequently, participants answered three questions regarding the quantity and quality of their direct contact with either migrants, foreigners, or refugees (e.g., "How often do you meet migrants/foreigners/refugees? How often do you spend time with migrants/foreigners/refugees?") and its valence ("How do you feel while doing so?", "How do you rate this experience?"); one question about quantity of their extended contact ("How many friends do you have that you know have friends who are migrants/foreigners/refugees?"); and one question about the quantity of their mass-mediated contact ("How often do you meet with the reports about migrants/foreigners/refugees in the media") and its valence ("What is the tone of these reports?"). They also answered one question about where they most often meet migrants, foreigners, or refugees (e.g., neighbourhood, school, family etc.).

Finally, participants answered socio-demographic questions about their age, gender, region of residence, university, field of study, religion, attendance at religious services, left/right and liberal/conservative ideological self-identification.

Results

To test for differences between the three migrant categorizations, we conducted ANOVA with migrant categorization as the independent variable (foreigners vs migrants vs refugees) and the mean score of respective subsets of questions as the dependent variable (s). Out of six individual comparisons, there was a statistically significant difference between migrant categorizations on the thermometer score, attitudes toward the target group, trust scores, and social distance. Effect sizes ranged from small to medium (see Table 1 for detailed results). Across the dependent variables, respondents whose instructions used the term "foreigners" scored the highest and participants who received instructions that used "refugees" scored the lowest.

[2] We report the results of a conjoint experiment about the impact of applicants' personal attributes on participants' preferences about who should get to stay in Slovakia in a separate paper.

We used multivariate analysis of covariance (Pillai's Trace test) to assess the overall difference between migrant categorizations across dependent variables (feelings, attitudes, trust, social distance, attitudes towards integration policies, behavioural intentions), as well as to assess the possible influence of three additional covariates: whether a participant had a place of residence in the Bratislava region (versus any other Slovak region), whether a participant attended a university in the Bratislava region (versus any other Slovak region) and the participant's gender. There was a significant effect for the residence covariate $F(6, 862) = 7.303$, $p < .001$. There was a nonsignificant effect for both university location ($F(6, 862) = 0.669$, $p = .68$) and gender ($F(6, 862) = 0.928$, $p = .47$). There was also a significant difference between migrant categorizations in dependent variables after controlling for the effects of covariates listed above, $F(12, 1726) = 13.172$, $p < .001$.

Intergroup contact. Overall, 35 percent of participants said they meet migrants, refugees, or foreigners either every day, multiple times per week or once per week; 14 percent said they spent time with them that often; and 19 percent said they communicate with them that often. However, there were differences between respective target groups: while nearly 30 percent of respondents from the "foreigners" section of the survey said they meet "foreigners" every day, only 2.7 percent (8 out of 294) from the "refugees" group said they do so. A similar pattern is also visible with extended and mass-mediated modes of contact: participants in the "foreigners" section reported seeing more news reports about foreigners than participants in both the "migrants" and "refugees" sections. Very few participants in the "refugees" section reported having any type of extended contact with refugees. Distribution of responses for modes of contact are reported in the Supplemental material, Figs 7–16.

To analyse differences in relationships between types of contact and the dependent variables (feelings, attitudes, trust, attitudes towards integration policies, social distance, behavioural intentions), we first correlated the different types of contact with the dependent variables, then we statistically tested differences between these correlation coefficients across target groups (e.g. comparing a relationship between direct contact and attitudes in "migrants" target group vs the same relationship in "foreigners" target group vs the same correlation in "refugees" target group). Correlation matrices are reported in Supplemental material, Figs. 17–19, as are matrices for an alternative analysis calculating the quantity and the valence of the different modes of contact separately, Figs. 20–22. Both analyses yield similar results.

Both direct and extended contact measures showed an association with other dependent variables for all target groups. The strongest relationship of $r = .54$ was recorded for a relationship between direct contact score and feeling thermometer in the "foreigners" target group, indicating that more frequent and positive contact with "foreigners" is related to more positive feelings towards "foreigners". We also analysed potential differences between correlation coefficients across target groups, e.g. comparing a correlation coefficient for the relationship between direct contact and attitudes in the "foreigners" target group with the correlation coefficient for the same relationship in the "refugees" target group. Out of six three-way comparisons using direct contact and one of the dependent variables (Table 2), five measures exhibited a statistically significant difference between the strength of the correlation coefficient in the "foreigners" and "refugees" target groups (in feelings, attitudes, social distance, attitudes towards integration policies, behavioural intentions; but not in trust). For all six measures, there were significant differences in coefficient strength between the "migrants" and "refugees" target groups while there were no statistically significant differences between the "migrants" and "foreigners" target groups. Out of six three-way comparisons using extended contact and a dependent variable (Table 3), two measures showed a statistically significant difference between the strength of the correlation coefficient in the "migrants" and "refugees" target groups (feelings and attitudes) and in three cases, there were significant differences in coefficient strength between the "migrants" and "foreigners" target groups (attitudes, feelings, trust). There were no statistically significant differences between coefficients in the "foreigners" and "refugees" target groups. Out of six three-way comparisons using mass-mediated contact and one of the dependent variables (Table 4), there were no statistically significant differences between correlation coefficients for any of the target group combinations.

Since the intergroup contact literature points out the independent effects of contact quantity and contact valence on the attitudinal and behavioural measures towards out-groups, we also conducted an alternative analysis (Figs. 20-22 in Supplemental material) that differs from the one mentioned above (and outlined in the pre-registration analysis plan). Calculating the quantity and the valence of the different modes of contact separately shows a stronger relationship between valence scores and the dependent variables than between frequency counts and the dependent variables. Similarly, to the previous analysis, these comparisons are also weakest for the "refugees" target group.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for dependent variables per target group and results of ANOVA analysis.

Dependent variable	Target group			F	p	ω^2
	Foreigner *Mean (SD)*	Migrant *Mean (SD)*	Refugee *Mean (SD)*			
Feeling thermometer	69.91 (21.98)	57.69 (25.25)	50.53 (26.75)	45.5	< .001	0.093
Attitudes	4.77 (1.34)	4.30 (1.51)	3.66 (1.49)	43.2	< .001	0.088
Trust	4.37 (1.85	3.98 (1.88)	3.57 (1.82)	13.5	< .001	0.028
Attitudes toward integration policies	5.80 (1.13)	5.79 (1.22)	5.58 (1.29)	2.93	.054	0.004
Social distance	5.93 (1.36)	5.62 (1.59)	4.99 (1.70)	27.4	< .001	0.057
Behavioural intentions	5.46 (1.44)	5.44 (1.49)	5.21 (1.55)	2.52	.081	0.003

Table 2
Correlation coefficients of direct contact with each dependent variable for each target group.

Dependent variable	Migrant	Foreigner	Refugee
Feeling Thermometer	.50[a]	.54[b]	.25[a,b]
Distance	.44	.47[a]	.28[a]
Attitudes	.48[a]	.47[b]	.28[a,b]
Intentions	.36	.38	.20
Policies	.38	.40[a]	.22[a]
Trust	.44[a]	.35	.21[a]

Note. In each row, correlation coefficients with the same superscripts denote a pair of target groups in which the difference between the coefficients showed to be significant. *P*-values are reported for pairwise correlation coefficient comparisons with conservative estimates, e.g. comparing a correlation coefficient for the relationship between direct contact and attitudes in the "foreigners" target group with the correlation coefficient for the same relationship in the "refugees" target group, while holding the experimentwise error rate at the given value of alpha. Calculations were made using a function by Moore (2019).

Table 3
Correlation coefficients of extended contact with each dependent variable for each target group.

Dependent variable	Migrant	Foreigner	Refugee
Feeling Thermometer	.46[a]	.28	.29[a]
Distance	.40	.27	.29
Attitudes	.48[a]	.34	.31[a]
Intentions	.31	.17	.24
Policies	.38	.26	.29
Trust	.40[a]	.19[a]	.26

Note. In each row, correlation coefficients with the same superscripts denote a pair of target groups in which the difference between the coefficients showed to be significant. *P*-values are reported for pairwise correlation coefficient comparisons with conservative estimates, e.g. comparing a correlation coefficient for the relationship between direct contact and attitudes in the "foreigners" target group with the correlation coefficient for the same relationship in the "refugees" target group, while holding the experimentwise error rate at the given value of alpha. Calculations were made using a function by Moore (2019).

Table 4
Correlation coefficients of mass-mediated contact with each dependent variable for each target group.

Dependent variable	Migrant	Foreigner	Refugee
Feeling Thermometer	−.07	−.06	−.04
Distance	−.09	−.16	−.17
Attitudes	−.01	−.10	−.05
Intentions	−.05	−.05	−.06
Policies	−.11	−.16	−.12
Trust	−.05	−.15	−.16

Note. In each row, correlation coefficients with the same superscripts denote a pair of target groups in which the difference between the coefficients showed to be significant. *P*-values are reported for pairwise correlation coefficient comparisons with conservative estimates, e.g. comparing a correlation coefficient for the relationship between direct contact and attitudes in the "foreigners" target group with the correlation coefficient for the same relationship in the "refugees" target group, while holding the experimentwise error rate at the given value of alpha. Calculations were made using a function by Moore (2019).

Discussion

Results suggest that respondents evaluate "refugees" least favourably, while "foreigners" receive the most favourable evaluations. "Migrants" occupy a middle position between the two. Compared to the migrant categorizations of "migrants" and "foreigners", "refugees" encountered the strongest hostility. These findings challenge previous research that identified a public opinion preference for "refugees" over "migrants" (De Coninck, 2019; O'Rourke & Sinnott, 2006; Wyszynski et al., 2020). Our findings indicate that the recategorization of "refugees" as "bogus" could lead to less favourable evaluations in comparison to "migrants" and "foreigners"; however, further research is needed to verify this line of interpretation. Our findings also indicate that public opinion preferences for migrant categorizations are country-specific and are not easily transferable to different sociocultural and political contexts. Potential cross-country comparisons would require additional inquiry into the perceived content of these distinct migrant categorizations (De Coninck, 2019).

The results also reveal differences between evaluations of migrant categorizations in most of the dependent variables. Focusing on effect sizes, there are medium to small differences in feelings, attitudes, trust, and social distance while there are no statistically significant differences in attitudes towards integration policies and behavioural intentions towards "migrants", "foreigners", and "refugees". These findings indicate that attitudes towards these target groups and attitudes towards integration policies concerning

these migrant categorizations do not necessarily reinforce one another (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010). In this case, they suggest that, in contrast to attitudes towards the target groups, attitudes towards integration policies are not so easily swayed by the target group in question. Attitudes towards integration policies are more likely to be determined by fundamental support or opposition to any type of out-group integration, regardless of which migrant categorization this integration concerns. In a similar way, an insignificant difference in behavioural intentions towards migrant categorizations could be more about a personal inclination to treat members of out-groups in a particular way rather than about distinctive reactions to different migrant target groups.

Our results regarding covariates are in line with previous studies that have found that women have less hostile attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers than men (Cowling et al., 2019; O'Rourke & Sinnott, 2006), and that participants from large cities (in our case, the Bratislava region) have more favourable views of immigrants than participants from smaller cities and the countryside (in our case, other regions in Slovakia) (Alba & Foner, 2017; Maxwell, 2019). This result can be confounded by the fact that participants from Bratislava region have more opportunities for direct (Figs. 7–9 in the Supplemental material), extended (Figs. 10–12 in the Supplement material), but not mass-mediated contact (Fig. 13 in the Supplement material) with migrants, foreigners, and refugees as compared to people from other Slovak regions.

The results indicate that both direct and extended (but not mass-mediated) intergroup contact play an overarching role in shaping young Slovak adults' evaluations of different migrant categorizations. For all three types of intergroup contact, participants reported less opportunities for contact with "refugees" than for contact with "foreigners" and "migrants". These findings correspond with the number of foreigners and asylum seekers (refugees) living in Slovakia, which determine the quantity of intergroup contact opportunities (Ministerstvo vnútra Slovenskej republiky, 2019; Úrad hraničnej a cudzineckej polície, 2018). The relationship between positive feelings and frequent and positive experience of direct contact was strongest for the "foreigners" and weakest for the "refugees" migrant categorization. More generally, the relationship between a number of attitudinal and behavioural measures and both direct and extended contact experiences was strongest for "foreigners" and weakest for "refugees", while "migrants" were somewhere in between. A very weak and negative relationship between experiences of mass-mediated contact with different migrant categorizations and measures of trust, social distance, and attitudes towards integration policies suggests that representations of "foreigners", "migrants", and "refugees" in the mass media play a minor role in negatively influencing participants' views of different migrant categorizations.

The results support previous research on the roles of quantity and valence of intergroup contact in intergroup relations (Graf et al., 2014; Meleady & Forder, 2019; Kotzur et al., 2018). They suggest that the valence (the degree of positivity or negativity), rather than frequency, of direct and extended intergroup contact plays a more important role in shaping evaluations of different migrant categorizations. The results suggest that even infrequent, positive direct or extended contact with a member of the migrant category can have a serious impact on people's views of these migrant categorizations.

The most severe limitation of the present research is the limited generalizability of the student sample to the general Slovak population. A more demographically representative sample could provide more valid and pronounced results and would also allow us to account for more covariates.

Another limitation is the lack of control for the content of migrant categorizations in our research design: it is not clear whom exactly participants imagined when they expressed their opinions about "migrants", "foreigners" and "refugees". These concerns could be partially alleviated by applying a more controlled experimental design (e.g. a vignette study) and by further investigating whom exactly respondents imagine when they evaluate targets designated by different group labels. Future research could examine the question of how migrant categorizations become imbued with positive or negative meanings (e.g. intergroup threat); how perceived positivity and negativity relate to evaluations of these groups; whether various types of actors, publics, and mass-media employ different discursive repertoires to represent them; and how these representations are related to popular perceptions (Bajomi-Lázár, 2019; Hameleers, 2019; Lee & Nerghes, 2018; Rucker et al., 2019).

Conclusion and practical implications

Our study challenges previous findings about public opinion preference for "refugees" over "migrants" and supports the intergroup contact hypothesis. Our findings support the argument against the practice of studying "refugees", "immigrants" and "foreigners" as umbrella terms with interchangeable meanings (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010). For example, although Kluknavská, Bernhard, and Boomgaarden (2019) recognize that each of the terms "refugee", "migrant", "asylum seeker" and "immigrant" "carries a certain distinct meaning", they use 'refugee' as an umbrella term "to include the variety of denominations designated by the media to people coming to Europe to seek refuge" (p. 7) throughout their article on discourses around the 2015 "refugee crisis" in Austria, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic (p. 7). Based on our findings, we argue for a more fine-grained approach to quantitative and qualitative analyses of seemingly synonymous categorizations that can capture the variety of their potential attitudinal and behavioural implications towards the people they represent. We join the call of Ommundsen et al. (2014), arguing that the distinctions between different immigrant group labels and categorizations and their perceptions and evaluation in public opinion should be taken more seriously and studied more systematically.

The fact that our results contradict previous findings from Western European countries makes a case for a more contextualized research that emphasizes the role of boundedness and malleability of migration-related (and other) categories to often unaccounted for aspects of their respective contexts (Hantrais, 1999; Pettigrew, 2018; Rojas & Valenzuela, 2019). They underscore the importance of paying closer attention to cultural, institutional, and normative contextual factors that could help explain why in some countries "refugees" are preferred over "migrants" while in others "migrants" receive more positive evaluations. A greater sensitivity to variable contextual factors would allow the exploration of conditions under which the seemingly identical migrant categorizations operate

differently and have important symbolic and material consequences for the lived experiences of people they represent.

In practical terms, findings about the important role of positive, frequent direct and extended intergroup contact in shaping the evaluations of different migrant categorizations could inform the development of interventions aimed at improving these evaluations. For both national government and municipalities, this has practical ramifications for the design of integration strategies (including the development of funding mechanisms for civil society) that should support interventions fostering direct positive contact between "refugees", "migrants", "foreigners" and Slovak nationals.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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Data, R code, materials used in this research, and pre-registration protocol are available at: https://osf.io/jq8f9/?view_only=87fe7e583a474a0e8587573de42f5bab

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2020.12.004.

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