

Avoiding or Accepting the Unknown: Asylum in the European Union

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Abstract

Many scholars have already dedicated their attention to the perceived migration crisis in Europe and related phenomena. The objective of the present paper is to examine tendencies of selected European national cultures to accept diversity and people with a migration background. The research hypothesis posits that countries with low Uncertainty Avoidance Index are more likely to accept migrants and refugees in their territory; while, on the contrary, countries that have relatively higher Uncertainty Avoidance Index tend to be more sceptical in regard to accepting migrants and refugees. In the study a variety of qualitative and mixed research methods (such as qualitative desk research, comparative analysis, and cluster analysis) are used. Firstly, applying the Uncertainty Avoidance Dimension by Hofstede, the European Union Member States are separated into four clusters according to their ranking within the Uncertainty Avoidance Index. Next, utilising data collected within the project MAGYC, the EU Member States are ranked according to the number of asylum centres, detention centres or similar facilities per capita. Finally, the countries with the highest Uncertainty Avoidance Index and the lowest number of asylum centres per capita are compared providing a comparison of the countries with the lowest Index and the highest number of asylum facilities per capita. The constructed simplified model allows for answering the question whether certain relation between inclination to avoid the unknown and the willingness of national cultures to accept migrants and refugees exists, concluding that the hypothesis is valid only in the case of several countries.

Keywords: asylum sites, uncertainty avoidance, national cultures, migrants, refugees

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Introduction

The outbreak of the perceived migration crisis several years ago has impacted European societies considerably. It has also become an issue frequently studied by scholars and discussed by policy makers.

In the current paper, we attempt to analyse how the European Union Member States and national cultures prevailing within them, are able and willing to accept diversity and otherness. The research question can be formulated as follows: *Does any relation between tendencies to avoid the unknown and the willingness of national cultures to accept migrants and refugees exist?* We apply the cultural dimensions theory by Geert Hofstede, particularly the dimension Uncertainty Avoidance. This dimension reflects how national cultures are open towards new, unexplored situations, experiences, and – not the least – also people. We test the hypothesis that countries with low Uncertainty Avoidance Index are more likely to accept migrants and refugees in their territory. Or, vice-versa, countries that have relatively higher Uncertainty Avoidance Index tend to be more sceptical in this regard. For the purposes of the present research, accepting migrants in a country's territory is in simplified terms exemplified by the tendency to establish facilities such as detention centres or arrival centres. However, this cannot be said to fully correspond to the reality. One of the reasons reposes in the fact that the numbers of asylum sites can be influenced by migrants' preferences concerning the destination country. Hence, the preferred countries need to properly respond, which can be reflected in a higher number of sites. Therefore, the number of sites – both lower and higher – is not only a matter of policies. The research builds upon the maps of asylum sites created by the research team of the Horizon 2020 project MAGYC² (Migration Governance and Asylum Crisis), of which the author of this article was a member.

The awareness of the diversity within national cultures notwithstanding, in the present paper the national cultures are considered to be homogeneous in terms of their values, behavioural tendencies, the worldview and the inherent tendency to avoid the unknown. This, of course, is far from reality and is only done to simplify the research process. For the same reason, the adjective “national” is used when referring to cultures, to better identify certain specifics within a nation's population.

The paper is structured as follows: Literature overview aims to provide theoretical background related to the topic of cultural dimensions and geographical distribution of

² The MAGYC (Migration Governance and asYlum Crises) project was funded from the European Commission's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant agreement number 822806. The project sought to assess how migration governance has been influenced by the recent “refugee crises” and has since been influenced by it, and how crises at large shape policy responses to migration. This four-year research project (2018–2022) brought together twelve international partners: the Hugo Observatory from the University of Liège (Coordinator), Sciences Po, the University of Economics in Bratislava, the GIGA institute of Global and Area Studies, Lund University, the IDMC, SOAS University of London, the University of Milan, the Lebanese American University, the University of Macedonia, Sabanci University, IfPO/CNRS. Project Website: www.themagycproject.com.

asylum facilities in the European Union countries. A special focus is placed on Slovakia and its place in the Uncertainty Avoidance dimension. Next, methods utilised are described, followed by the presentation of research results. Finally, main findings as well as limitations of our research are summarized in the chapter Discussion and Conclusion.

Literature overview

Numerous works have been published on the factors effecting migrants' choice of the destination country. One factor, obviously, is language and culture. The more significant the difference between the country of origin and the target country, the higher are the costs related to adaptation (Adserà, 2015). Research also shows that migration flows decrease with an increase in cultural distance (Mihai and Novo-Corti, 2020). Thompson (2017) asserts that most of the works investigating migration include economic factors and motives. However, economic, as well as political and social factors are not sole motivators of many migrants. One should consider the impacts of both culture and place.

What needs to be mentioned here is the role of the state. In some countries, a gap between the objectives of restrictive immigration policies and the real number of migrants in a country has been identified. This is, among others, the case of Slovakia (Lidák and Štefančík, 2020), where the issue of migration has not been sufficiently articulated in political discourse (Stefancik et al., 2022). A crucial factor are the priorities and attitudes of respective governments. In case of several countries, the approach to immigration has changed with the new government (Zagoršeková, 2022). Migration indeed is a complex issue comprising cultural, economic, social, and last but not least legal aspects (Rak, 2023).

Social or cultural scientists, anthropologists or psychologists are likely to be well familiarised with the research of Geert Hofstede. Despite that, given the interdisciplinarity of our research, we find it relevant to briefly describe the underlying theory. Geert Hofstede introduced the concept of cultural dimensions. Originally, there had been four of them; later the fifth and finally the sixth one was added (Table 1).

The initial focus of the research was on values at the workplace. The research was conducted at international IBM offices across the globe, between 1967-1973 (The Culture Factor Group|Group, 2023).

Table 1: Hofstede's cultural dimensions

Dimension / index
Power Distance Index
Individualism vs Collectivism
Masculinity vs Femininity
Uncertainty Avoidance Index
Long Term Orientation vs Short Term Normative Orientation
Indulgence vs Restraint

Source: Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010

Power Distance Index indicates how inequality is perceived in a society. More precisely, it indicates to what extent those less powerful perceive the unbalanced distribution of power. The Individualism and collectivism dimension expresses whether a society highlights individuals or social groups. The Masculinity and femininity dimension distinguishes cultures based on characteristics such as assertiveness and achievement (standing for masculine cultures), and values such as modesty or quality of life (for feminine societies). Long versus short time orientation describes cultures' preferences towards either the past or the future. Indulgence and restraint is about pleasure and gratification of needs or, the opposite, their suppression (The Culture Factor Group|Group, 2023).

Uncertainty Avoidance Dimension

The Uncertainty Avoidance dimension can be said to “express the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity” (The Culture Factor Group|Group, 2023: 4). Hence, it is “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations” (Hofstede et al., 2010: 191). It is further asserted that “extreme ambiguity creates intolerable anxiety” (Ibid.: 189) and while human societies have established ways to tackle anxiety, these are mostly linked to religion, law and technology. Uncertainty may be explained as a subjective feeling or experience; however, such states can be, at least to a certain extent, shared with other members of a society. Overall, the feeling of uncertainty is both learned, as well as acquired. The description of one’s level of uncertainty avoidance is usually done by assigning to them attributes “strong” and “weak”.

The Index for each EU country including the United Kingdom is showcased in Table 2 below. The lowest Index (Denmark) and the highest (Greece) are highlighted in bold.

Table 2. European Union Member States and their Uncertainty Avoidance Index

EU Member State	Uncertainty Avoidance Index
Austria	70
Belgium Fr	93
Belgium NL	97
Bulgaria	85
Croatia	80
Cyprus	NA
Czechia	74
Denmark	23
Estonia	60
Finland	59
France	86

Germany	65
Greece	112
Hungary	82
Ireland	35
Italy	75
Latvia	63
Lithuania	65
Luxembourg	70
Malta	96
Netherlands	53
Poland	93
Portugal	104
Romania	90
Slovakia	51
Slovenia	88
Spain	86
Sweden	29
United Kingdom	35

Source: Author's own processing based on Hofstede et al. (2010: 192-194)

What looks to be especially relevant in relation to migration governance is the assumption that there is prevalence of intolerant political ideologies in countries with strong Uncertainty Avoidance. As opposed to that, there are tolerant ideologies in countries with weak tendencies to avoid the unknown. This is closely associated with the respect for human rights (Hofstede et al., 2010: 229). The authors summarize the main differences between weak Uncertainty Avoidance countries and strong Uncertainty Avoidance countries regarding migration and related issues as indicated in Table 3.

Table 3: Uncertainty Avoidance and migration

Weak uncertainty avoidance	Strong uncertainty avoidance
More ethnic tolerance	More ethnic prejudice
Positive or neutral towards foreigners	Xenophobia
Refugees should be admitted	Immigrants should be sent back

Source: Hofstede et al. (2010: 231)

Slovakia in focus

Slovakia is approximately in the middle of the scale, scoring 51 in the Uncertainty Avoidance dimension. Hence, the country can be considered neutral when it comes to tendencies to avoid the unknown and uncertain. Adding migration and asylum to the equation, however, one could perhaps expect the Index to be of higher value. In favour of that speaks, on the one hand, the anti-migration rhetoric of some politicians and their respective parties, as well as their voters; on the other hand, statistical data related to numbers of accepted asylum applications, population structure, etc. According to Stefancik, Stradiotova and Seresova (2022), even the issue of integration has been a marginal topic in the discourse of Slovak politicians, as many of them perceive and present migration as a threat to society. Utterances referring to migrants as a potential threat are often produced by left of right-wing populists (Dulebová et al., 2024).

Slovakia, generally put, does not represent a typical target country of migrants. Based on the Eurostat data, almost 66% of immigrants to Slovakia previously resided in another EU Member State in 2022 (Eurostat, 2024). As for asylum, even before the migration crisis of 2015, Slovakia had not belonged to the EU Member States that would accept every asylum application. On the contrary, there were years when only approximately 20 asylums were granted, in 2006 only 8 out of almost 2900 applications (Štefančík and Lenč, 2012). Considering the period after the migration crisis outbreak, only 282 asylum seekers were registered in 2020, mostly of Afghani, Syrian or Moroccan origin. The situation has changed as a result of the Russian aggression in Ukraine. In September 2022, more than 95 thousand Ukrainian refugees were located in the country (UNHCR, 2024). Nevertheless, Slovakia's population is rather homogeneous, with 80.7% people claiming Slovak nationality (Government Office of the Slovak Republic, 2020).

As demonstrated above, the concept of culture is particularly relevant with regard to migration-related topics. Cultural identity concerns not only the feeling of patriotism or being a part of a group, or as Kiner calls it, "sense of belonging to a particular social group"; it can simultaneously be linked to hostile approaches to others (Kiner, 2020: 345).

Geographical distribution of asylum centres

To fulfil the objective of the present paper, it is important to analyse the asylum sites in the European Union Member States. For this purpose, the study builds upon the document published as a deliverable from the EU-funded H2020 project MAGYC (Puškárová et al., 2020). Similarly, as within the cited work, there is no distinction among arrival centres, detention centres and other such settlements and they are all referred as "asylum sites."³ The data collected within the project was on accommodation centres, detention centres and similar establishments within the European Union Member States

³ This distinction, however, is made in Maps of Asylum Seekers' Sites (Puškárová et al., 2020).

plus the United Kingdom. Figure 1 below demonstrates numbers of asylum sites per capita – the darker the color, the more asylum sites per capita in the respective country.

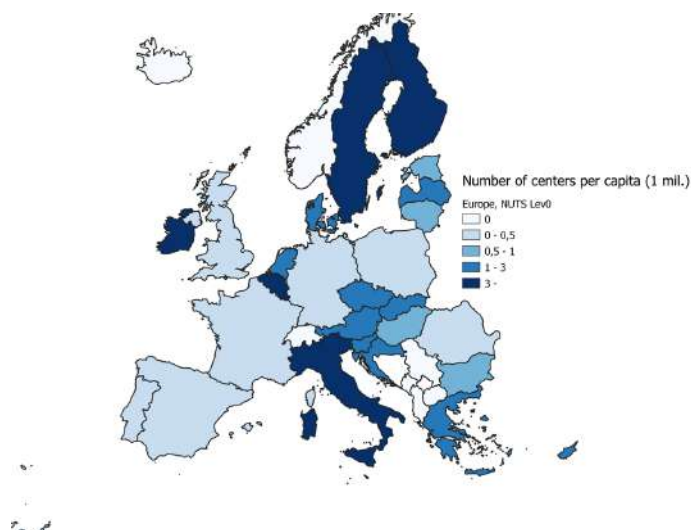


Figure 1: Asylum sites per capita

Source: Puškárová et al., 2020

As for total numbers of such facilities, in 12 out of 27+1 countries, there are at least 15 asylum sites located. These twelve countries are Austria, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Greece, Finland, France, Ireland, Netherlands, Poland, Sweden and Italy. One of the most significant findings relates to the unequal distribution of asylum seekers in the countries. Several areas with especially high concentration were identified. These are often, though not always, capital cities and their surroundings. This applies for instance to Vienna, Athens, Paris or Warsaw (Puškárová et al., 2020). The largest destination of refugees in the EU is Germany (Kunychka and Raneta, 2020).

As for the most concentrated areas, some scholars paid their attention to exploring issues such as difficulties faced by the migrants (or, more specifically, asylum seekers and refugees) in those particular locations. An example is a study by Přivara (2022), investigating problems faced by migrants in the municipality of Vienna. Throughout the process of integration, migrants generally face various difficulties. Kiner (2020) analyses institutional and cultural barriers related to integration processes in Slovakia, asserting that one of the keys to successful integration is mastering the language of the host country. Dependent on the language barrier is also the ability to tackle bureaucratic obstacles.

Methodology

Our contribution utilises qualitative research methods. The paper is rather theoretical; it processes and builds on existing data, we do not generate any primary data.

The initial phase of the research was dominated by qualitative desk research. There are two works with special relevance for the present study. The former is *Cultures and Organizations* by Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010). The latter is the report produced by the research team of the Horizon 2020 project MAGYC summarizing the findings on locations on arrival centres, detention centres and related establishments in the EU Member States at the end of 2018 (Puškárová et al., 2020). The data was published as a project deliverable and is freely available on the Project website.

As the next step in the research, we conducted a simple cluster analysis, allowing us to group the countries into, in our concrete case, four categories, i.e. clusters (McIntosh et al., 2010). Based on the work of Geert Hofstede, we categorised EU Member States according to their quantitative representation within the Uncertainty Avoidance Index. The same was done in relation to asylum sites – the countries were divided into four categories, i.e. the map above was transformed into a matrix.

To answer the dominant research question, we used comparative analysis. On the one side of the comparison, we placed the countries with the lowest number of asylum sites per capita and the highest UA Index; on the other side the countries with the lowest Index and the highest number of accommodation centres, detention centres and similar facilities per capita.

Results

The matrix below demonstrates the countries being clustered into four categories according to their Uncertainty Avoidance Index (Figure 2). The last quadrant includes also the countries with the Index above 100. It is visible that the countries are not distributed equally; the first quadrant includes Denmark only; on the contrary, most countries belong to the last quadrant, i.e. their Uncertainty Avoidance Index has higher values.



Figure 2: EU Member States and their Uncertainty Avoidance Index

Source: Author's own processing based on Hofstede et al. (2010: 192-194)

For the purpose of comparison, we also transformed the map above into a four-quadrant matrix. Each quadrant comprises countries based on the number of asylum seekers' sites per capita (mil.) (Figure 3).

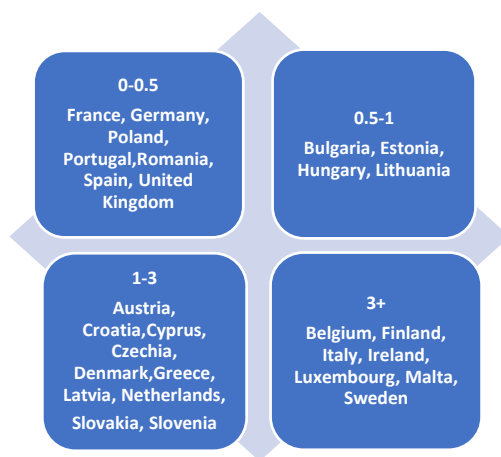


Figure 3: EU Member States and the numbers of asylum sites per capita

Source: Author's own processing based on Figure 2

Based on the analysis of the two matrixes we can conclude that there indeed are some overlaps, however, our hypothesis is not absolutely valid. For instance, several countries within the cluster with the highest Index (France, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Spain) simultaneously belong to the cluster with the lowest number of asylum sites per capita. Denmark, as the country with the lowest Index, has 1-3 asylum sites per million inhabitants, although some countries have even more than that. Similarities can be observed in case of Estonia and Lithuania belonging to the cluster with 0.5-1 asylum sites per capita (i.e. the second lowest cluster) and belonging to the cluster comprising countries with the Index 51-75 (i.e. second highest cluster). For the rest of the countries, however, our hypothesis has not been confirmed. The United Kingdom, for instance, has its Uncertainty Avoidance Index as high as 35, however, it has just a few asylum sites. On the contrary, Ireland, with an exactly identical Index, belongs to the countries with the most asylum sites per capita.

Discussion and conclusion

The European Union has been facing influx of refugees for some time now. The countries of origin are usually those less developed and less politically stable (Kunychka et al., 2023). Moreover, a distinct cultural background is not a rare phenomenon.

In the current paper we tested the hypothesis whether the Uncertainty Avoidance Index by Hofstede is reflected in the numbers of asylum sites per capita in the EU Member States + the UK. The analysis carried out has proved our hypothesis only partially, specifically

only in case of seven out of 27+1 EU countries (Portugal, Spain, Romania, France, Poland, Estonia, Lithuania).

We are aware that our analysis is rather simplified, hence our work possesses several limitations. We would like to list them and comment on them in the following paragraphs.

Firstly, the document mapping asylum sites was finalised in April 2020, the data concerning asylum sites have not been updated since. Obviously, it might have occurred that some facilities have been closed in the meantime, or, on the contrary, new sites might have been established. An update, or a regular monitoring of the facilities and their operation may be recommended.

Secondly, within the comparison part, we utilise data on asylum sites in the EU countries per capita, not real numbers. If virtual amounts of asylum facilities had been used, the results would differ considerably. An example would be Slovakia belonging to the cluster of countries with a higher number of asylum sites per capita (1-3), however, the real number of facilities accepting migrants is very low compared to countries such as Germany or France. Indeed, regarding the perceived refugee crisis in Europe, Slovakia has been one of the least favoured countries, as opposed to Germany or Sweden (Puškárová et al., 2020). As highlighted above, the deliverable Maps of Asylum Seekers' Sites includes separate maps solely for countries with at least 15 asylum sites, i.e. 12 countries in total. For instance, Slovakia is not among them. On the other hand, some countries (France Germany, Poland) from the cluster with the lowest numbers of sites per capita are represented in the MAGYC report, meaning the real numbers of the asylum facilities are above 15.

Thirdly, the primary data used for the purpose of this paper were produced prior to the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022. Therefore, the results might be challenged also given the fact that the Russian aggression in Ukraine has resulted in an enormous number of people fleeing the country, as well as mobilisation of countries such as Slovakia in terms of humanitarian aid.

Next, we have operated with clusters of countries, not rankings. Countries have been divided into four categories based on their Uncertainty Avoidance Index; and into four categories based on the number of asylum sites per million inhabitants.

Lastly, our paper focuses exclusively on the European Union Member States and the United Kingdom. On the other hand, this is understandable because the EU countries are the usual target countries of the refugees. A follow-up research could either comprise the whole globe, which, surely, would be rather demanding due to data scarcity, or another region, and could be linked to, for instance, migration caused by environmental factors. In this context and in the context of future movements, the Index can be helpful when it comes to the readiness of countries to accept diversity.

For the next research, we recommend several issues. Firstly, numbers of the asylum seekers' sites could be updated considering the circumstances of the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Secondly, regular monitoring of the facilities, their real numbers, their capacities, etc. could also be beneficial for other scholars as well as policy makers. Thirdly, a remake of

our contribution calculating with real numbers of asylum facilities – not numbers per capita – and a subsequent comparison with this work could be of interest, as well.

According to Kiner (2021), integration plays a key role in achieving welfare and prosperity in Europe. In relation to policy making, attention should be paid to intercultural education, the principles of which are still not fully established within study curricula. Mastering intercultural communication may be of tremendous importance in relation to integration of migrants (Čiefová, 2020). As Štefančík and Lenč (2012) emphasise, for integration policies to be successful, foreigners need to be accepted by the autochthonous population. To conclude, understanding culture-related phenomena can be of utmost importance in relation to conflict and migration management (Mihai and Novo-Corti, 2020).

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