

THE MODERATING EFFECT OF RESILIENCE AND SOCIAL  
SUPPORT ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POST-  
MIGRATION STRESS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING  
AMONG UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN ROMANIA

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**Abstract**

This study explores the connection between Post-migration Stress and Psychological Well-Being among Ukrainian refugees in Romania, with a focus on the moderating roles of Resilience and Social Support. Using scales for stress, well-being, resilience, and social support, data was collected from Ukrainian refugees (N = 84), mostly women aged 18 to 68. The analysis, conducted before significant changes in government support, revealed a negative correlation between post-migration stress and psychological well-being. Both resilience and social support showed moderating effects in the relationship between post-migration stress and environmental mastery (a facet of psychological well-being construct). The study also examined demographic variations within the refugee community in relation to stress, well-being, social support, and resilience, highlighting potential impacts of subsequent changes in refugees' circumstances on research outcomes.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Refugiați ucraineni, stres post-migrare, reziliență, bunăstare psihologică, sprijin social.

**Keywords:** Ukrainian Refugees, Post-migration stress, Resilience, Psychological Well-Being, Social Support, Environmental mastery.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Within a year since the outbreak of war in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, more than 3.2 million refugees from Ukraine have crossed the border into Romania. As of January 13, 2023, a total of 107,000 refugees from Ukraine were in Romanian territory, with women and children making up 80% of the total refugee population

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(Romanian Government Report, 2023). Emergency Decree No. 15/2022 regulated social support for Ukrainian refugees in Romania, granting each refugee 10 euros per day for accommodation and 4 euros per day for food. In April 2023, significant changes were made with Regulation No. 22/2023, which reduced support for each refugee to a fixed monthly amount for accommodation and food. These changes have led to a significant proportion of refugees leaving Romania, creating insecurity and impacting their integration into the labour market and education.

The aim of this article is to examine the relationship between post-migration stress and psychological well-being among Ukrainian refugees in Romania, as well as their social environment factors such as social support or personal factors such as resilience influence this relationship. Although numerous studies have been conducted on refugee populations, the literature is particularly strong, especially in the last decade (Alemi & Stempel, 2018; Blackmore *et al.*, 2020; Bogic *et al.*, 2012; Brough *et al.*, 2003; Fadhlia *et al.*, 2022; Gebresilassie *et al.*, 2022; Georgiadou *et al.*, 2020; Hynie, 2018, Li *et al.*, 2016, Nissen *et al.*, 2021) and the topic is particularly timely as the conflict in Ukraine is still ongoing, published studies on Ukrainian refugees in Romania are currently underrepresented.

In the present study, we aim to examine how post-migration stressors contribute to explaining the variance in the occurrence of aspects of psychological well-being reported by Ukrainian refugees in Romania, and how resilience, acting as an internal factor, and social support, acting as an external factor, influence this relationship.

The ultimate aim of the paper is to contribute to the development of current research on forcibly displaced populations by highlighting certain elements of the post-migration living conditions of the Ukrainian refugee population in Romania and their impact on mental health.

### 1.1. POST-MIGRATION STRESS, RESILIENCE, AND SOCIAL SUPPORT AMONG EVOLVING CONFLICT REFUGEES

After the two world wars, researchers have been increasingly concerned with studying the impact of military conflict on people's psychological well-being. Initially, many of these studies focused on the effects of armed conflict on those directly affected by it. However, with the emergence of increasingly complex forms of warfare, from the Cold War to the hybrid warfare we see taking place in Ukraine today, modern conflict has increasingly expanded from the battlefield as a geographically bounded space into the psychological field. As a result, even a very localised armed conflict can have an impact on a much larger territory through displacement of populations, disruption of communication and supply chains and psychological warfare. Research on the effects of war on civilians outside the conflict zone and the intensity of these effects is becoming increasingly important due to the growing exposure of civilians to conflict (Osiichuk & Shepotylo, 2019).

On 28 July 1951, in a special conference, the United Nations approved the „Convention relating to the Status of Refugees” in Geneva. From 1951 to the present, the Geneva Convention has been the foundation of international law on international protection and provides a definition of a refugee: „a person with a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion who is outside his or her State of origin and is unable or unwilling, owing to such fear, to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country” (Geneva Convention, 1951). Romania acceded to the Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees in 1991.

Post-migration stress has begun to be studied more closely with the waves of forced migration over the past decade and it has been found that, although it has fewer associations with traumatic events and the development of PTSD, by its more subtle but persistent nature, post-migration stress can have an even greater potential negative impact on the mental health and psychological well-being of refugees (Porter & Haslam, 2005).

The multidimensional construct of post-migration stress, as delineated by the authors of the homonym scale (Malm *et al.*, 2020), encompasses seven domains. Four of these facets pertain to the host society environment, namely 'perceived discrimination,' 'lack of competences' specific to host country, 'economic strain' and 'social strain.' The remaining three are more closely linked to family and home country stress: 'loss' (of home country, social life, status), 'family separation' and concern for family members who stayed back in the home country and 'conflict within the family.'

On the other hand, Ryff and Keyes (1996) outlined six components of psychological well-being: 'autonomy', 'environmental mastery', 'personal growth', 'positive relationships with others', 'purpose in life', and 'self-acceptance'. Psychological well-being, denoting an individual's positive evaluation of their own life, is included in this study as a dependent variable or criterion.

An extensive meta-analysis of the concept of resilience, which reviewed 270 articles and studies on the construct, proposes to define resilience as „the process of negotiating, managing, and adapting to significant sources of stress or trauma” and notes that both personal qualities and resources and the individual's environment and life context facilitate or, conversely, undermine this ability to adapt and bounce back from adversity (Windle *et al.*, 2010).

Resilience plays a significant role in explaining why some people manage better in traumatic situations than others. Therefore, those with more resilience-related traits are more likely to adapt to a stressful event successfully, while people with fewer resilience-related traits won't adapt as well (White *et al.*, 2010).

Harandi, Taghinasab and Nayeri (2017) note that „social support is the amount of support a person perceives and reports receiving. Also, social support was defined as a phenomenon that involves people's interactions, so when a person gives and receives social interaction, it plays an important role in their health”.

Concurrent to these findings, social support was proven to provide physical and psychological benefits to individuals who experience stressful physical and psychosocial events and is considered a factor in reducing psychological distress when individuals experience stressful events (Brummett *et al.*, 2005).

Participants in several studies conducted on refugee populations reported feeling a sense of acceptance, security, belonging, and being able to avoid isolation due to social connections (Walther *et al.*, 2021; Siriwardhana *et al.*, 2014).

Also, the presence of family members in the host country can be a major emotional resource. Social support is a major theme in most studies on refugee resilience (Siriwardhana *et al.*, 2014) and social networks provide emotional and informational support and promote a sense of belonging (Chung, Hong & Newbold, 2013).

## 2.METHODOLOGY

### 2.1.OBJECTIVE

The overarching objective of this study is to examine the intricate correlations between post-migration stress and psychological well-being among Ukrainian refugees in Romania, encompassing both global and nuanced facets. To support this overarching goal, the secondary objectives include assessing demographic-based variations in the studied variables, determining which specific factors of post-migration stress most significantly predict facets of psychological well-being in Ukrainian refugees, and investigating the potential impact of external social support and personal resilience on the interplay between post-migration stress factors and psychological well-being in this refugee population. These subsidiary objectives collectively contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics shaping the psychological experiences of Ukrainian refugees in Romania.

### 2.2.HYPOTHESES

Previous studies in refugee populations have shown that a number of post-migration stressors are negatively associated with refugees' psychological well-being (Nissen *et al.*, 2021, Hynie, 2018). In the literature (Bruwer *et al.*, 2008), stress has also been found to be negatively correlated with resilience, i.e. resilience and social support (Lee, Nam & Kim, 2013). Based on these theoretical considerations, we formulated the following hypotheses:

*H1*: We hypothesize that post-migration stress as an overall factor is correlated with *H1a*) psychological well-being as an overall factor and *H1b*) its subfactors (autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, self-acceptance).

*H2*: We expect that post-migration stress at the facet level (discrimination, lack of skills, financial stress, loss, family separation, social stress, family conflict) correlates with psychological well-being as a general factor.

*H3*: We expect a connection between stress after migration and *H3a*) resilience, *H3b*) social support and psychological well-being.

Separation from family is an important factor in the mental health of refugees (Bogic *et al.*, 2012), and separation, particularly from partners, is a common aspect of forced migration. Often the partner remaining in the conflict zone finds themselves in risky and violent situations, which increases the stress associated with the separation. Based on the above premise, we proposed the following hypothesis:

*H4*: We hypothesize that there are statistically significant differences between the facets of psychological well-being depending on the presence or absence of the partner in Romania.

Since the integration process of refugees in the new country presents many challenges in terms of environmental mastery and requires a high level of functioning, resilience and social support are of utmost importance for research on forcibly displaced populations (Walther *et al.*, 2021). Given the above theoretical premises, we hypothesized:

*H5*: We hypothesize that *H5a*) social support as an external resource and *H5b*) resilience as an internal factor shape the relationship between post-migration stress and environmental mastery as a facet of psychological well-being among the Ukrainian refugees.

### 2.3. PARTICIPANTS

The present study was carried out on a sample of 84 participants from the conflict zone in Ukraine who were in Romania at the time of data collection ( $M_{age} = 38.50$ ,  $SD = 8.58$ ), 86.9% women.

The recruitment of participants and their inclusion were made on a voluntary, snowball basis, with confidentiality assurance. The questionnaire was translated into Ukrainian by an authorized native translator and sent to respondents in their mother tongue, with the help of staff from the Malva Ukrainian Refugee Community Centre in Bucharest. Initially, 124 respondents completed the questionnaire distributed in groups on social platforms dedicated to Ukrainian refugees in Romania. Incomplete responses ( $N=39$ ) and one response that did not meet the minimum age criterion of 18 years were excluded. Only the data collected from the respondents aged over 18 who provided valid and complete answers ( $N=84$ ), were included in the study.

Although the gender distribution of respondents is not balanced, with the percentage of female respondents being over 80%, this percentage reflects the statistical share of women in the total adult refugee population in Romania at the time of data collection (Romanian Government Report, 2023).

## 2.4. MEASURES

*Post-migration stress* was assessed by using the 21-item Refugee Post-migration Stress Scale (RPMS) (Malm, *et al*, 2020). The scale has seven subscales: *Perceived Discrimination* (4 items,  $\alpha = .74$ , with items such as: "I felt disrespected because of my nationality"), *Lack of Competences* (3 items,  $\alpha = .74$ , with items such as „I experience annoying difficulties communicating in the language of the host country”), *Economic Strain* (3 items,  $\alpha = .83$ , with items such as „I worry because of unstable financial situation”), *Loss* (3 items,  $\alpha = .82$ , with items such as: „I miss my country”), *Family Separation & Concerns* (2 items,  $\alpha = .88$ , with items such as: "I worry about family members from whom I am separated"), *Social Strain* (3 items,  $\alpha = .67$ , with items such as „I feel excluded or isolated in the host country") and *Family Conflicts* (3 items,  $\alpha = .78$ , with items such as „I feel disrespected in my family”). A 5-point Likert scale was used for all items, ranging from 1 („Never”) to 5 („Very often”).

The Post-migration Stress Scale for Refugees (RPMS) is the most recent instrument validated and developed specifically for refugee populations to measure the Post-migration stress experienced by this social group. For the purpose of this research we considered the RPMS Scale as the most appropriate instrument to measure the variable of post-migration stress experienced by Ukrainian refugees in Romania because it is a concise, multi-dimensional, structured and up-to-date instrument with good psychometric results on other refugee populations (Nissen, Sengoelge & Solberg, 2021).

*Psychological Well-Being* was assessed using the 42-item Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff and Keyes, 1996). The measure has six subscales: *Autonomy* (7 items,  $\alpha = .71$ , with items such as: „I am not afraid to voice my opinions, even when they are in opposition to the opinions of most people”), *Environmental mastery* (7 items,  $\alpha = .67$ , with items such as „In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live”), *Personal growth* (7 items,  $\alpha = .70$ , with items such as „I have the sense that I have developed a lot as a person over time”), *Positive relations with others* (7 items,  $\alpha = .66$ , with items such as „People would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others”), *Purpose in life* (7 items,  $\alpha = .80$ , with items such as „I have a sense of direction and purpose in life”), *Self-Acceptance* (7 items,  $\alpha = .79$ , with items such as: „I like most aspects of my personality”). For all items, a 6-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 („Strongly disagree”) to 6 („Strongly agree”).

*Resilience* was measured using the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) (Smith *et al.*, 2008), which includes 6 items such as „I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times”. The measure had, on this study, a very good internal consistency

coefficient:  $\alpha = .83$ . A 5-point Likert scale was used for all items, ranging from 1 („Strongly disagree”) to 5 („Strongly agree”).

Unlike previous instruments for measuring resilience, which assessed more personal resources that could increase resilience, the BRS was developed to measure a person's ability to recover from stress and their ability to adapt to difficult or stressful situations. For the purpose of the present research, we considered the BRS Resilience Scale to be the most appropriate instrument as it was also used in other recent studies on refugee populations (Yildirim *et al.*, 2022).

*Social support* was measured using the short version of the ENRICH Social Support Inventory (Mitchell *et al.*, 2003), which consists of 5 items such as „Do you have someone around whom you can counsel when you have a problem?”. The measure had an internal consistency index  $\alpha = .83$ . A 5-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 („Never”) to 5 („Always”).

## 2.5. DATA ANALYSIS

The statistical analysis was carried out in SPSS.

Exploratory descriptive analysis showed a normal distribution on the large post-migration stress, psychological well-being and resilience scales (Shapiro-Wilk test results were not statistically significant) and an abnormal distribution on the social support scale ( $p < .05$ ). At the facet level, all post-migration stress sub-facets showed an abnormal distribution ( $p < .05$ ), with the exception of the absence of skills subscale which showed a normal distribution ( $p = .213$ ). As for the distribution at the level of psychological well-being facets, they showed a normal distribution, with the exception of the purpose in life subscale which did not showed a normal distribution ( $p < .05$ ).

The post-migration stress subscales (discrimination, financial stress, loss, family separation, social stress and family conflict) were not normalized by the *Log10* function, therefore non-parametric tests were used.

Correlational analyzes were conducted to examine the associations between post-migration stress and various aspects of psychological well-being of the Ukrainian refugee population in Romania. Regression analyzes were then used to identify the specific factors of post-migration stress that most reliably predicted specific dimensions of psychological well-being. To examine the moderation effects, particularly the interaction between post-migration stress and external factors such as social support and personal resilience, 5000 bootstrap samples were used. These analyzes were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics v.21. Additionally, to evaluate the moderation models, we used Process v.3, developed by Andrew F. Hayes, specifically implementing Model 1.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1. CORRELATION ANALYSIS

Spearman correlations between post-migration stress, psychological well-being, resilience and social support, as global factors and at the sub-factor level, where appropriate, for the entire sample are presented in Table no. 1.

Post-migration stress is significantly and negatively correlated with psychological well-being as macro-factors reported by Ukrainian refugees in Romania ( $r = -.47, p < .01$ ), confirming hypothesis H1a).

General post-migration stress showed strong negative significant correlations with three aspects of psychological well-being, namely: environmental mastery ( $r = -.60, p < .001$ ), purpose in life ( $r = -.41, p < .001$ ), and self-acceptance ( $r = -.44, p < .001$ ), and a weaker correlation with personal growth ( $r = -.28, p < .001$ ). No significant correlations were found between post-migration and autonomy ( $r = -.21, p = .052$ ) and positive relations with others ( $r = -.05, p = .664$ ). This partially confirms hypothesis H1b) as it correlates with only four of the six facets of psychological well-being.

Analysing the correlations between post-migration stress at the facet level and psychological well-being as a macro-factor, the strongest negative significant correlation was found with the family conflict facet ( $r = -.43, p < .001$ ), followed by financial difficulties ( $r = -.32, p < .001$ ) and social stress ( $r = -.29, p < .001$ ). Lower correlations were observed with discrimination ( $r = -.26, p < .05$ ) and lack of competencies ( $r = -.23, p < .05$ ). The country loss ( $r = -.14, p = .222$ ) and family separation ( $r = -.04, p = .688$ ) did not correlate with psychological well-being. Therefore, hypothesis H2 is partially confirmed, as there is a correlation between four of the post-migration stress factors and psychological well-being.

Consistent with the literature, resilience displayed a significant negative correlation with post-migration stress ( $r = -.44, p < .001$ ) and a positive correlation with psychological well-being ( $r = .46, p < .001$ ), confirming hypothesis H3a). Social support showed a good positive correlation with psychological well-being ( $r = .33, p < .001$ ), confirming hypothesis H3a). Even if lower in intensity, the negative significant correlation between social support and post-migration stress ( $r = -.24, p < .05$ ), confirming hypothesis H3b), is consistent with previous studies on refugee populations that identified social support as an important element in alleviating the effects of post-migration stress (Siriwardhana *et al.*, 2014).

*Table no. 1*  
Descriptive statistics and Spearman correlations for the variables in study

|    | Variable                       | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1           | 2           | 3           | 4           | 5           | 6    | 7           | 8           | 9          | 10         | 11         | 12         | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 |
|----|--------------------------------|----------|-----------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|----|----|----|----|----|
| 1  | POST-MIGRATION STRESS          | 2.71     | .50       | -           |             |             |             |             |      |             |             |            |            |            |            |    |    |    |    |    |
| 2  | Perceived Discrimination       | 1.36     | .50       | <b>.49</b>  | -           |             |             |             |      |             |             |            |            |            |            |    |    |    |    |    |
| 3  | Lack of competences            | 2.94     | .93       | <b>.60</b>  | <b>.31</b>  | -           |             |             |      |             |             |            |            |            |            |    |    |    |    |    |
| 4  | Economic strain                | 3.09     | 1.05      | <b>.71</b>  | <b>.31</b>  | <b>.39</b>  | -           |             |      |             |             |            |            |            |            |    |    |    |    |    |
| 5  | Loss of home country           | 3.96     | .97       | <b>.58</b>  | .06         | .06         | .19         | -           |      |             |             |            |            |            |            |    |    |    |    |    |
| 6  | Family Separation & Concerns   | 4.10     | .96       | <b>.33</b>  | -.08        | .10         | .11         | <b>.48</b>  | -    |             |             |            |            |            |            |    |    |    |    |    |
| 7  | Social Strain                  | 2.88     | .97       | <b>.83</b>  | <b>.36</b>  | <b>.37</b>  | <b>.57</b>  | <b>.55</b>  | .17  | -           |             |            |            |            |            |    |    |    |    |    |
| 8  | Family Conflict                | 1.54     | .72       | <b>.46</b>  | <u>.25</u>  | <b>.33</b>  | .22         | .04         | -.06 | <u>.25</u>  | -           |            |            |            |            |    |    |    |    |    |
| 9  | PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING       | 4.17     | .55       | <b>-.47</b> | <u>-.26</u> | <u>-.23</u> | <b>-.32</b> | <b>-.14</b> | -.04 | <b>-.29</b> | <b>-.43</b> | -          |            |            |            |    |    |    |    |    |
| 10 | Autonomy                       | 4.10     | .68       | -.21        | -.03        | -.20        | -.12        | -.01        | -.07 | .03         | <b>-.36</b> | <b>.70</b> | -          |            |            |    |    |    |    |    |
| 11 | Environmental mastery          | 3.83     | .69       | <b>-.60</b> | <b>-.36</b> | <b>-.39</b> | <b>-.43</b> | -.19        | -.15 | <b>-.39</b> | <b>-.36</b> | <b>.77</b> | <b>.53</b> | -          |            |    |    |    |    |    |
| 12 | Personal growth                | 4.39     | .67       | <b>-.28</b> | -.20        | -.18        | -.14        | -.08        | -.05 | -.14        | -.21        | <b>.73</b> | .48        | <b>.48</b> | -          |    |    |    |    |    |
| 13 | Positive relations with others | 4.40     | .67       | -.05        | -.09        | .08         | -.07        | .15         | .05  | -.01        | -.28        | <b>.59</b> | <u>.26</u> | <b>.35</b> | <u>.29</u> | -  |    |    |    |    |

|    |                 |      |     |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |   |
|----|-----------------|------|-----|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|---|
| 14 | Purpose in life | 4.19 | .87 | <b>-.41</b> | <u>-.24</u> | -.15        | <b>-.29</b> | -.16        | .02         | <b>-.37</b> | <i>-.30</i> | <b>.80</b> | <b>.40</b> | <b>.58</b> | <b>.49</b> | <b>.47</b> | -          |            |            |   |
| 15 | Self-acceptance | 4.09 | .81 | <b>-.44</b> | -.18        | -.15        | <u>-.25</u> | <u>-.22</u> | -.09        | <u>-.27</u> | <b>-.37</b> | <b>.86</b> | <b>.59</b> | <b>.64</b> | <b>.60</b> | <b>.44</b> | <b>.60</b> | -          |            |   |
| 16 | RESILIENCE      | 2.86 | .76 | <b>-.44</b> | -.26        | <u>-.27</u> | -.19        | -.20        | <u>-.25</u> | <i>-.33</i> | <b>-.35</b> | <b>.46</b> | <b>.39</b> | <b>.39</b> | <b>.31</b> | <u>.23</u> | .28        | <b>.48</b> | -          |   |
| 17 | SOCIAL SUPPORT  | 3.75 | .92 | <u>-.24</u> | <b>-.32</b> | <u>-.23</u> | -.19        | .13         | .08         | -.08        | <b>-.34</b> | .33        | .11        | <u>.27</u> | .19        | <b>.42</b> | .21        | <b>.29</b> | <b>.31</b> | - |

*Note.* N = 84; Significant correlations at the  $p = 0.001$  (bilateral) are shown in bold. Correlations with the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient ( $\rho$ ) at the  $p = 0.01$  are shown in italics. Underlined figures represent correlations significant at the  $p = 0.05$ .

### 3.2. T-TEST

To test hypothesis *H4*, a T-test for two independent samples was used to analyze the differences between respondents who are in Romania with their partner (N=59) and those whose partners stayed in Ukraine (N=25). The results are provided in Table 2.

*Table no. 2*  
Post-Migration Stress and Psychological Well-being for participants with and without their partner in Romania

| Variable                       | With partner in Romania |     | With partner in Ukraine |     | <i>t</i> (84) | <i>p</i>    | Cohen's <i>d</i> |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|-----|-------------------------|-----|---------------|-------------|------------------|
|                                | M                       | SD  | M                       | SD  |               |             |                  |
| PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING       | 4.21                    | .55 | 4.06                    | .56 | -1.20         | .234        | .271             |
| Autonomy                       | 4.12                    | .67 | 4.04                    | .73 | -.50          | .620        | .116             |
| Environmental mastery          | 3.95                    | .69 | 3.56                    | .62 | -2.55         | <b>.014</b> | <b>.581</b>      |
| Personal growth                | 4.48                    | .58 | 4.18                    | .81 | -1.66         | .106        | .457             |
| Positive relations with others | 4.44                    | .68 | 4.32                    | .67 | -.72          | .475        | .177             |
| Purpose in life                | 4.16                    | .94 | 4.27                    | .67 | -.59          | .559        | -.126            |
| Self-acceptance                | 4.14                    | .81 | 3.96                    | .82 | .92           | .364        | .221             |

*Note:* Mean and standard deviation variable values for each of the groups are shown for participants reported to be „with life partner in Romania” (N=59) and „with life partner remaining in Ukraine” (N = 25), as well as the results of *t* tests (assuming unequal variance) comparing the variable estimates between the two groups. In bold significant correlation at  $p < .001$

The analysis of the data reveals several insights into the psychological well-being of individuals with partners in Romania compared to those with partners in Ukraine. The t-tests conducted for each psychological well-being variable indicate specific patterns. Notably, participants with partners in Romania scored slightly higher in psychological well-being ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = .55$ ) compared to those with partners in Ukraine ( $M = 4.06$ ,  $SD = .56$ ), although the difference was not statistically significant ( $t(84) = -1.20$ ,  $p = .234$ ). The effect size, as measured by Cohen's *d*, was found to be 0.271, suggesting a small effect. However, when examining individual dimensions of psychological well-being, significant differences emerge in environmental mastery ( $t(84) = -2.55$ ,  $p = .014$ , Cohen's *d* = .581), indicating that participants with partners in Romania scored higher in this specific aspect. Other dimensions, such as autonomy, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance, did not exhibit statistically significant differences between the two groups, with Cohen's *d* values

ranging from -.126 to .457, suggesting small to moderate effect sizes. In light of these results, we partially reject hypothesis *H4*.

### 3.3. MODERATION ANALYSIS

To test the *H5* that the relationship between post-migration stress and environmental mastery as a facet of psychological well-being among Ukrainian refugees is moderated by either Social Support (*H5a*) or Resilience (*H5b*), two moderation analyses were conducted. To avoid potentially problematic multicollinearity, the variables were centered (Aiken & West, 1991). The results of the two generated models are included in Table no. 3.

*Table no.3*  
Moderation Analysis with Social Support and Resilience as moderators of the relationship between Post-migration stress and Environmental mastery

| Hypothesis | Predictors                             | $\beta$ | se  | t            | $\Delta R^2$ | F for $\Delta R^2$ |
|------------|----------------------------------------|---------|-----|--------------|--------------|--------------------|
| <i>H5a</i> | Post-migration stress                  | -.88    | .13 | <b>-6.78</b> |              |                    |
|            | Social Support                         | .06     | .07 | .87          |              |                    |
|            | Post-migration stress * Social Support | -.35    | .11 | <b>-3.24</b> | .39          | 17.28              |
|            | Model $R^2$                            | .39     |     |              |              |                    |
| <i>H5b</i> | Post-migration stress                  | -.62    | .13 | <b>-4.65</b> |              |                    |
|            | Resilience                             | .21     | .09 | <i>2.41</i>  |              |                    |
|            | Post-migration stress * Resilience     | -3.57   | .17 | <b>-2.16</b> | .38          | 16.47              |
|            | Model $R^2$                            | .38     |     |              |              |                    |

*Note.* N = 84; in bold significant correlation at  $p < .001$ , in italics significant correlation at  $p < .05$

#### ***Model 1: Moderation by Social support***

In the first step of the analysis, the variables Post-migration stress and Social Support were included, explaining a significant amount of variance in environmental mastery,  $R^2 = .39$ ,  $F(3, 80) = 17.28$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Although post-migration stress has a significant effect on environmental mastery ( $\beta = -.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and social support does not have a significant effect on environmental mastery ( $\beta = .06$ ,  $p = .385$ ), the interaction between the post-migration stress and social support significantly contributed to the variance in environmental mastery,  $\Delta R^2 = .08$ ,  $\Delta F(1, 80) = 10.491$ ,  $p < .01$ . The interaction plot (Figure 1) indicated that the higher the Post-migration stress is, the lower the environmental mastery is at lower social support levels. The moderation effect was particularly pronounced at higher levels of social support, where individuals experienced enhanced environmental mastery in the face of elevated post-migration stress.

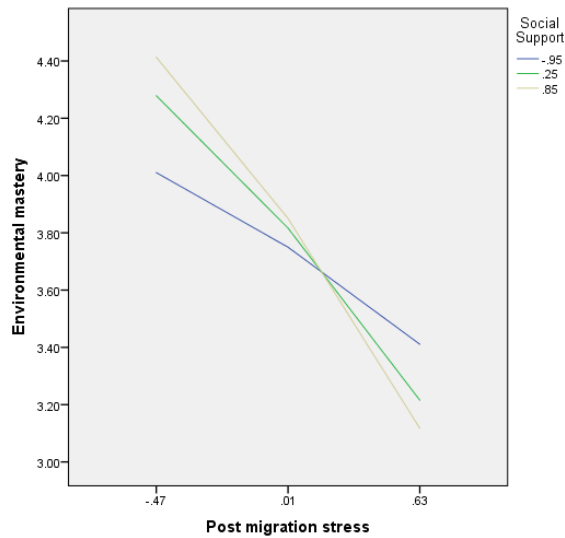


Figure 1

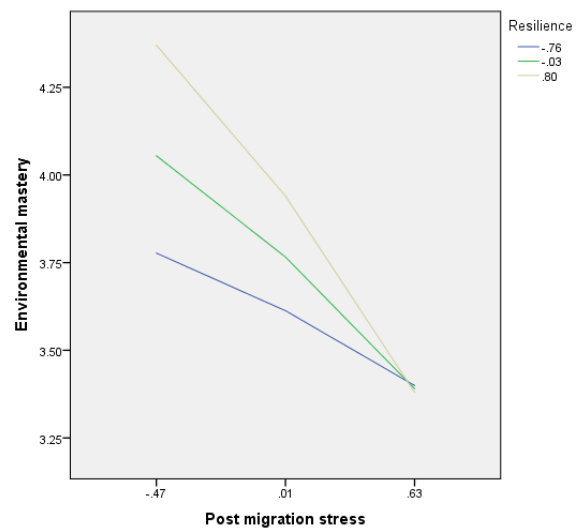


Figure 2

### ***Model 2: Moderation by Resilience***

In the second model, the variables post-migration stress (Post-migration stress) and Resilience were included in the model, accounting for a significant amount of variance in environmental mastery,  $R^2 = .38$ ,  $F(3, 80) = 16.475$ ,  $p < .001$ .

The interaction between Post-migration stress and Resilience significantly contributed to the variance in environmental mastery,  $\Delta R^2 = .04$ ,  $\Delta F(1, 80) = 4.644$ ,  $p < .05$ , while both post-migration stress ( $\beta = -.62$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and resilience ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $p < .05$ ) had a significant effect on environmental mastery. The interaction plot (Figure 2) revealed that as Post-migration stress and Resilience increased, Environmental mastery also increased. At low Post-migration stress levels, resilience did not substantially impact environmental mastery ( $p = .061$ ). However, among individuals facing high post-migration stress, those with elevated levels of Resilience exhibited better Environmental mastery as facets of psychological well-being.

In summary, both Resilience and Social Support were found to moderate the relationship between post-migration stress and environmental mastery among Ukrainian refugees, highlighting the importance of these factors in buffering the impact of stress on psychological well-being.

## **3.4. DISCUSSIONS**

It was found that refugees in general face many challenges and obstacles associated with the post-migration environment, including limited financial resources, acculturation, discrimination and the social policies of the host country. Furthermore, these stressors related to the post-migration environment and uprooting cumulatively have a stronger negative impact on refugees' psychological

well-being and mental health than the pre-migration traumatic experience (Malm, Tinghög & Narusyte, 2020).

The results of our study are guided by these considerations, with applied statistical tests showing a clear negative correlations between post-migration stress, both at a facet and overall level, and psychological well-being with its facets.

Social support was positively associated with psychological well-being, reinforcing the results of previous research (Walther *et al.*, 2021) conducted on refugee populations, a result also confirmed in our research with a statistically significant correlation with post-migration stress.

As expected, resilience also showed positive correlations with psychological well-being and negative correlations with post-migration stress. The existing literature provides particularly robust results to demonstrate positive associations between resilience and psychological well-being (Lee, Nam & Kim, 2013; Fredrickson, 2001) and negative correlation with stress (Ong *et al.*, 2006, Xing *et al.*, 2013).

Regarding the separation of families, especially of life partners, our study did not find statistically significant differences in various aspects of psychological well-being between refugees currently living with their life partners in Romania and those with partners in Ukraine. Overall psychological well-being scores showed no significant differences, suggesting a similar impact on well-being regardless of partner location. However, a closer look at individual dimensions revealed differentiated findings. Participants with partners in Romania showed higher levels of environmental mastery, indicating possible differences in certain aspects of well-being influenced by the geographical separation of life partners. This results contradict findings from other studies of refugee populations and consistently shows that partner separation has a significant negative impact on psychological well-being (Georgiadou, Schmitt & Erim, 2020) Although existing literature suggests negative impacts, our research did not find statistically significant differences on most dimensions of psychological well-being between refugees currently living with their life partners in Romania and those separated from their partners in Ukraine. Three possible explanations could be formulated (one cultural, one social and one psychological) for the unexpected results of the present study regarding the lack of a significant statistical difference between the two samples for most aspects of well-being. Of all ethnic groups of Slavic origin, Ukrainians are most descended from the Cossack population, considered by many historians to be the forerunners of the modern Ukrainian nation. Cossacks were considered warriors and defenders of the borders against attacks from migrant populations and other invaders.

In recent history, the Cossack army on the Don was the main resistance force against the Bolshevik army. In Cossack culture, unlike other Slavic cultures, including Russian culture, women played a central role in the family and lived far more independent lives from men than was common at the time. Of course, this

was also a necessity in a warrior population where men were often away at war and away from the family. Cossack women were known to be very independent and used to holding the reins of the family at a time when this was very unusual in most other cultures. Cossack women were known for their strong character. The ethnographer G. B. Gubarev characterized them as follows: "Centuries of hardship and adversity have given rise to a fearless determination among Cossack women. The Cossack woman was also a boatman and a skilled horseman and wielder of weapons. The Cossack woman was perfectly capable of defending her children and her home. Thus the Cossack period, with its wars, its Mongol-Tatar invasions and its constant uprisings, gave rise to a new type of woman, who ran the domestic economy and defended her home and family while her husband was away at war." (Encyclopedia of Ukraine).

Since the current research participant group consists of 86.9% women (representative of the gender distribution of the Ukrainian refugee population in Romania), the Kazakh ancestry of contemporary Ukrainians could be a possible cultural explanation for the difference between the result obtained in this study and the studies conducted to other refugee populations and could be a direction for further research. An alternative explanation for the results obtained can be associated with the fact that in Romania a large number of Ukrainian refugees live in a few large urban centers and therefore social support is ensured intra-ethnically through relationships with other members of the community that take place there family relationships. In fact, in a study examining the psychological well-being of military spouses, social support was found to have an important moderating effect on the relationship between stress and psychological well-being of respondents and may counteract elements associated with the stress of separation from a partner (Green *et al.*, 2013). A third possible explanation, psychological in nature, could also explain the results of our research and also suggest a direction for future research. When wives who have been separated from their partners attribute to the partner left behind in Ukraine the role of a heroic defender of the homeland, they may feel a sense of pride or duty fulfilled that is similar to the natural reactions of sadness and grief that accompany family separation, partially counteracted. A study of a sample of wives of Israeli soldiers who had been taken prisoner of war found that despite the loneliness and pain associated with the separation, respondents to the separation also experienced positive emotions such as a sense of personal growth and development attributed. The personal and social perspective of active and courageous men fighting for the defense of the homeland, on the one hand, has a positive effect on the self-esteem of their wives, who are proud of their partner, and on the other hand, they themselves have found out that they are in difficult situations cope alone and that separation from their partner has allowed them to exercise autonomy, which is an important aspect of psychological well-being (Lieblich, 1997). The linear regression analysis carried out in this study revealed family conflict as the main factor for post-migration stress, with a negative

predictive role for all aspects of psychological well-being. This finding supports the results of other studies conducted on refugee populations. For example, a 2022 study of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands showed that positive relationships within the family are central to refugees' well-being and adaptation, as family harmony is a motivating factor in building their new life and planning for the future in their new land despite adversity (Fadhli *et al.*, 2022). This is also consistent with other previous research (Veronese *et al.*, 2021) that has shown that the presence of strong family ties gives refugees a sense of ability to cope with difficulties. Forced migration due to unforeseen circumstances, such as the war in Ukraine, leads to a significant deterioration in environment mastery as refugees have to adapt to a completely new and unfamiliar environment.

As expected, of all aspects of psychological well-being, environment mastery was the most negatively correlated with factors associated with post-migration stress and, also, shown the only difference between the two analyzed groups (with and without partner with them in Romania). This can be explained by the urgent requirements for refugees to function in new social coordinates, from important aspects of life such as the need to communicate without knowing the language (often without a foreign language) to understanding how to access medical provision or social assistance system, up to more mundane things such as filling out a form, using the public transport system or going shopping. These results confirm the results of other previous studies that have shown that refugees have many problems adapting to the new environment (Carswell *et al.*, 2011) and that this is one of the aspects of well-being that is most influenced by it become stress factors after migration.

It is interesting to note that social stress, which in the case of refugees is interpreted as social isolation in the new culture, plays a stronger negative predictive role than family conflict. This highlights the importance of efforts to socially integrate the refugee population and create a framework in which they can interact not only intra-ethnically but also with the general population of the host country. Results from a large meta-analysis on resilience (Lee *et al.*, 2013) showed that resilience is closely linked to optimism and good affect, which are favorably correlated with self-efficacy. Thus, resilience can be considered a protective factor against PTSD and other psychiatric disorders. Not surprisingly, our research showed that higher levels of resilience lead to a weaker association between post-migration stress and environment mastery. Social support has generally been identified as an important predictor in the relationship between post-migration stress and psychological well-being in many studies (Walther *et al.*, 2021, Van der Boor *et al.*, 2020). There are also studies in which social support did not play a moderating role on the relationship between acculturative stress and psychological well-being and did not predict a significant increase in variance in psychological well-being (Alemi & Stempel, 2018). A possible explanation could relate to a migrant-specific process that involves a clear compartmentalization or separation

of the external and private aspects of life. This separation could explain the lack of a clear relationship between social support (associated with family and intra-ethnic community) and post-migration stress (associated with external factors in the new environment). For migrants, intra-community and family environment and greater social environment are perceived as non-overlapping aspects that are connected to different areas of their lives and are not integrated into a unified perspective on personal existence. Still, in our study both resilience and social support were found to be moderating the relationship between post-migration stress and environment mastery.

### 3.5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

A limitation of this study could be seen in the transversal design, which makes it difficult to draw causal conclusions. Additionally, results were obtained exclusively through self-report questionnaires, increasing the possibility of common method variance contaminating the reported associations.

The integration process in the host country is characterized by many difficulties and requires a high level of functionality from the refugees. Therefore, it is particularly important to examine their impact on psychological well-being and the internal and external resources that can facilitate this integration at the level of the refugee community and at the social level of the host country. A limitation of the study is the number of participants included in the study (N=84).

As previously mentioned, difficult access to respondents is also a common problem in research on refugee populations. A second limitation of the research concerns the circumstances of the research population, which changed significantly very soon after data collection. Financial support has decreased, conditions for obtaining it have become more stringent and uncertainty about the near future has increased. It can only be assumed that these significant changes in the conditions of the study population would have affected the measurement results if the questionnaires had been administered after the date of the announcement of these changes in the law.

While at the time of the arrival of the waves of refugees the general focus was on meeting basic needs such as shelter and food, as time passes and the refugees' stay in the new country extends, more subtle but longer-term aspects come to the fore and impact on issues such as psychological well-being and the need to facilitate the adaptation and social integration of a numerically significant population. For this reason, we believe that this study, carried out a year after the outbreak of war and the arrival of the first waves of refugees in our country, can be a starting point for further research to determine the directions of intervention, social support programs and public actions to support the integration of refugees.

Another direction for future research is to conduct a comparative analysis with groups of Ukrainian refugees in other countries who have benefited from other

forms of support and to draw conclusions of a more general nature relevant to formulating a set of best practices in their integration into the receiving countries.

Lastly, this study could be integrated into broader comparative research between different refugee populations to identify commonalities in their experiences as well as ways in which different levels of external support have an impact on counteracting the negative effects of post-migration stressors and improving psychological well-being and ultimately to facilitate the successful integration of the refugee population.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Despite numerous studies on refugee populations, with a particularly extensive literature in the last decade, we are not aware of any published studies that specifically address Ukrainian refugees' post-migration stress and well-being, a topic of significant relevance given the ongoing conflict in the country Ukraine. The effort to scientifically investigate and document aspects of unfolding history in real time is consistent with a broader goal in the social sciences.

The crisis triggered by the armed conflict in Ukraine and the presence of an unprecedented refugee population in our country should not be ignored in psychological research. Research on populations belonging to traumatized ethnic communities, such as refugees, is inherently challenging. Overcoming barriers extends beyond language and cultural barriers to include community members' reluctance to participate in studies and, more generally, limited access to respondents. Significant efforts were made to recruit a strong group of participants for this research to ensure the scientific relevance of the data collected.

This study contributes to the growing interest in studying the effects of armed conflict on civilians outside the war zone. The forced displacement of large populations affects a much larger area than that lying between the borders of the States directly involved in the conflict and results in increasing civilian exposure to the conflict.

This research is consistent with the paradigm of recent studies on changing refugee populations of focusing from pathology and deficit to resources and resilience, without negating the existence of traumatic experiences and the importance of clinical approaches. Post-migration stress and its factors are cumulative and encompass a range of experiences, living conditions and challenges that refugees face upon arrival in the host country. This construct, more subtle than the traumatic events preceding migration, proved difficult to define. Not surprisingly, even among Ukrainian refugees, the variable "post-migration stress" showed a strong negative correlation with psychological well-being and its facets. This result is not surprising for a population in a completely new environment in which it must quickly learn to navigate various aspects of life in the host country. Mastering the environment encompasses almost all aspects of life in the host

country, from accessing health services to understanding the transportation system, administrative organization, local customs, and more.

Resilience, viewed as a set of qualities and personal abilities that enable healthy functioning or adaptation in the face of significant adversity or a disruptive life event, played a moderating role in the relationship between post-migration stress and environmental mastery as a facet of the psychological well-being. This aspect is particularly relevant because environmental mastery is the facet of psychological well-being most predicted by post-migration stressors and most influenced by displacement.

Social support also acted as a moderator of environmental mastery in relation to post-migration stressors. We explained this result by the likelihood that respondents compartmentalize aspects of life in their ongoing effort to adapt not only to the new environment but also to conditions of uncertainty and stress. Positive relationships and social support are associated with the immediate family and intra-ethnic community, while post-migration stress is exclusively related to external environmental factors. This disconnect may result in a lack of association between social support and post-migration stress.

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#### **On-line Resources**

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*Data Availability Statement*

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article are made available by the authors without undue reservation.

*Authors' Contributions*

Both authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the main objective of the study, the analysis of the data, and the writing of the manuscript.

*Conflict of interest*

The authors declare that the research was conducted without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.