



ATTITUDES TOWARDS IMMIGRANT WORKERS, THEIR POSITION ON THE LABOR MARKET AND EXPERIENCES OF INTEGRATION IN CROATIA: A SEMI-SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the existing scientific literature on labour migration in Croatia through a semi-systematic literature review and thematic analysis, with the aim of synthesising knowledge about migration trends, the position of foreign workers on the labour market, their integration experiences, and public attitudes. The analysis includes 22 scientific papers published in Croatian social science journals in the period from 2013 to 2025, and the interpretation of the findings is based on the theoretical frameworks of intergroup threat and group position theory. The results indicate a continuous increase in the need for foreign labour, especially in sectors with significant labour shortages, such as construction, tourism, and the service sector. Foreign workers are generally concentrated in lower-paid and lower-skilled occupations, although a smaller group of highly educated workers is also present. Despite the growing demand, they face numer-

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ous challenges, including higher unemployment, administrative obstacles, and limited access to rights and services. The analysis of public attitudes reveals a pronounced ambivalence: although there is awareness of the economic need for foreign workers, there are also negative attitudes, high social distance, and a perception of migrants as socioeconomic and sociocultural threats. These attitudes are linked to socio-demographic and socio-cultural characteristics and the broader socio-political context, which confirms the relevance of the applied theoretical approaches. Migrants' integration experience points to the important role of employers, but also to shortcomings in the form of weak institutional support, especially in the areas of language, information, and access to rights. In conclusion, the paper points to the need for further development of integration policies based on empirical findings as well as strengthening interdisciplinary cooperation. It also highlights the need for additional qualitative research in order to better understand the everyday experiences of immigrants and improve the effectiveness of integration policies in Croatia.

Keywords: Attitudes, Croatia, Labour market, Immigrant workers, Integration, Semi-systematic literature review, Thematic analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

International labour migration has become a structural and enduring feature of contemporary European societies experiencing both emigration and immigration, shaping political and public discourse, demographic trends, labour markets and cultural diversity. According to Eurobarometer data, approximately 37 million individuals born outside the European Union reside within its borders, accounting for around 8% of the total population.¹ At the same time, immigration is consistently perceived as one of the key social and political issues, with approximately 25% of EU citizens ranking it among the three most important societal concerns.² These figures highlight not only the demographic significance of migration but also its pronounced political and social relevance.

Over the past decade, labour migration has become increasingly significant in the Croatian context as well. The intensification of global migration flows, driven by structural inequalities, armed conflicts, demographic changes, geopolitical instability, and processes of globalisation, has led to increased cross-border labour mobility. In the context of population ageing and labour shortages, many EU Member States, including Croatia, are becoming increasingly dependent on migrant workers to sustain economic activity in key sectors such as construction, transport, industry, tourism, and services³.

¹ European Commission, *Integration of Immigrants in the EU*, Special Eurobarometer 519, 2022, Available at: <https://www.integrazionemigranti.gov.it/AnteprimaPDF.aspx?id=3524>, Accessed 25 March 2026, p. 5.

² *Ibid.*

³ Government Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities., *Izješće o politikama integracije: Prava vezana uz rad državljana trećih zemalja u Republici Hrvatskoj*, Vlada Republike Hrvatske, 2022, p. 9.

Traditionally characterised as a country of emigration, Croatia has in recent years experienced a rapid increase in labour immigration.⁴ This shift has been particularly pronounced following its accession to the EU in 2013⁵ and subsequent changes in labour market regulation, including the liberalisation of the work permit system and the abolition of quotas in 2021. According to data from the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia, the number of residence and work permits issued increased significantly – from approximately 66,655 in 2020 and 81,000 in 2021, to more than 124,000 in 2022; 172,000 in 2023; 206,000 in 2024, and 170,000 in 2025.⁶ According to the same source, foreign workers in Croatia are predominantly employed in sectors characterised by labour shortages, such as construction, agriculture, tourism and hospitality, transport, and industry. Most originate from Southeast Europe and Asia, reflecting broader regional and global migration patterns.⁷ At the same time, analyses by the Ombudsperson⁸ and reports from institutions specialising in human rights in Croatia point to numerous challenges in the integration of foreign workers, including administrative barriers, limited access to information, insufficient institutional support, and difficulties in exercising labour and social rights.⁹ In this context, public attitudes towards immigrants represent a key factor in the integration process. They shape the social environment in which migrants live and work and influence their opportunities for social inclusion, in-

⁴ OECD, *Reviews of Labour Market and Social Policies: Croatia 2025*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2025, Available at:

[<https://doi.org/10.1787/90b78cc3-en>], Accessed 27 March 2026.

⁵ Croatia has also implemented significant changes in its migration-related legislation. During the EU accession process, Croatian legislation was harmonised with the EU acquis, including in the area of labour migration. The Foreigners Act (Official Gazette No. 133/20, 114/22, 151/22, 40/25) constitutes the central legal framework governing the entry, movement, and residence of foreign nationals, as well as procedures for issuing visas and residence and work permits, the rights and obligations of foreign nationals, irregular migration, and return. The rights of asylum seekers and persons under international or temporary protection, and their access to the labour market, are regulated by the Act on International and Temporary Protection (Official Gazette No. 70/15, 127/17, 33/23, 17/25). In addition, the provisions of the Labour Act (Official Gazette No. 93/14, 127/17, 98/19, 151/22, 64/23) and the Occupational Safety and Health Act (Official Gazette No. 71/14, 118/14, 154/14, 94/18, 96/18) apply to all workers in Croatia, including foreign workers with a legally regulated employment status.

⁶ Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia, *Statistics of issued residence and work permits for 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025*, Available at:

[<https://mup.gov.hr/gradjani-281562/moji-dokumenti-281563/stranci-333/statistika-169019/169019>], Accessed 25 May 2026.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Ombudswoman of Croatia, *What Problems are Most Frequently Reported by Foreign Workers in Croatia?*, 2023, Available at:

[<https://www.ombudsman.hr/en/what-problems-are-most-frequently-reported-by-foreign-workers-in-croatia/>], Accessed 25 March 2026.

⁹ *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, note 4, p. 12 – 15.

tegration, and equal treatment.¹⁰ Comparative research demonstrates significant variation across European societies in public perceptions of immigrants, with attitudes closely linked to economic conditions, levels of education, age, migration history, and broader socio-political contexts.¹¹ While some societies emphasise the economic contributions of migrants, others express concerns related to labour market competition, pressure on welfare systems, and cultural change.¹² At the global level, findings based on Gallup World Poll data indicate the ambivalence of public perceptions, whereby potential economic benefits of migration are recognised alongside concerns about its social and economic consequences.¹³

Research on migration trends in Croatia has the long history, but it has even expanded during last years, especially since the rise in the inflow of foreign workers in 2021 onwards (not only from neighboring, Western Balkan countries, but including workers from Asian nations such as Nepal, India, Phillippines, Bangladesh etc.)¹⁴, and since Croatia recorded “positive net migration“ for the first time in 2022 after “years-long negative net migration“ (after a population decline of around 10% population between 2011 and 2021 population censuses, accelerated population aging and fertility decline, and after more than 15% of working age population have emigrated since joining the EU in 2013).¹⁵

The Croatia’s migration transition from a emigration to an immigration society brings new challenges for the whole society, as well as a possibilities for economic sustainability because “foreign workers have become essential in key sectors such as

¹⁰ Čačić-Kumpes, J.; Gregurović, S.; Kumpes, J.; *Migracija, integracija i stavovi prema imigrantima u Hrvatskoj*. Revija za sociologiju, Vol. 42, No. 3, 2012, pp. 305-336.

¹¹ Goubin, S.; Ruelens, A.; Nicaise, I.; *Trends in attitudes towards migration in Europe. A comparative analysis*. HIVA – Research Institute for Work and Society, 2022, p. 21.

¹² Goubin, S.; Ruelens, A.; Nicaise, I., *op. cit.*, note 13, pp. 21, 23.

¹³ Esipova, N. B.; Ray, J.; Pugliese, A., *How the World Views Migration*, IOM, 2017, Available at: [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/how_the_world_gallup.pdf], Accessed 26 March 2026.

¹⁴ A selective collection and review of the relevant academic publications, contemporary national and international research projects and initiatives, as well as expert reports about foreign workers can be seen in: Hornstein Tomić, C.; Budimir, Župić, A. *Labour migration and demographic change in Croatia. Mapping conditions and potentials for a cohesive migration transition*, 2025, pp. 17-20. [doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.30383041], Review of the studies of local migration specialist, media analysis and industrial relations about foreign workers can also be seen in: Butković, H.; Samardžija V.; Rukavina, I. *Strani radnici u Hrvatskoj: izazovi i mogućnosti za gospodarski i društveni razvoj*, Institut za razvoj i međunarodne odnose, Zagreb, 2022, pp. 114-124.; Review and analysis of different research on attitudes towards immigrants can be seen in: Gregurović, M. *Stavovi prema tražiteljima azila i izbjeglicama u Hrvatskoj: pregled istraživanja u razdoblju 2005.-2020.*, u: Gregurović, S.; Klempić Bogadi, S. *Neminovnost ili izbor? Povijesni i suvremeni aspekti migracija u Hrvatskoj*, Naklada Jesenski i Turk, Institut za migracije i narodnosti, Zagreb, 2023, pp. 127-148.

¹⁵ Hornstein Tomić, C.; Budimir, Župić, *op. cit.*, note 14, pp. 2-3.

construction, tourism and services due to persistent labour shortages”.¹⁶ Moreover, managing challenges and opportunities of the migration transition, supporting social integration of a heterogeneous group of foreign workers coming from culturally diverse countries, as well as preparing and building a democratic, open and inclusive society will remain to be a current and important, scientific-theoretical and empirical, as well as practical-political issue in the future. Namely, due to some UN estimates for Croatia, a “further decline to 3,3 million inhabitants is projected by 2050.”, while according to Croatian Employer’s association estimates “the total number of foreign workers in Croatia could reach 400,000 to 500,000 by 2030”.¹⁷ In this regard, we emphasize the importance of scientific approaches that enable theoretical and empirical insights and consider it as the main basis for managing Croatia’s migration transition, for developing inclusive integration policies and building sustainable, labour market. Therefore this paper addresses the following research question: *What insights does the selected scientific literature provide regarding labour migration in Croatia in terms of trends, labour market dynamics, integration, and public attitudes towards foreign workers?*

This paper aims to synthesise research on attitudes towards foreign workers in Croatia, their labour market position, and integration experiences, while identifying key challenges and implications for integration policies. To achieve this, a semi-systematic literature review and thematic analysis were combined to identify dominant patterns, methodological approaches, and research gaps in the existing literature.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOME PERSPECTIVES AND INSIGHTS

A review and analysis of the broader theoretical framework that enables a better understanding and interpretation of contemporary migration processes is beyond the scope of this chapter. Various migration theories can be broadly divided into those explaining the causes of migration and those analysing its impacts on countries of origin and destination¹⁸. These also include functionalist and historical-structural approaches, as well as theories emphasising migrants’ agency and identity, and migration transition theories¹⁹. Among these, migration transition theories are particularly significant, as they view migration as part of broader pro-

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-5.

¹⁸ Castles, S.; de Haas, H.; Miller, J. M. *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (5th ed). New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-54.

cesses of development, social transformation, and globalisation²⁰. In this perspective, migration is understood as an integral component of wider developmental change and as a process with its own internal, self-sustaining, and potentially self-undermining dynamics.²¹

The concept of migration transition is an old one, and it could be recognized in the hypothesis about the *mobility transition* first developed by Zelinski (1971.) who analyzed spatial mobility with the degree of social-economic and demographic development and modernization, and distinguished five phases of the development of societies: 1. the premodern traditional society 2. the early transitional society; 3. the late transitional society; 4. the advanced society, and 5. a future superadvanced society.²² A similar theory according to which each European country is in a specific stage of the immigration cycle is developed by Okolski (2012), and this transformation from the country of emigration to the country of immigration is termed the *migration transition*.²³ Okolski identifies five stages of migration patterns. He argues that a country transitions from emigration to immigration when emigration declines sharply, demographic transition occurs (including population ageing and falling fertility), and the number of foreign workers exceeds the number of domestic workers who emigrate. This shift marks a new phase of national development.²⁴

Analysing the link between development and migration has a long theoretical tradition, with de Haas (2010) distinguishing between *migration optimists* and *migration pessimists*. This divide reflects broader tensions in social theory (functionalist vs. structuralist), development theory (balanced growth vs. asymmetrical development), and political economy (neoliberal vs. state-centrist perspectives).²⁵ In contrast to these opposing views, *migration pluralists* emphasise the heterogeneous and non-deterministic relationship between migration and development. They integrate both agency and structure and highlight diverse mechanisms through which migration affects development, including the new economics of labour migration, household livelihood strategies, and transnational perspectives.²⁶ Pluralistic ap-

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 47.

²¹ De Haas, H. *Migration and Development: A Theoretical Perspective*, The International Migration Review, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2010, p. 228.

²² Zelinsky, W. *The Hypothesis of the Mobility Transition*, Geographical Review, Vol. 61, Issue 2, 1971, pp. 230-231.

²³ Okolski, M. *Transition from Emigration to Immigration: Is it the Destiny of Modern European Countries?*, in: Okolski, M. (ed.) *European Immigrations: Trends, Structures and Policy Implications*. Amsterdam University Press, 2012, p. 23.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²⁵ De Haas, H., *op. cit.*, note, 21, p. 229.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 241.-248.

proaches view migration as an integral part of broader processes of economic and social development and modernisation. They emphasise the need to analyse both the causes and consequences of migration across macro, meso, and micro levels. However, the question of whether migration promotes or hinders development remains unresolved.²⁷ Overall, different theoretical perspectives highlight different aspects of migration, leading to varying approaches and policy frameworks.²⁸ In this context, it is important to note that contemporary migration optimism also has a strong ideological dimension, as it aligns with the dominant neoliberal political philosophy.²⁹

An analysis of the migration transition that contemporary Croatian society is undergoing would not be complete without research into how the “host” society responds to these changes. Therefore, in a theoretical sense, attitudes towards immigrants and foreign workers are particularly examined. These attitudes are most commonly explained through the frameworks of intergroup threat theory, group position theory, and realistic conflict theory. These approaches are used complementarily to explain how economic, symbolic, and discursive factors jointly shape attitudes towards foreign workers. They share the underlying assumption that negative attitudes towards out-groups stem from perceived threats to the interests, resources, or identity of the dominant social group.

Intergroup threat theory posits that prejudice arises primarily from subjective perceptions of threat rather than objective conditions. Stephan and Stephan distinguish between two main types of threat: realistic and symbolic.³⁰ Realistic threats refer to the perceived loss of economic and political resources, such as employment opportunities, income and social influence.³¹ Even in the absence of objectively grounded threats, the mere perception of competition can generate negative attitudes towards other groups. Symbolic threats, by contrast, are associated with perceived differences in values, norms, and cultural identity, and often involve fears related to the erosion of social norms or the moral order.³² In situations of direct contact between groups of different cultural identities, a lack of knowledge of the cultural specificities of the other group can result in discomfort and fear, which can consequently contribute to the formation of negative stereotypes and

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Castels, p. 52.

²⁹ De Haas, p. 257.

³⁰ Stephan, W. G.; Stephan, C. W., *An integrated threat theory of prejudice*, in: Oskamp S. (ed.), *Reducing prejudice and discrimination*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2000, pp. 23 - 45.

³¹ Stephan, W. G.; Ybarra, O.; Morrison, K. R., *Intergroup threat theory*, in: T. D. Nelson (ed.), *Handbook of prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination*. Psychology Press, 2009, p. 43-59.

³² *Ibid.*

increased social distance.³³ Realistic conflict theory emphasises that competition over limited resources can generate intergroup tensions and negative attitudes.³⁴ In the context of labour migration, members of the host population may perceive foreign workers as competitors for jobs and wages. The integration of intergroup threat theory and realistic conflict theory allows for the analysis of both the material and symbolic dimensions of prejudice.

At the macro level, group position theory, developed by Blumer, provides an additional explanatory perspective. According to him, prejudice is not merely an individual psychological phenomenon but a product of collective processes and perceptions of the dominant group's social position. Prejudice is conceptualised as a sense of group position, reflecting how the dominant group perceives its relationship to other groups. This includes a sense of in-group superiority, perceptions of hierarchical ordering, and concerns over the potential loss of privileges.³⁵

Empirical research further supports the relevance of these theoretical frameworks. Anti-immigrant attitudes tend to increase when members of the dominant group perceive higher levels of threat, particularly in contexts characterised by a growing share of migrant populations and economic insecurity (job loss or increased competition for resources).³⁶ Broader societal conditions, such as adverse economic circumstances and increasing numbers of migrants or foreign workers, contribute to heightened perceptions of threat and, consequently, to stronger prejudice and negative attitudes.

In short, these theoretical approaches – migration transition, intergroup threat, and group position theory – enable a more nuanced understanding and interpretation of findings derived from the thematic analysis.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this paper, a semi-systematic literature review was combined with thematic analysis³⁷ with the aim of synthesising existing scientific knowledge about labour migrants in Croatia. The review followed predefined guidelines for searching, se-

³³ Stephan, W. G.; Ybarra, O.; Morrison, K. R., *op. cit.*, note 19, p. 48.

³⁴ Sherif, M., *Group Conflict and Co-operation: Their Social Psychology*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966, p. 156.

³⁵ Blumer, H., *Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position*. Pacific Sociological Review, Vol. 1, No.1, 1958, pp. 4-5.

³⁶ Quillian, L., *Prejudice as a response to perceived group threat: Population composition and anti-immigrant and racial prejudice in Europe*, *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 60, No.4, 1995, p. 589.

³⁷ Snyder, H. *Literature Review as a Research Methodology: An Overview and Guidelines*. Journal of Business Research, Vol. 104, 2019, p. 335.

lecting, and evaluating sources to ensure transparency and reproducibility, while also allowing some interpretative decisions in the inclusion and assessment of studies, in line with the flexibility of semi-systematic approaches. In the second phase, an adapted thematic analysis was used for reading and interpreting the data, initial coding, and the identification, organisation, and categorisation of themes, leading to the formulation of relevant conclusions.³⁸ This approach was chosen for its flexibility in combining different analytical perspectives and enabling continuous researcher reflection and contextual interpretation.³⁹

3.1. Selection strategy and data sources

For this paper, the literature search was conducted using the following academic databases: WOS, Scopus, and HeinOnline, ensuring that all peer-reviewed scientific papers published in Croatian scientific journals were included. These journals, according to the Portal of Croatian Scientific and Professional Journals (Hrčak), were active at the time of this analysis, have operated continuously for the past fifteen years, and cover the field of social sciences, particularly sociology, law, and political science. This ensured the inclusion of a representative sample of domestic scientific production published in relevant academic journals.

The following twelve (12) scientific journals are listed alphabetically: “Croatian Academy of Legal Sciences Yearbook”, “Croatian Journal of Social Policy”, “Croatian Political Science Review”, “Croatian Sociological Review”, “Collected Papers of Zagreb Law Faculty”, “Collected Papers of the Faculty of Law of the University of Rijeka”, “Collected Papers of the Faculty of Law in Split”, “Journal for General Social Issues”, „Journal of law and social sciences of the Law Faculty of University J. J. Strossmayer in Osijek“, “Migration and Ethnic Themes“, “Sociology and Space” and “Social ecology”.

In defining the time frame for the selection of literature, 2013 was chosen as the starting year, as it marks Croatia’s accession to the EU. All articles published up to the end of 2025 that contain the following key words in the title, abstract, or key word list (in Croatian and English) were included: “migrants”, “immigrants”, “labour (im)migrants”, “economic (im)migrants”, “foreign workers”, “attitudes toward (im)migrants”, “integration of (im)migrants”, “(im)migration policy”, and “labour market integration”.

The study selection process was carried out in three phases. In the first phase, database searches identified an initial pool of papers (N=33), which were then screened

³⁸ Braun, V.; Clarke, V. *Thematic Analysis: a practical guide*. SAGE Publications, 2021.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

by title and abstract after excluding studies not published in Croatian scientific journals in sociology, law, or political science within the last 15 years, or not relevant to the topic. In the second phase, full-text screening was conducted to assess eligibility according to inclusion and exclusion criteria. Full-text reading was necessary due to inconsistent terminology in the literature, which uses terms such as migrants, immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. This study focuses on labour or economic migration (foreign workers, labour/economic migrants), distinguishing it from political or forced migration (refugees and asylum seekers), while acknowledging that migration flows may overlap and include both voluntary and forced forms depending on the reasons or motives for migrating (that are also often manifold).⁴⁰

3.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria included: (1) scientific articles (original, review and preliminary), (2) period 2013–2025, (3) focus on Croatia or inclusion of Croatia in comparative analysis, and (4) thematic relevance for attitudes towards migrants, labor market, integration or migration policies. The exclusion criteria referred to papers dealing exclusively with refugees and asylum seekers, professional and non-peer-reviewed papers, and papers without empirical or analytical contribution. The selection process was carried out in three stages: (1) initial search and removal of irrelevant works, (2) review of abstracts and keywords, (3) detailed analysis of complete texts. After applying the criteria, the final sample included 22 scientific papers from 9 Croatian journals, which were subjected to further thematic analysis: *Migration and Ethnic Themes* (8), *Journal for General Social Issues* (4), *Croatian Sociological Review* (3), *Sociology and Space* (2), and one paper each from the *Croatian Academy of Legal Sciences Yearbook*, *Croatian Journal of Social Policy*, *Croatian Political Science Review*, *Collected Papers of the Faculty of Law in Split*, and *Collected Papers of Zagreb Law Faculty*.⁴¹

3.3. Data analysis

Selected papers were analysed using thematic analysis, enabling the identification of recurring patterns and conceptual connections across studies. The analytical

⁴⁰ Castles, S.; de Haas, H.; Miller, J. M. 2014., *op. cit.*, note 18, p. 26.; Vukorepa, I. *Migracije i pravo na rad u Europskoj uniji*. Zbornik Pravnog fakulteta u Zagrebu, Vol. 68, No. 1, 2018, p. 85.; Kalebić Maglica, B.; Švegar, D.; Jovković, M. *Odnos osobina ličnosti, efekta okvira i stavova prema migrantima*. Društvena istraživanja, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2018, p. 496.

⁴¹ One paper was included in the analysis because even though it was published in 2012 and based on a survey of attitudes towards foreign workers in Croatia conducted in 2009, it is significantly related to the understanding of other papers used in the thematic analysis.

process consisted of four phases of thematic analysis: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) initial coding, (3) identification of themes and (4) categorisation and interpretation. Based on this process of thematic analysis, four main analytical categories were identified: (1) attitudes toward foreign workers in Croatia, (2) foreign workers and the Croatian labour market, (3) integration experiences of immigrants in Croatia and (4) migration and integration policies in Croatia and the EU.

3.4. Limitations and value of the study

The chosen methodological approach offers several advantages. It enables the integration of diverse sources, provides insight into the development of the research field over time, and facilitates the identification of recurring thematic and conceptual patterns across studies. At the same time, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the review is restricted to papers published in Croatian scientific journals, which means that some relevant studies and research reports were not included in the analytical corpus, although selected international literature was incorporated into the theoretical framework. Second, given the substantial changes in migration trends after 2021, the findings of earlier studies should be interpreted within their specific social and migration contexts. Third, the methodological heterogeneity of the included studies limits direct comparability but also allows for a broader and more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

Despite these limitations, the combination of a semi-systematic literature review and thematic analysis provides a comprehensive and theoretically informed synthesis of the existing scientific literature on labour migration in Croatia. Overall, this analytical framework enabled an integrated examination of public attitudes towards foreign workers, labour market dynamics, integration experiences, and migration policies, thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of contemporary immigration processes in Croatia.

4. RESULTS OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS

4.1. Attitudes towards foreign workers in Croatia

The reviewed studies indicate that attitudes towards foreign workers in Croatia are structured around three interrelated themes: (1) perceptions of economic, cultural and security-related threats, (2) social distance towards migrants and foreign workers, and (3) socio-demographic and ideological determinants of attitudes. The findings further reveal important temporal changes associated with Croatia's

transition from a predominantly emigration country to an increasingly immigration-oriented society.

An overview of Croatian citizens' attitudes towards economic or labour immigrants (foreign workers) is based on ten scientific papers presented in chronological order, reflecting the time- and context-dependent nature of these attitudes.

A 2009 survey⁴² conducted on a representative sample of Croatian adults (N = 1300) found high levels of resistance towards foreign workers and reluctance to establish closer contact with them, despite Croatia not yet being an EU member and experiencing little labour immigration at the time.⁴³ Greater social distance was associated with gender (women), age (aged 30 and over), lower education, poorer socioeconomic status, residence in smaller communities, right-wing political orientation, stronger religiosity, religious practice, and the belief that religious and national identities are closely linked.⁴⁴ Foreign workers were widely perceived as both socioeconomic and sociocultural threats, with perceptions of sociocultural threat being particularly pronounced among older (men aged 70 and over), less-educated, and socioeconomically disadvantaged respondents.

A similar study conducted shortly after Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013 (N = 1,100 from Osijek-Baranja and Vukovar-Srijem counties)⁴⁵ reported somewhat more positive attitudes towards immigrant workers, but cultural threat perceptions and social distance remained significant. Nevertheless, immigrant workers continued to be perceived as a cultural threat, and considerable social distance remained present. Negative attitudes were more common among older, politically right-oriented, conservative, and less-educated respondents, whereas more liberal, tolerant, and better-educated individuals expressed more positive views. Socioeconomic and employment status had no significant effect.⁴⁶

A highly consistent finding across almost all studies concerns the socio-demographic and ideological predictors of negative attitudes. Older age, lower educational attainment, stronger religiosity, right-wing political orientation, nationalism and authoritarian values repeatedly emerge as factors associated with greater social distance and stronger perceptions of migrant threat. The consistency of these findings across different samples and time periods suggests that attitudes

⁴² Čačić-Kumpes, J.; Gregurović, S.; Kumpes, J., *op. cit.*, note 10, p. 305.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

⁴⁵ Gregurović, M.; Kutl, S.; Župarić-Iljić, D. *Attitudes towards Immigrant Workers and Asylum Seekers in Eastern Croatia: Dimensions, Determinants and Differences*. Migracijske i etničke teme, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2016, p. 91.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112-115.

towards migrants in Croatia are closely connected with broader value orientations rather than solely with direct contact or labour-market competition.

The ISSP National Identity module conducted in 2013 and 2014 in seven Central and Eastern European countries, including Croatia,⁴⁷ revealed somewhat negative attitudes towards immigrants as an economic threat, while support for perceiving immigrants as a cultural threat was low.⁴⁸ Migration research in Croatia, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, also identified immigrants as a perceived health threat, with the pandemic contributing to restrictions on labour migration and fostering xenophobia, cultural racism, Islamophobia, and anti-Asian or anti-Chinese attitudes globally and within the EU.⁴⁹ However, Eurobarometer data from 2020 indicate no increase in anti-immigrant attitudes or xenophobia in Croatia; instead, they suggest a positive shift, with 52–70% of respondents expressing positive feelings towards immigrants from outside the EU and 50% reporting positive attitudes compared to 45% negative.

Across studies conducted before the large-scale increase in labour immigration, migrants were predominantly perceived through the lens of symbolic and cultural threat. Economic concerns were present, but attitudes were largely shaped by perceptions of cultural difference, concerns about social cohesion and exclusivist understandings of national identity. Notably, these attitudes emerged in a period when Croatia had relatively limited experience with immigration, suggesting that perceptions were often formed in relation to imagined rather than directly experienced migrant populations.

Attitudes towards immigrants in Croatia, analysed through the European Social Survey (ESS) from 2010/2011 to 2023/2024⁵⁰, have generally remained more negative than the European average regarding perceived immigration threat.⁵¹ Data from 2020/2021 and 2023/2024 indicate a statistically significant shift towards more negative attitudes following the increase in the immigrant population, particularly in perceptions of immigrants as a cultural threat and towards immigration of people from different racial or ethnic backgrounds, while perceptions of economic threat remained unchanged. Negative attitudes are more common

⁴⁷ Petrović, N.; Mrakovčić, M.; Fila, F. *Anti-EU Backlash from Below or Above? Public Opinion in Central and Eastern Europe Prior to the 2015 Migration Crisis*. *Revija za sociologiju*, Vol. 51, No. 3, 2021, p. 317.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

⁴⁹ Gregurović, M., et al., *Pandemic Management Systems and Migration*. *Migracijske i etničke teme*, Vol. 36, No. 2-3, 2020, p. 218.

⁵⁰ Čačić-Kumpes, J.; Kumpes, J.; Klempić Bogadi, S.; Podgorelec, S. *Europska »migracijska kriza« i stavovi prema imigrantima i imigraciji u Hrvatskoj*. *Migracijske i etničke teme*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 2024, p. 217.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 251-252.

among older, less-educated, rural, more religious, socioeconomically disadvantaged, politically right-leaning, and more nationalistic respondents.

The findings suggest two distinct phases in the development of public attitudes towards migrants in Croatia. The first phase, extending roughly from the 1990s until 2020, corresponds to Croatia's position as a predominantly emigration country characterised by relatively low levels of immigration and limited direct contact with foreign workers. During this period, negative attitudes towards migrants were present, but migrants remained a relatively abstract social category. The second phase begins with the rapid increase in labour immigration after 2020. Migrants and foreign workers became increasingly visible in everyday social life, particularly through the arrival of workers from South and Southeast Asia. Contrary to expectations that increased contact might automatically foster acceptance, recent findings indicate growing social distance and stronger perceptions of cultural threat. This trend may reflect broader processes associated with migration transition, in which societies adjust to their new role as immigration destinations.

Two surveys examined attitudes of Croatian law students towards migrants from the Middle East in 2019 and 2024.⁵² The 2019 study (N = 667) found slightly negative to neutral attitudes, with more negative views among right- and centre-right-oriented, more religious students, those from Split and Osijek, and students in higher years.⁵³ Voluntary migrants were more often perceived as economic opportunists, while forced migrants (asylum seekers and refugees) elicited greater empathy and support.⁵⁴

The 2024 study (N = 590) showed a significant increase in social distance towards most migrant groups compared to 2019, particularly foreign workers.⁵⁵ The highest social distance was expressed towards asylum seekers, refugees, Roma, foreign workers, and migrants from the Middle East and Africa, while migrants from former Yugoslavia were perceived as less culturally distant. Higher social distance was associated with clerical, nationalist, conservative, and authoritarian attitudes, opposition to multiculturalism and European integration, and higher religiosity, whereas pro-European orientations predicted lower social distance.

⁵² Mrakovčić, M.; Gregurović, M. *Neprijatelj pred vratima? Ili kako studenti prava iz četiriju najvećih hrvatskih gradova doživljavaju azilante i migrante s Bliskog istoka*. Sociologija i prostor, Vol. 58, No. 3, 2020, p. 291.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 304-305.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

⁵⁵ Mrakovčić, M.; Gregurović, M.; Miočić, M. *Studenti prava i društvena distanca prema migrantima u Hrvatskoj – što se promijenilo između 2019. i 2024. godine?*. Politička misao, Vol. 62, No. 3, 2025, pp. 96-99.

Additional studies on Croatian adolescents and university students highlight the role of personality traits and media exposure. A 2017 survey of high school students in Karlovac (N = 102) found that extraversion, agreeableness, and openness were linked to lower perceived threat, while authoritarianism was the strongest predictor of perceived social, cultural, and health-economic threats; negatively framed media increased these perceptions.⁵⁶ A 2019 study of university students in Zagreb (N = 601) examining attitudes towards migrant criminality showed that respondents distinguished between legal and illegal migrants, supported stricter sanctions for the latter, and generally did not express strong xenophobic or racist attitudes, indicating more favourable views than in earlier studies.⁵⁷

Overall, the literature reveals a pattern of persistent ambivalence towards migrants and foreign workers. While economic necessity increasingly legitimises labour immigration, social acceptance remains conditional and uneven. Cultural concerns, social distance and perceived threats continue to shape public attitudes, indicating that societal adaptation to Croatia's new migration reality remains incomplete.

4.2. Foreign workers and the Croatian labour market

Three main themes emerge from the literature concerning foreign workers in the Croatian labour market: (1) the changing structure of labour immigration, (2) labour-market segmentation and vulnerability of migrant workers, and (3) the growing economic dependence on migrant labour.

Five scientific papers provide insight into the position of immigrants, or foreign workers, in the Croatian labour market.

An analysis of Labour Force Survey (LFS) data for 1998–2012 showed that immigrants became increasingly concentrated in the working-age population (25–49) during 2006–2012⁵⁸, indicating predominantly work-related migration. Although foreign citizens had a higher share of tertiary education than the domestic population in the later period, immigrants were on average less educated than domestic workers⁵⁹, suggesting that Croatia mainly attracts lower-educated migrants who fill less desirable jobs. Foreign workers were more likely to be employed in elemen-

⁵⁶ Kalebić Maglica, B.; Švegar, D.; Jovković, M. *Odnos osobina ličnosti, efekta okvira i stavova prema migrantima*. Društvena istraživanja, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2018, p. 499.

⁵⁷ Vuk, M.; Doležal, D.; Jovanović, E. *Utjecaj karakteristika imigranata počinitelja kaznenih djela na stavove studenata prema kriminalitetu imigranata*. Društvena istraživanja, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2021, p. 56.

⁵⁸ Botrić, V. *Immigrants' Characteristics and the Croatian Labour Market: an Explorative Study*. Migracijske i etničke teme, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2015, pp. 39–41.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52–53.

tary, craft, service, and other low-skilled occupations. While there were no major differences in average net wages between foreign and domestic workers within the same occupations, immigrants consistently experienced higher unemployment rates. According to 2014 Ministry of the Interior data, most work-related immigrants originated from former Yugoslav countries (70.93%), followed by China, Russia, the USA, and Ukraine.

A separate study using LFS data from 2007 and 2012 examined the labour market position of permanent immigrants, who represented 9.6% of the population in 2012⁶⁰, with most originating from Bosnia and Herzegovina (70%)⁶¹. In both years, employed and unemployed immigrants most commonly had upper secondary education⁶² and there were no large differences in average net wages within the same occupations⁶³. Their occupational structure shifted from craft-related occupations in 2007 towards service, sales, and professional occupations in 2012 while unemployment increased among those employed in elementary occupations, crafts, and plant and machine operation.⁶⁴ The reviewed evidence suggests a gradual transformation of labour immigration patterns. Earlier immigration flows were dominated by workers from neighbouring former Yugoslav countries, while recent studies indicate increasing diversification of countries of origin and a growing reliance on non-European labour markets.

Compared to the reference group (aged 35-44), predictors of unemployment among foreigners in 2007 included service and sales occupations and individuals older than 55⁶⁵, while in 2012 they also included elementary occupations, plant and machine operators, and younger individuals (15-24).⁶⁶ Predictors of long-term unemployment were lower secondary education and ages 45+ in 2007, and lack of prior work experience and age 55+ in 2012. These findings highlight the need for a more active immigration policy and targeted labour market integration measures⁶⁷.

A 2013 survey of foreign workers in Zagreb, Karlovac, and Rijeka (N=61)⁶⁸ found that most respondents originated from Bosnia and Herzegovina, had secondary

⁶⁰ Botrić, V. *Nezaposlenost i dugotrajna nezaposlenost doseljenih u Hrvatsku*. Migracijske i etničke teme, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2016, p. 63.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁶⁸ Božić, S.; Kuzmanović, B.; Barada, V. *Strani radnici u Hrvatskoj: porijeklo, status, orijentacije*. Migracijske i etničke teme, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2013, p. 371.

or primary education, and worked in Croatia primarily for higher earnings and geographical proximity. The sample was almost entirely male, predominantly aged 30–50, with incomes below the Croatian average. Many maintained strong transnational ties and most intended to remain in Croatia either permanently or for as long as possible.

A 2022 interview study with stakeholders in the long-term care sector (N=13) found broad agreement that immigration is an inevitable response to labour shortages.⁶⁹ Nearly „all respondents viewed immigration as an inevitable solution to labour shortages“ in a sector affected by “care drain”⁷⁰, although they expressed concern that migrant workers would remain only temporarily before moving to more developed economies. Croatia was seen as particularly attractive to workers from Bosnia and Herzegovina and other former Yugoslav countries due to geographic and linguistic proximity, although this labour pool is shrinking and future recruitment is expected to increasingly target Asian and African countries. Respondents also expressed concerns about the temporary nature of migrant employment and the readiness of Croatian society, particularly older populations, to accept greater diversity.

An important paradox emerges from the reviewed studies. Although migrant workers are increasingly recognised as indispensable for addressing labour shortages, Croatia remains a relatively unattractive destination compared with Western European countries. As a result, the country faces a dual challenge: retaining domestic workers while simultaneously attracting and retaining foreign labour. This finding reflects Croatia’s intermediate position within European migration systems, functioning both as a sending and a receiving country.

Overall, Croatia is perceived as less attractive than countries such as Austria and Germany due to lower wages and weaker working conditions, highlighting the need to address „care drain, retain domestic workers, and develop comprehensive integration measures, including professional training, language education, and evidence-based immigration policies.

Research on Croatian counties (2005–2013) further shows that social and cultural diversity positively contributes to entrepreneurship, innovation, and economic growth.⁷¹ More innovative regions, such as the City of Zagreb, Split-Dalmatia,

⁶⁹ Bađun, M., *Long-Term Care Workforce in Croatia: A Qualitative Study on the Potential Role of Immigration*. Revija za socijalnu politiku, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2024, p. 261.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 270., 275.

⁷¹ Stojčić, N.; Bečić, M.; Vojinić, P., *The Impact of Migration Movements on Innovation Activities in Croatian Counties*. Društvena istraživanja, Vol. 25, No. 3. 2016, p. 292.

and Primorje-Gorski Kotar counties, also record higher immigration levels. Highly educated immigrants positively affect innovation, while low-educated immigrants may have a negative impact, alongside broader positive interregional effects of migration on innovation activity.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that labour immigration has evolved from a marginal phenomenon into a structural component of the Croatian labour market. The increasing reliance on foreign labour appears closely linked to demographic decline, labour shortages and continuing emigration, suggesting that immigration is becoming an essential mechanism for sustaining economic activity.

4.3. Integration experiences of immigrants in Croatia

The analysed studies identify three key dimensions of migrant integration in Croatia: labour-market integration, institutional integration and socio-cultural integration.

Two scientific papers provide insight into the integration experiences of foreign workers in Croatia.

A 2024 study based on nine semi-structured interviews with Indian workers living and working in Zagreb or Zagreb County examined their migration motives and integration experiences.⁷² Participants varied in age, education, occupation, and length of stay, with some employed in their professions and others in delivery services or agriculture⁷³. All had secured employment before arrival and highlighted the importance of migrant networks and digital platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn in finding work. Key migration motives included financial difficulties, unemployment, lack of opportunities in India, and, among higher-educated participants, professional advancement and international work experience. Regardless of education level, participants emphasised better working conditions in Croatia, particularly shorter working hours and more free time. Regarding integration, all participants stressed the crucial role of employers, who provided accommodation and administrative support upon arrival, including residence and work registration and assistance with opening bank accounts.

A recurring finding concerns the central role of employers in facilitating integration. Rather than functioning solely as labour-market actors, employers frequently

⁷² Rajković Iveta, M.; Magdalenić Vincek, A., *Uzroci migracija i integracijska iskustva suvremenih migranata iz Indije u Zagrebu i Zagrebačkoj županiji*. Migracijske i etničke teme, Vol. 40, No. 2, 2021, p. 337.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 341-345.

perform responsibilities typically associated with public institutions, including administrative assistance, accommodation arrangements and initial orientation. This suggests that integration processes in Croatia remain highly employer-dependent. English was the primary language of communication for all participants. While some wished to learn Croatian and had access to employer-supported language courses, others were unaware of or faced difficulties accessing available courses. Limited motivation to learn Croatian may reflect intentions to remain in Croatia only temporarily.

The findings further indicate that labour-market integration often occurs more rapidly than socio-cultural integration. While most participants reported positive employment experiences, language acquisition, broader social participation and long-term settlement intentions appeared considerably more limited. This suggests that participation in the labour market does not automatically lead to broader integration into Croatian society, particularly when migrants perceive their stay as temporary or when institutional support for integration remains limited.

The cultural diversity of India was reflected among participants, who spoke five different mother tongues and practised Hinduism or Islam. Hindu participants generally practised their religion at home, while Muslim participants considered mosque attendance important and were supported by employers in doing so. Most participants were satisfied with living and working conditions in Croatia, and their future plans depended mainly on employment opportunities and family considerations. The findings highlight the need for a socially and culturally inclusive integration policy, as institutional integration - including access to information, rights, education, language learning, and healthcare - should be the responsibility of public institutions rather than employers alone.

Additional insights are provided by research on Zagreb as an “arrival city”⁷⁴. Beyond providing housing and employment Zagreb is expected to support the structural, cultural, and social integration of immigrants⁷⁵, as part of inclusive and sustainable urban development, while also encouraging entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation⁷⁶. Due to its stronger institutional infrastructure, Zagreb offers greater integration opportunities than other parts of Croatia⁷⁷. However, as

⁷⁴ Jurčević, K.; Podgorelec, S.; Bušić, K., *Migracije i urbana transformacija Zagreba: Integracija, digitalizacija i održivost kroz koncepte pametnog grada, grada budućnosti i grada dolaska*. Sociologija i prostor, Vol. 63, No. 2, 2025, pp. 271-291.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 280-281.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

elsewhere in the country, migrant social integration remains constrained by local attitudes that fluctuate between limited support and latent distrust.

Overall, the reviewed evidence suggests that integration in Croatia remains predominantly functional and employment-oriented, while broader social and institutional dimensions of integration remain less developed.

4.4. Migrant integration policies in Croatia and the EU

Two main themes emerge from the literature on integration policies: (1) the influence of European integration frameworks on Croatian migration governance and (2) the gap between formal rights and practical implementation of integration measures.

Five scientific papers provide insight into integration policies in the EU and Croatia. Two papers analyse the legal and institutional framework of migrant integration, including the European integration model. EU integration policy is not binding for Member States and remains their responsibility; however, common basic principles (eleven principles confirmed in 2014), pre- and post-arrival measures, relevant directives transposed into national law, and funding programmes shape national approaches⁷⁸. Although non-binding, the European model operates as a mechanism of mutual influence between the EU and Member States.

For Croatia, key conditions for improved integration include strengthening migrants' educational, socio-economic, civil, cultural, and health-related rights. Two prerequisites are also emphasised: public awareness campaigns to address negative attitudes and perceptions of migrants as a socio-economic and cultural threat, and enhanced cooperation among institutions and experts involved in integration processes.⁷⁹ Another paper highlights legal differences in the right to work between EU citizens and third-country nationals and situates this within Croatia's broader context of emigration and "brain drain", "youth drain", and "care drain".⁸⁰ This underscores the need for both integration policies to attract migrants and retention policies to reduce labour outflow.

⁷⁸ Lalić Novak, G.; Giljević, T., *Pravno i institucionalno uređenje integracije migranata u Republici Hrvatskoj – prema europskom modelu*. Godišnjak Akademije pravnih znanosti Hrvatske, Vol. X, No. 1, 2019, pp. 166-168.

⁷⁹ Blagojević, A. *Pravni i institucionalni okvir integracije migranata u hrvatsko društvo*. Zbornik radova Pravnog fakulteta u Splitu, Vol. 57, No. 3, 2020, pp. 731-732.

⁸⁰ Vukorepa, I., *Migracije i pravo na rad u Europskoj uniji*. Zbornik Pravnog fakulteta u Zagrebu, Vol. 68, No. 1, 2018, p. 86.

A comparative study using MIPEX2020 and ESS2018⁸¹ data across 27 European countries classifies Croatia in the “slightly unfavourable equality on paper” group, indicating partial provision of rights and a lack of full integration, which may reinforce perceptions of migrants as unequal.⁸² ESS2018 data further show that countries with more comprehensive integration policies tend to report more positive attitudes towards immigrants, while those with weak or only formal policies show more negative attitudes and lower perceived migrant contribution.⁸³

A notable discrepancy emerges between the growing economic importance of migration and the relatively modest development of integration policies. While labour migration has expanded rapidly, institutional mechanisms supporting long-term integration have developed at a considerably slower pace. This discrepancy is particularly visible in Croatia, where increasing reliance on foreign labour coincides with a migration policy framework that remains focused primarily on labour-market needs rather than broader social integration.

An analysis of key EU documents on migrant integration⁸⁴ highlights their limited consideration of migrants’ social realities and the specific characteristics of host societies.⁸⁵ These documents are criticised for assuming a simplified model of full integration that is not consistent with sociological concepts such as segmented integration and migrants’ transnational ties, nor with the multidimensional nature of adaptation in contemporary European societies⁸⁶. It is therefore argued that EU integration policy should adopt a more pragmatic approach grounded in social science evidence and empirical “field experiences” of researchers and practitioners involved in integration processes.⁸⁷

Taken together, the findings suggest that Croatia’s migration governance remains largely focused on regulating labour-market entry rather than facilitating long-term social integration. This imbalance may become increasingly important as the country continues its transition towards a more permanent immigration regime.

⁸¹ Gregurović, M., *Integration Policies and Public Perceptions of Immigrants in Europe: ESS Meets MIPEX in the Aftermath of the European “Migration Crisis”*. *Revija za sociologiju*, Vol. 51, No. 3, 2021, p. 347.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 361.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

⁸⁴ Božić, S.; Kuti, S., *Europska politika integracije migranata: od standardiziranja mjera za zemlje Europske unije prema integracijskom servisu utemeljenom na društvenoznanstvenim spoznajama*. *Revija za sociologiju*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2018, p. 49.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

5. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that attitudes towards foreign workers and migrants in Croatia cannot be understood independently of the broader demographic, economic, and social changes that have taken place over the last two decades. The reviewed studies suggest that Croatia is undergoing a process of migration transition. Traditionally characterised as a country of emigration, Croatia has increasingly become a country of immigration, particularly since 2021, when labour shortages, population ageing, the emigration of domestic workers, and economic growth created substantial demand for foreign labour. The rapid increase in work permits issued to third-country nationals indicates a structural shift in the migration system, suggesting a transition from a historically dominant emigration model towards a more mixed migration regime in which immigration has become an increasingly important component of labour market functioning.

The reviewed studies show that this transition has been accompanied by considerable social ambivalence. On the one hand, migrants are increasingly recognised as necessary participants in the Croatian economy, particularly in sectors affected by labour shortages, such as hospitality, construction, retail, and long-term care. On the other hand, public attitudes towards migrants and foreign workers continue to be characterised by varying degrees of social distance, cultural concerns, and perceptions of threat. This discrepancy suggests that economic integration is progressing more rapidly than social integration. In other words, foreign workers are increasingly accepted as labour market participants, while their broader social inclusion as members of society remains considerably more limited.

The identified gaps in the reviewed studies point to several important directions for future research while simultaneously reflecting certain methodological and temporal limitations of this study. First, the analysed corpus includes a substantial number of studies conducted before 2021, that is, before the intensification of labour migration. Although these studies make an important contribution to the development of migration research in Croatia and provide valuable insights into the formation of attitudes towards migrants during earlier stages of migration processes, their findings must be interpreted within the social and migration context of the period in which they were conducted. At that time, migrants and foreign workers were significantly less present in everyday Croatian society than they are today. Consequently, these findings cannot be fully equated with the circumstances characterised by the rapid increase in foreign workers and the greater visibility of migration after 2021, highlighting the need for further research in the contemporary context. Second, qualitative studies of the everyday experiences of foreign workers remain relatively rare, despite their potential to provide deeper insights

into processes of integration, barriers, and adaptation strategies. Third, there is a lack of comparative research explicitly linking the Croatian context with broader European trends, despite the fact that migration patterns, public discourse, and regulatory frameworks are increasingly shaped within the wider European political context.

The methodological limitations of this study are also related to corpus selection, which primarily focused on papers published in Croatian scientific journals. Consequently, certain relevant studies and research reports, such as the Centre for Peace Studies surveys on Croatian citizens' attitudes towards foreigners and minorities conducted in 2013, 2017, and 2024, were not included in the analysis, despite their important contribution to the scientific literature and understanding of attitudes towards migrants in Croatia. It should therefore be acknowledged that this review does not encompass the entire field of migration and migration-attitude research, but rather a clearly defined and methodologically bounded segment of it.

The temporal dimension of the findings is particularly important. Migration processes in Croatia can be divided into two phases. The first phase (2013–2021) was characterised by a increase number of foreign workers, limited employment opportunities, and low institutional capacities for migration management. The second phase, beginning after 2021, was marked by the abolition of labour quotas and a sharp increase in residence and work permits, leading to the diversification of the migrant population, intensified public debate, and increased pressure on integration mechanisms. The findings indicate that studies published before 2021 reflect a substantially different social and institutional context from that which emerged after 2021. Research conducted before the significant rise in labour immigration generally recorded negative attitudes towards migrants; however, these attitudes developed in a context in which migrants largely represented an abstract social category. By contrast, studies conducted after 2021 suggest that attitudes became more negative precisely when migrants became more visible in everyday life. Particularly relevant are ESS findings showing an increase in perceptions of cultural threat and greater social distance following the rise in immigration. These results suggest that direct exposure to migration does not automatically lead to greater acceptance. Rather, increased visibility of cultural diversity may initially stimulate concerns regarding cultural change and social cohesion, especially in societies with limited historical experience of large-scale immigration.

These findings correspond to theoretical approaches emphasising perceived group threat and securitisation processes, according to which security threats are not defined solely by objective circumstances but are socially constructed through politi-

cal and public discourse in which particular phenomena are framed as security-relevant. Within the analysed literature, migrants and foreign workers are frequently associated with economic, cultural, and security concerns. Although perceptions of economic threat remain present, cultural threat appears to be a more persistent and influential dimension of public attitudes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, and following increased immigration from more distant regions such as South Asia, concerns related to cultural differences, social cohesion, and national identity became more pronounced than concerns about labour market competition. These findings are largely consistent with symbolic threat theory, suggesting that concerns related to cultural change, social cohesion, and collective identity may play a more significant role in shaping attitudes towards migrants than concerns related to economic competition. This interpretation corresponds with the recent findings of Župarić-Iljić and Lalić, which demonstrate that cultural threat, social distance, and value orientations are more important predictors of attitudes towards migrants than economic factors.⁸⁸ This suggests that perceptions of migrants as a security threat are shaped more strongly by public discourse, media representations, and broader social insecurities than by direct experiences or empirically verified security risks.

At the same time, the analysed studies provide only limited empirical support for perceiving migrants as a security threat. Research on Croatian students' attitudes towards migrant indicates that respondents generally distinguish between legal and illegal migration⁸⁹, and when it comes to attitudes towards migrant criminality, they do not express strongly xenophobic or racist attitudes⁹⁰. Nevertheless, the findings also suggest that perceptions of migrants as a threat are not entirely rejected but are selective and conditioned by value orientations and migration type. More negative attitudes are expressed among more religious, nationally oriented, and conservative students, whereas greater empathy is shown towards refugees than towards economic migrants. Furthermore, comparisons between the 2019 and 2024 findings indicate an increase in social distance in the more recent period.⁹¹

The analysis of the reviewed studies and comparison with the recent findings of Župarić-Iljić and Lalić (2024) demonstrate that attitudes towards migrants are neither uniformly positive nor uniformly negative. While some citizens recognise

⁸⁸ Župarić-Iljić, D.; Lalić, S., *Stavovi prema strancima i manjinama u hrvatskom društvu u 2024. godini: prijetnja, susret, suživot?*, Centar za mirovne studije, Zagreb, 2024.

⁸⁹ Mrakovčić; Gregurović, *op. cit.*, note 52.

⁹⁰ Vuk, Doležal; Jovanović, *op. cit.*, note 57.

⁹¹ Mrakovčić, Gregurović, Miočić, *op. cit.*, note 55.

the economic contribution of foreign workers and support their presence in the labour market, others continue to perceive them primarily through the lens of cultural difference and social distance. The recurring influence of religiosity, nationalism, conservatism, and political orientation identified across numerous studies further confirms that attitudes towards migrants are embedded within broader ideological and identity-based frameworks.

Despite Croatia's increasing need for foreign workers, the reviewed studies indicate that institutional responses have not kept pace with labour market demands. Employers frequently assume responsibilities that would normally belong to public institutions, such as assistance with accommodation, administrative procedures, and initial adaptation, suggesting that Croatia's integration system remains insufficiently developed and poorly coordinated.

Regarding the relationship between integration policies and public attitudes, comparative European evidence shows that countries with more developed integration policies generally display more positive attitudes towards migrants. Croatia's classification within the MIPEX category of "equality on paper" suggests that formally guaranteed rights are not always accompanied by effective implementation and long-term integration measures. The experiences of Indian workers analysed in the reviewed literature further illustrate the consequences of this situation. Although participants generally expressed satisfaction with their working conditions, many aspects of their integration depended primarily on employers rather than systematic institutional support. These findings point to the need for more comprehensive language, educational, and social integration programmes.

The Croatian context is largely comparable to the experiences of other European countries during earlier phases of migration transition. Similar patterns of labour demand, increased migrant visibility, social ambivalence, and policy adaptation were observed in Southern European countries such as Spain, Italy, and Portugal during their transition from emigration to immigration countries. Croatia therefore, appears to be following a trajectory already observed elsewhere in Europe, albeit under contemporary conditions shaped by EU membership, global labour mobility, and demographic decline. From the perspective of migration transition theories, Croatia appears to be entering a stage of positive *net migration* associated with the later phases of demographic and migratory development (Zelinsky; Okólski). However, migration transition should not be understood as a linear or irreversible process. Although these theories associate socioeconomic development with increasing migration over the long term, the relationship is multidimensional, context-dependent, and potentially reversible. The findings suggest that institutional and integration capacities have not developed at the same pace as

immigration, indicating that the long-term demographic and economic benefits of migration depend not only on migration inflows but also on effective social and institutional adaptation.

Overall, the findings suggest that Croatia is entering a new phase of migration development in which immigration is becoming a structural component of demographic and economic sustainability. Nevertheless, the reviewed literature indicates that social acceptance, institutional integration, and public perceptions have not yet fully adapted to this transformation. Future research should therefore devote greater attention to the consequences of migration transition, integration policies, and the relationship between economic dependence on migrant labour and public perceptions of migrants in Croatian society. Greater emphasis should also be placed on qualitative research capable of providing deeper insights into the everyday integration processes and experiences of foreign workers.

6. CONCLUSION

These findings, interpreted through intergroup threat and group position theory, indicate that perceived economic and especially sociocultural threats - shaped by broader sociopolitical contexts, increased migration visibility, and dominant public discourse—are central to attitudes towards foreign workers. The results suggest that greater exposure to migration does not necessarily reduce social distance, particularly where large-scale immigration is recent and integration frameworks remain underdeveloped.

The scientific contribution of this paper lies in synthesising a fragmented literature on labour migration in Croatia and identifying key analytical patterns and research gaps. These include the limited scope of qualitative research on migrants' lived experiences and weak conceptual and empirical links between studies on public attitudes, labour-market dynamics, and integration outcomes. Overall, the findings position Croatia within an ongoing migration transition marked by rapidly increasing labour immigration and incomplete social and institutional adaptation.

Results further show that economic integration of foreign workers progresses faster than socio-cultural integration, highlighting a persistent gap between labour-market inclusion and broader social acceptance. Migrants are increasingly viewed as functional economic actors, while their societal acceptance remains conditional.

The findings highlight the need for more comprehensive integration policies that extend beyond labour-market demands and address social, cultural, and institutional dimensions. This includes strengthening evidence-based policy design, improving institutional coordination, and incorporating migrants' and practitioners'

lived experiences to support more effective and sustainable integration frameworks in Croatia.

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