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Kanas, Agnieszka; van Tubergen, Frank; Kosyakova, Yuliya

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Determinants of refugees' generalised and institutional trust: evidence from Germany

Agnieszka Kanas [a], Frank van Tubergen [b,c] and Yuliya Kosyakova [d,e]

[a]School of Social and Behavioral Sciences (ESSB), Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, Netherlands; [b]Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI), KNAW/University of Groningen, The Hague, Netherlands; [c]Department of Sociology, Utrecht University, Netherlands; [d]Institute for Employment Research (IAB), Nuremberg, Germany; [e]University of Bamberg, Germany

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the factors shaping refugees' institutionalised and generalised trust, focusing on three key influences: (1) pre-arrival migration effects, such as experiences of trauma; (2) asylum procedure effects, including the length and outcome of the process and perceptions of fairness; and (3) post-procedure effects, particularly the context of reception. Using data from the IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees in Germany, we find that the conditions of the asylum process and the reception context are critical determinants of refugees' trust. Specifically, while the length of the asylum process and living in shared accommodations negatively affect institutional trust, these impacts are largely mediated by other refugee-specific experiences, such as perceptions of procedural and interactional justice. Receiving a positive asylum decision directly enhances refugees' trust in German institutions and other people, whereas being trapped in existential limbo severely erodes trust levels. Additionally, refugees subject to residency restrictions exhibit lower institutional and generalised trust levels than those without such limitations. These findings highlight the critical role of short and fair asylum procedures and inclusive reception policies in fostering trust among refugees, with significant implications for improving integration outcomes and social cohesion.

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Introduction

During the period of war, persecution, and various violent conflicts that followed the Arab Spring in the Middle East (UNHCR 2019), over six million refugees sought international protection within European Union countries between 2010 and 2022 (Eurostat 2020). Of those, more than two million refugees moved to Germany (Eurostat 2020). Additionally, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, more than one million people have fled to Germany (UNHCR 2024).[1] As a result of this significant influx of

CONTACT Agnieszka Kanas kanas@essb.eur.nl
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refugees, considerable attention has been devoted to their specific challenges. These challenges include a higher prevalence of trauma and mental health issues, along with prolonged periods of uncertainty due to waiting times for the asylum decision (Damen, Dagevos, and Huijnk 2022; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Lawrence 2016; Hall and Werner 2022; Hvidtfeldt et al. 2018; Kosyakova and Brenzel 2020; Sundvall et al. 2021).

This study contributes to the growing literature on refugees' integration outcomes by examining their institutional and general trust levels. *Institutional trust* pertains to the confidence in the effectiveness and fairness of state institutions such as police, judiciary, and, in the case of refugees, asylum agencies (Rothstein and Stolle 2008; Sønderskov and Dinesen 2016). *Generalised trust* refers to the belief in the trustworthiness of others about whom little information exists (Uslaner 2008). Previous research has shown that high levels of trust in institutions and other people increase social capital and foster cooperation (Ostrom 2009; Putnam 2000). Trust plays a pivotal role in enabling refugees to form new connections within the host society, which expands their social networks and aids in their overall integration. For example, Strang and Quinn (2021) have shown that difficulties in establishing trust with both host society members and among refugees limit their ability to build meaningful social connections. This lack of trust leads to low engagement with both local services and individuals, exacerbating refugees' social isolation. Additionally, institutional trust is vitally important due to the typically higher reliability of institutions in Western countries than those in refugees' countries of origin. Trusting these institutions facilitates access to essential services, such as healthcare services, saving money, or reporting crimes (Hall and Werner 2022; Strang and Ager 2010). As a result, trust is frequently seen as essential to the successful integration of refugees into host societies, facilitating more extensive social networks and greater participation in host societies.

Although this study centres on refugees, it is informed by broader research on trust among immigrant populations. Existing studies on immigrants highlight the significant role that both the country of origin and host country characteristics play in shaping levels of trust. For instance, immigrants often carry the trust levels from their native countries, which can also be passed down to their offspring (Dinesen 2013; Uslaner 2008; van Slageren and van Tubergen 2021). Concurrently, the trust levels of immigrants and their children are shaped by their experiences within the host country. Studies have shown that immigrants adjust their trust levels based on the trustworthiness of the ethnic majority and the quality of institutional governance in the host country (Dinesen 2013; Nannestad et al. 2014; Sønderskov and Dinesen 2016). When these factors are favourable, immigrants are likely to increase their trust levels, facilitating smoother integration and more positive interactions within the host society.

Our paper contributes to this broader literature on immigrants' trust by focusing specifically on refugees, a distinct population whose experience differs fundamentally from those of other immigrants. Unlike economic and family immigrants, refugees migrate under unplanned and often traumatic circumstances, facing significant institutional hurdles in host countries. These challenges include idle waiting in the lengthy asylum procedure, poor living conditions in the asylum centres, and residency restrictions (Kosyakova and Kogan 2022). Despite the profound impact these experiences likely have on refugees' trust in institutions and other people, empirical understanding of how they shape refugees' trust levels remains limited (Strang and Quinn 2021).

So far, only a handful of studies have examined factors related to refugees' trust, and most have relied on qualitative approaches focusing on specific subgroups, such as unaccompanied youth (Eide et al. 2020; Hynes 2017; Ni Raghallaigh 2014; Smith, Mansfield, and Wainwright 2023), business owners (Gandolfo 2022), or religious converts (Vähä-Savo and Koivuluhta 2024). These studies provide important insights into the role of refugee-specific experiences in shaping trust. However, their qualitative and often small-scale nature makes them less suitable for identifying broader patterns and testing the impact of specific factors on trust. In contrast, only three recent quantitative studies have explicitly examined the relationship between refugee-specific experiences and trust, making them more directly comparable to our approach. Hall and Werner (2022) analyse the effects of pre-migration trauma on institutional and generalised trust among refugees in Turkey. Esaiasson, Lajevardi, and Sohlberg (2022) investigate how the outcome of the asylum procedure affects trust levels among refugees in Sweden. Finally, Sohlberg, Agerberg, and Esaiasson (2024) explore the effect of asylum processing time in shaping institutional and generalised trust within the same Swedish refugee population.

Our study makes two contributions to this recent research on refugees' trust. First, we take a comprehensive approach by exploring a wider array of factors potentially influencing refugees' generalised and institutional trust. Beyond examining the effects of traumatic experiences during migration, as well as the duration and outcomes of the asylum process, we also consider additional refugee-specific factors. These include perceived legitimacy of the asylum procedure and treatment through the process, experiences in shared accommodations at asylum centres, and residential restrictions, all of which could play crucial roles in shaping trust within this vulnerable population. The benefit of this comprehensive approach is twofold: it allows us to identify previously unnoticed factors, and it enables a deeper examination of previously studied factors, elucidating the mechanisms behind their effects. For instance, Sohlberg, Agerberg, and Esaiasson (2024) found that refugees who experienced longer waits for asylum decisions reported significantly lower levels of generalised and institutional trust. In our study, we build on this finding by examining whether the negative effect of prolonged asylum procedures is driven by increasing dissatisfaction with both procedural and interactional justice.

Second, we use a representative, large-scale survey, providing more robust evidence on these refugee-specific factors. Existing work necessarily relied on small convenience samples of refugees, which severely restricted the inclusion of additional factors and limited the generalizability of the findings. Our study relies on data from the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (Brücker, Rother, and Schupp 2017), a large-scale survey among 10.000 refugees. The data represents asylum-seekers and refugees who have arrived in Germany since 2013 and their household members. For our analyses, we rely on the data from 2018 (third wave) and study institutional and generalised trust. Similar to Esaiasson, Lajevardi, and Sohlberg (2022), our data includes all refugees, regardless of their asylum procedure status, addressing a gap in previous research, which often focused only on refugees with positive decisions. Given that EU+ recognition rates varied significantly across origin groups and destination countries, averaging 34% in 2021 (EUAA 2022), it is crucial to consider the institutional and generalised trust levels of refugees with uncertain legal outcomes.

Theoretical framework

Background

In the broader literature on immigrant trust, two perspectives dominate as explanations of interpersonal and institutional trust: cultural and experiential perspectives. The *cultural perspective* argues that trust is primarily shaped early in life through socialisation by parents and schools (Inglehart 1997; Putnam and Goss 1995; Uslaner 2008). According to this perspective, individual experiences later in life have a diminished impact on developing trust. The *experiential perspective*, on the other hand, suggests that trust is more fluid, with individuals adjusting their levels of trust throughout their lives based on personal experiences (Rothstein 2003; Rothstein and Eek 2009; Sønderskov and Dinesen 2016). To disentangle the relative importance of the two perspectives, previous research has often relied on studying trust levels among migrants, focusing on the impact of the trust levels of their origin and destination country (e.g. Dinesen 2013; Nannestad et al. 2014). It has been shown that both perspectives matter in explaining immigrants' trust levels (Nannestad et al. 2014; Uslaner 2008; van Slageren and van Tubergen 2021).

For example, Uslaner (2008) examined immigrants in the U.S. and showed that people with grandparents from high-trust societies have higher generalised trust levels. Also, in support of the cultural explanation, van Slageren and van Tubergen (2021) found that the lower levels of trust among Muslim children of immigrants in Europe are explained by their immigrant parents being born and raised in lower-trust societies. In support of the experiential perspective, Nannestad et al. (2014), drawing on data from Denmark, found that immigrants' experiences with the quality of Danish institutions strongly impact their generalised and institutional trust.

Our study extends beyond macro-level conditions that influence trust by examining how refugees' personal experiences shape their trust levels. We build and extend previous research by proposing a more comprehensive examination of refugees' experiences in relation to their trust levels. We consider three types of effects that influence refugees' experiences and trust: (1) *pre-arrival migration effects*, including experiences of trauma; (2) *asylum procedure effects*, such as the length of the procedure, its outcome, and perceptions of fairness; and (3) *post-procedure effects*, including the context of reception.

Pre-arrival migration effects: traumatic experiences

First, and in line with earlier work, we argue that refugees' trust is influenced by their *traumatic experiences during migration*. Refugees are vulnerable to physical violence, sexual exploitation, and psychological abuse during their migration (Gushulak and MacPherson 2000; IOM et al. 2024). For instance, among recent refugees who migrated to Germany, one-quarter reported surviving shipwrecks, while two-fifths had experienced physical assault. Additionally, one-fifth reported being robbed, and 15% of female refugees disclosed incidents of sexual assault (Brücker et al. 2016). Several qualitative studies have emphasised the role of past traumatic experiences in shaping refugees' trust, both toward members of their ethnic community and the broader society (Gandolfo 2022; Hynes 2017; Ni Raghallaigh 2014). Drawing on the experiential mechanism and previous research, we propose that traumatic experiences during migration can significantly affect

refugees' trust levels towards strangers and institutions (Gushulak and MacPherson 2000; IOM et al. 2024). We hypothesise that *the experience of trauma during the migration journey is negatively related to generalised and institutional trust among refugees* (*H1*).

Asylum procedure effects

Refugees' trust levels can also be affected by experiences during the *asylum procedure*. We consider four aspects in which conditions during or related to the procedure may shape trust: the length of the procedure, the procedure outcome, perceptions of procedural and interactional justice, and the housing situation in the asylum centres.

To begin, scholars have argued that prolonged uncertainty and idle waiting for the asylum decision can cause stress, apathy, feelings of insecurity, and even depression among refugees (Damen, Dagevos, and Huijnk 2022; Hvidtfeldt et al. 2018), which, in turn, are likely to lessen refugee trust levels (Hall and Werner 2022; Nickerson et al. 2019; Sohlberg, Agerberg, and Esaiasson 2024). In line with this argument, Hvidtfeldt et al. (2018) have shown that among refugees in Denmark, waiting longer than one year for an asylum decision increases the risk of developing nervous and psychotic disorders in the follow-up years. In addition, Sohlberg, Agerberg, and Esaiasson (2024) have shown that longer stays in asylum procedures decrease the institutional and generalised trust among refugees in Sweden. We, therefore, predict that in Germany, the length of the asylum procedure is also *negatively related to generalised and institutional trust among refugees (H2)*.

We also expect the procedure's outcome to affect refugees' trust levels. Esaiasson, Lajevardi, and Sohlberg (2022) found that refugees in Sweden who received positive decisions showed higher trust in Swedish people and institutions than those who faced rejection. They also reported that refugees with positive decisions exhibit higher levels of institutional trust than those with pending decisions, whereas the level of institutional trust among those with a negative decision is statistically indistinguishable from that of those with a pending decision. In terms of generalised trust, rejected refugees demonstrate lower levels than those awaiting decision, whereas the difference between those with a positive decision and those with a pending decision is not statistically significant. According to the authors, these findings suggest that receiving a positive decision sets off refugees in a positive relation to state institutions and people. By contrast, being in limbo appears to have a similarly negative effect on institutional trust as having a negative decision. This is different for generalised trust: refugees seem to place trust in Swedish people even while awaiting a decision, but this trust is undermined by receiving a rejection. In this study, we examine the effects of asylum decisions in a context where the German state was overwhelmed by a surge in asylum applications. Although the policy aimed to shorten the duration of the asylum process, it faced significant challenges, including a shortage of decision-makers and the hiring of many less qualified personnel (Kosyakova and Brücker 2020). Therefore, we hypothesise *that receiving a positive asylum decision compared to a pending and negative decision is positively related to generalised and institutional trust among refugees (H3)*.

Sohlberg, Agerberg, and Esaiasson (2024) and Esaiasson, Lajevardi, and Sohlberg (2022) could not closely examine the underlying mechanisms behind the negative effect of the lengthy asylum procedure and procedure outcome on refugee trust. This

study examines one potential explanation behind their finding: increasing perceptions of (in-)justice. In the literature, a common distinction is made between two types of justice perceptions: procedural and interactional justice (Colquitt et al. 2001; Ryo 2013, 2021). *Procedural justice* refers to the judgments about the fairness of procedures used to make decisions. *Interactional justice*, on the other hand, reflects the degree to which people are treated with politeness, dignity, and respect by authorities involved in procedures and how information about the procedure is explained to people (Colquitt et al. 2001; Laxminarayan 2013). It can be argued that when individuals perceive decision-making procedures to be fair, consistent, and unbiased (i.e. procedural justice), they are more likely to trust institutions and the people involved. Likewise, when refugees perceive that they are treated with politeness and given explanations for decisions (i.e. interactional justice), they are more likely to perceive institutions as trustworthy and to extend trust to others who represent or interact with that institution (Colquitt et al. 2001; Ryo 2021). We also expect to see that the legal uncertainty of asylum outcome and the long time spent in the asylum procedure are likely to contribute to the legal, economic, and social marginalisation of refugees and, because of that, decrease their confidence in the fairness of German state institutions and actors. In line with this idea, Frank and Nivorozhkin (2024) found that uncertain legal status is associated with reduced perceptions of procedural fairness among refugees in Germany. Thus, we hypothesise *that more positive perceptions of procedural and interactional justice positively affect generalised and institutional trust among refugees (H4a) and that increasingly negative perceptions of justice (partly) explain the negative effect of lengthy asylum procedure (H4b) and negative or pending asylum decision (H4c).*

Another way conditions during the asylum process can affect refugees' trust is the *housing situation*. In Germany, many refugees are housed in shared accommodation provided by reception centres, relying entirely on the German state for shelter, food, health services, and education. A major critique of these reception centres is that refugees living there have limited autonomy in making basic life decisions and remain physically isolated from the host society (Damen, Dagevos, and Huijnk 2022; Ghorashi 2005). Additionally, the quality of living conditions in these centres is often criticised due to overcrowding, inadequate services, incidents of violence, and social isolation (European Council on Refugees and Exiles et al. 2019). Such poor housing conditions can diminish refugees' satisfaction and well-being, further eroding their trust in institutions and broader society (Esaiasson, Lajevardi, and Sohlberg 2022; Sohlberg, Agerberg, and Esaiasson 2024). We, therefore, hypothesise that *poor housing conditions are negatively related to generalised and institutional trust among refugees (H5).*

Post-asylum effects: contexts of reception

In addition to experiences during migration and the asylum procedure, a country's legal framework for reception may also influence refugees' trust levels. In their review of the literature on refugee integration, Strang and Ager (2010) argue that refugees' trust is undermined by the legal frameworks and integration policies that create an 'otherness' around refugees, contributing to their social alienation. We examine this idea by looking at residential obligation restrictions imposed on refugees (see Kanas and Kosyakova (2023) for details). Upon arrival in Germany, refugees are subject to state-based

allocation to the German federal states (based on the specific key calculated, considering tax revenues and population size). Within federal states, refugees are further assigned to German counties (Kreis) based on a similar key. After this initial assignment, refugees are not allowed to leave the county until they receive protection status recognition (§12a, Residence Act). Moreover, even upon a positive decision, refugees are required to stay in the assigned region for three years, and in eight of 16 States, refugees are required to remain in the assigned county.[2] Therefore, this restrictive factor becomes critically important after the completion of the asylum procedure.

Restrictions on refugees' right to free mobility can contribute to their feelings of exclusion and being unwelcome, which in turn erodes their trust. Being subjected to movement limitations can reinforce a sense of otherness and marginalisation, signalling that refugees are not fully integrated or trusted by the host society (Ghorashi 2005; Strang and Ager 2010). In this context, researchers refer to a recent shift from a 'culture of service' to a 'culture of disbelief' in the assessment of asylum claims, where mistrust and suspicion from caseworkers deciding on refugee status often lead to a vicious cycle of mistrust relations (Hynes 2017; Ni Raghallaigh 2014). As a result, this perceived lack of welcome can foster distrust, not only toward institutions enforcing these restrictions but also toward others. Hence, we hypothesise that *residential restrictions are negatively related to generalised and institutional trust* among refugees *(H6)*.

Data and method

Data and sample

Our analysis is based on the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Refugee Survey, a longitudinal household survey conducted in Germany (doi:10.5684/soep.iab-bamf-soep-mig.2022) (Brücker, Rother, and Schupp 2017). The data were drawn from the Central Register of Foreign Nationals (*Ausländerzentralregister*, AZR) and are representative of the refugee population in Germany that have arrived since 2013 (irrespective of current legal status) and their household members. Further details on the data, sampling methods, and subsamples can be found in (Brücker, Rother, and Schupp 2017; Kroh et al. 2016; Kühne, Jacobsen, and Kroh 2019). Data collection was performed using computer-assisted face-to-face interviewing (CAPI) techniques with questionnaires available in seven languages: Arabic, English, Farsi/Dari, German, Kurmanji, Pashtu, and Urdu. Auditory instruments were employed to accommodate illiterate participants, and translators were provided where necessary.

Our analysis focuses exclusively on panel respondents from the 2018 survey year, as this survey year specifically included questions on generalised and institutional trust. Only panel respondents received the corresponding questions. Data from earlier waves were used to establish critical biographical covariates. We restricted the sample of 3,911 original 2018 panel respondents by excluding individuals who arrived in Germany before 2013 or whose arrival year was unspecified (159 persons), those with more than one asylum application (e.g. after being rejected; 18 persons), and those with implausible application and decision dates (63 persons). These exclusions delivered an analytical sample of 3604 observations. Since the number of missing values in dependent outcomes varies, the size of the corresponding analytical samples differs. This issue is addressed in the subsequent section.

Dependent variables

To measure *generalised trust*, we considered refugees' responses regarding their opinion on the following statement: 'People can generally be trusted,' with response categories ranging from 1 ('Agree completely') to 4 ('Totally disagree').[3] The item was standardised to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. For *institutional trust*, we created a compound index from four survey questions regarding personal trust in German institutions: (a) 'How much do you trust the public administration?' (b) 'How much do you trust the German government?' (c) 'How much do you trust the legal system?' and (d) 'How much do you trust the police?' These items were rated on a scale from 0 ('No trust at all') to 10 ('Complete trust'). The Cronbach's alpha for these items was very high at 0.843, indicating strong internal consistency. Using principal component analysis, we combined these indicators into a single measure. The first factor, with an eigenvalue of 2.71 explaining 69% of the variance, gave the greatest weight to item (b) (0.523), followed by (c) (0.518), (a) (0.490), and (d) (0.468). This index was also standardised to a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one.

Independent variables

We consider self-reported *traumatic experiences during migration*, assessed through a survey question about encountering one or more of the following: financial fraud, sexual harassment, physical attacks, shipwreck, robbery, blackmail, or imprisonment during their journey or escape. This question was posed only to those respondents who consented to report their experiences related to their escape (about 62 percent of respondents). An indicator variable was then created, assigning a value of 1 if the respondent reported any of these incidents and 0 for no traumatic experience.

The *length of the asylum procedure* is quantified as the number of months from the initial asylum application to the decision. If a decision has not been made by the end of the survey interview date, the variable is treated as right censored, i.e. we considered the number of months from the initial asylum application to the interview date. We use an indicator for *approved asylum status* derived from the status of the asylum application and, if relevant, the type of decision received. Refugees with an approved application and those without the need to apply because they were resettled on humanitarian grounds are coded as one. In contrast, those with pending applications or those who received a negative decision are coded as zero.

We also measure the perceived *procedural and interactional justice* of the asylum procedure. We created a composite index using responses to 11 questions reflecting refugees' experience with various authorities involved in the asylum procedure (e.g. BAMF, BA, Immigration Authorities). The questions probed perceptions of fairness, clarity in communication, timeliness of information, respectfulness, and whether respondents felt discriminated against based on origin. These questions also included assessments of how fairly respondents thought they were treated, whether explanations and decisions were clearly communicated, and the politeness of the personnel involved. The responses were rated on a scale where 1 indicated the most positive experience and 4 the least. For instance, the question 'How fair do you feel treated?' had response options ranging from 1 ('Very fairly') to 4 ('Very unfairly'). Similarly, the remaining items asked respondents to reflect on their most recent interactions, with responses ranging

from 1 ('Applies completely') to 4 ('Does not apply at all'). The internal consistency of the index, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha, was high (0.918), demonstrating strong reliability. We utilised principal component analysis (PCA) to condense these 11 indicators into a single measure. The first principal component, with an eigenvalue of 6.27, explained 58 percent of the total variance. This component's factor loadings were used to calculate the composite measure, which was subsequently standardised to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. This standardised measure serves as a robust indicator of the perceived procedural and interactional justice experienced by refugees within the asylum process.[4]

We also included an indicator for the type of housing based on responses from the household questionnaire. This indicator was coded as one if the respondent resided in *shared accommodation* and zero if residing in a private apartment or house.

The legal framework of reception is indicated by a measure of *residency restrictions* surveyed in a household questionnaire completed by the household heads. This questionnaire asked whether respondents were subject to any legal residency obligations or had the freedom to choose their residence. The corresponding variable was categorised as follows: (1) free choice of residence, (2) residency restrictions at a specific location, and (3) residency restrictions within a particular federal state.

Estimation strategy

We start our analysis with Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models with robust standard errors to estimate the influence of various factors on refugees' generalised and institutional trust. The model is specified as follows:

$$Trust_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 trauma_i + \alpha_2 asylum\ length_i + \alpha_3 approved_i + \alpha_4 justice_i + \alpha_5 accomodation_i + \alpha_6 residency_i + \alpha_7 X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where $Trust_i$ is a continuous variable for generalised or institutional trust for a respondent i. The $trauma_i$ refers to traumatic experiences during the migration journey, $asylum\ length_i$ indicates the length of the asylum procedure, $approved_i$ indicates approved asylum status, $justice_i$ indicates procedural and interactional justice, $accomodation_i$ refers to shared accommodation in the asylum centre, and $residency_i$ refers to residency restrictions. Vector X_i denotes an array of potential individual-level confounders that may distort the relationship between refugee-specific factors and trust levels. Specifically, we account for country of birth (aggregated into Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea/Somalia, Iran, former USSR, West Balkan, rest of Africa, and other countries), female, having a partner in the household, having children aged below 16 in the household, the duration of stay (in years), age at arrival, pre-migration education (in years), agreeableness, an indicator for current residence in the east (versus west) Germany, federal-state-specific share of residents very concerned about immigration to Germany, federal-state-specific unemployment rate, and federal-state-specific population density and ε_i is the error term.

To manage missing data, we apply multiple imputations using chained equations (van Buuren 2012). We construct 50 imputed data sets that use all available information from the full models. Respondents with missing information on generalised and institutional trust measures were included in the multiple imputation but not in the corresponding

analyses. Missing information was present to varying degrees, with a maximum of 41 percent in the measure for traumatic experiences during migration (see Table 1, column 4).

Results

Descriptive results

Figure 1 presents the average levels of generalised and institutional trust among refugees over the years since arrival. One of the most striking findings is that, despite facing significant hardship and uncertainty, refugees report substantially higher levels of both generalised and institutional trust than German natives and non-refugee immigrants. On average, refugees score 2.8 (SD = 0.91) on generalised trust (on a 1–4 scale) and 8.6 (SD = 1.68) on institutional trust (on a 0–10 scale). In contrast, generalised trust levels

Table 1. Unweighted descriptive statistics on model covariates.

Variables	Mean/ Share	SD	*N*	Range
DEPENDENT VARIABLES				
Generalised trust, standardised	0.00	1.00	3568	−1.96–1.31
Institutional trust, standardised	0.00	1.00	3215	−5.89–0.75
INDEPENDENT VARIABLES				
Traumatic experience during migration	0.53		2115	0/1
Length of the asylum procedure (in months)	1.05		2962	0/1
Approved asylum status	0.79		3437	0/1
Procedural and interactional justice, standardised	0.00	1.00	3557	−3.74–0.96
Shared accommodation	0.18		3588	0/1
Residency restrictions			3482	
– Free choice of residence	0.32			0/1
– Residency restrictions at a specific location	0.35			0/1
– Residency restrictions within a particular federal state	0.33			0/1
CONTROLS				
Female	0.38		3604	0/1
Has children aged below 16 in the household	0.67		3604	0/1
Has a partner in the household	0.62		3588	0/1
Duration of stay (in years)	3.18	0.76	3604	0–5
Age at arrival	31.73	10.60	3604	14–91
Pre-migration education (in years)	9.71	5.17	3217	0–37
Agreeableness, standardised	0.00	1.00	1586	−5.46–0.65
Current residence in east Germany	0.14		3604	0/1
Federal-state-specific share of residents very concerned about immigration to Germany	0.32	0.06	3588	0.22–0.48
Federal-state-specific unemployment rate	0.53	0.16	3588	0.29–0.98
Federal-state-specific population density	513.94	835.37	3588	69.10–4090.16
Country of origin			3603	
– Syria	0.56			0/1
– Afghanistan	0.12			0/1
– Iraq	0.13			0/1
– Eritrea/Somalia	0.06			0/1
– Iran	0.02			0/1
– former USSR	0.02			0/1
– West Balkan	0.01			0/1
– Other Africa	0.04			0/1
– Other	0.03			0/1

Notes: SD = standard deviation. Variation in the number of observations is due to differences in missing data across variables.
Data source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP- Sample of Refugees (doi:10.5684/soep.iab-bamf-soep-mig.2022).

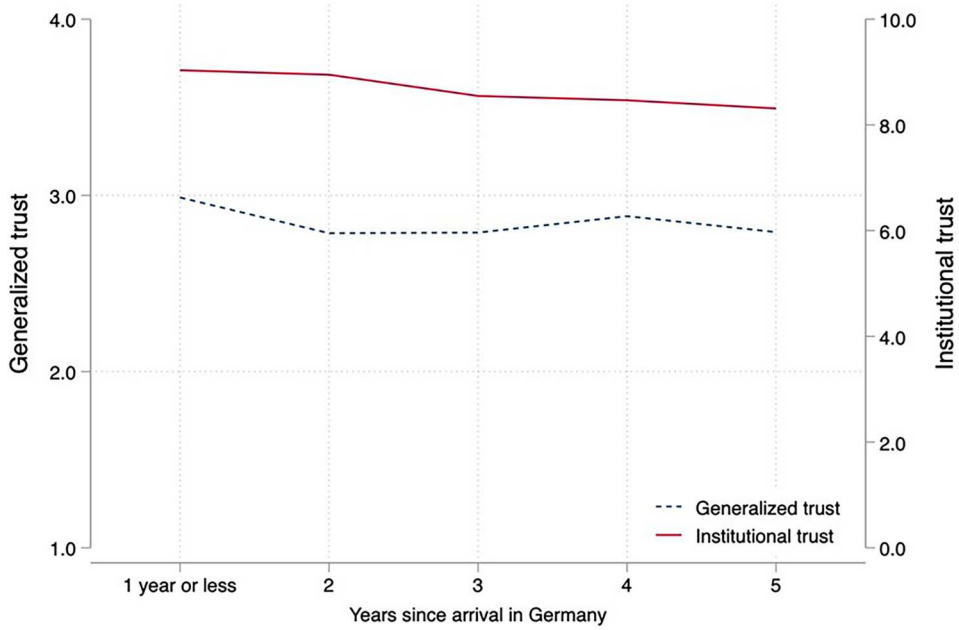

Figure 1. Institutional and generalised trust by years since arrival.

Notes: Institutional trust: $N = 3215$. Generalised trust: $N = 3568$. Data source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Refugee Survey (doi:10.5684/soep.iab-bamf-soep-mig.2022), weighted results.

among German natives and non-refugee immigrants were 2.3 (SD = 0.63) and 2.4 (SD = 0.74) respectively in 2018, while institutional trust was considerably lower at 5.29 (SD = 1.96) for natives and 5.4 (SD = 2.2) for non-refugee immigrants in 2021 (see Tables A1 and A2).[5]

Figure 1 also shows that refugees' initially high levels of institutionalised and generalised trust decline over the years in Germany. Five years after their arrival, institutional trust decreased from an average of 9.0 to about 8.3, a 7.8 percent drop. While generalised trust also declines over time, the absolute decrease is smaller – falling from 3.0 upon arrival to 2.8 after five years – but its relative decline, at 6.7 percent, is similarly pronounced. In the next section, we examine which refugee-specific experiences help explain these trust levels.

Multivariate results

Figure 2 displays the linear regression coefficient for the hypothesised effects, with control variables included and their 90% confidence intervals. 'Total effects' models refer to models testing a single hypothesised relationship; therefore, they indicate the 'gross' or 'overall' effect of each determinant. Instead, 'direct effects' models incorporate all hypothesised effects simultaneously, hence they capture the direct effects of the determinants, net of the other factors. Tables A3 and A4 in the Appendix present stepwise regression models that gradually introduce the key independent variables while controlling for individual confounders.

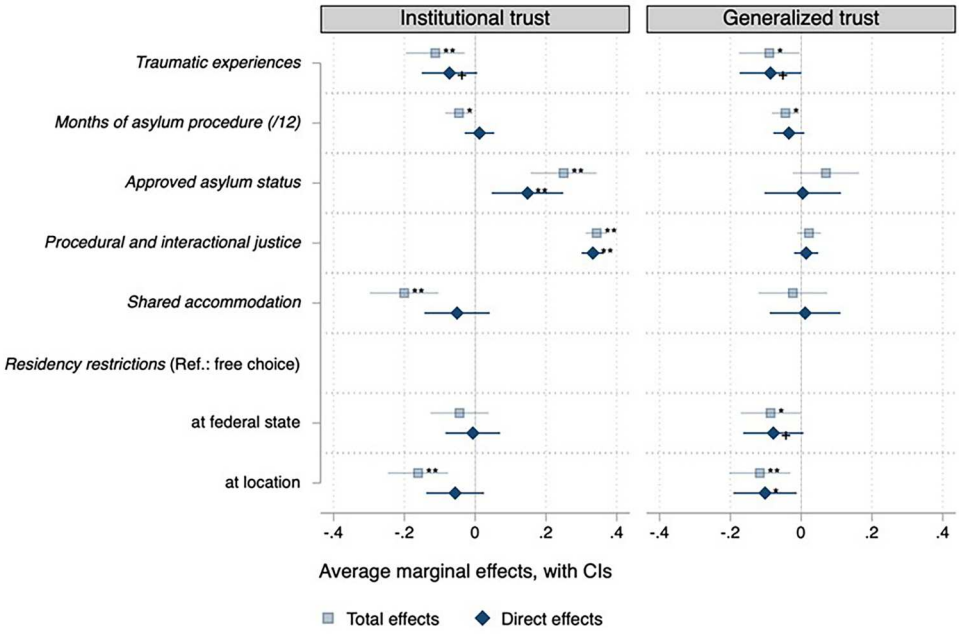

Figure 2. Refugee-specific effects on institutional and generalised trust. Presented are average marginal effects (Ordinary least squares regressions).

Notes: $+p < 0.10$, $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$(two-sided tests). CIs = confidence intervals. Institutional trust: $N = 3215$. Generalised trust: $N = 3568$. Control variables include country of origin, female, having a partner in the household, having children aged below 16 in the household, the duration of stay, age at arrival, pre-migration education, agreeableness, an indicator for current residence in East Germany, federal-state-specific share of residents very concerned about immigration to Germany, federal-state-specific unemployment rate, and federal-state-specific foreign population density. Data source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Refugee Survey (doi:10.5684/soep.iab-bamf-soep-mig.2022).

We start by reporting the results of the experience of trauma, as outlined in *H1*. Refugees who experienced trauma during their migration journey have significantly lower levels of institutional ($b = -.11$, $SE = .04$) and generalised ($b = -.09$, $SE = .04$) trust as compared to those without such experiences. The comparison of models presenting total and direct effects of trauma in Figure 2 further shows a significant reduction in the effect of trauma on institutional trust when multiple refugee-specific factors are included (compare $b = -.11$, $SE = .04$ in total effects model to $b = -.07$, $SE = .04$ in the direct effects model in Figure 2). Interestingly, the effect of trauma on generalised trust remains substantially the same when considering other refugee-specific factors. These findings suggest that, while other refugee-specific experiences partly explain the effect of previous trauma on institutionalised trust, there is a persistent impact of traumatic experiences continuing to shape refugees' trust towards institutions and other people.

With regard to the asylum procedure, in line with *H2,* we find that refugees who spent a longer time in the asylum procedure have lower levels of institutional and generalised trust than those who have been in the procedure for a shorter period ($b = -.05$, $SE = .02$ and $b = -.04$, $SE = .02$). Next, in line with H3, refugees with recognised asylum status have higher levels of institutional trust than those who are waiting or received a negative asylum decision ($b = .25$, $SE = .05$). Interestingly, the relationship between positive

asylum decisions and generalised trust, while also positive, does not reach statistical significance.

Additional analyses reveal that while both a negative and pending asylum decision significantly undermine institutional trust, being in existential limbo is more detrimental to generalised trust levels. Specifically, refugees with a negative ($b = -.31$, $SE = .06$) or pending ($b = -.19$, $SE = .06$) asylum decision exhibit lower institutional trust than those with a positive decision. However, the institutional trust levels of those with a pending decision are not statistically different from those with a negative decision ($b = .12$, $SE = .08$). In terms of generalised trust, refugees who have received any asylum decision – whether positive ($b = .20$, $SE = .06$) or negative ($b = .24$, $SE = .08$) – report significantly higher levels of generalised trust than those in existential limbo. Furthermore, there is no significant difference in generalised trust between those with a negative decision and those with a positive decision ($b = .04$, $SE = .05$).

Consistent with *H4a*, refugees who view their interactions with state actors more positively report higher levels of institutional trust than those with negative perceptions ($b = .34$, $SE = .02$). Interestingly, while the relationship between perceived procedural and interactional justice and generalised trust is positive, it does not reach statistical significance. Furthermore, in line with *H4b* and *H4c*, procedural justice partially mediates the significant relationship between the length of the asylum procedure and positive asylum outcome on the one hand and refugees' institutional trust levels on the other hand (b indirect effect $= -.027$, $SE = .007$; b indirect effect $= -.094$, $SE = .018$).

We observe a similar pattern for the other indicator of the asylum procedure: shared accommodation, which is significantly related to institutional trust but seems not to affect generalised trust levels (*H5*). Specifically, shared accommodation is negatively associated with institutional trust ($b = -.20$, $SE = .05$). However, its effect is fully explained by other refugee-specific experiences ($b = -.05$, $SE = .005$).

With regard to *H6* about the legal context of reception, we find that refugees facing federal residential restrictions have lower levels of institutional trust than those with no restrictions ($b = -.16$, $SE = .04$). However, the relationship becomes insignificant after taking other refugee-specific experiences into account ($b = -.06$, $SE = .04$), implying that other refugee-specific factors likely confound this relationship. Moreover, we also find that residential restrictions, both at the federal and local levels, are negatively related to generalised trust ($b = -.12$, $SE = .04$ and $b = -.09$, $SE = .05$), and this effect remains stable even after considering other variables ($b = -.10$, $SE = .05$ and $b = -.08$, $SE = .04$). Overall, these findings imply that unfavourable legal context of reception directly or indirectly undermine refugees' trust in German institutions and other people.

Robustness findings

It is important to note that our results remain robust even when accounting for a wide range of potential confounders that could influence the relationship between refugee-specific factors and trust levels. These include fixed effects for geographical origin, gender, household composition, duration of stay, age at arrival, and pre-migration education, as well as an indicator for current residence in East versus West Germany. Additionally, we control for host-country regional factors and pre-migration individual traits – specifically agreeableness, which is generally stable, unlikely to be shaped by

refugees' personal experiences, and has been shown in the literature to positively affect both social and institutional trust (Mondak and Halperin 2008).

Beyond accounting for these confounders, we also examine whether refugee-specific factors continue to shape trust levels over time. To address this, we leverage the temporal variation in refugees' length of residence and interact this measure with our key independent variables (see Tables A5 and A6 in the Appendix). Interestingly, we find little evidence that the influence of refugee-specific factors on trust changes significantly over time. The exception is the interaction between residency restrictions at a specific location and years since migration, which is both positive and significant for institutional trust. Combined with the negative main effect of residency restrictions on refugee institutional trust, this suggests that while residency restrictions initially have a negative effect on refugee trust, their impact diminishes as refugees spend more time in Germany.

Discussion

This paper adds to the existing literature by examining how refugee-specific experiences shape refugees' trust in host-country institutions and other people. Despite their distinct experiences and the unique legal contexts of their reception, empirical research on trust among refugees remains limited. Furthermore, the few existing studies on refugees' trust tend to address specific subgroups (Eide et al. 2020; Gandolfo 2022; Hynes 2017; Ni Raghallaigh 2014; Smith, Mansfield, and Wainwright 2023; Vähä-Savo and Koivuluhta 2024) or only single factors like asylum outcome or the length of the asylum procedure (Esaiasson, Lajevardi, and Sohlberg 2022; Hall and Werner 2022; Sohlberg, Agerberg, and Esaiasson 2024). While these studies offer important insights into the specific experiences of refugees, there remains a need for a more comprehensive understanding of refugees' experiences in forming their trust levels. This paper contributes to that effort by drawing on a large representative sample of refugees in Germany and by examining multiple factors simultaneously, thereby complementing and extending the scope of existing research. This approach enables us to investigate the mechanisms underlying refugee-specific experiences, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of trust formation among refugees.

In line with our expectations, there is evidence that trauma during migration reduces institutionalised and generalised trust among refugees. More specifically, refugees who experienced traumatic events during their migration journey report lower levels of institutionalised and generalised trust compared to those without such experiences. This negative effect of past trauma persists, although marginally significant, even after accounting for other refugee-specific experiences and individual confounders, suggesting that these negative experiences in the past may continue to shape refugees' interactions with host society institutions and others. While we expected that past trauma negatively affects refugees' trust levels, previous research suggests that its role may be more complex, with both negative and positive trauma-related experiences influencing trust. For example, Hall and Werner (2022) found that among refugees in Turkey, greater conflict exposure correlates with lower trust in Turkish political institutions, a relationship partly explained by posttraumatic stress disorder. However, they also found that conflict exposure can enhance general trust in others through experiences of mutual support and cooperation in challenging circumstances.

With regard to the asylum procedure, we find that these experiences significantly impact refugees' trust in state institutions but have less effect on generalised trust in others. The length of the asylum process is negatively related to institutional and generalised trust among refugees; however, this relationship is fully mediated by refugees' perceptions of procedural and interactional justice. Thus, our findings contribute to prior research on refugee trust (Sohlberg, Agerberg, and Esaiasson 2024) by identifying mechanisms underlying the negative effects of asylum length on refugees' trust.

Consistent with Esaiasson, Lajevardi, and Sohlberg (2022), refugees with a positive asylum decision report higher institutional trust than those with a negative or pending decision. We further demonstrate that this relationship is partially mediated by refugees' perceptions of procedural and interactional justice. Additional analyses reveal that living in a state of 'existential limbo' is particularly determinantal for refugees' trust levels. Refugees awaiting an asylum decision have not only lower levels of institutional and generalised trust compared to those with a positive decision but also lower levels of generalised trust compared to those with a negative asylum decision.

Living in shared accommodation in the asylum centre is also negatively related to refugees' institutional trust, although its effects seem to be mostly indirect. Importantly, living in shared accommodation is not significantly related to refugees' trust in others.

Finally, refugees subjected to residency obligations have lower levels of institutional and generalised trust than those without such restrictions. These findings align with previous quantitative research highlighting the detrimental effects of residency obligations on refugees' language acquisition and labour market outcomes (Cardozo Silva, Kosyakova, and Yurdakul 2023; Kanas and Kosyakova 2023). It also resonates with broader qualitative research indicating that subjecting refugees to differential, often more restrictive treatment, combined with othering processes, harms their well-being and life satisfaction (Ghorashi 2005; Strang and Quinn 2021). Our research adds to these findings by showing that such a negative reception context also negatively impacts refugees' trust in institutions and others.

While some determinants of refugees' trust are likely to be universal (e.g. experiences of trauma), our study also reflects on particularities of German asylum policy and its role in shaping our findings. Since 2016, three key reforms have reshaped the German asylum process: (1) the introduction of a cluster system aimed at accelerating asylum processing times, (2) expanded opportunities for asylum-seekers to participate in integration courses and work while awaiting a decision, and (3) residential allocation policies and mobility restrictions. In light of our findings, the reforms that prioritise procedural efficiency and early integration, such as the shortened asylum procedures and greater access to integration activities and employment opportunities, are likely to have had a positive impact on refugees' trust in Germany. These measures are particularly relevant in comparison to other European countries where asylum processes are significantly longer and access to integration programmes is more limited (Damen, Dagevos, and Huijnk 2022; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Lawrence 2016; Kosyakova and Kogan 2022). Given the large effect sizes associated with procedural and interactional justice, further efforts to streamline asylum decision-making, improve communication, and ensure respectful treatment could reinforce these trust-building mechanisms.

At the same time, living conditions in shared accommodations for asylum-seekers in Germany reflect broader European challenges, such as prolonged stays in reception

centres due to a shortage of private housing (European Council on Refugees and Exiles et al. 2019). However, additional German policies, including mandatory residence requirements that restrict refugees to the federal state or county where their application is processed, impose further structural constraints on mobility and integration options (Kanas and Kosyakova 2023). Given the significant negative impact of residential restrictions on refugees' trust, addressing local inequalities in assistance to refugees could mitigate some of their adverse effects (Kanas and Kosyakova 2023).

Interestingly, refugees in Germany seem to exhibit significantly higher levels of trust than both German natives and other immigrant groups. While the trust levels of refugess tend to decline over time, the initially elevated levels of generalised and institutional trust are an important finding, particularly given the considerable challenges refugees encounter before and after migration. This presents both an opportunity and a responsibility for the host state and society, as sustaining this initial trust can support not only refugees' successful integration but also the effectiveness of public institutions and the broader social cohesion of the receiving society.

One limitation of our study is that, although the refugee survey data are longitudinal, the majority of respondents answered questions on trust in 2018 only, requiring us to rely on a single wave of the survey.[6] This restricts our ability to draw causal conclusions regarding some refugee-specific factors, particularly those that happened after arrival, such as perceptions of procedural and interactional legitimacy, which may be influenced by reverse causality or selection bias. However, this limitation is less pronounced for factors that occurred before migration (e.g. traumatic experiences) or for those measuring policy outcomes that are not easily influenced by refugees. Nevertheless, future research should revisit these relationships using longitudinal data that follows refugees over time to capture causal dynamics better.

Second, while our study is the first to examine a broad range of refugee-specific factors, a more detailed account of refugee experiences would be beneficial in some cases. This is especially true for the understanding of trauma before migration, which is not measured in our data. Given the theoretical importance of trauma in shaping trust levels (Hall and Werner 2022), it would be valuable for future studies to reexamine these relationships using more detailed measures of past trauma.

Notes

1. We do not focus on recent Ukrainian refugees because they are granted residence permits in accordance with the EU Temporary Protection Directive, which allows them to reside, seek employment, and attend school in the EU for two years without official asylum procedure.
2. Exceptions apply for employees subject to social security contributions who work at least 15 weekly hours and earn a monthly income of approximately 700 €.
3. We checked whether it is possible to use four related items in the measure of generalised trust: (a) 'Nowadays one can't rely on anyone,' (b) 'If one is dealing with strangers, it is better to be careful before trusting them,' (c) 'Do you believe that most people would exploit you if they had the opportunity or would try to be fair to you?' and (d) 'Would you say that people usually try to be helpful or that they only pursue their own interests?' The first two items were measured on a scale ranging from 1 ('Agree completely') to 4 ('Totally disagree'). Items (c) and (d) offered a binary choice between 'would exploit' and 'would be fair' and between 'try to be helpful' and 'pursue their own interests,' respectively.

However, the internal consistency, as indicated by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.577, was low, and the principal component analysis revealed a two-factor solution.

4. Although procedural and interactional justice have been treated as distinct concepts from institutional trust in previous research (Kang 2022; Marien and Werner 2019), these concepts likely overlap, as both involve subjective evaluations of institutional treatment. To empirically validate this theoretical distinction, we conducted principal component analysis combining all trust items with procedural and interactional justice measures. The results reveal a clear three-component solution: procedural and interactional justice items load highly onto one component, while trust items load highly onto two separate components.
5. The information on institutional trust among German natives and non-refugee immigrants is only available in 2021 year (see table A1 in the Appendix).
6. While the questions about institutional trust were included in the 2021 survey, the wording for some items changed, and one new question was added (see Table A1). As a result, only two questions remain directly comparable. Additionally, only about one quarter (27%) of our sample responded to the institutional trust questions in 2021.

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Data availability statement

This study uses the factually anonymous data of waves 2016-2022 of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees. The survey is conducted jointly by the Institute for Employment Research (IAB), the research data center of the Federal German Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), and the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) at the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW). External researchers may apply for access to these data by submitting a user-contract application to the SOEP Research Data Center (https://www.diw.de/en/diw_02.c.222836.en/data_access_and_order.html). DOI: 10.5684/soep.iab-bamf-soep-mig.2022. Replication codes for data preparation and analyses are available at https://osf.io/ps7zq/.

AI policy

Grammarly and ChatGPT 4o have been utilised for language editing at the final manuscript preparation stage. All content and interpretations are the authors' own.

ORCID

Agnieszka Kanas http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0057-2474
Frank van Tubergen http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6415-2877
Yuliya Kosyakova http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9621-1755

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