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Attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees and governmental responses in 8 European countries

Forum on the EU Temporary Protection Responses to the Ukraine War

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Introduction

This article uses new survey data gathered in late May and early June 2022 by the Observatory for Public Attitudes to Migration (OPAM) at the European University Institute (EUI) to explore public attitudes to Ukrainian displacement in eight EU member states (Austria, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, Slovakia). We show attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees and to actions of governments, explore variation between the eight countries and also compare attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees with those toward Syrian refugees. We do so because public attitudes are likely to be an important facilitator or constraint of government actions. This is not to say that there is a simple transmission mechanism whereby politicians respond to public sentiment. The relationship is clearly far more complex than that; not least, because political elites through their actions and words about migration and refugees do influence and shape public attitudes as too can media representations of migration and refugee flows. So, while there is a complex debate about the relationship between attitudes and policy, we assume that attitudes matter; not least, because 'responding to the public' is an important source of legitimation for political elites.

Understanding attitudes

There is a rich literature on attitudes to migration, asylum and refugees from which we can extract five points that inform our analysis. First, attitudes to migration are formed in the same way as attitudes to other issues. By this, we mean that people's attitudes and world views are formed early in life and shaped by key early life experiences, particularly education. Second, once established world views and attitudes are difficult to shift and are thus relatively stable over time. Third, events or crises are likely to increase the salience – or level of public attention – to the issues of migration and refugees and activate pre-existing dispositions rather than prompt people to change their underlying attitudes. Fourth, attitudes to migration have become more favourable over time across Europe. This does not mean that there is a wave of pro-migration sentiment but it does suggest that there has been a growth in support for migration over the last 20 years or so that is most likely linked to generational change. Finally, and very relevant for this ASILE Forum contribution, there is variation across countries within the EU in attitudes to migration and refugees. Countries in Central Europe have been more sceptical about or opposed to migration and refugee inflows in the past, but differences across CEE and Western Europe appear less pronounced with regard to Ukrainian refugees. To explore these country differences further, we analyze public attitudes in selected Western European countries as well as all of the Visegrad countries, plus Romania.

By now it is well known that more than 6 million have been displaced by the war in Ukraine. Potentially, this kind of mass displacement could be politically destabilizing, but what we actually have seen is a wave of support from governments and the public. Key contrasts are the supportive responses of EU governments and the ways that Ukrainian displacement has been covered in the media compared to other refugees. The media coverage for Ukrainian refugees has tended to be very positive and to focus on the 'human' side of displacement whereas the coverage of Syrian displacement was dominated by scenes of chaos and disorder at sea and land borders in the face of large-scale arrivals, albeit nowhere near the scale of Ukrainian arrivals. This is significant because many people have conservative value orientations meaning that they value order and stability and that, consequently, scenes of apparent chaos as likely to trigger concern. In contrast, Ukrainian refugees have been portrayed as people requiring help and support. Clearly, the fact that Ukrainians were represented as fellow Europeans played a key role too and there can be little doubt that media coverage, compared to Syrians, has at times been racialized.

Attitudes to Ukrainian displacement

Given that the situation for Ukrainian refugees seems likely to be protracted, it is important to understand how citizens in key hosting states have responded to the situation and also think about how attitudes could evolve in the future. For this, we surveyed a combined total of 8525 respondents in the eight countries between 25th May and June 6th 2022 with nationally representative samples of approximately 1000 respondents. In this article, we report the top-line data by which we mean the overall findings. In later work, we will be able to dig more deeply into the data to look at the influence of, for example, socio-demographic factors such as age, gender and education.

We began by asking respondents to what extent they think their country should allow refugees to move and live in their country. Respondents could choose between allowing none at all; allowing a few; allowing some; and, allowing many. Figure 1 shows that in all eight countries respondents are strongly supportive of welcoming Ukrainian refugees. Even in the most negative countries such as Slovakia and Hungary, respondents who would allow no Ukrainian refugees at all amount to only around 10 per cent. Germany and Romania are among the most positive, more than half of the respondents in these two countries would support allowing many Ukrainian refugees to come to their country.

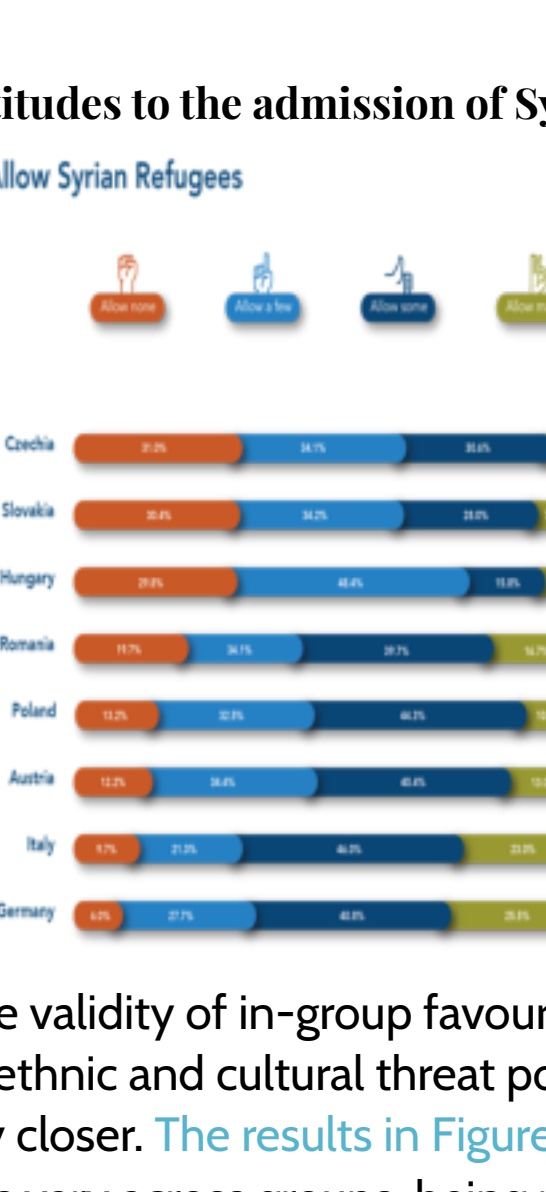
It is worth highlighting that what we observe is that the debate is not a simple binary between those who oppose entry for refugees from Ukraine and those who favour their free unconditional entry. The overwhelming majority in all of the surveyed countries would allow at least a few Ukrainian refugees to move and live in their countries, but we find that strong support also brings with it some preference that numbers be regulated or controlled. This could suggest that the powerful emotional response to mass Ukrainian displacement also brings with it a concern that the relevant authorities, particularly national governments, are seen as being able to effectively manage the situation.

Figure 1: Attitudes to the admission of Ukrainian refugees



As we were interested in whether there might be differences between the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees compared to refugees from other countries, we also conducted a survey experiment in each country. We randomly split the sample into two with half of the respondents being asked explicitly about the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees, while the other half was asked about Syrian refugees. Randomization ensures that subjects are expected to be identical in all other (un)observed characteristics that may confound a comparison across groups.

Figure 2: Attitudes to the admission of Syrian refugees



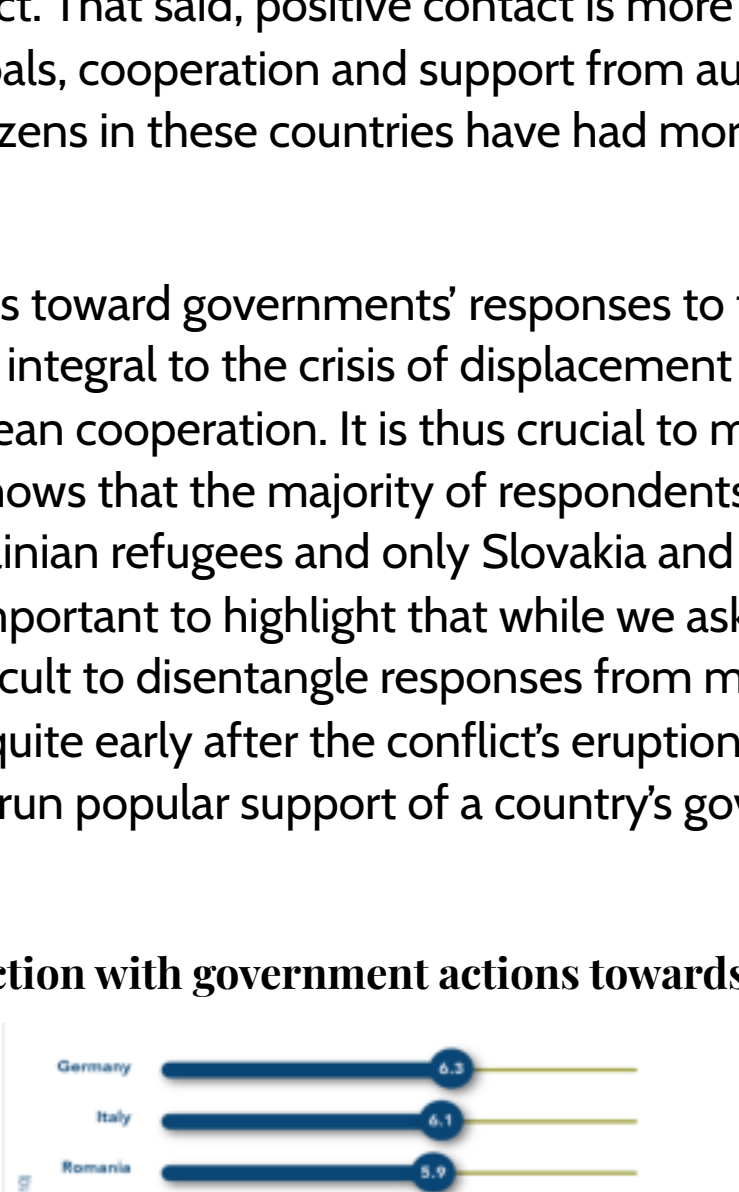
Our survey experiment is an opportunity to test the validity of in-group favouritism in explaining public attitudes towards immigration and refugees based on the perceived ethnic and cultural threat posed by culturally more distant refugee groups as compared to refugees perceived as being culturally closer. The results in Figures 1 and 2 confirm previous research findings in the European context that attitudes toward immigrants vary across groups, being more negative toward ethnic minorities and especially pronounced in the case of Muslims. While our analysis shows that participants in the survey experiment in all European countries generally favour Ukrainians over Syrians, the differences are much more pronounced in Central and Eastern Europe.

We suggest two reasons for this difference. First, in CEE countries where historical processes have seen ethnic minorities turned into majorities and vice-versa, the (re)established post-communist states are based on an ethnocultural national identity and a political project that centres on the creation of a culturally stable and ethnically homogeneous majority within the new sovereign borders. From this perspective, the arrival of ethnically and culturally diverse groups such as Syrian asylum seekers can be perceived as threatening already vulnerable national identities. Particularly in countries such as Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary which are relatively small in terms of population size and area, the arrival of ethnically and culturally diverse groups can be represented as a 'cultural threat'.

Second, CEE countries had only small numbers of asylum applications before 2022. Although the causal relations between contact and attitudes are not fully established, a large body of research lends firm support to the thesis that contact is likely to decrease negative attitudes and reduce hostility toward other groups' populations. Using insights from contact theory, it is possible to say that respondents in Western European countries have had more chances of personal experience with Syrian refugees and thus more opportunities for intergroup contact. That said, positive contact is more successful when Allports' (1954) optimal contact conditions are met: equal status, common goals, cooperation and support from authority figures. As, over time, Ukrainians have been one of the largest minorities in CEE, citizens in these countries have had more opportunities to have contact with Ukrainians rather than Syrians.

We also wanted to try to understand attitudes toward governments' responses to the Ukrainian crisis. In 2015 it was divisions and disunity between EU governments that were integral to the crisis of displacement and led to the subsequent political and institutional crisis with a breakdown of European cooperation. It is thus crucial to monitor the satisfaction with government responses to the current situation. Figure 3 shows that the majority of respondents in the eight European countries are satisfied with their governments' actions towards Ukrainian refugees and only Slovakia and the Czech Republic have satisfaction levels below the average. On the other hand, it is important to highlight that while we asked specifically about the governments' actions towards refugees from Ukraine, it can be difficult to disentangle responses from more general levels of satisfaction with the government. Moreover, responses provided quite early after the conflict's eruption might also reflect the so-called 'rally round the flag effect' that describes an increased short-run popular support of a country's government or political leaders during periods of international crisis and war.

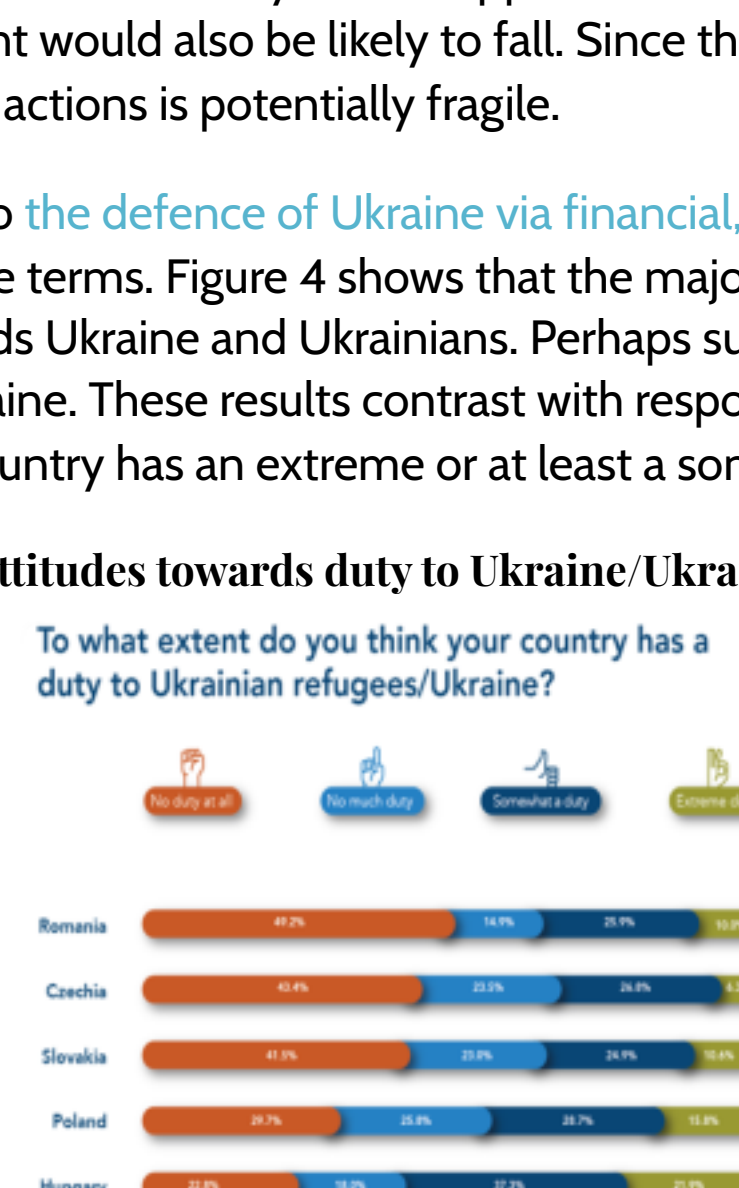
Figure 3: Satisfaction with government actions towards Ukrainian refugees



We were also interested in understanding whether respondents were satisfied with their governments' specific actions toward Ukrainian refugees. We found that, in each of the eight countries surveyed, respondents who are satisfied with their government's actions are also much more likely to be supportive of their country allowing refugees from Ukraine to come. Of course, the direction of causality is difficult to disentangle, but it is likely that if support for Ukrainian refugees from the public fades away in time, then levels of satisfaction in government would also be likely to fall. Since these levels of satisfaction are far from overwhelming, the support for governments' actions is potentially fragile.

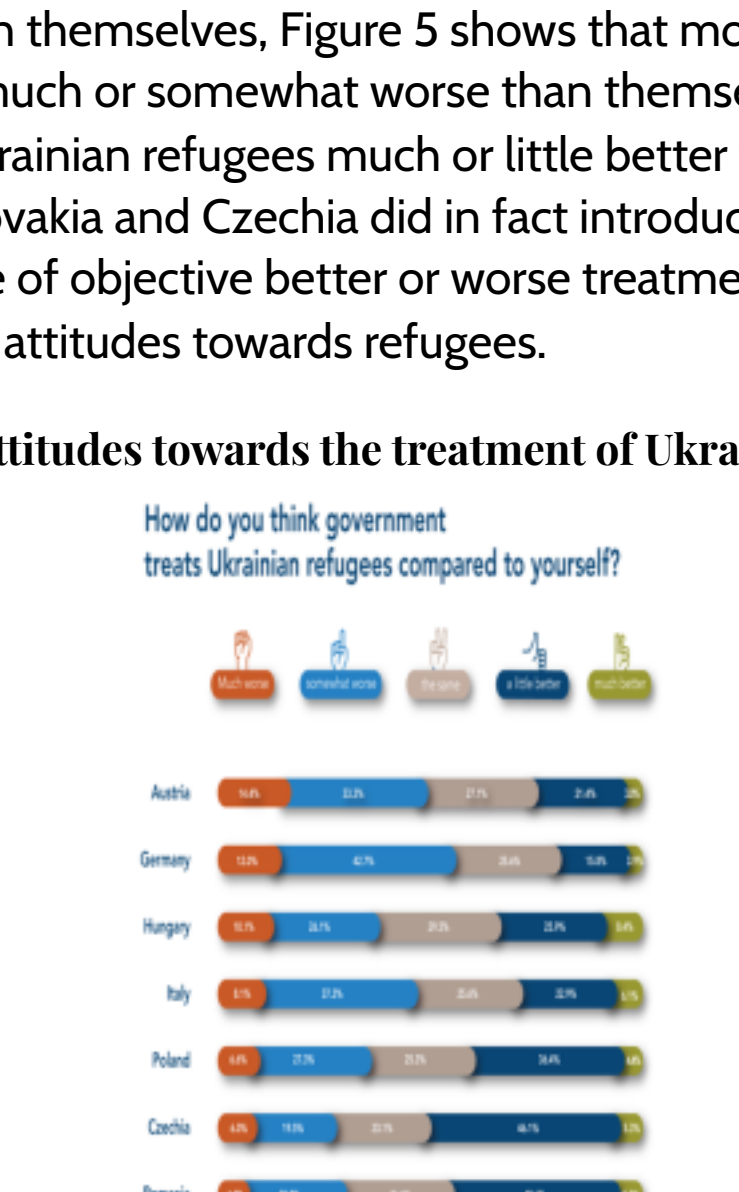
European countries have been contributing to the defence of Ukraine via financial, humanitarian and military aid with CEE states among those contributing the most in relative terms. Figure 4 shows that the majority of respondents in CEE see their country as having no duty at all or not much duty towards Ukraine and Ukrainians. Perhaps surprisingly, the majority of Hungarians feel they have somewhat or extreme duty toward Ukraine. These results contrast with respondents from Austria, Italy and Germany, where the majority in each country believes their country has an extreme or at least a somewhat duty towards Ukraine.

Figure 4: Attitudes towards duty to Ukraine/ Ukrainian refugees



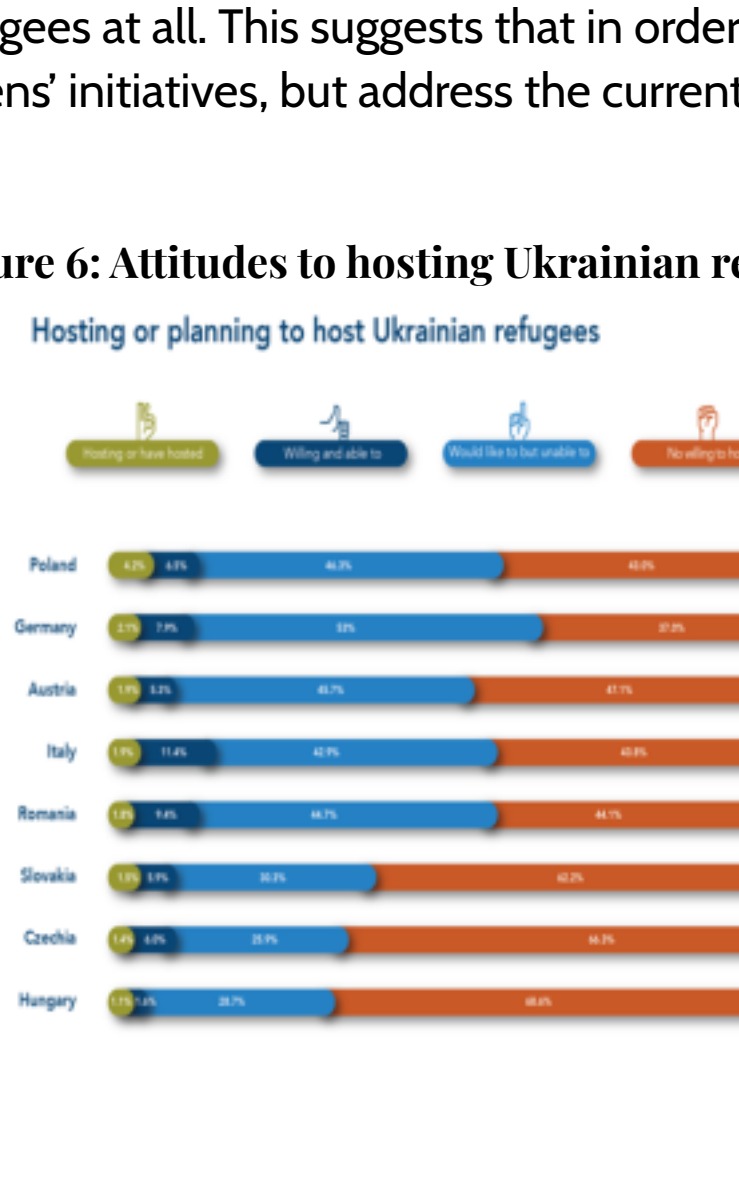
Responses to migration and refugees are powerfully driven by perceptions of fairness. When asked whether their government treats Ukrainian refugees better or worse than themselves, Figure 5 shows that more than half of German respondents think that their government treats Ukrainian refugees much or somewhat worse than themselves, while more than half of Slovaks and Czechs think that their government treats Ukrainian refugees much or little better than themselves. Nevertheless, causality can be difficult to disentangle as governments in Slovakia and Czechia did in fact introduce free public transport and other services for Ukrainian refugees. Nevertheless, irrespective of objective better or worse treatment, subjective perceptions of fairness and unfairness can have very powerful effects on attitudes towards refugees.

Figure 5: Attitudes towards the treatment of Ukrainian refugees



Especially in the early days of the conflict, private citizens' humanitarian efforts such as providing free accommodation have been highlighted by media and politicians alike. Figure 6 shows that only a small proportion of respondents in each country have, in fact, either hosted or are willing and able to host Ukrainian refugees. Moreover, clear majorities of citizens in Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia are not willing to host Ukrainian refugees at all. This suggests that in order to diminish potential conflicts in the long run, governments should not rely on private citizens' initiatives, but address the current situation in a systematic manner at the local and national institutional levels.

Figure 6: Attitudes to hosting Ukrainian refugees



Conclusion

Effective policy responses to displacement from Ukraine that are also seen as being fair by citizens are likely to require an informed understanding of the causes and effects of public attitudes. A few months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine we can see strong support for Ukrainian refugees among all of the eight European countries that were surveyed. This support far exceeds that of other refugee groups as shown by contrasting attitudes towards Syrian refugees. Nevertheless, we also find a preference that even Ukrainian numbers be regulated or controlled.

A key difference from previous large-scale inflows such as the so-called 'migration crisis' in 2015-16 is the much more favourable governmental and media responses, notably in CEE countries. At least so far, there seems to be general satisfaction with how things are being handled in all countries surveyed. On the other hand, we also detected some underlying fragility linked to peoples' need to see that the situation is properly managed which could become more pronounced if the situation is protracted, as seems likely. If the conflict persists and mass displacement becomes a long-term issue, citizens are likely to want to know that there is a plan and that it is being implemented. Otherwise, there is a risk that EU member states could once again turn a crisis of displacement into a political and institutional crisis.

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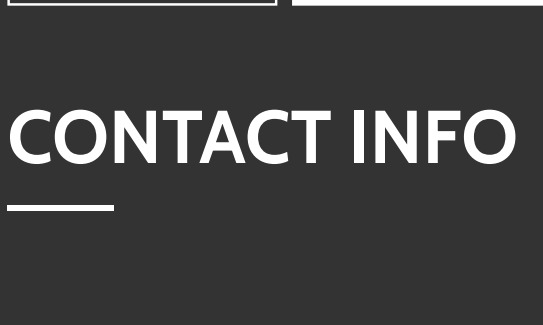
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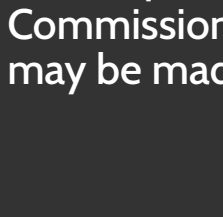
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