Housing as a Critical Precondition for Stability: Ukrainian Refugees in Slovakia

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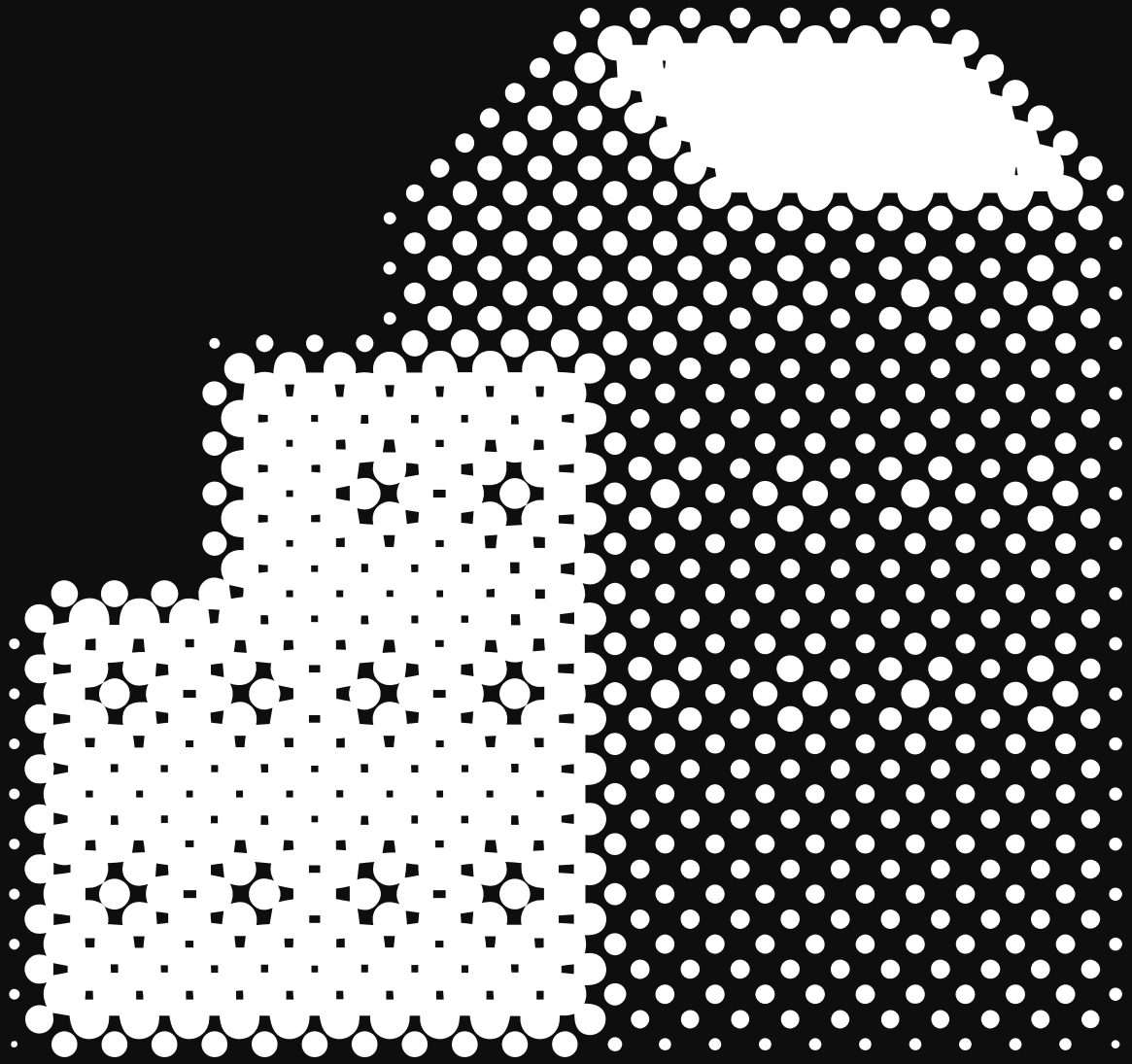

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Abstract

Keywords

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The full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine has resulted in over 120,000 displaced Ukrainians, predominantly children, women, and older adults, seeking temporary protection in Slovakia. Since the onset of this humanitarian crisis, securing adequate housing has emerged as a critical challenge for Ukrainians within Slovakia. Slovakia adopted various strategies in response to the urgent needs following February 2022. At first, these included ad-hoc solutions like sharing private accommodation, providing collective lodging options through hotels and hostels, and introducing a supportive housing subsidy to help accommodate displaced Ukrainians and enable property owners to rent vacant spaces. However, these measures have neither fully resolved the problem of poor access to housing and marginalisation of the refugees nor addressed the vulnerability of refugees stemming from the temporariness associated with the legal contexts of temporary protection status. Moreover, the housing allowance for Ukrainians is still uncertain and subject to (continuous) change. Even though the Housing Policy of the Slovak Republic until 2030 includes foreigners and migrants among disadvantaged groups in the housing market, foreigners (including Ukrainian refugees) are generally excluded from public (regulated) rental housing. Such unequal access to public housing connected with an unaffordable private market can lead Ukrainian refugees to unstable, precarious housing conditions and affect their social integration, community ties, and personal agency.

Drawing from theoretical frameworks and concepts in the anthropology of home, affordable housing and refugee studies, this chapter reflects on housing by examining how displaced individuals and communities navigate complex social, economic, and political landscapes to secure housing and a sense of belonging. Based on ongoing ethnographic research on the implications of care in Ukrainian refugee families in Slovakia, conducted between February 2024 and August 2024 in Bratislava, this chapter explores the effects of temporariness and the implications of housing on the life trajectories of Ukrainian refugees. The authors argue that the state, when categorizing who deserves supported housing, acts rigidly by defining vulnerability within strict boundaries. It neither bases regulations on data about potentially vulnerable groups among refugees nor allows for individual consideration of an applicant's vulnerability within the new housing allowance regulation, thereby further exacerbating social vulnerability, insecurity, and the sense of temporariness in a liminal situation.

Introduction

The full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine has resulted in over 120,000 displaced Ukrainians, predominantly children, women, and older adults, seeking temporary protection in Slovakia (UNHCR, 2024b). People searching for protection from war represent a diverse population in sociodemographic profile (UNHCR, 2024a), but also concerning their social identities, class, economic, social, and cultural capital, and other social ties to a host country and the ability to participate in society fully. With a predominant representation of women with children and older adults, many of whom have severe disabilities, access to affordable, stable, and safe housing[1] became a critical precondition for their lives in displacement. Alongside, people on the move, including ethnic minorities, asylum seekers, economic migrants, and undocumented people, face heightened vulnerability to various human rights abuses, with one of the most persistent being the denial of adequate housing (Consoli, 2023; EWSI, 2024).

The search for stable housing was accompanied by a general underdevelopment of housing solutions for international protection seekers and holders of asylum and subsidiary protection, as well as the bad situation with affordable housing in Slovakia. The state has developed diverse strategies to address the problem in cooperation with other relevant entities, such as local authorities, legal entities, state institutions with their housing facilities, and public or non-governmental and international organizations. These developments included a financial scheme and a housing subsidy to support the free accommodation of Ukrainians granted temporary protection in Slovakia. The housing subsidy provides a monetary allowance directly to owners of housing facilities who offer free accommodation to Ukrainian refugees in apartments, guesthouses, hotels, or charity accommodations.

In the chapter, we center our focus on housing. Housing in a displacement context is not merely a shelter or a habitable living space providing a secure, healthy environment with privacy and dignity (George et al., 2023; Scott-Smith, 2024). Housing arrangements, which demarcate private from public life, function as homes, not only as physical spaces but also as social spaces that symbolise and reinforce cultural values, social norms, and identity (Douglas, 1991), as well as resilience, recovery, and security. We perceive housing as a central axis for refugees' further life strategies, as without stable, affordable, and adequate housing, it is impossible to live a fulfilling life, continue the integration process, and adequately meet the needs of all household members (e.g., children). For Ukrainian refugees, affordable housing is imperative to ensure stability, dignity and adequate inclusion in their new community's social and economic sectors (Habitat for Humanity, 2023). Ukrainian refugees develop housing strategies in the situation of liminality and temporariness (Lazarenko, 2024) while taking into account the needs of their (transnational) families (Maxwell et al., 2024) dispersed across the national borders while maintaining the sense of familihood (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Cienfuegos-Illanes & Brandhorst, 2023). Housing in displacement becomes a critical means of 'anchoring' for refugee populations, serving as a foundation for the reproduction of transnational family connections across borders (Silvius, 2020, p. 295). While some, due to the critical destruction of infrastructure, including housing, in Ukraine, start life anew, for others, housing in displacement transforms into a form of home where refugees are not entirely uprooted (Glick Schiller, Basch, Szantom Blanc, 1994) but instead operate across multiple homes simultaneously. Displaced individuals establish a sense of home in the host country while sustaining ties and identities linked to their homeland, allowing them to navigate and inhabit multiple 'homes' simultaneously. Rather than experiencing displacement as a single, isolating uprooting, refugees engage in transnational practices that blend and reinforce connections across borders, forming layered and multifaceted concepts of home. Therefore, the core question we pose in our analysis is how Ukrainian refugees experience the affordability, stability, and security of housing within the complex social, economic, and political landscape in Slovakia following their displacement after February 2022.

The chapter is structured into six parts. After the introduction, we present the theoretical frameworks and conceptual basis underlying our thoughts. This is followed by background information on the situation of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia, including broader housing governance, legislative contexts, and a reflection on the housing market in Slovakia. The fourth part introduces our research methodology and ethical considerations, and the last section presents research findings on the housing experiences of Ukrainian refugees and conclusions.

Our research aims to contribute to discussions on housing as a human right and inform policies supporting sustainable and inclusive housing solutions for displaced populations. Being positioned within the perspective of applied anthropology, we use ethnographic insights to analyze the experiences of refugees. One of our research goals is to bring its findings to a wider audience, discuss the situation of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia, and potentialy influence social policy and improve refugee conditions, advocating for housing arrangements that foster stability, integration, and dignity for displaced populations.

1 Apart from housing, we observed that many Ukrainian refugees face also other challenges: access to information about the new regulations and their rights, access to healthcare, integration into work, childcare services,education and the language barrier.

1 Theoretical framework and concepts

Houses and homes were the focus of many anthropologists' research. For some, it encompassed the physical and ritual space, the relations and grounds for social reproduction, or spaces where relations were reproduced and actively mediated or focused on the house as an economic organisation (Samanani & Lenhard, 2019, p. 3). Others looked at housing and home from the feminist and critical approach as a domain of labour and creativity, as well as one holding the potential for alienation or exploitation (Samanani & Lenhard, 2019, p. 7). In this text, we will not list all the anthropological conceptualisations of housing (and home) but will focus on housing as a human right, a basic need and a foundation for a stable and secure life, as the site of reproduction. For people who reside in it, it contains a range of social, cultural, and political goods (Marcuse & Madden, 2016). In our research and our text, we consider housing to be a human right. From this point of view, housing is not only a physical space or commodity but is an essential component of human dignity, security, and social stability. By framing housing as a human right, this perspective sheds light on the structural inequalities inherent to refugee housing (Brown et al., 2024) and barriers to access and calls for policy changes that prioritise housing as a central pillar of social justice.

Due to housing policies based on a market economy, housing has become a commodity, and the concept of housing as a universal social service and a means of fulfilling the population's basic needs has shifted to the concept of housing as a commodity (Marcuse & Madden, 2016; G. Lutherová, 2014). In this context, the home has centred around the idea of a privately owned dwelling occupied by a nuclear family (Samanani & Lenhard, 2019, p. 8).

The housing we have, our home, should provide us with a sense of ontological security and stability. “Ontological security is the sense that the world's stability can be taken for granted. It is an emotional foundation that allows us to feel at ease in our environment and at home in our housing. Although the ontological security is a subjective state, it depends upon several structural conditions...” (Marcuse & Madden, 2016, p. 58). What if these structural conditions exclude people from housing? What if the family does not have stable and safe housing, as in the case of Ukrainian refugees who have been arriving in Slovakia since 2022? Even though the Housing Policy of the Slovak Republic until 2030 (Ministry of Transport and Construction of the Slovak Republic, 2021) included foreigners and migrants among disadvantaged groups in the housing market, foreigners (including Ukrainian refugees) are generally excluded from public (regulated) rental housing by the local housing policies. Such unequal housing access conditions can lead to so-called residential segregation, that is, the 'pushing out' of foreigners to the outskirts of cities or unstable, precarious housing conditions (Kapacity.sk, n.d.).

The housing challenges are interconnected with the legal status of Ukrainians, temporary protection status, contributing to temporaryness and liminality. The subjective perception that displacement is temporary results in liminality, thus shaping refugees' personal agency and affecting future life trajectories. Liminality represents a transitional phase, a threshold within social and cultural processes, where old structures disintegrate, and new ones are not fully established (Turner, 1969; Horvath et al., 2017). Ukrainians are experiencing life conditions where conventional normative orders are suspended or disrupted due to the war and subsequent displacement, resulting in a state of constant uncertainty, ambivalence, and tension, leaving them feeling ‘stuck’ in a limbo between transitional phases (Stenner et al., 2017). New strategies are emerging in response to specific social and psychological challenges associated with adapting to new situations. Liminality is closely tied to temporality—where the experienced conditions are perceived as having only a temporary nature. As time progresses, Ukrainian refugees adapt and integrate, and the perception of temporality also evolves. Temporariness is thus a continuum where diverse forms of temporariness shape the adaptation patterns differentially for short-term and long-term stayers (Chiu & Ho, 2023). Apart from perceived temporality, the legal status leads to legally framed temporality. Temporary protection schemes, by definition, create an uncertain liminal status—a legal ‘limbo’ (Hartonen et al., 2022; Goldring, 2014)—where protection enables relatively easy access to host countries but at the same time introduces uncertainty regarding changing conditions (such as the permitted length of stay, supportive measures, and social and labour rights). However, it is essential to note that Ukrainian refugees have experienced more favourable treatment, making their access to protection and society easier, compared to responses to other refugee groups in Slovakia and other countries alike.[2] The Ukrainian refugees faced less rejection when applying for rental flats than other migrants, especially people of colour (Walther, 2024). These, however, have not protected holders of temporary protection from vulnerability to changes

2 Selective approach to solidarity with refugees, a tendency to extend support and empathy selectively, favoring particular groups over others based on perceived deservingness, political alignments, or cultural similarities in responses to different groups of refugees or migrants (Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2015; Scholten et al., 2015), caused Ukrainian refugees to be treated differently, with higher acceptance and support (on the policy level and in the society) which was reflected, for instance, in immediate access to protected status (although with some limits for Slovakia, full public healthcare was enabled only from September 2023 or to self-employment from July 2024). Still, Ukrainians remained vulnerable to changes in legal framework of temporary protection scheme (such as its duration or entitlements related to this status).

in temporary protection schemes and consequent potential negative impacts. At the same time, Ukrainian refugees' perception has changed over time and feelings tied to the perceived cultural proximity between Slovaks and Ukrainians as Slavic people diminished within six months, as refugee-related challenges intensified following the energy crisis, increasing debt and decreasing incomes among voters (Tužinská, 2023; Szicherle & Kazaz, 2022).

The temporal nature of this type of protection inherently contributed to a perception of uncertainty and temporality of displacement. An increasing body of scholarship addresses the situation of Ukrainian refugees through the conceptual lens of temporality and uncertainty (Hartonen et al., 2022; Lazarenko, 2024; Maxwell et al., 2024). These conceptualisations draw from earlier scholarship addressing the experiences of asylum seekers as a liminal experience associated with chronic uncertainty (Griffiths, 2014) and the construction of refugeeness as a state of 'permanent temporariness' (Carciotto, 2018). Temporariness has also been identified as a key element of migrant vulnerability (Goldring, 2014), which may function as a disciplinary practice of the state that impacts migrants' experiences and subjectivities (Robertson, 2014). Regarding liminality and temporariness, the situation of Ukrainian refugees represents a particular modality in experiencing space, time, and agency. It adds another dimension highlighting the precarity of being protected 'temporarily', uncertainty about the legal duration of temporality (Lazarenko, 2024), and subjective perception of temporariness aligned to the end of the war. Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia perceive their situation as temporary, and still, even more than two years after the total war, they mainly intend to return once the war ends (SAV, 2024). At the same time, they negotiate their everyday lives with respect to legal frameworks regulating temporary residence and other welfare state regulations or institutional practices. To analytically distinguish between the various layers of temporality, in the chapter, we use adapted conceptualization by Chiu & Ho (2023), where subjective temporality refers to migrants' subjective feelings about their temporary presence and objective temporality refers to the legal definition and set criteria by the state framing eligibility to stay within the particular duration (Chiu & Ho, 2023, pp. 1288–1289). Moreover, the range of Ukraine-specific support measures in Slovakia, including housing assistance, is closely tied to the legal status of temporary protection. The personal desire of many Ukrainian refugees to settle only temporarily has further complicated planning for housing integration solutions (Haase et al., 2023).

2 The situation of the Ukrainian refugees through the lens of housing

The outbreak of the total military invasion of Russia into the territory of Ukraine on February 24, 2024, resulted in an unprecedented humanitarian situation, with millions of people being either internally displaced or seeking international protection abroad. Nowadays, two and a half years after the outbreak of the war, more than 6.6 million Ukrainians have left Ukraine and live outside their country of origin (UNHCR, 2024b), out of whom 123,809 have applied for temporary protection status in Slovakia until July 15, 2024 (Ministry of Interior of the SR, 2024). These developments have broadly affected the country in many aspects, as it was a feminised experience (Andrews et al., 2023; Dutchak, 2023; Lazarenko, 2024).[3] Since the beginning, it has primarily been women with children and older adults who fled—in Slovakia constituted adult women 75.3% (61,649 people) and adult men 28.56 % (23,380 people) of the adult population. Children up to 17 years represented a 31.32 % share (38,780 people), and persons older than 60 had an 8.11 % share (10,048 people) of the total number of Ukrainians with temporary protection in mid-July 2024 (Ministry of Interior of the SR, 2024). The highest representation of Ukrainians in the country is in the two biggest cities and regions—Bratislava (37,7%) and Košice (12,63%)[4] as they offer better life opportunities—services and employment, although more difficult access to housing. This specific composition and the extent of displacement posed a significant challenge to housing governance.

Slovakia is among the countries with limited experience accommodating refugees in general (Hegedüs et al., 2023; Tužinská, 2023), with few institutionalised structures to receive migrants seeking protection and persisting challenges about refugee housing before February 2022 (Hlinčíková & Sekulová, 2015). Slovakia, with its deep-rooted history of emigration and immigration, is now emerging as an asylum destination, still navigating the transformation of its asylum infrastructure (Tužinská, 2023). The situation compelled the country to manage the significant inflows of persons fleeing the conflict area and develop the legal framework

3 With a predominant share of women with family dependents, the forced migration of Ukrainian refugees represented specific, gender-determined challenges for receiving countries. These challenges included facilitating access to education for children, ensuring the availability and affordability of child-care services, and providing healthcare services for the elderly, among others. Issues such as limited access to education and healthcare remain pressing concerns in the Slovak context.

4 In Žilina Region it was 10.25% and other parts of the country regions have less than ten percent (Ministry of Interior of the SR, 2024).

for support, including managing access to short-term housing for those with temporary protection. The introduction of the housing subsidy for the provision of housing to Ukrainian refugees by the government in March 2022 was an important step in access to stable and safe housing.[5] The housing subsidy, referred to by our interview partners as 'program', was at the momentum of its introduction as a monetary allowance paid directly to housing facilities owners, private owners, and non-profit legal entities,[6] including business legal entities,[7] who offered Ukrainian refugees free accommodation in apartments, guesthouses, hotels, hostels or other types of accommodation. Thanks to housing subsidies, Ukrainians with temporary protection status had accommodation free of charge. The governance of the Ukrainian refugees, similarly to other countries, was recognised as primarily a housing challenge (Haase et al., 2023, p. 213). With ongoing conflict, the country developed attempts to transform urgent response to a mid- and longer-term solutions, including addressed long-term support for vulnerable persons.

The 'story of housing' for Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia

The 'story of housing' for Ukrainian refugees represents a dynamic adaptation process and the complexity of challenges in the general and local housing contexts. The circumstances and pathways to housing arrangements varied depending on the refugees' length of stay in Slovakia, their motivations before fleeing, and the presence or absence of social networks and ties. The UNHCR's Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA), conducted in summer 2023, highlighted a significant reliance of Ukrainian refugees on supported housing and a high prevalence of collective housing in Slovakia. The report shows that up to 84% of Ukrainian refugees lived in subsidized housing. At the same time, from a typological perspective regarding forms of housing, 7% of Ukrainian refugees lived in apartments and flats, 23% in reception centres, 18% in shared accommodations (guesthouses), 10% in hotels or hostels, and 2% in other types of accommodation. Common issues they experienced included a lack of privacy, overcrowded households, and inadequate living conditions (UNHCR, 2024a). Simultaneously, earlier research highlights ongoing challenges related to housing Ukrainian refugees, including ensuring dignified accommodations for larger families and addressing children's educational needs (SAV, 2024). Additional issues include the lack of cooking facilities, inadequate sanitation, and limited living space in housing arrangements (UNHCR, 2024a).

In many European countries, similar patterns regarding housing solutions for accommodating Ukrainian refugees are observed (Hegedüs et al., 2023). During the first phase of the reception of refugees, ad hoc solutions were predominated (accommodation in reception centres, collective sites, and solidarity housing offered by private persons) (Hegedüs et al., 2023). In Slovakia, state institutions and ministries have made their accommodation facilities available to Ukrainian refugees (Ministry of Interior of the SR, 2022), those aimed at asylum seekers and international protection holders, but also additional ones. Additionally, local authorities were actively involved, not only in joint activities but also in developing their humanitarian ad-hoc solutions. For instance, the Bratislava municipality operated an assistance centre of help (City of Bratislava, n.d.) and set up humanitarian collective housing in Pasienky for one and a half years. As the number of new arrivals was unprecedented, with safe and dignified accommodation being a key priority, hospitality and solidarity initiatives were developed across all societal levels.[8] Later, professional coordination (joint activities of local and regional authorities, NGO sector, and international organisations[9]) and volunteers helped people move to housing facilities, collective or rental private flats, supported by the housing subsidy. Even though Ukrainians were expected to stay in hotels, hostels, or collective institutional facilities only temporarily, this accommodation has become long-term for many. There are various reasons why this is so: the private rental sector is expensive, there is a housing shortage in the rental sector, most Ukrainians are still hesitant and unsure about their stay in Slovakia, and the interest and solidarity of the receiving countries' populations to offer their flats for rent decreased. Remarkably, the most vulnerable people, especially mothers with small children or older adults who could no longer work and, apart from accommodation within housing subsidy and Ukrainian pensions, do not have income, feared for their future and housing and therefore preferred to stay in collective housing. Also, the collective housing offered them social support and the presence of a wider Ukrainian community, and it has been a source of mutual help and solidarity.

At the same time, Ukrainian refugees' housing situation was inseparably tied to the general housing situation in Slovakia. Slovakia, like many other countries, is experiencing a housing crisis. Housing is expensive,[10] and the number of individuals and families living in inadequate, temporary, and unstable housing is growing. Rental prices per apartment within the private rental sector have been rising in Bratislava (and in other Slovak towns) in recent years,[11] and the number of apartments for rent is decreasing. The average price in Bratislava is 12€ per square meter (Dedinský, 2023). With the very low number of municipal rental housing (0,99%) (Markovič & Šedovič,

5 Act No. 92/2022 Coll. of March 22, 2022 on Certain Additional Measures in Connection with the Situation in Ukraine.
6 The housing subsidy for private and non profit legal entities was administered via the local authorities on whose territory the accommodation was provided.
7 The housing subsidy for displaced persons in facilities of legal entities operating in the accommodation services sector was regulated by various legislative amendments by the Ministry of Transport of the Slovak Republic. Starting from July 1, 2024, legal entities operating in the accommodation services sector will no longer be entitled to receive a housing subsidy for displaced persons.
8 For instance the initiative of NGOs under the umbrella of online platform "Who Will Help Ukraine"(Who Will Help Ukraine?, n. d.).
9 NGOs and international organizations (IOM, UNHCR, UNICEF) have been playing a crucial role in support for refugees (counselling, collection and distribution of donations, practical help with looking for accommodation, jobs, education, legal support etc.).
10 In the Slovak Republic, households spend on average more than 27% of their gross disposable income on housing, which is one of the highest values in the OECD, where the average is 20%. (OECD Better life index, Slovak republic: https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/slovak-republic/)
11 This is due to inflation and high interest rates in the banks (RTVS, 2024), coupled with an insufficient public rental sector and the absence of price regulation of rental housing.

2021) and in the 'homeowner society' (Consoli, 2023, p. 196), there are almost no other options for housing left. This issue affects not only the socially disadvantaged and vulnerable groups but also the middle class, which is becoming increasingly indebted and burdened with mortgages. The proportion of ownership,[12] rental, and publicly regulated housing speaks a lot about the critical housing situation. In 2020, the total housing stock in Slovakia comprised of 92.3% ownership housing and only 7.7% rental housing (of which 6.1% was commercial, and 1.6% was regulated rental housing) (Eurostat, 2022).[13] Currently, the average rental housing in the European Union accounts for approximately 25% (Eurostat, 2022). Slovakia has an above-average share of overcrowded and multigenerational households compared to other EU countries (Kubala & Peciar, 2019, p. 9). Even before the COVID pandemic, up to 40% of the population lived in overcrowded households, and nearly 70% of young people (18 – 34 years old) lived with their parents (Kubala & Peciar, 2019, p. 10). This situation is partly due to housing policy development and housing conditions after the regime change in the 1990s. The country transitioned from state-managed housing construction and housing care to a market economy, with the rise of private and decline of public ownership, and it has all evolved during a rapid societal change.[14] After 1989, living has become a subject of supply and demand, and the responsibility for ensuring housing has changed from state and public administration to individuals (Pelikánová, 2009). Previous research (e.g., G. Lutherova, 2014) suggests that in countries of the former Eastern Bloc, the principle of meritocracy is very strongly present in the housing sector (Sandel, 2021), and the culture of deservingness forms an invisible but firm barrier to improving housing for the poorest (Kusá, 2023; Kusá, 2018). In Slovakia, regulated rental housing is currently so scarcely (financially and physically) affordable that people only consider it when they cannot help themselves otherwise.[15] The policy framework for public rental housing sets thresholds and boundaries for many vulnerable groups, including refugee populations, thereby normalising a situation where some deserve to live in such housing while others do not. Normalisation is the endpoint and outcome of a process in which a specific configuration of inequality appears as 'normal' or even 'natural' so that the very notion of (un)deservingness is sedimented into 'common sense' (Streinzer & Tošič, 2022).

Lack of systematic long-term housing solutions (not only) for Ukrainian refugees

In these contexts, access to housing for people from Ukraine in Slovakia can be considered very problematic. Although Ukrainians could apply for public municipal (social) housing, long waiting lists and strict eligibility criteria governing who could or could not request it in the towns requiring several years of permanent residence excluded refugees with temporary protection or foreigners with temporary residence permit in Slovakia. Such requirements contribute to the production of social vulnerability (Pozzi et al., 2019, p. 1). On one hand, these conditions define the residents of towns who are 'eligible,' and on the other hand, they exclude certain groups from housing, such as low-income households, homeless people, and foreigners (migrants and refugees). We observed an effort of some municipalities to refine the conditions defining access to public housing (fe. ig. Bratislava); however, without a deeper structural focus on increasing housing affordability in Slovakia, these changes do not yet represent an effective solution. In Bratislava, due to the state's insufficient systemic approach to the expansion of the public housing stock and housing issues for vulnerable groups and the political decisions of the previous city administration, based on which many municipal apartments were sold into private ownership (Markovič & Šedovič, 2021), the city magistrate has been working on revising the conditions for municipal rental housing and expanding the pool of eligible applicants. Therefore, eligible applicants could be, among others, migrants or refugees who can prove their actual residency[16] in Bratislava. However, due to the limited capacities of public municipal rental housing, other systematic long-term solutions are also needed on local, regional, and nationwide levels.

In September 2024, Slovakia is still missing the vision for providing long-term affordable housing for refugees from Ukraine, partly because of the war's unclear development (Hegedüs et al., 2023). Also, there is no plan or system for preventing housing loss or providing social services, as refugees can face a high risk of homelessness. In Slovakia, if a family or individual loses housing, people are typically forced to rely on informal ties or utilise social services with temporary accommodation (shelters, hostels). Those Ukrainian families and individuals who do not have family or other social networks and ties in Slovakia are in even more vulnerable positions than other Slovak citizens, resulting from their legal status of temporary residence, language barriers, and discrimination.[17] The Slovak welfare system does not guarantee that the cost of standard housing for low-income families will be covered (Hegedüs et al., 2023). In general, there is a lack of financial support for low-income households in the form of a functional housing allowance, which is currently very low and limited only to recipients of material-need benefits.[18] This means that people with employment, parents on maternity/paternity leave, or individuals receiving various pensions cannot access it.

12 In Slovakia, housing culture is deeply rooted in the aspiration for homeownership, with the family house and garden as the ultimate ideal. (See more Podoba, 2013, Buzalka, 2023.)

13 "At the beginning of 1990s, 'a massive privatisation of flats' took place. Consequently, within a few years, originally state flats or cooperative flats turned into flats under private ownership (as their original 'tenants' bought them for residual value)" (Špirková, 2018).

14 Sonia A. Hirt speaks of privatism that represents a general cultural condition of mass tendency towards a private ownership (Hirt, 2012).

15 See also: Hlinčíková, M. 2024. Homeless Families in the Circle of Continuous Change. Housing Crisis in the Slovak Context. In *Slovenský národopis / Slovak Ethnology*, vol. 72, no.3, pp. 288-306. 1339-9357. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2024.3.24

16 If the applicant does not have permanent residency, he/she must provide a document proving his/her actual residency in Bratislava prior to submitting the application (e.g., a photocopy of an employment contract from an employer, a housing contract, a rental agreement, proof of school attendance, etc.).

17 Despite stronger 'solidarity' resources overall, housing options have varied for some sub-groups. In Slovakia, alongside general discrimination against foreigners in the rental market, racially driven discrepancies exist, particularly in the differing treatment of Ukrainian nationals and the Roma population from Ukraine (Hegedüs et al., 2023, p. 57).

18 The housing allowance is € 95.20 per month for a household with one member, € 161.60 per month for a household with two members, and € 205.10 per month for a household with three members (Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, n.d.).

3 Research methodology

The chapter is based on qualitative research that involved semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian refugees (mainly) in vulnerable situations and public institution representatives, participant observation, and informal conversations. We conducted the research with 14 Ukrainian refugees with temporary protection status, nine women and five men aged between 35 and 72, in two primary phases in Bratislava: the first from February to March 2024 and the second in June 2024. In August 2024, we interviewed two representatives of public institutions working with Ukrainian refugees. Each phase of the research reflected the evolving situation in Ukraine and changes in housing policies for Ukrainians in Slovakia. We carried out interviews with the assistance of an interpreter translating from Ukrainian to Slovak, in English and Slovak. As the research was in Bratislava, the findings reflect the local context of opportunities, limits, and trajectories with nationwide implications.

The interview partners were selected based on the diversity of the regions of origin, be it Eastern Ukraine and areas under occupation, Central Ukraine, the South or Western part, and Transcarpathia. Moreover, the sample reflects different stages of integration, where some interview partners arrived in Slovakia immediately after the outbreak of the total war, while others came in winter 2023 or spring 2024 only. While each story is unique, collectively, they reveal the structural contradictions and unjust social arrangements that shape their lives. The stories of the people's everyday lives we interviewed capture their struggles to secure stable and safe housing. We have intended to provide a space where "the experiences and knowledge of the marginalised can be given epistemic authority, be legitimated and taken seriously" (Samzelius, 2020, p. 25).

The research sample also involved refugees in different life situations and positions in the life cycle and reflected single-parent households of Ukrainian women with children when the husband stayed in Ukraine, single-parent households with children with severe disabilities, full-size families with both parents and children present in Slovakia; grandparents with grandchildren and lone older adults. Also, on purpose, the research sample included different living arrangements in Slovakia—renting commercial apartments outside of the 'program', renting a room and sharing the apartment with other tenants, renting an apartment with the support of housing subsidy, and shared collective institutional housing where, besides the accommodation, daily meals are provided for free. The sample does not include Ukrainian refugees currently living in homestay accommodations for refugees (Bassoli & Luccioni, 2023) and Ukrainians living in reception centres. However, many of our interview partners had such an experience before finding their current accommodation arrangement. Last but not least, the research sample reflects different aspects of vulnerability based on traumatic war-related experiences, capacity to participate in the receiving society, caring commitments, healthcare situations, social and cultural capital, or (un)availability of supportive social networks.

Ethical considerations

The research approach in refugee studies requires specific reflexive, methodological, and ethical considerations due to the vulnerability of the sample. Interview partners experienced traumatic war-related events in their home country and during their flight, and it was likely that other family members were still exposed to war in Ukraine during the fieldwork. Our methodological approach adhered to ethical standards for studying vulnerable refugee populations (American Anthropological Association, 2012; Düvell et al., 2010; Jacobsen & Landau, 2003). We applied the 'dual imperative' principle (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003), which links academic knowledge with ethical action to improve the lives of refugees and forced migrants (Souter, 2013). Research situations[19] were designed to be safe spaces for sharing information relevant to interview partners. At the same time, we were self-reflexive about our positionality as researchers, power asymmetry, and the vulnerability of interview partners to reduce bias and increase transparency and trustworthiness (Amelina, 2021; Cassell et al., 2018; Dahinden, 2016; Tuzi, 2023). We also considered aspects of 'caring reflexivity' (Rallis & Rossman, 2010), an approach embracing the centrality of relationships to ethical and credible research. Thus, care for interview partners, their well-being, and avoiding re-traumatization were prioritized throughout the research process.

Given the vulnerability of the research participants, the interviews were highly emotional and involved strong feelings from both sides. Interviewees expressed various emotions, including sadness, fear, anger, and very often crying. Questions about housing frequently triggered these emotions, particularly in contexts involving the loss of homes or wartime circumstances and all the people and places they had to leave behind. The topic of housing and home also raised questions in people's minds about their unclear and temporary situation in Slovakia. Although we were trained in handling social research with

19 All interview partners received comprehensive information in Ukrainian about their rights during the interview, including the possibility of not responding to questions, the right to withdraw from the interview at any point, explanation of the purpose of the research, data use, and data protection, and signed the written informed consent. We did not ask questions regarding traumatic experiences related to their flight from Ukraine unless the interview partner mentioned them spontaneously. All names, as well as specific contexts, are subject to anonymization in order to protect the interview partners.

traumatised individuals to ensure safety, the interviews remained challenging. When participants faced particularly distressing situations and their traumatic emotions resurfaced, we deviated from the pre-defined script, either shifting to different questions or ending the interview altogether in two instances.

Last but not least, all interviews were transcribed (if audio-recorded) or documented with extensive notes. We examined the research data using deductive coding and thematic analysis. For each interview, a 'research medallion' was created. This medallion, a condensed information source, included off-record details, reflexive notes, and notes on emotional reflection, which served as a critical empirical resource for the analysis.

4 Experiencing housing: Ukrainian displaced populations in Slovakia

Trajectories of housing

Refugees arriving in Slovakia in the initial weeks and months after the outbreak of the war faced a somewhat chaotic situation as diverse ad-hoc housing solutions were being developed. In these cases, securing temporary housing often depended on random factors and the collaboration of volunteers, NGOs, state institutions, local authorities, civil society, charities, international organisations, and the business sector. During the early weeks of the war, the humanitarian crisis inspired extraordinary acts of hospitality, emphasised and appreciated also by our interview partners, with citizens reaching out to refugees and offering housing—such as houses and apartments—directly in public spaces and through social networks (Hrabovská Francelová, 2022).

Vira, who fled with two children, lived in north-central Ukraine and left to search for the safety and well-being of her two children and husband (who could not finally cross the borders due to mobilisation law in Ukraine). She came directly from the border to a city in Slovakia because her former husband's friend knew someone there and asked for shelter for her. This instance highlights the crucial role of personal ties and contacts in providing housing solutions for refugees. However, at the borders, Vira also met volunteers eager to provide homestay accommodation for refugees and allow refugees to live in unused apartments. After two days with their husband's contact's friends, she moved to the apartment offered by random citizens wanting help. (Vira, 37 years, rented apartment)

As Vira's experience illustrates, for our interview partners, it was typically a short-term homestay accommodation upon arrival, where they shared an apartment or a house with owners. Our interview partners narrated that pathways to humanitarian housing and the search for immediate safety were at the forefront of these strategies, focusing on physical security and shelter.

Another interview partner, Alisa came to Slovakia with her friend and stayed in a homestay for three months. She remembers her time there with sentiment and gratitude, as the owners helped her with her first job in Slovakia, which aligned with her background and expertise. They stay in touch (calls, meetings) even after two years. Later, with the support of the accommodation allowance, she rented a room in a shared three-room apartment with two other Slovak women she did

not know before. She has lived there for more than two years. Since July 2024, she has not been eligible for renting a room with a housing subsidy for Ukrainians anymore as she is economically active and does not fulfil the criteria for age eligibility. She wants to return to Ukraine as her mother, with severe disabilities, stayed in Ukraine and needs her care. (Alisa, 42 years, shared rented apartment)

While some of our interview partners arrived in Slovakia by chance, others followed pre-existing social ties. Social networks significantly influence migration decisions by providing valuable support, including assistance in finding accommodation and employment and offering financial aid (Bertoli & Ruyssen, 2018), especially for Ukrainians fleeing the conflict (Best & Menkhoff, 2022). Support from the Ukrainian community was crucial in accessing housing, both from those already established in Slovakia before February 2022 and from newly arrived refugees helping others. Some interview partners had family in Slovakia before the war, who provided accommodation upon arrival. This network also extended help to the broader Ukrainian community, with initial refugees later assisting their family members, friends, or acquaintances in relocating.

Valentyna endured over a year and a half under Russian occupation in Eastern Ukraine. After a harrowing journey through Russia, Valentyna joined her son's family in Uzhhorod. Then, she travelled directly by night bus to Bratislava in November 2023 to a collective institutional facility. Her niece, who had arrived in Slovakia in February 2022, facilitated this housing arrangement and provided the necessary support. Although Valentyna is eligible for long-term housing support, she wishes to return to Ukraine as soon as possible as she has difficulty mentally adapting to displacement at her age. (Valentyna, 71 years, collective institutional housing facility)

In new social contexts, refugees leverage various capacities to shape their lives, including accessing housing according to their needs. Given their specific situation and vulnerability, some interview partners required more targeted and long-term support (not only concerning housing), while others navigated the receiving society, its welfare regime, and infrastructure more successfully. In connection with that, they took active agency in independently creating their housing arrangements based on their needs and the needs of their family members. The aspect of refugees' engagement in creating their life trajectories highlights subjectivity and agency, expanding discussions around migrants and integration processes, which are often marked by normativity, outdated societal imaginaries, methodological nationalism, harmful objectification of migrants as the 'other,' and a narrow focus on migrants and refugees when identifying the factors shaping integration outcomes (Spencer, 2022). Simultaneously, it underscores the development of diverse adaptation strategies, showing that refugees are not entirely constrained by the temporary protection regime. They often employ specific strategies of resistance to the limitations imposed by their temporary status (Chiu & Ho, 2023). The focus on agency and recognising proactive roles of refugees in their integration and well-being at the same time shifts the analytical perspective from highlighting the weaknesses or 'faults' of the migration experience to exploring the opportunities and capabilities it can generate for migrants and the communities where they settle (Calo & Baglioni, 2023). Refugees are active agents rather than merely passive aid recipients in these cases.

Tanya, from Western Ukraine, arrived in Slovakia in March 2022, followed by her 18-year-old son. Her daughter and her family were already living in Bratislava. Tanya, the university-educated professional, told us that she prioritised securing a stable job and income to meet the needs of herself, her son, and her family left behind in Ukraine (her mother and brother, a widower with a small daughter). Immediately upon arrival and after obtaining status recognition, she found a one-room apartment through the supported housing scheme. She secured a job as a cashier at a supermarket, where she was promoted to head cashier within five months. When her son joined her, they needed a larger apartment; Tanya opted to rent a two-room flat commercially to avoid dependence on support and potential unpredictable changes in legislation. Tanya works a lot, and her income from working extra hours is sufficient to support her family financially and materially in Ukraine. Additionally, she mediates job opportunities for Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia and donates to Ukrainian orphans and the army. She views her displacement in Slovakia as temporary. Tanya plans to return to Ukraine to care for her 77-year-old mother once her son starts university in Slovakia. (Tanya, 49 years, rented apartment)

As Tanya's story shows, Ukrainian refugees often shape their life trajectories to meet the needs of their transnational families. Her example also highlights the significant role of social and cultural capital in influencing refugees' overall opportunities, their positioning within the receiving society, and the diversity of experiences along the axis of vulnerability. While considered a key pillar of social integration, housing is a critical element of refugees' stability (Habitat for Humanity, 2023, Brown et al., 2024). Accessibility, stability, and housing security for Ukrainian refugees are influenced by complex social, economic, and political factors, which have broader implications for housing opportunities. The economic and social factors determining the actual affordability of individuals and families to purchase commercial housing were narrated as one of the main obstacles to stable housing and affecting insecurity. Similarly to other countries, refugees in Slovakia frequently engage in contingent, informal, and precarious work as a survival strategy (Veselková & Hábel, 2024). While for some, economic performance occurs more smoothly, allowing them to find employment or even secure qualified positions. For others, however, the process is accompanied by obstacles and complicated. The estimated employment rate among Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia is between 22% and 37% (Veselková & Hábel, 2024). However, Ukrainian refugees face greater challenges in the labour market compared to

Ukrainian labour migrants, often working in positions below their qualifications with limited stability and job security (Guzi et al., 2024). The structural characteristics of this group, mainly consisting of single-parent households with children and dependent members, shape not only their opportunities and modes of participation but also their inherent vulnerability.[20]

Engagement in poorly compensated work may exacerbate the pressures of a costly private housing market and the demands of care and reproductive work for their (transnational) families (Silvius, 2020, p. 294). Research on Ukrainian refugees in Europe highlights the gender-specific nature of their experiences, as it is predominantly women with dependents who have fled (Andrews et al., 2023; Dutchak, 2023; Mozetič et al., 2023; Lazarenko, 2024). Extensive caregiving responsibilities significantly impact women's economic performance, life trajectories, and integration. The opportunities, strategies, and economic outcomes for refugee women affect their social capital, often leading to lower returns on their human and social capital and placing greater burdens of childcare or eldercare on them (Kosyakova et al., 2023). For others, particularly in vulnerable families such as single-parent households, lone seniors, or families with members with severe disabilities, even income from full-time employment may not guarantee safe, affordable and appropriate housing.

Vitalya arrived in Slovakia with her 37-year-old daughter and two grandsons, aged 5 and 16. Her daughter quickly found full-time employment, which financially supported the entire family. With the help of volunteers, they secured a three-room apartment through the housing subsidy for Ukrainian refugees. Vitalya has severe health issues, particularly with her spinal cord and legs, and therefore she is unable to work. She assists her daughter with the children and volunteers at the local community centre. Financially, they face difficulties, and the housing allowance is crucial. As she expressed during the interview, they would need to return to Ukraine without the subsidy. Starting in July 2024, they are no longer eligible for supported housing. (Vitalya, 60 years, years, collective institutional housing facility)

Our ethnographic research reveals that narratives are deeply infused with considerable insecurity and fear. This includes the fear of losing current housing and the anxiety of searching for accommodation that may quickly become unaffordable or inaccessible. Conducted amid a rapidly changing legislative framework and short-term policy announcements, our research captured a pervasive sense of vulnerability among interview participants, reflecting their concerns about the unpredictability and precariousness of housing stability. The housing subsidy has proven crucial, as securing a stable income and affording commercial rents can be challenging. This scheme has served as a vital lifeline for vulnerable groups, including single-parent families, women with disabled relatives, and older adults, offering essential security and stability in situations perceived as temporal in particular.

The changing nature of the housing support for Ukrainian refugees and the uncertainty

Since the introduction of housing subsidy, initially, as a type of ad-hoc solution, the housing subsidy has undergone several changes concerning the total amounts, the deadline for the provision, and eligibility criteria for accommodation providers and occupants to transform into a more sustainable long-term solution. The original proposal set the duration for paying the housing subsidy until the end of June 2022, which was later extended until the end of September 2022.[21] In September 2022, besides the increase in amount per person, the deadline for the housing subsidy was set—until the end of February 2023.[22] The temporariness of the scheme brought a certain level of insecurity among Ukrainian refugees, as the deadlines were not accompanied by a broader discussion or information about the length of its provision. During 2023–2024, there were short-term decisions regarding extensions continuing, yet no information was provided about plans or a long-term strategy for supported housing. The decision to extend the housing subsidy until the end of May 2023 was adopted on February 22, 2023;[23] the extension from June 2023 to December 2023 was adopted on May 24, 2023,[24] and the extension from January 2024 until the end of March 2024 was adopted on December 6, 2023.[25] On February 21, 2024, the allowance reduction was adopted for March 2024, which the government justified by the need to align spending on subsidised housing with the current financial capacity of the state budget.[26]

20 According to Multi-Sector Needs Assessment 2023, the majority of households are led by women with young children and older family members in their care and in one-tenth household is present person with a disability (UNHCR, 2024a). Moreover, no access to child-care services reported in 2023 52% of adults with 0 – 4 years of children; 46% of adults with higher or university education were not economically active and 23% of children 6 – 17 years old not enrolled in compulsory education (UNHCR, 2024b).

21 Amendments of the Government Regulation No. 218/2022 Coll. on the Provision of a Housing Subsidy for Displaced Persons.

22 According to the Government Regulation of the Slovak Republic, amending and supplementing Government Regulation No. 218/2022 Coll. on the Provision of a Housing Subsidy for Displaced Persons, adopted on September 20, 2022, the amount increased to a 5€ per night for the accommodation of a person younger than 15 years old and 10€ per night for those older than 15 years old and maximum compensation according to the number of rooms—710€ for a property with one room, 1 080€ for two rooms, 1 430€ for three rooms, and 1 790€ for four rooms.

23 Government Regulation of the Slovak Republic No. 62/2023 Coll. on the Contribution for Providing Accommodation to Displaced Persons in Connection with the Situation in Ukraine, adopted on February 22, 2023.

24 Government Regulation No. 179/2023 Coll. on the Contribution for Providing Accommodation to Displaced Persons in Connection with the Situation in Ukraine, adopted on May 24, 2023.

25 Government Regulation of the Slovak Republic No. 474/2023 Coll. on the Contribution for Providing Accommodation to Displaced Persons in Connection with the Situation in Ukraine (2023), adopted on December 6, 2023.

26 From March 1, 2024 to March 31, 2024, regardless of age, the contribution is 6€ per night. Government Regulation of the Slovak Republic No. 23/2024, amending and supplementing Government Regulation of the Slovak Republic No. 474/2023 Coll. on providing a contribution for the accommodation of displaced persons as amended (2024), adopted on February 22, 2024.

Relevant stakeholders, representatives of institutions in the field of working with Ukrainian refugees, NGOs,[27] local authorities, accommodation providers, as well as the hosts themselves reflected this amendment critically, as it was published in the collection of laws only three days before it took effect and due to broad negative influence on Ukrainian refugees, including its contribution to uncertainty and vulnerability (Mittelmannová, 2024). In practice, according to the experiences of institutional research participants, collective housing providers began to require additional payments from refugees because the housing subsidy did not cover all expenses. Simultaneously, the quality of housing for many Ukrainians deteriorated due to overcrowding. To avoid losing their housing and to afford the rent, tenants started sharing their accommodations with more people.

Further prolongation of housing subsidy from April 2024 until the end of June 2024 was adopted on March 20, 2024.[28] As of July 1, 2024, a change in the eligibility criteria was introduced, providing a comprehensive housing subsidy for the accommodation of Ukrainian refugees for 120 days after the status recognition. For long-term housing subsidies became eligible vulnerable refugees only, defined as those in material need, single parents with a child under five years old, persons granted custody of a child, severely disabled persons, and persons over 65 years old.[29] Fundamental change in this amendment was also the exclusion of the business legal entities from eligible receivers of housing allowance, resulting, in practice, in the termination of housing of vulnerable groups in commercial collective accommodations and shrinking opportunities to supported housing for vulnerable Ukrainian refugees. After the last amendment's introduction, the government justified the change with the need for more targeted support, streamlined processes related to providing protection,[30] unburdening the national state budget, and increasing the refugees' autonomy.

27 Human Rights League published in March, 15, 2024 a statement drawing attention that the significant reduction in housing subsidies often does not cover operational costs or market rates for housing (large cities in particular); the reduction in benefits, as not addressed in related legislation, allowing legal entities legally request additional payments, but property owners not; reduced subsidy force landlords to demand additional payments and refugees must pay to keep a roof over their heads; amendiment does not address the needs of vulnerable groups who may struggle to secure adequate housing. Additionally, the policy was published only three days before it took effect, providing insufficient time for refugees and housing providers to adjust. Although there is an effort to extend the support scheme, specific legislative actions have not yet been taken, creating uncertainty in ensuring access to suitable housing or financial means to obtain it in accordance with European standards (Mittelmannová, 2024).

28 Government Regulation of the Slovak Republic No. 59/2024, amending and supplementing Government Regulation of the Slovak Republic No. 218/2022 Coll. on providing a contribution for the accommodation of displaced persons as amended (2024), adopted on March 20, 2024.

29 The government regulation 23/2024 defines the allowance as 5€ per night regardless the age, with a maximum limit of 900€ for apartments with 4 or more rooms, and adjusted limits for 1-room and 2-4-room apartments. The Government Regulation of the Slovak Republic No. 23/2024, amending and supplementing Government Regulation of the Slovak Republic No. 218/2022 Coll. on providing a contribution for the accommodation of displaced persons as amended (2024), adopted on February, 21, 2024.

30 Act No. 144/2024 Coll. amending and supplementing Act No. 480/2002 Coll. on asylum and on amendments and supplements to certain acts as amended, and amending and supplementing other acts (2024), adopted on June 13, 2024.

The critical role of housing subsidy and the production of social vulnerability

Broader systemic institutional and bureaucratic infrastructures can impede housing stability, contributing to issues with rental housing, uncertainty in long-term accommodation, and limited access to public housing (Marcuse & Madden, 2016). Critical consideration of ethical and political concerns associated with housing provision to refugees is also needed due to significant systemic power imbalances impacting refugees' life trajectories. These concerns include the unequal social positions individuals occupy and their effects on refugees' life paths, processes of determining housing eligibility by organisations mediating housing, conditionality for housing provision, and their influence on asylum policies and institutional practices (Bassoli & Luccioni, 2023). What emerges as particularly problematic is the issue of conditionality, not only in determining who gets suitable accommodation and under what criteria but also in the context of eligibility for housing subsidies. Refugees thus often become 'objects' of social policy, subject to the categorical constraints inherent in bureaucratic processes (Silvius, 2020, p. 296). In practice, administrative categories exclude those who, for objective reasons, cannot help themselves but still need assistance, causing them to fall through the cracks of the support system.

Serhyi arrived in Slovakia in April 2024 with his wife and grandson. During the first two years of the war, while living in a conflict zone, Serhyi's family endured extreme terror and trauma, including the deaths of his daughter (the mother of his grandson) and son, as well as the loss of all their property. Faced with the only hope for a better future for his grandson, a prominent Ukrainian athlete in his age category, Serhyi decided to move to Slovakia based on the recommendation of a family acquaintance. After arriving in Slovakia, they lived with this acquaintance for a couple of days; her apartment was overcrowded with other refugee families from Ukraine, so she helped them find a place in a collective institutional facility. Serhyi and his family are still in the acute phase of trauma recovery, and he cannot work as the family would lose social support. At the time of the interview, Serhyi was uncertain about his family's future and had secured housing in an institutional facility only 120 days after being granted temporary protection. They wish to stay in Slovakia as there is nowhere to return to Ukraine. (Serhyi, 57 years, years, collective institutional housing facility)

The situations of refugees are complex, so the administrative category of 'vulnerable' persons eligible for support may not fully address the needs of those who require targeted assistance. Deliu and Nowicka (2024) argue that, to address gaps in regulations, institutional administrations develop empirically grounded definitions of social categories (e.g., disabled, vulnerable, elderly) that supplement formal classifications. However, these definitions may still fall short in practice. In this way, different institutions actively construct representations of deservingness through which various political, practical, and social objectives are achieved and performed (Tarkiainen, 2023). In the context of Ukrainian

refugees who settled in Slovakia (even if only temporarily), the state categorises them into those who deserve the housing subsidy and others. The state acts rigidly, defining vulnerability within strict boundaries without attempting to base regulations on data about potentially vulnerable groups among refugees and without allowing individual consideration of an applicant's vulnerability within the new housing allowance regulation. “Statements of deservingness are more ‘at hand’; they can be easily ‘picked-up’ and employed, and not necessarily have to rely on accountable argumentation” (Streinzer & Tošić, 2022, p. 11). People like Serhyi, who have endured severe trauma and are responsible for their orphaned grandchild, may struggle to receive the support they need and find themselves in challenging situations without adequate help.

The situation became especially problematic for those who were near the eligibility threshold due to age (retired in Ukraine, i.e. 63 years old, but not 65 as amendment requires), socioeconomic conditions (income slightly higher than material need), and vulnerability associated with living in single-parent households with children and limited income in Slovakia. In other words, due to uncertainties about how changes and eligibility criteria will be applied in practice, our research partners felt uncertain. Those most at risk of losing their housing subsidy experienced emotions such as fear, anxiety, and worry in response to these developments.

We are very worried because the supported housing program has been extended for only three months. But what are we supposed to do when it ends? We are deeply troubled and anxious and do not know when the war will end. We visited Ukraine, but it is not liveable there. There are still sirens, the war is ongoing, and children are crying and scared, so we decided that we must stay here. We have to live here as long as the war continues. Where we come from, it is simply not possible to live. (Vitalya, 60 years old, rented apartment)

According to institutional research participants, the very last-minute announcement of change in eligibility criteria for supported housing from July 2024 led to many losing subsidised housing. Moreover, the officials from a public institution with whom we spoke recognised that the amendment did not account for vulnerable refugees, such as families with individuals who have severe disabilities (physically or mentally) and do not yet have recognised documentation in Slovakia. This includes, for example, children with autism without medical documentation, retirees from Ukraine who are under 65 years old, and individuals with serious health diagnoses. As a result, the amendment had far-reaching effects on Ukrainian refugees who despite being extremely vulnerable, lost their entitlement for supported housing.

In the context of housing, it is that they [families with health diagnoses] *are dealing with difficult situations... when they are in a collective housing where the* [autistic] *child displays various behaviours, it must be constant stress. If we cannot even take care of these children, then what are we discussing here? ...if we cannot even address the most critical cases, then the state has completely failed. Instead of addressing this, they chose the easiest solution by focusing on 65+.* (officer of the public institution)

While most research participants associated temporariness with living in displacement until the war ends, others linked their plans to remain in Slovakia directly to the duration of the housing subsidy. Due to the limits on the subsidy's duration (e.g., three months), they based their stay in Slovakia on the restricted time frame defined by their eligibility for housing support. Several interview partners indicated they would be compelled to return without the subsidy, as their households cannot afford commercial rent in Slovakia.

Right now, we are in a situation where we do not know if we will have to leave because we are unsure about the new law. We do not know if we will need to leave starting from the first of the next month... Last week, we visited the [counselling centre for Ukrainian refugees] *and visited* [a free] *legal advisor. We do not know what to do or what will happen soon regarding the housing subsidy—whether we must leave the collective institutional facility and return to Ukraine. We have been here for two years and purchased some things we needed. We are unsure what to do with them, including winter and summer clothes.* (Ihor, 63 years, collective institutional housing facility)

Partly contributing to housing expenditures was acceptable for some of our interview partners, especially if they had employment or social supportive networks (husband or other family member). However, the change in legislation did not allow for this option—supplementary payments for partial housing subsidies are not legal, and such regulation was one of the concerns raised by NGOs (Mittelmannová, 2024). The only options for Ukrainian refugees are paying the commercial price or receiving free accommodation for those who meet the criteria of 'vulnerable persons'. For others, such as single mothers with children who only have low-paid jobs, the change in eligibility criteria made the situation very complicated. We spoke with people whose situation was more difficult, mainly if there was no perspective of employment (because of the age, language barrier, or the need to take care of other members of the family), support from other family members, or destroyed home in Ukraine and therefore no place, where they could come back. The uncertainty resulting from this situation held them in an unstable and unsafe position.

We have two options: rent an apartment or return to Ukraine. We cannot afford to pay for a commercial rental, so if we cannot stay for free, we will return to Ukraine. However, we are delighted here; it is good for us here. We knew it [housing subsidy] *would not be forever... The lawyer told us that the published information* [at the beginning of June 2024] *was not accurate but general. Moreover, it is likely that here* [in the collective institutional facility offering free accommodation], *we have the right as refugees, especially since we are pensioners and came based on a bilateral agreement. We do not work anywhere; we depend on aid and have nowhere*

else to go and no means to live. Therefore, the lawyer said we should not be evicted. However, we are unsure if we will have accommodation in the hostel. We do not know if we must leave or where to go. We do not know. (Ihor, 63 years, years, collective institutional housing facility)

Narratives about housing intersected with temporality in even broader contexts. The vision of life in displacement as temporary may also justify accepting less suitable accommodation than preferred housing arrangements in other situations. For some, actual housing was in sharp contrast to their dwelling in Ukraine—some had houses with gardens and large apartments in Ukraine, while in Slovakia, tiny rooms, even for more people, were accepted if provided free. Some of our interviewees experienced overcrowded housing where too many lived in rooms, which might be unsuitable for families with young and school-aged children. Overcrowded households do not only mean physical discomfort for families but "are also associated with risks to social and educational development, for example, a child cannot invite around friends nor can they find a quiet and suitable place to do their homework" (Quilgars & Pleace, 2023, p. 183). For many, sharing apartments with strangers they did not know before was a temporarily acceptable opportunity if it meant that their rent was low.

We also have a dog... I get up in the morning; we live in a small, tiny room. There is one wardrobe and three beds. We also have a shower. So, we have to take turns getting up. Every morning, we shower in order: I go first, then my granddaughter, and then my wife. (Ihor, 63 years, collective institutional facility)

Following that, narratives surrounding housing did not reflect an ambition to voluntarily change the current housing arrangements, as most of the people we spoke with were planning to leave Slovakia and return to Ukraine. Instead, interviewees preferred to maintain their current housing arrangement rather than seek more suitable or improved (and expensive) options. Like Silvius's results (2020), our interviewees aimed to keep housing expenditures as low as possible, directing their financial resources toward the upbringing, health, and well-being of members in their (transnational) households. While some of our research partners managed to maintain their housing arrangements under the condition of paying full rent (e.g., 42-year-old Alissa) or remained in supported housing due to meeting the criteria of vulnerable refugee status (e.g., 66-year-old Olya and 71-year-old Volodyslav), others with more financial resources moved to commercially rented flats (e.g., 38-year-old Tetiana with her husband and three young children). Conversely, those with severe financial constraints made more difficult decisions, such as sharing one room in a rented apartment with multiple families at the full commercial price (e.g., 45-year-old Polyna who is in Slovakia with her two children and her husband is in the Ukrainian army) or returning to Ukraine (e.g., 39-year-old Inna with a son with serious psychiatric diagnosis). According to our interview partners from the public institution, some are even utilising shelters for people experiencing homelessness in Bratislava, as low-threshold housing opportunities do not exist for those without financial resources.

In the context of these developments, it was not so much the adjustment of the housing allowance itself, the transformation of the comprehensive housing subsidy to an addressed long-term one, or the possible administrative specification of a 'vulnerable person' that was problematic in Slovakia. Instead, the issue is the lack of communication regarding the planned changes, the missing mechanism for targeted support in nuanced cases requiring long-term assistance, the absence of the intermediate phase of adaptation to the loss of support, the short-term extensions, the announcements of the changes at the very last moment, and the uncertainty of the future long-term strategy, which negatively impacted the refugees' lives and their everyday experiences. Initially designed as urgent assistance, supportive measures gradually extended beyond immediate emergency responses as the Slovak government began reassessing the sustainability and structure of these subsidies, aiming to balance support with financial practicality. These developments were also shaped by the political context, as Slovakia's political landscape saw growing debates, especially after the parliamentary elections in September 2023, on migration and national financial priorities, especially with conservative and nationalist factions gaining influence. At these debates, the financial effects of refugee support on the national budget were considered, with arguments that resources should also address Slovakia's internal challenges and the needs of the general Slovak population. This approach reflects an effort to balance national interests with humanitarian commitments, resulting in more structured but potentially restrictive policies, often at the expense of subsidies to support refugees.

Conclusion

In displacement, where liminality becomes a defining feature of daily life, stability, dignity, and accessibility to housing are crucial for enabling refugees to rebuild their lives.[31] The choice of housing often dramatically influences how well refugees can stabilise and settle in and to what extent they begin to feel at home (Hlinčíková & Sekulová, 2015, p. 82). Our analysis shows that one of the biggest challenges Ukrainian refugees face in Slovakia is securing housing. Refugee narratives reveal that governance mechanisms often fail to address their nuanced needs, and these are further affected by systemic limitations, institutional structures at national and municipal levels, rental market challenges, and structural issues in the housing sector. While Slovakia initially offered comprehensive housing support for Ukrainian refugees in response to the crisis, over time, as strategies shifted from immediate to mid- and long-term responses, and the housing subsidies were tightened, these mechanisms proved inadequate in addressing housing insecurity. Instead, they exacerbated social vulnerability, instability, and a sense of temporariness, leading to increased marginalization and social exclusion.

We argue, that the legal frameworks around temporary protection and broader support measures, such as housing subsidies, fail to address the complexity of their vulnerabilities. The state defines the boundaries of these legal categories, determining eligibility for assistance without fully considering the diverse circumstances and needs of people fleeing the war, placing many in precarious positions. While some refugees could find housing independently or with subsidies and transition from short-term to long-term solutions, others faced deeper vulnerabilities and fell through the cracks of the support system. In Slovakia, country with limited social rental housing, a 'homeowner society' model, and a welfare system with a dysfunctional housing allowance, many refugees are at risk of homelessness or feel compelled to seek safety in other EU countries or even return to Ukraine. This situation underscores the urgent need for systemic, long-term solutions that prioritize the needs of vulnerable refugees and address the pressing challenges in Slovakia.

31 For the successful integration of people fleeing from Ukraine into broader Slovak society, an approach based on equal rights and mutual support is essential. Migrants can bring economic activity and development, new ambitions, and diversity in thought and behavior to the cities where they settle (Gallová Kriglerová, 2016).

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