

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

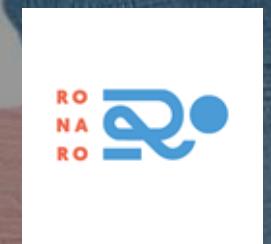
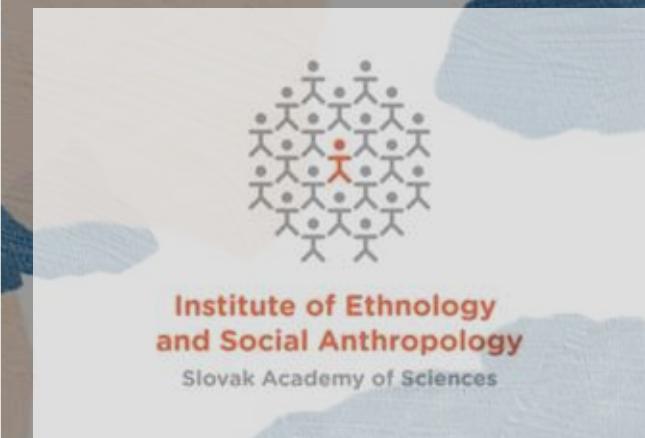
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Structure of the Presentation



Introduction



Research Methodology and Theoretical Approach



Housing Experiences of Ukrainian Refugees



Conclusion

The situation of the Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia

- Nowadays, more than 6.7 million Ukrainians have left Ukraine and live outside their country of origin, predominantly in Europe (UNHCR, 2025), out of whom **134.281 have applied for temporary protection status in Slovakia** until August 10, 2025 (Bureau of Border and Foreign Police, 2025).
- Since the beginning, it has **primarily been women with children and older adults** in Slovakia: adult women constituted 70.2% (65,513 people) and adult men 29.8% (27,848 people) of the adult population. Children up to 17 years represented a 30.5% share (40,920 people), and persons older than 60 had a 7.9 % share (10,647 people) of the total number of Ukrainians with temporary protection at the beginning of August 2025 (Bureau of Border and Foreign Police, 2025).
- Slovakia is a country 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.

The housing situation of the Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia



- 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 predominated** (accommodation in reception centres, collective sites, and solidarity housing offered by private persons) (Hegedüs et al., 2023).
- Later, **professional coordination** (joint activities of local and regional authorities, NGO sector, and international organisations) and volunteers helped people move to housing facilities, collective or rental private flats, supported by the housing subsidy.

The housing situation of the Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia



- **The housing subsidy** provided by the government to Ukrainian refugees in March 2022 was an essential step in ensuring access to stable and safe housing.
- The housing subsidy, referred to by our interview partners as “program,” is a monetary allowance paid directly to housing facility owners, private owners, and non-profit legal entities, including business legal entities, 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 housing situation of the Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia



- 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 subsidised 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.
- Typical issues they experienced **included a lack of privacy, overcrowded households, and inadequate living conditions** (UNHCR, 2024).

The housing situation of the Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia



- Although Ukrainians were initially expected to stay **in collective accommodation** only temporarily, this **has become long-term for many**. There are several reasons for this: the private rental sector is expensive, a housing shortage exists in the sector, most Ukrainians remain uncertain about their stay in Slovakia, and the interest and solidarity of the receiving countries' populations in offering their flats for rent have decreased, social support of the community.
- Remarkably, **the most vulnerable people with the lowest income preferred to stay in collective housing**.
- The housing allowance for Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia has undergone **several short-term extensions and changes in amount**, tightening of eligibility criteria and duration, without a clear long-term strategy (Wilsch, Hlinčíková, 2024)

Housing policy in Slovakia

- At the same time, the Ukrainian refugees' housing situation was inseparably tied to the general housing situation in Slovakia.
- Slovakia ("**homeowner society**") is experiencing a housing crisis.
- Housing is expensive, 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, 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, 2021);
- Public social housing - long waiting lists and strict eligibility criteria;

Theoretical backgrounds



Epistemic injustice



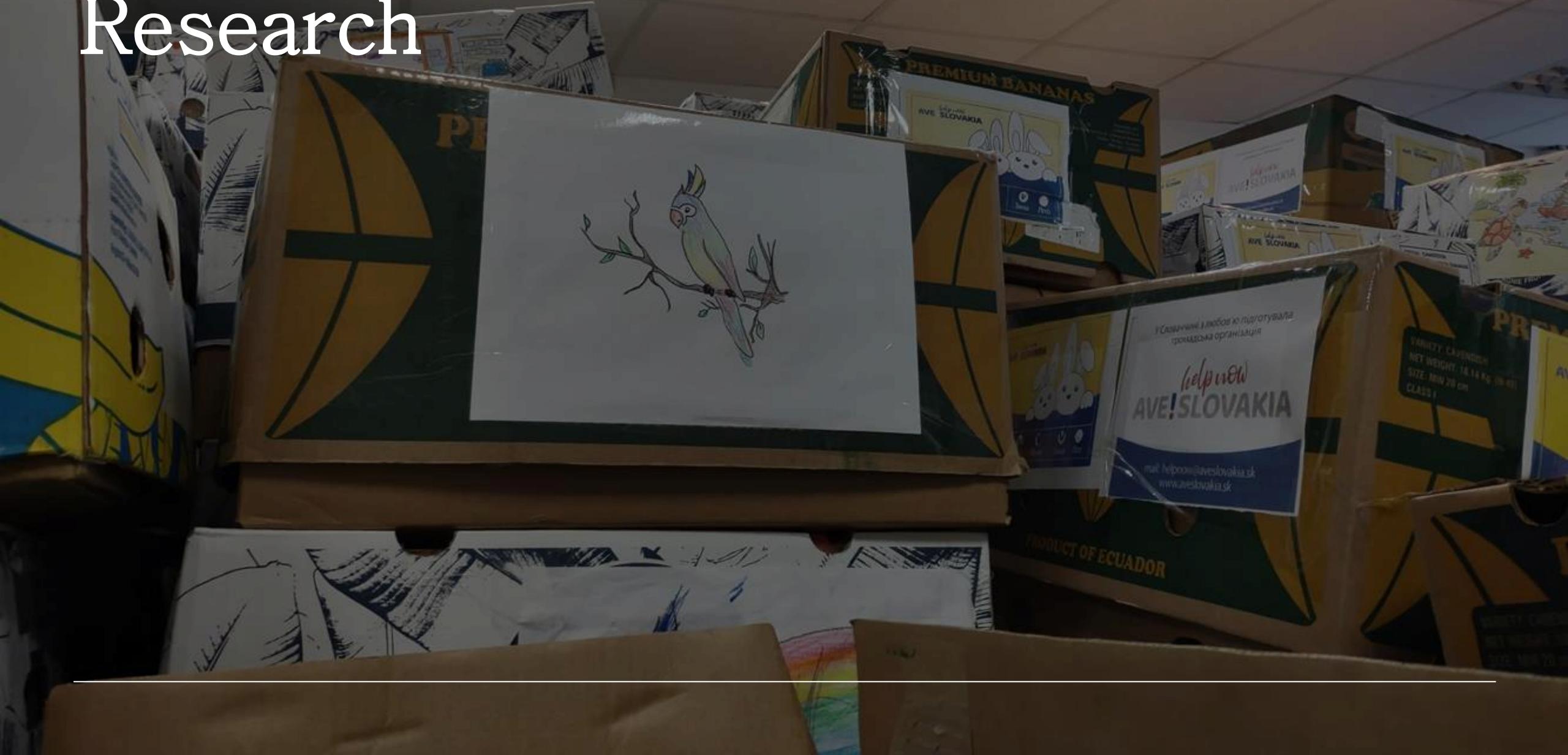
- Our contribution is theoretically grounded in **the concepts of epistemic injustice** - we explore, on the particular example of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia, the structural and discursive mechanisms that regulate who is understood, who speaks, and who is granted epistemic legitimacy.
- Displaced populations, refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants are particularly vulnerable to various forms of injustice, including epistemic injustice (Dotson, 2012; Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2012, 2022).
- **Epistemic injustice refers to** the unjust treatment of the individuals and groups in their capacity as potential knowers and occurs when social actors, typically marginalised or vulnerable groups such as refugees, are excluded, silenced, undermined, devalued, misrecognised, partially or perniciously included from contributing their epistemic perspectives and knowledge (Dotson, 2012; Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2012, 2022).

Epistemic injustice



- Representations that overemphasise vulnerability or structural exclusion without acknowledging **refugees' active epistemic engagement** risk reproducing a deficit-based narrative, framing displaced persons as passive victims.
- Such portrayals, however well-intentioned, may inadvertently reinforce the very epistemic harms they seek to expose, positioning certain knowers as epistemically subordinate and rendering acts of resistance invisible (Dotson, 2012; Medina, 2022; Pohlhaus, 2017).

Research



Research



- Qualitative research that involved **semi-structured interviews** with Ukrainian refugees and public institution representatives, **participant observation**, and **informal conversations**.
- We conducted **repeated interviews 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.

Research



- 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, 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).

Ethical considerations



- 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 -it required **specific reflexive, methodological, and ethical considerations due to the vulnerability of the sample**.
- Research situations 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. We also considered aspects of "**caring reflexivity**" (Rallis & Rossman, 2010), an approach embracing the centrality of relationships to ethical and credible research.
- All interviews were transcribed or documented with extensive notes. We examined the research data using deductive coding and thematic analysis. For each interview, a "research medallion" was created.

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Results

detská izba

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Housing experience: the changing nature of the housing support



- The last prolongation of housing allowance in 2024 brought a change in the eligibility criteria, providing a comprehensive housing subsidy for the accommodation of Ukrainian refugees for 120 days after the status recognition.
- **For long-term housing subsidies, eligibility became limited to 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.
- **These administrative categories exclude individuals who, for objective reasons, still require assistance, thereby causing them to fall through the cracks of the support system.**

Housing experience: the changing nature of the housing support



- The situations of refugees are complex, so the administrative category of "vulnerable" persons eligible for support does not fully address the needs of those who require targeted assistance.
- **The situation became especially problematic for those who were near the eligibility threshold** due to age (retired in Ukraine, i.e. 63 years old), socioeconomic conditions and vulnerability associated with living in single-parent households with children and limited income in Slovakia.
- **Narratives about housing intersect 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.

Housing experience: epistemic injustice in practice



- Research on Ukrainian refugees in Europe highlights **the gender-specific nature of their experiences**, as it is predominantly women with dependents who have fled.
- Particularly in vulnerable families such as single-parent households, lone seniors, or families with members with severe disabilities, **even income from full-time employment did not guarantee safe, affordable and appropriate housing**.
- Our ethnographic research reveals that **narratives are deeply infused with considerable insecurity and fear** of losing current housing and the anxiety of searching for accommodation that may quickly become unaffordable or inaccessible.
- Those with low or unstable incomes, such as older adults, single parents, or people with disabilities, depend on state support to cover housing costs.

Housing experience: the changing nature of the housing support

- Several of our research partners **encountered systemic obstacles in determining their eligibility for housing subsidies.**

We are struggling because the supported housing program has been extended... only for three months. But when it ends, what are we supposed to do? We are going through a lot of emotional distress, worrying about this... We won't have money for housing if the housing support ends... (Vitalina, 60 years old)

- Crucially, these changes in housing allowance were not communicated in advance, and decisions were made at the last moment, severely limiting refugees' capacity for agency.



Housing experience: epistemic injustice in practice

- Individuals who lost their entitlement to housing subsidies were given only about a week to secure alternative housing following the July 1, 2024, legal amendment. Such short notice disproportionately affected those without established social networks or financial security:

Everything happened so suddenly... [The family received the information about the need to vacate the accommodation only on June 21, 2024, with the requirement to leave by the end of June 2024]. I was searching for apartments online, but I couldn't find anything at all. [...] People from the church shared the information that the sister was looking for housing. [...] It was fortunate that we found an apartment so quickly.

(Tetiana, 40 years old)



Housing experience: epistemic injustice in practice

- As a result, several of our interview partners who did not qualify for a long-term housing allowance **left Slovakia for good**. Others consequently **faced significant challenges**, including overcrowded housing, sharing commercial accommodation with other families, or being overburdened with work to afford commercial rent.
- According to our interview partners from the public institution, some were utilising shelters for people experiencing homelessness in Bratislava, as low-threshold housing opportunities do not exist.
- When the system does not provide a transparent and credible source of information in the Ukrainian language or fails to consider the specific needs of refugees from Ukraine, it creates **conditions in which refugees are unable to interpret their rights and obligations accurately**.
- This lack of clarity fosters uncertainty, forcing them to seek information on their own and rely on various sources of uncertain credibility.

Conclusion

- **Epistemic injustice has real consequences** for Ukrainian refugees' ability to access housing, services, and social recognition.
- **The failure to integrate the lived knowledge of refugees into service provision and policy-making** exacerbates existing inequalities and undermines the potential for equitable and inclusive practices (Wilsch, Hlinčíková, 2024).
- Interview partners described their **reliance on non-institutional, informal knowledge networks**, such as family members or the community. While these networks often provided crucial support, they also exposed refugees to epistemic risks, such as misinterpretation, misinformation, or manipulation. The failure of the state to create clear, accessible, and culturally legible information channels opened space for third-party intermediaries to play the role of 'epistemic brokers' with unequal power.



Conclusion

- These insecurities often stemmed from a gap between the refugees' lived realities and the systemic frameworks meant to support them, which frequently failed to take their specific circumstances into account.
- **Ukrainian refugees reported various insecurities arising from their vulnerable position**, mainly due to restricted access to information.
- **Epistemic injustice is also reflected in the way migrants are often reduced to numbers.** This reveals a more fundamental epistemic injustice - the systematic exclusion of refugees' perspectives from the processes that shape their lives.



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Thank you! 😊

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