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

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Theoretical lens

- Ontological security as essential for feeling "at home" and integration (Marcuse & Madden, 2016)

- Housing as a human right and foundation for social stability (Marcuse & Madden, 2016; Brown et al., 2024)

- Temporariness and liminality shaping refugee agency and vulnerability (Turner, 1969; Horvath, Thomassen & Wydra, 2017; Chiu & Ho, 2023; Lazarenko, 2024)

- Transnational family practices and multi-sited notions of "home„ (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Silvius, 2020; Cienfuegos-Illanes & Brandhorst, 2023)

- Epistemic injustice marginalising certain groups' voices by undermining their credibility, silencing or disrespecting their experiences, or rendering their knowledge unintelligible (Fricker, 2007; Dotson, 2011; Medina, 2012, 2022; Kidd, Medina and Pohlhaus, 2017)

- Moral economy of care in humanitarian contexts (Robinson, 2011), humanitarian paternalism (Barnett, 2011),

Broader housing context in Slovakia

- Shift from state to market-driven housing after 1989, reinforcing inequalities (Pelikánová, 2009).

- Slovakia faces a severe housing crisis: high costs, few rental options, and a dominant "homeowner society" model (Consoli, 2023).

- Only 7.7% of housing is rental (vs. EU average ~25%); municipal rental housing just 0.99% (Eurostat, 2022; Markovič & Šedovič, 2021).

- Widespread overcrowding: ~40% live in crowded households; ~70% of young adults with parents (Kubala & Peciar, 2019).

- Strict criteria and a culture of "deservingness" exclude many vulnerable groups, including refugees (Kusá, 2018; Streinzer & Tošič, 2022).

- There is no guarantee that the cost of standard housing for low-income families will be covered under the Slovak welfare system (Hegedüs et al., 2023).

Refugee governance in Slovakia

- 132,863 persons with TP in Slovakia
- adult women 75.3 %, children up to 17 years 31.32 %, persons older than 60 had an 8.11 %

- Women lead the majority of households with young children and older family members in their care;

- in one-tenth is a person with a disability;

- no access to child-care services 52% of adults with 0 – 4 years of children;

- 46% of adults with higher or university education not economically active.

Type of Housing	P (%)
Subsidized housing (overall)	84
Apartments and flats	47
Reception centres	23
Shared accommodations (guesthouses)	18
Hotels or hostels	10
Other types	2

Research methods

Ethnographic Research

- Methods: Semi-structured interviews, informal interviews, and participant observation

- Period: February 2024 – February 2025, Bratislava

- Participants: 24 interview partners (5 men, 19 women), aged 31–72; and institutional representatives

- Diversity: Varied housing arrangements, household types, regions of origin, stages of integration, socioeconomic status, care responsibilities, and life-cycle positions

- Analysis: Thematic analysis using NVivo 14

- Ethics: In line with American Anthropological Association (2012); Düvell et al. (2010); Jacobsen & Landau (2003)

Housing in Context of the Ukrainian Displacement

- From a system perspective, the governance of Ukrainian refugees was recognised primarily as a housing challenge (Haase et al., 2023).

- Limited experience in accommodating refugees overall in Slovakia (Hegedüs et al., 2023; Tužinská, 2023); few institutionalised structures existed to receive migrants seeking protection, with persistent challenges even before February 2022 (Hlinčíková & Sekulová, 2015).

- In Slovakia: state facilities, local authority initiatives (e.g., Bratislava's Pasienky centre), NGOs, and volunteer efforts were mobilised. Accommodation was expected to be temporary but often became long-term due to high rental costs, housing shortages, and uncertainty about future plans.

- Slovakia was compelled to develop frameworks to provide access to short-term housing for those with temporary protection, including the introduction of the "programme" (housing subsidy).

- Missing a comprehensive vision for providing long-term affordable housing for Ukrainian refugees; no plan or system to prevent housing loss or to provide adequate social services, leaving refugees at high risk.

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- Shift from urgent responses to semi- and long-term strategies — from homestays towards greater independence

- Strategies strongly affected by a liminal situation, a tendency to keep expenditures as low as possible.

- Lack of affordability as the primary constraint (even full-time employment may not ensure adequate housing)

- Diverse capacities to navigate new environments (e.g., single-parent families, women with disabled relatives, older adults)

- Some required more targeted, long-term support beyond housing (due to health, age, care needs, trauma)

- Housing strategies are shaped by temporality and the acceptance of inadequate conditions that do not reflect actual needs, while being informed by a strong imaginary of the "ideal home."

- Subjectivity and agency: Proactive strategies for coping and adapting.

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- Role of the housing subsidy crucial, but a discretionary approach undermines the sense of ontological security.

- Short-term decisions on housing subsidies were announced at the very last moment.

- From 1 July 2024:

  - Change in eligibility criteria: support limited to 120 days after status recognition.

  - Exclusion of business legal entities operating commercial and collective accommodations.

  - Revised definition of "vulnerability": persons in material need; single parents with a child under five; persons granted custody of a child; severely disabled persons; and persons over 65.

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- Lack of sensitivity to vulnerability is particularly problematic for individuals who hover near eligibility thresholds — whether defined by age, socioeconomic status, or family structure (such as single-parent households) — and for those with severe physical or mental disabilities, especially when these are unrecognized or undiagnosed.

- A pervasive sense of vulnerability emerged among interview participants, shaped by a rapidly shifting legislative framework and unpredictable, short-term policy announcements.

- This context fosters a profound sense of insecurity and temporariness.

- The loss of housing entitlements exacerbates this dynamic, leading to what Rai (2024) describes as "depletion" — the cumulative erosion of individuals' and households' capacities to sustain social reproduction and care.

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- Partial housing contributions were acceptable to some refugees (e.g., those with jobs or family support). However, legislative changes prohibited supplementary payments for partial subsidies (Mittelmannová, 2024).

- As a result, refugees now face only two options: pay the full market price or receive free accommodation if classified as 'vulnerable'.

- For many — such as single mothers in low-paid jobs or those lacking family support and employment prospects — this shift created severe complications and deepened insecurity.

- Activation of the informal networks: shared housing arrangements for commercial price, renting in good faith for an amount lower than the commercial rate and others, even utilising shelters for people experiencing homelessness

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- In the context of refugee support — for example, programs designed for Ukrainian refugees — the category of vulnerability frequently functions as a bureaucratic tool for determining who "deserves" support. Vulnerability is not just an empirical condition (e.g., being elderly, disabled, alone) but is also constructed and instrumentalized by institutions to allocate resources, regulate access, and create moral hierarchies among refugees (Robinson, 2011).

- Vulnerability is administratively constructed and tied to standardised eligibility criteria (e.g., age, health status, family configuration). This approach risks overlooking complex, invisible, or intersectional forms of vulnerability, such as psychological trauma, disrupted social ties, or gendered dynamics of care responsibilities. In reality, vulnerability is dynamic, relational, and context-dependent.

- The concept is often reduced to a binary logic — "vulnerable" versus "not vulnerable" — which tends to reinforce paternalistic views of recipients as passive objects rather than active.

- Moreover, these bureaucratic framings frequently lack accountable, context-sensitive argumentation (Streinzer & Tošić, 2022), leading to situations in which refugees with genuine but less "visible" vulnerabilities fall through the cracks of support systems.

Conclusions

- Inadequate in addressing housing insecurity, measures instead deepen social vulnerability, foster instability and a sense of impermanence, and ultimately heighten marginalisation and exclusion. A central problem is conditionality: determining who receives suitable accommodation and under what criteria. This turns refugees into "objects" of social policy, constrained by bureaucratic categories (Silvius, 2020).

- Legal categories and support measures fail to reflect the complex, diverse vulnerabilities of refugees. By narrowly defining eligibility, they leave many in precarious positions and deepen exclusion.

- The exclusion of refugees' epistemic voices from policy-making at both local and national levels reinforces these challenges and undermines inclusive housing and integration policies, thereby exacerbating humanitarian paternalism (Barnett, 2011), which asserts a moral and epistemic authority to act on behalf of others while overlooking or suppressing their acute and actual needs.

- In Slovakia, structural housing limitations — the absence of social rental housing, a dominant homeowner model, and a dysfunctional housing allowance system — further exacerbate insecurity.

Thank you for your attention!

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