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Refugee migration from Ukraine to other parts of Europe:
Challenges to the housing-integration intersection at the city level

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Abstract

In the context of the massive refugee influx from Ukraine to its European neighbouring states over the last months, this update reflects on the experiences of two international exchanges led by HOUSE-IN: a JPI Urban Europe-funded project that deals with challenges at the housing-integration nexus. The exchanges revealed the impacts of this forced migration at the intersection of housing and integration in several European cities. The update analyses the civic and temporal nature of responses to this refugee movement, which have challenged major assumptions about practices of settling and integration under uncertainties of war, as well as those around access to housing and support.

Keywords

Refugee migration, Ukraine, European cities, housing integration, selective solidarity

Introduction and objectives

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has led to a massive influx of refugees fleeing to European neighbouring states since late February 2022. According to UNHCR data from October 2022, more than 7.7 million people were recorded at European borders, and 4.4 million persons registered for Temporary Protection or another protection scheme.[1] The primary destinations of the refugees are Ukraine's direct neighbour states as well as other countries in the central and eastern parts of the continent. The EU has provided support to Ukrainian refugees in accordance with the 2001 Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), an exceptional legal basis that sought to learn from the displacements of the Yugoslav Wars. It was activated for the first time to provide a common legal basis for the reception, settling and support of refugees from Ukraine.

In the context of this situation, housing-integration represents both an indispensable prerequisite for the (temporary) settling down of war refugees at their new places of residence, and an unexpected large-scale challenge for the host cities and local societies. Thus, the HOUSE-IN consortium[2] set up a series of international exchanges in May and September 2022 to discuss the local responses to the housing and integration needs of Ukrainian refugees, as well as the initial local coping responses and lessons learnt, which we share through this short update (See also Astolfo et al., 2022).[3] The two online events included inputs from the HOUSE-IN project partners and case study cities, researchers working in other contexts, such as Warsaw (Poland), researchers from other JPI Urban Europe-funded projects, and Ukrainian researchers and refugees.

Research context and background

Our reflections are part of the JPI Urban Europe-funded research project HOUSE-IN[4] that focuses on challenges of the housing-integration nexus at the local scale. We define the housing-integration nexus as the complex interdependencies between access to housing, the residential environment, the process of settling and belonging as well as forms of social encounters and support enabling people to settle. The project brings together the expertise of researchers and practitioners of four countries and five cities.[5] Although the cities we research are distinctive in terms of their migration histories and housing market structures, housing-integration of Ukrainian war refugees represents a key challenge for all of them. The expertise developed and lessons learnt since 2015/16, when many refugees from Syria

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[1] https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine, accessed on 20 Oct 2022; Temporary Protection Directive (TPD; Council Directive 2001/55/EC), https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system/temporary-protection_en, accessed 20 Oct 2022.
[2] HOUSE-IN is a European project consortium working on challenges at the intersection of housing and integration of migrants in cities working in the context of the JPI Urban Europe Call Urban Migration.
[3] Recordings of the September event can be found at https://eutropian.org/coping-with-future-refugee-challenges/.
[4] Full title: The Housing-Integration-Nexus: shaping exchange and innovation for migrants' access to housing and social inclusion; June 2021-November 2022; https://jpi-urbaneurope.eu/project/house-in/.
[5] The case studies are Vienna (Austria), Riga (Latvia), Lund and Helsingborg (Sweden) and Leipzig (Germany).

escaped to Europe, have played a decisive role in coping with the arrival of Ukrainian refugees in 2022, especially in Germany and Sweden.

Housing-integration as a key challenge across local contexts

Seen from the perspective of host cities and countries, the governance of refugee migration from Ukraine (and refugee migration in general) is largely a housing challenge. This applies to all our researched cases, no matter how different the cities' housing market structures and policies are. The second key challenge is to provide conditions for people to settle down and to getting oriented with respect to jobs, language, education, childcare, medical services, and social interaction, for which adequate, affordable and safe housing is fundamental. In the HOUSE-IN project case studies, as in many other European cities, a considerable number of private households were ready to accommodate Ukrainian refugees for the short or medium term. Enabling access to private homes continues to be significant and is one of the most important reasons why the issue of housing has not yet become a much larger problem. From a long-term perspective, however, independent housing for the refugees is intrinsic to unburdening private households and increasing the refugees' autonomy (GESIS blog, 2022). Additionally, the involvement of civic society has led to many contacts between refugees and residents and strengthened knowledge about and empathy for Ukrainian refugees among residents of the host cities. There are, however, clear signs that this has not increased empathy for refugees in a more general context.

In many places, local authorities tried to set up ad-hoc support schemes to govern the arrival and housing of Ukrainian refugees. In Leipzig and Riga, for example, arrival and support centres for Ukrainian civilians were established, which brought together different services and support structures (registration for welfare, housing, childcare, employment etc.) and made arrival comparatively easy and procedurally efficient. In many cities, financial support has been given to housing owners and private households who have helped to accommodate people. Bureaucratic obstacles and problems with access to housing, however, remained significant, especially after the first months when the capacity to help and provide support started to decrease.

Strong roles of non-state actors within a context of broad societal support

Non-state actors such as NGOs, churches etc., have played a major and indispensable role within the governance of Ukrainian refugee migration. In many places, cities could draw on existing organisational and network structures and their past experiences. Specifically, non-state actors themselves were able to build on their professional knowledge developed in the past years, especially since 2015. In many cases, diverse forms of cooperation with local authorities have evolved (ideally on an equal footing) because local authorities have increasingly depended on non-state actor expertise, knowledge and contacts with refugees. Although the experience and professionalism of non-state actors differs, they have played important roles in pressuring local and supralocal authorities to improve conditions, prolong financial support, and/or make decisions on pressing questions (such as, how to protect the rights of third-country nationals for longer time periods or how to switch from an ad-hoc

crisis reception mode to developing robust arrival infrastructures). Non-state actors found themselves within a context of enhanced solidarity, involvement, and support by civic society at a level that Europe had not seen for a long time. While the level was still high in autumn 2022, there is a noticeable rise in "compassion fatigue" among helpers due to bureaucratic obstacles, stress and exhaustion (cf. Astolfo et al., 2022).

Selective solidarity and its downside: prevailing discrimination and racism

As noted above, European host societies showed a high level of support and readiness to help Ukrainian war refugees. Initial surveys report that many of the supporters had never before been engaged in refugee aid; their strongest motivation to help was to show more engagement than just donating money, etc. (Haller et al., 2022 for Germany, Mieńkowska-Norkiene, 2022 for Poland). Local housing and hotel owners offered accommodation, new support platforms to engage support were established, and people who were not previously involved in refugee aid became an integral part of these support structures. At the same time, attitudes of racism and discrimination have prevailed. New distinctions have arisen between Ukrainians and third-country nationals not coming from Ukraine, or minorities from Ukraine such as Roma (cf. Näre et al., 2022, De Coninck, 2022). Cases of direct rejection of "non-white" refugees by people who offered shelter have been reported from all our cities. Additionally, non-Ukrainian refugees are at risk of being neglected by civic support structures and policy in comparison to Ukrainian refugees. This has led to the perception that Ukrainian refugees receive a "privileged treatment" with respect to financial support, access to the job market, to educational facilities and language courses compared to others, and to the frustration of NGOs that follow principles of justice and equal treatment. The "selective solidarity" with Ukrainian refugees and a specific bundle of support, e.g. free-of-charge public transport, parking, or use of meeting places (e.g. in Lund) and cultural facilities, have also led to frustration among other asylum seekers and helpers. This creates a tense situation as the interests of different vulnerable groups are played against each other, whilst the activation of TPD for one group masks unchanged, or even a war-enhanced, entrenchment of European bordering practices (Dzenovska, 2022). A new debate has emerged among NGOs, municipal and other organisations about how to provide equal support and end this new discrimination against non-Ukrainians.[6]

Temporality and uncertainty as current and future challenges

At the time of writing (late autumn 2022), the war is still ongoing, and there is no certainty about whether it will end in the near future. Continuing temporalities and uncertainties represent the main challenges for each individual as well as for future governance, policies, and support. Who must leave Ukraine, and who needs to stay where and for how long? These and other uncertainties affect various domains of everyday life,

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[6] In Latvia, for example, NGOs see the consolidated support to Ukrainian refugees as a good vantage point from which to advocate for the improvement of integration measures for all refugees in the country, regardless of their origins.

including the future perspectives of young refugees.[7] On the one hand, most Ukrainian refugees wish to return home as soon as possible and, thus, many question the need (and energy spent) to fully integrate them into host societies from a long-term perspective.[8] On the other hand, considering the ongoing war, the current shortage of housing due to the destruction in Ukraine and the hardship that people will face in the coming winter months, they will have to make longer-term decisions concerning jobs and school attendance of their children. This might make a return less likely the longer people stay abroad. Set against this background, planning for provision of longer-term housing for the refugees represents a huge challenge (cf. Duszczyk and Kaczmarczek, 2022). This is true for all the cases that we researched, no matter how different the cities and their housing markets are. The desire of many Ukrainian refugees to settle only temporarily makes any planning for housing-integration solutions even more complicated. Any long-term perspectives depend on how the war develops, how the different regions in Ukraine will be affected by it, and how post-war reconstruction will be facilitated. Uncertainty continues to be the setting for refugees and their planning and decision-making, as well as for host cities, societies, and supporters. Nevertheless, the activation of the TPD and civic society shows signs that more "rapid and flexible integration" with prioritised and temporally adjustable housing has been a large step forward.

Last but not least: With the rising cost of living caused mainly by the rapid increase of energy prices in many European countries and cities, the willingness and capacity of many local people to support refugees from Ukraine and to provide a place to stay may also decrease. Furthermore, the recent increase in the number of refugees arriving via the Western Balkan route is once again fuelling the public and political discourses on how to deal with refugees in general and this group in particular. Economic hardship in the receiving (urban) societies threatens to increase the rejection of migrants at large and puts solidarity at risk.

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[7] On the school situation of Ukrainian refugees, see: https://eurocities.eu/latest/ukrainian-children-are-back-to-school-in-eu-cities/ (accessed on 7 Nov 2022)

[8] As Valeria Lazarenko, Ukrainian researcher and refugee herself, pointed out at our second workshop in September 2022.

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