



Beyond refugee camps: housing solutions for war refugees from Ukraine in Poland

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Abstract

In the wake of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Poland received the greatest number of refugees. While for some it was a transit country and a significant number returned to Ukraine following the stabilisation of the front, nearly one million refugees remained in Poland on a long-term basis. The majority were women with children, the elderly, and people with disabilities. It was the gravest humanitarian crisis in Poland's post-World War II history. The existing Polish reception infrastructure for refugees proved entirely inadequate to accommodate such a large and sudden arrival of people. Under a special law on assistance to refugees from Ukraine, the Polish government introduced alternative forms of short- and long-term accommodation that departed from the traditional model of refugee camps. These included shelters at reception points, collective accommodation centres, and subsidised hosting in private homes. This article aims to critically evaluate this refugee housing governance, with particular emphasis on collective accommodation facilities and private hosting arrangements in Polish households. The study draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Western Poland between 2022 and 2025. The issues are presented in a process-oriented manner, taking into account the evolution of legal regulations which at some point led to refugee commodification and overlapping of the schemes.

Keywords War refugees from ukraine · Poland · Housing governance · Collective accommodation · Private hosting · Commodification of refugees

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Introduction

As a result of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Poland became the destination for the greatest number of refugees. By mid-May 2022, around 3.5 million persons fled Ukraine to Poland (Duszczuk & Kaczmarczyk, 2022: 164). While for some it was a transit country, and a significant number returned to Ukraine when the front stabilised, almost one million refugees remained in Poland long-term.¹ The majority were women with children, the elderly, and people with disabilities. It was the gravest humanitarian crisis in Poland's post-World War II history. One of the most pressing needs of people fleeing Ukraine was shelter, given that the existing Polish reception infrastructure for refugees was inadequate to accommodate such a large and sudden arrival of people (cf. Lakševics et al., 2024). Initially, the Polish state created reception points in sports halls, entertainment arenas, and exhibition centres that offered short-term accommodation facilities. That was, however, a temporary solution because the Polish authorities deliberately refrained from establishing large-scale refugee camps. Thus, under a special law on assistance to refugees from Ukraine passed on March 12, 2022, alternative forms of refugee accommodation subsidised by the state were created that included collective housing and private hosting.

Collective accommodation centres were established within both state-owned and private infrastructure (primarily from the tourism sector) and remain in operation to this day. From the beginning of the full-scale war until April 30, 2023, in total nearly 506,000 Ukrainian refugees lived in such facilities.² Hosting refugees in private homes was subsidised by the state until June 30, 2024, representing a novel form of housing support for refugees in Poland. It is estimated that by the end of April 2022, 38% of all refugees (525,000 people) were accommodated this way in just the twelve largest cities in Poland (UMP, 2022a: 14).³ Although Ukrainian refugees were hosted in private homes also in other countries, like Italy, France or Spain (Bassoli & Luccioni, 2023), the scale of private hosting in Poland was unprecedented, given the previous rather reluctant attitude of Polish society towards refugees (Krzyżanowski, 2016; Bachman, 2016) and the Central and Eastern Europe's lack of experience in receiving refugees.

This article aims to critically evaluate housing governance and various temporary housing solutions for Ukrainian refugees in Poland, focusing on a comparison of collective accommodation and private hosting. The analysis is guided by a set of inter-related research questions designed to shed light on both the institutional architecture

¹ <https://dane.gov.pl/pl/dataset/2715/resource/45202/table>. Retrieved March 13, 2025.

² *Gigantyczna skala pomocy, choć nie bez uchybień - Najwyższa Izba Kontroli*. Retrieved March 13, 2025.

³ <https://gremi-personal.com/jak-mieszkaja-uchodzczy-z-ukrainy-w-polsce-i-kto-za-to-placi/>. Retrieved March 14, 2025. There are no official nation-wide statistics about private hosting available because this form of accommodation was not monitored by the state. The data we recall comes from the survey conducted by the Union of Polish Metropolises. Other accommodation options identified in this survey included: living with a family member/friends from Ukraine who had lived in Poland before the full-scale war (23%), renting an apartment on the commercial market (20%), renting a room in a hotel or hostel (7%) (UMP, 2022b: 19).

of refugee housing policies and their tangible impact on the everyday lives of those displaced by war.

First, the study asks how Polish legal frameworks shaped the provision of housing for Ukrainian refugees following the outbreak of the full-scale invasion in February 2022.

Second, it examines what types of collective accommodation were created in response to the humanitarian crisis and how their organisation reflected broader state strategies of refugee reception and spatial dispersal.

Particular attention is paid to the third question, which explores the structural vulnerabilities embedded within these arrangements – such as limited institutional oversight, precarious living conditions and lack of integration support, permanent relocations, social isolation, and conditions conducive to exploitation – that may have deepened refugees' insecurity and led to their commodification.

The fourth question shifts the focus to private hosting, asking to what extent this model provided an alternative form of effective refugee housing, and what challenges or risks it posed in the absence of state's coordination, monitoring, and institutional support for the hosts.

The issues are presented in a process-oriented manner, considering the evolution of legal regulations and the actions of institutions responsible for managing the humanitarian crisis. Therefore, in the first section, we present and analyse the legal framework and housing governance regarding Ukrainian war refugees in Poland. Then, in the following sections, we critically scrutinise the most common housing solutions for Ukrainian refugees, i.e. reception points that served as short-term shelters, collective accommodation centres, and subsidised hosting in private homes. In the concluding section, we indicate the main differences between these models but also the ways they overlapped, both in the case of tourism sector and employer-motivated hosting arrangements, and we present a wider critique of collective housing and the prospects offered by private hosting.

Collective accommodation centres in Poland have been mostly evaluated by NGOs that published their results in the form of reports (Pertek, Kuznetsova & Kot, 2022; Amnesty International, 2023; Fundacja W Stronę Dialogu, 2023; Jarosz & Klaus, 2023; Miłowska, Górka & Trzcińska, 2024). The most extensive was the report prepared by the Migration Consortium (Jarosz & Klaus, 2023) – a coalition of nine NGOs working in Poland in the field of migrants' and refugees' integration. The research for this report was conducted in six voivodeships in Poland, with one of them – the Greater Poland – being completed by the authors of this article. Private hosting – being less visible and therefore less traceable – has been even more rarely studied, with a notable exception being a project comparing community sponsorship initiatives in Poland, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany (Grzymała-Kazłowska et al., 2022, 2023; Hryciuk-Ziółkowska et al., 2024; Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2024) accompanied by a smaller project that focused solely on people hosting Ukrainian refugees in the east-central Poland (see Firgolska, 2023), and the project based on in-depth interviews with hosts and hosted refugees in south-eastern Poland (Łuczaj, 2024a, b). Finally, there have been more general studies on various forms of aid offered by Polish society to Ukrainian refugees, with private home hosting being one of them (Kalinowska et al., 2023: 169–203).

The article is based on ethnographic research conducted in western Poland (Greater Poland Voivodeship) between 2022 and 2025, among Ukrainian refugees, private hosts, owners and managers of collective accommodation centres, and various governmental and civil society actors involved in refugee reception. The research methods included: action research while volunteering in temporary shelters in the city of Poznań (the capital of Greater Poland voivodeship) between the end of February and April 2022; activist research in the collective accommodation centre in Poznań, whose residents resisted the facility's closure in autumn 2022; participant observation and semi-structured interviews in various collective accommodation centres in Greater Poland voivodeship in 2023; and semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with hosted refugees, hosts, and representatives of institutions and NGOs supporting private hosting in two big cities, two towns, and two villages in Western Poland from 2024 to the present. We also analysed the legal documents related to the housing of Ukrainian refugees. Finally, we collected available statistical data and organisations' reports on both collective accommodation and private hosting. The research in collective accommodation centres was conducted as part of the aforementioned project of the Migration Consortium (Jarosz & Klaus, 2023), and then within the project funded by the Centre for Migration Studies of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Bloch & Szmyt, 2024). The research on private hosting of Ukrainian refugees has been conducted in a team project supervised by Natalia Bloch and funded by the Polish National Science Centre.

Legal and institutional framework for supporting war refugees from Ukraine

Poland's response to Ukrainian war refugees combines continuity in its long-standing migration policy towards Ukrainian citizens with extraordinary legal measures adopted following Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022. The instrumental conflation of migrants and refugees, already evident during the 2015–2016 European refugee crisis, resurfaced in official narratives. At that time, the Polish government justified its refusal to join the EU relocation mechanism by citing the reception of over one million Ukrainian refugees. In practice, however, these individuals – many of whom left Ukraine as a result of the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas in 2014 – lacked formal refugee status or temporary protection (Drewski & Gerhards, 2024: 144). The contrast between this narrative and the simultaneous exclusion of asylum seekers from Syria and Afghanistan at the Polish–Belarusian border – portrayed as instruments of Russia's hybrid war – highlights the selective application of solidarity mechanisms and criminalisation of mobility (Fiałkowska & Judzińska, 2025).

In response to the mass displacement following February 24, 2022, the Polish government adopted the *Act of 12 March 2022 on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens in Connection with the Armed Conflict in Ukraine* (Ustawa, 2022). This legislation, aligned with the *EU Temporary Protection Directive* (Council Implementing Decision 2022/382), enabled the rapid legalisation of stay without the need for asylum procedures. Ukrainian citizens and their family members were granted legal resi-

dence for 18 months, together with immediate access to employment, education, public healthcare, and social benefits. A simplified registration process for obtaining a PESEL (personal identification number) facilitated access to public services.

War refugees from Ukraine were allowed to work without a permit and register businesses on equal terms with Polish citizens. Although professional qualifications in sectors such as healthcare and education could be recognised more easily, the process remained restrictive. They received one-time financial assistance for basic needs, and from 2024 onwards, families became eligible for increased Family Care Capital (from 500 to 800 PLN⁴ per child per month). The Act also guaranteed universal access to public schools and kindergartens for children, and introduced simplified procedures for university admissions and scholarship programmes. Healthcare entitlements were provided through the National Health Fund. However, any absence from Poland exceeding one month resulted in the automatic loss of protection status.

The implementation of assistance was decentralised. Voivodes (provincial governors)⁵ coordinated local responses and managed a dedicated Relief Fund, while municipalities were authorised to carry out independent aid initiatives. Initially, emergency reception points were established in large halls in major cities to provide temporary accommodation and basic services; these were phased out by April 2022. Simultaneously, collective accommodation centres (CACs) were established in hotels, hostels, resorts, and care facilities. Initially referenced in the 1999 Census Act, a revised definition adopted on July 1, 2024 stipulated that CACs must host at least ten refugees for a minimum of 14 days. In practice, they varied widely in size, standards, and management models (public, private, or NGO-run). Although conceived as temporary, CACs evolved into long-term housing solutions for vulnerable groups, including elderly persons, people with disabilities, and single mothers.

A separate form of support was introduced for private hosting. Individuals who hosted refugees in their homes could apply for a daily subsidy of 40 PLN per person, initially for up to 60 days (later extended to 120), with further extensions possible in exceptional cases. The application required detailed household information and declarations to prevent duplicate payments. However, the programme lacked central coordination and was discontinued on July 1, 2024. Aside from the subsidy, hosts received no institutional support.

As refugee stays lengthened, a legislative amendment effective from January 28, 2023 introduced partial co-payment for CAC accommodation. After 120 days in Poland, refugees were expected to cover 50% of costs (up to 40 PLN per day), increasing to 75% (up to 60 PLN) after 180 days. Exemptions were granted to specific groups: elderly persons (women over 60, men over 65), people with disabilities and their caregivers, pregnant women, single parents of three or more children, minors, and temporary guardians. Another category – persons in ‘difficult life circumstances’ – was so vaguely defined that its application varied significantly, often generating confusion. Some of our research participants, including CAC staff, criticised this classification as absurd, noting that wartime displacement itself constitutes a ‘difficult life circumstance’.

⁴ On average, 1 EUR is equivalent to 4.25 PLN.

⁵ Poland is divided into 16 provinces, known as voivodeships.

Exemption policies varied by region. For instance, the Greater Poland Voivodeship exempted 90% of CAC residents from fees, applying broader criteria than those set at the national level. These were subsequently formalised in a directive issued in October 2023. The list of exemptions was expanded to include full-time students, convalescing soldiers, and individuals in mourning, followed in 2024 by single mothers with children under three. Simultaneously, more restrictive conditions were introduced for people with disabilities. Only Polish-issued certificates were accepted, effectively excluding many with partial impairments and chronic diseases. This disproportionately affected individuals unable to engage in physical labour but not formally recognised as disabled.

In sum, the *Act of 12 March 2022* established a parallel system of support for Ukrainian refugees, distinct from the standard reception model for asylum seekers in Poland. The latter group remained subject to protracted procedures and resided in semi-open centres. In contrast, Ukrainian refugees gained near-immediate access to the labour market, education, social protection, and healthcare. This dual system resulted in two distinct refugee populations, differentiated by legal status, entitlements, and spatial allocation. The Polish state consistently emphasised rapid economic self-sufficiency as its goal, expecting refugees to find employment and secure housing within months. Large-scale refugee camps were deliberately avoided. Instead, authorities implemented a dispersal strategy, whereby reception points in large cities functioned as transit hubs, from which refugees were relocated to smaller CACs across regional areas (Firlit-Fesnak, 2023: 122–129).

This approach illustrates how refugee governance in Poland continues to be shaped by broader political and demographic imperatives. While providing unprecedented support to a specific group of displaced persons, it also introduced new forms of stratification and exclusion based on nationality, legal status, and bureaucratic eligibility – reinforcing inequalities within the refugee population itself.

Reception points and short-term shelters

During the initial weeks of the full-scale war in Ukraine, refugees were received in temporary shelters located primarily in major Polish cities. They were typically situated in sports halls, entertainment arenas, and exhibition centres (Csoba, Diebel & Szöör-Fülöp, 2025: 95–97). In Poznań, the largest reception facility, capable of accommodating 800 people, was established at the Poznań International Fair. These facilities were intended for stays no longer than three days, during which refugees were expected to choose from six mobility or housing options: (1) independent onward travel to other Polish cities or EU countries; (2) organised relocation to other European countries; (3) return to Ukraine; (4) relocation to CACs within the region; (5) private hosting; (6) rental housing on the commercial market (see Fig. 1⁶).

Based on ethnographic observations conducted at the Poznań International Fair Reception Point in March and April 2022, approximately 20% of refugees remained in the shelter for several weeks, with some staying throughout the two months of

⁶ The accommodation and mobility options for Ukrainian war refugees in Poland in 2022–2023 (by Zbigniew Szmyt).



Fig. 1 The accommodation and mobility options for Ukrainian war refugees in Poland in 2022-2023 (by Zbigniew Szmyt)

its operation, despite ongoing encouragement to relocate. While Polish authorities instructed the voivodes to establish CACs in facilities run by central and local authorities as well as private entities, the relocation to those collective accommodation centres was widely resisted by shelter residents. Similar reluctance was observed toward international relocation opportunities, and the authorities appeared to overlook key factors underlying this resistance. In fact, many refugees chose to remain in Poland, anticipating a swift end to the war and a prompt return home. For example, numerous women from the Kharkiv region returned shortly after the area's liberation, despite continued shelling. Moreover, relocation to other EU countries was often unappealing as Poland offered more convenient temporary refuge due to its geographic proximity to Ukraine, linguistic and cultural affinities, and existing networks of relatives and acquaintances.

As a result, assembling relocation groups often required several weeks. Refugees actively exchanged information via social media platforms such as Telegram, Viber, and WhatsApp, which became key channels for assessing relocation options. Early reports described tent-based camps in some host countries, with conditions

significantly worse than those in Poland. Refugees who relocated to Germany often returned, advising others against the move. Additional concerns influenced the decision-making processes. Some women feared being housed alongside male refugees from Afghanistan and the Middle East, reflecting widespread stereotypes and anxieties about gender-based violence. Fears of human trafficking and forced labour, particularly in Italy, rooted in prior experiences of Ukrainian seasonal workers, were also widely circulated online. As a consequence, interest in many relocation programmes remained low. Only official schemes sponsored by governments (e.g. Ireland, Canada) or local authorities (e.g. Spain, the Netherlands) were seen as offering greater safety and attracted comparatively more interest.

Moreover, many refugees immediately upon arrival at reception points began the process of obtaining a PESEL number, which required waiting for appointments at municipal offices. Those not intending to return to Ukraine in the short term often sought employment soon after arrival and some had already secured jobs, making relocation undesirable. Temporary shelters thus increasingly functioned as transitional housing for refugees preparing to move into private rentals, and when removed from one shelter, they often sought registration at another reception point in the same city.

Collective accommodation centres

According to the Polish Ministry of the Interior and Administration, approximately 386,000 Ukrainian refugees used collective accommodation centres during the peak arrival between February and October 2022. The Housing and Accommodation Sector's report shows that in January 2024, still 7% of registered refugees (nearly 67,000 individuals) lived in CACs, while by June 2024, this number had dropped to 22,394. At that time, Poland maintained 1,236 CACs, of which 1,071 were active, with the total capacity reaching roughly 50% (Miłowska, Górka & Trzcińska, 2024: 6–21).

Shortly after the full-scale war outbreak, each voivodeship office in Poland was obliged to compile a list of facilities that were designated as CACs. These included state-owned hotels and sports and leisure facilities administered by voivodeship, municipal, and communal authorities, as well as privately owned accommodations from the hospitality sector such as hotels, hostels, guesthouses, resorts, and agro-tourism facilities. Reserve lists included lower-standard facilities – such as village and church halls or fire brigade buildings – that were converted into CACs during the peak refugee arrivals in spring 2022. Some buildings were in disrepair and did not meet basic technical safety standards.

Precarious living conditions and luck of integration support

Overall, CACs varied widely in capacity and standard, from smaller centres offering hotel-like conditions with private rooms and attached bathroom to large facilities maximising occupancy through bunk beds and temporary drywall partitions subdividing open spaces. The latter failed to meet basic humanitarian standards, despite

standardised financial allocations from the voivodeship offices set at a minimum of 70 PLN (approx. 16.50 EUR) per person per day. In poorly adapted facilities, residents were housed in overcrowded, inadequate rooms with shared bathrooms and no access to the kitchen, which led to the improvised use of electric appliances that caused electrical faults. Since the operators of CACs were obliged to meet only the basic needs of refugees, i.e. shelter and collective catering, no attention was given to integration. This neglect contributed to social isolation of refugees and exacerbated dysfunctions, including interpersonal conflicts and alcohol abuse.

Our fieldwork conducted in CACs in Greater Poland Voivodeship revealed that a particularly pressing issue in CACs was the lack of appropriate spaces for children. Children made up as much as 40% of CACs residents. While most of them were enrolled in Polish schools and simultaneously continued their Ukrainian education remotely, for some, online schooling was their only form of education. They were forced to study in overcrowded rooms or hallways, while recreational activities often took place in unsafe locations such as parking areas. Mothers faced particular difficulties arranging childcare during working hours, limiting their ability to engage in full-time employment. This sometimes led to tensions with social workers, who expressed concern over potential legal violations due to repeated instances of inadequate childcare. Many centres also lacked basic infrastructure for residents with disabilities, such as lifts or access ramps.

In terms of management, voivodeship authorities played only administrative roles, limited to assigning refugees to particular CACs and compensating facility owners. Oversight of CAC's operations was minimal, typically confined to technical inspections related to fire safety, with no evaluation of provided services. There were no standardised operational norms across CACs. The lack of institutional support from public authorities resulted in ad hoc management practices, heavily reliant on the individual competence and initiative of centre managers. Staff with backgrounds in hospitality or social care generally demonstrated stronger logistical abilities, but integration-related and language skills remained limited. Psychological support – much-needed in the case of war refugees, many of whom suffered from PTSD – was usually not available, while permanent positions for integration assistants or consultants were lacking. As a consequence, residents frequently relied on informal support from fellow refugees, further deepening the sense of helplessness experienced by both the displaced and the inadequately trained staff. Another contentious issue was the introduction of the aforementioned refugee participation in accommodation costs in CACs, especially since the fees often exceeded the means of refugees, particularly single mothers and multi-generational families.

Permanent relocations and uncertainty

In the course of our research, we also identified a serious structural problem that extends beyond the conditions offered by particular CACs, that is the practice of enforced, repeated relocations between the centres. CACs were both established and dissolved in an ad hoc manner, and these decisions were announced to the residents, typically with a month's notice. It made refugees live in a constant uncertainty about

the future. While they were not rendered homeless – those eligible for continued housing support were issued referrals to other CACs – the decisions about relocation offered little or no room for negotiation. A few times, we had the opportunity to observe, sometimes being actively involved, the refugee protests against the CACs' closure. The authorities seemed to overlook the fact that relocation involved more than a simple change of address. It often meant losing employment, interrupting children's schooling or childcare, and dismantling the social networks built by adults and children alike. A mother of a child who suffered from PTSD described the toll of repeated relocation: 'We have put in so much physical and mental effort to earn our place in this community that we no longer have the strength to adapt to new conditions. (...) It's hard to become independent when we are constantly being moved around.' These relocations, often occurring every few months, became a persistent feature of life in CACs. Our longitudinal fieldwork captured the processual nature of these relocations, as we repeatedly encountered the same individuals being transferred from one CAC to another – one woman with two young children had been moved five times. Such practices not only drastically curtail refugees' agency in determining their place of residence (see Leonowicz-Bukała & Łuczaj, 2024), but also prove fundamentally detrimental to integration efforts, perpetuating a sense of ongoing displacement (El Moussawi, 2024).

'Beautiful isolation': relocation to provincial areas

Even more than relocations themselves, Ukrainian refugees feared being relocated to provincial areas – small towns or rural settings. This policy, promoted by the Polish government and metropolitan authorities (Mędrzecka-Stefańska et al., 2022: 32–34), was intended to ease the 'refugee burden' on major cities by redistributing refugees spatially and, simultaneously, to revitalise so-called shrinking towns by injecting them with new social capital. While spatial dispersal of migrants and refugees has been indicated by researchers as a factor supporting integration and upward mobility (see e.g. Bolt et al., 2010), this was not the case in Poland. Refugees were not dispersed into local communities, but concentrated in CACs, often located in remote areas and cut off from interaction with the host society. Furthermore, CACs in rural or small-town contexts were ill-equipped to provide integration support. Unlike in large cities, where staff from aid organisations or NGOs visited CACs to offer their services, the provincial centres operated exclusively with their own personnel, who lacked the competence and resources necessary to support refugee integration effectively.

Other CACs that were not located in remote areas per se, were nonetheless affected by Poland's widespread problem of public transportation exclusion of provincial regions, leaving refugees, who did not own cars, effectively isolated (see Jarosz & Klaus, 2023: 30). Access to medical services, educational institutions, and especially the job market was severely limited in such settings. The names of the CACs to which refugees in our study were referred illustrate the spatial isolation of these locations: the 'Fig in the Forest' cottage complex, the 'Forest Corner' resort, the 'On the Edge of the Forest' resort, or the 'By the Pond' inn. These facilities were agro-tourism

resorts, typically located in scenic yet socially and infrastructurally isolated areas. As one resident of the CAC in Poznań remarked, upon receiving a referral to such a location following that centre's closure: 'It's a beautiful holiday location, but not for living.' The feeling of being 'trapped' in such 'beautiful isolation' of provincial CACs resulted in refugees' frequent attempts to 'flee' – a term used by CACs administrators. We could observe this dynamic in a CAC established in a recreation resort located 13 km from the county town and 70 km from Poznań. Following the announcement of refugee participation in the costs of their accommodation, the number of residents dropped by 60%, driven by fears of being unable to pay due to a lack of local employment. In six months from the amendment implementation, the population of this CAC decreased from 250 to 60 residents. Even prior to this, the centre experienced high turnover; according to its manager, more than a thousand refugees had passed through the facility since the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

Refugee commodification

Finally, our research revealed a highly concerning phenomenon of the commodification of refugees both as hospitality sector clients (see Gibson, 2003) and labour. Refugee commodification can be defined as 'the transformation of forcibly displaced populations (and their hosting) into commodities subject to negotiation and trade in the marketplace,' performed by both 'state and non-state actors at the international or domestic level' (Freier et al., 2021: 2748). In Poland, it was a result of the partial privatisation of refugee housing characterised by 'neoliberal norms of market competition, economic efficiency and dispersed responsibility' (Darling, 2016: 230). Especially those private hospitality sector operators whose facilities were already in a declining or even mature phase, and thus were looking for a less demanding customer, started perceiving refugees as very attractive clients (see e.g. Lenz, 2010: 218–221; Petiel et al., 2025). One of the Poznań's hotels we researched, before it had been turned into a CAC, received such reviews from commercial clients: 'One star and only for a tasty breakfast. The rest is a tragedy. Everything looks like from the 1990s. I recommend changing it to a hostel.' Moreover, the tourism sector is characterised by seasonality, which in the case of resorts and agro-tourism facilities in the Polish climate means only three to four months of summer season and one to 1.5 of winter one. Meanwhile, a refugee is a relatively permanent customer (that helps to overcome seasonality), with little alternatives, whose accommodation is paid regularly by the state, and therefore such a client does not have (or is expected not to have) the expectations like a commercial customer.

The normalisation of such market-based logics and the legislative changes that introduced mandatory financial contributions of refugee in the costs of their accommodation in 2023 led to the emergence of 'headhunting' practices. In the course of our research, we identified three forms of such practices. Firstly, new actors began offering 'free accommodation' combined with work opportunities. During our visits to CACs in Poznań, we could see such offers – advertised on makeshift posters – that promised free-of-charge accommodation combined with employment opportunities in rural areas near Poznań. These conditional offers of shelter tied to labour

posed risks of exploitation, particularly for refugees who did not meet the exemption criteria and thus remained financially vulnerable. Secondly, we documented cases of direct refugee ‘headhunting,’ where CACs competed to recruit individuals who qualified for accommodation fee exemptions beyond the criterion of ‘difficult life circumstances,’ i.e. the elderly, people with disabilities and their caregivers, or single parents of three or more children. The latter turned out to be economically the most desirable refugee-clients. One such an example was a Ukrainian headhunter who actively recruited refugees from the aforementioned provincial centre to the CACs in Poznań. Thirdly, some owners of the facilities that had lost their CAC status began hosting refugees ‘privately’ by using the state’s 40 PLN daily allowance available for the first 120 days after entering Poland. These subsidised refugees also became a valuable resource and were actively sought after, sometimes even at border crossings, leading to competitive recruitment practices of vulnerable residents.

Subsidised hosting in private homes

We interpret the mass-scale private hosting of war refugees from Ukraine in Poland as a spontaneous, informal, bottom-up form of refugee sponsorship. Refugee sponsorship is presented as an alternative – or complementary – model of refugee reception, particularly *vis-à-vis* collective housing. It was initiated in 1979 in Canada as a state-private partnership in receiving refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, where it is now well-established and institutionalised (Reynolds & Clark-Kazak, 2019). It was further developed in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Argentina (Bond & Kwadrans, 2019). In Europe – although some homestay initiatives for refugees can be traced back to the late 1930s with regard to the Spanish refugees in France (Dreyfus-Armand, 2016) – refugee sponsorship was introduced quite recently, primarily in reference to the resettlement of Syrian refugees after 2015, in countries such as France, Finland, Italy, Germany, United Kingdom, Ireland, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, and Portugal (ICMC Europe, IOM & UNHCR, 2017; Kumin, 2015; Tan, 2021; Hassan & Phillimore, 2020; see Bassoli & Luccioni, 2023 for a complete review on the homestay accommodation initiatives in the European context⁷). It was organised by various bodies: informal groups, NGOs, as well as local and national governments. Later on, it was adopted for hosting Ukrainian war refugees as well (see e.g. Phillimore, 2022 for Great Britain).

Refugee sponsorship as an alternative model of refugee reception

Refugee sponsorship refers to a situation when an individual/a family or a community (a group of individuals or a social organisation, e.g. a faith-based; so-called community sponsorship) hosts a refugee or a refugee family for a particular period

⁷ The authors recall various terms used in the literature to describe this phenomenon in different national contexts: ‘hosting,’ ‘family hosting,’ ‘citizen hosting,’ ‘solidarity hosting,’ ‘private accommodation,’ ‘home accommodation,’ ‘domestic reception,’ ‘private housing alternatives,’ ‘private hospitality,’ ‘individual hospitality,’ ‘domestic hospitality,’ or ‘flat shares’ (Bassoli & Luccioni, 2023: footnote 1 & 2).

(spanning from a few months to two years, but on average one year) based on a sponsorship agreement which defines the responsibilities of hosts, guests, and the state (Reynolds & Clark-Kazak, 2019). The principal idea is that such sponsorship should lead to refugees' self-reliance.

The state not only provides legal admission of refugees and their access to public services, but plays a crucial role in this model by selecting and verifying the participants of such programmes, training hosts, overseeing the proper implementation of the sponsorship contracts, and stepping in when either party fails (Grzymała-Kazłowska et al., 2022: 5). Such hosting includes not only accommodating refugees but also various forms of everyday support. There are different solutions regarding the funding, including governmental support or, less frequently, refugees contributing to utility costs or paying a reasonable rent. Ideally, refugee sponsorship should not involve significant financial costs on the part of the hosts (Labman, 2016). In this respect, hosts should be supported financially and institutionally by the state, engaging instead in other logistical, social, and emotional assistance in the process of refugees' integration (Senthanar et al., 2020; Lanphier, 2003).

The main advantage of this form of refugee reception is that it directly involves the members of the receiving societies and initiates the integration process from the very beginning through establishing interpersonal relationships between hosts and refugees (Ives, 2007; Reynolds & Clark-Kazak, 2019; Bond & Kwadrans, 2019; Kaida et al., 2020). It gives refugees a sense of belonging to the host society, but also helps to build more open and welcoming communities, stimulating positive attitudes toward refugees as future members of the host societies (McKee et al., 2019). Also, refugee sponsorship can foster reciprocity (Grzymała-Kazłowska et al., 2022: 5) – refugees who have been offered direct support from the receiving society will be willing to return to this society.

State's absence

In Poland, hosting Ukrainian war refugees in private homes, as aforementioned, was supported by the state through financial assistance to hosts who could apply for a daily allowance of 40 PLN per hosted refugee for a maximum period of 120 days. However, apart from this subsidy, the hosts did not receive any formal instrumental support (such as training or consulting opportunities) and were left without any supervision. Initially, some municipalities started creating the lists of residents willing to host refugees, but ultimately they withdrew from the role of middlemen. Some NGOs stepped in and mediated in linking people offering accommodation with refugees looking for shelter, but the majority of hosts simply announced themselves online, either via spontaneously created social media pages or on the neighbourhood groups. During the first days of the full-scale invasion, Poles directly picked up refugees from the Polish-Ukrainian border and drove them to their homes.

Often, people willing to host refugees visited temporary shelters and offered their hosting services there. At some point – which we could observe while volunteering at one such facility – the police made attempts to verify their identity, but apart from checking whether they did not have any human trafficking record, there was

no recording of who took whom in. There was a criticism that the state failed as a coordinator of private hosting of refugees, leaving this sphere beyond any formal control (Jarosz & Klaus, 2023: 81). La Strada Foundation, which is the leading Polish NGO in the field of human trafficking, started the information campaign at the border to make the most vulnerable refugees, i.e. women and unaccompanied minors, aware of the risks related to getting into cars of strangers. Overall, the majority of refugees hosted in private homes arrived through unofficial channels, which even the hosts cannot reconstruct. When asked about how those channels operated, the hosts answered, for instance, ‘We don’t know, there was some guy, a kind of middleman, he brought those women here.’

Variety of private hosting

The premises in which the refugees were hosted varied widely, but mostly included a room in a flat or a house (most often a spare room described as a ‘guest room,’ but there were also cases of a child’s room that was emptied to host a refugee family: ‘[a 5-year-old] Mania agreed to give up her room, moved to her older sister’s, where she slept on a mattress that we slid under her bed during the day’) or an extension in a single-family house with a separate entrance, kitchen, and bathroom. But refugees were also hosted in separate flats (usually purchased for investment or rent) or houses (either used as second homes or inherited from a deceased family member), or in a year-round bungalow situated in the post-socialist recreation areas. The time of hosting also differed significantly: from a few days (in the case of refugees being in transit on their way to Western Europe) to over two years, but on average, three-four months. In the course of our research, we also encountered the classic forms of community sponsorship where refugees were hosted by Catholic monasteries and in parish houses, in schools, and by associations and foundations (like the Greater Poland’s Alzheimer’s Association that three years after the war outbreak, still hosted two female refugees). A specific form of private hosting that we identified was renting a room or an apartment for a refugee family by a group of friends who could not host themselves, but contributed money for such rent. Finally, there were Ukrainian migrants who, due to the limited accommodation opportunities – i.e. living in small rented premises – used the 40 PLN subsidy to rent a flat or a room on the commercial market for their relatives or friends who fled the war and expected to be hosted. In those cases, although the hosts did not share their homes with refugees, they still assisted them with various forms of support.

Instrumental, social, and emotional support

The aforementioned assistance was related to the fact that private hosting went far beyond providing shelter and food. It included an extensive instrumental support in adapting refugees to the life in Poland, especially that they often did not have ‘mobility capital,’ i.e. the experience in travelling and living abroad, and intercultural competence related to it (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002: 51). This support included:

- handling paperwork and formalities (such as obtaining a PESEL number; apply-

ing for social benefits; completing forms, especially since these were in Latin and the majority of refugees only knew a Cyrillic alphabet; making appointments and assisting during the visits in the offices; helping with opening a bank account; etc.)

- assisting in educational integration of refugee children (enrolling in a nursery, kindergarten, or school; arranging a computer with a Cyrillic keyboard for children who continued their Ukrainian education online);
- searching for Polish language courses and supporting informal language education at home;
- searching for a job (often through personal contacts with employers, but also explaining paperwork related to contracts and labour rights);
- facilitating access to healthcare (making appointments and assisting during the visits to the doctors; serving as a contact person in case of emergency; families who hosted refugees with disabilities or chronic diseases had to invest a lot of time and effort to support their guests);
- offering transportation (giving lifts; lending bicycles);
- material support (equipping rooms with beds, desks, bedding, towels, etc.; buying clothes, cosmetics, and hygiene products);
- searching for a flat for rent (Ukrainian war refugees, especially those with children, faced challenges in finding a flat on the commercial market [Amnesty International, 2023], therefore, such support was crucial) and assisting in moving to a new flat;
- support with returning to Ukraine and continued assistance afterwards (such as collecting money for a power generator or sending parcels with food, cleaning products, and clothes for children).

This instrumental support was combined with social and emotional one. Refugees were incorporated into the hosts' social networks that facilitated their integration (Phillimore et al., 2021). They thus 'benefited from the social capital gained from having a ready-made network to help them settle in' (Phillimore, 2022). They were taken for walks, excursions, to playgrounds and restaurants, watched TV series together, played board games, and had barbecue parties. As one female refugee concluded: 'I wouldn't know what Poznań is, if it wasn't for him [the host]! (...) He forces me out and brings me back to life; without him, I would be depressed.' A female host in her sixties recalled a hosted 5-year-old boy: 'As soon as he heard that I was back home, he would shout: 'Maria, I am here! Come and get me!' As I was reading [on the sofa], he used to slip under my blanket.' The boy's mother, once she put him in a bed, used to join the hosts in the living room – they watched movies together (in Polish because she wanted to learn the language) and talked. Often, the hosts and refugees had meals together and celebrated holidays together.

The emotional support was the most challenging one. A woman who hosted a 17-year-old girl whose mother had stayed back in Ukraine confessed: 'I knew she was crying all the time, and I didn't know what I could do. I didn't know how to support her so as not to violate her boundaries. If she was little, I would have hugged her, taken her on my lap... I didn't want to be persistent... Or maybe I should have tried harder? Maybe I could have done more?' When she found out that the girl's

boyfriend was in Warsaw (300 km from Poznań), she took her there for a day so that the two could meet.

Community hosting

Although in Poland, these were mostly individuals and families who hosted refugees, often they were supported by their social networks, i.e., friends, neighbours, or co-workers. It was essential in the face of the absence of institutional support and the fact that hosting entailed offering instrumental support at various levels. Social capital turned out to be very relevant in engaging in aid activities (Downarowicz & Wydra, 2022: 16). It was, therefore, an in-between form of individual and community sponsorship (cf. Phillimore et al., 2022). In one of the villages researched by us, whose residents hosted 97 refugees, the leaders of the Rural Women Circle who coordinated the hosting came up with the idea of a ‘supporting family,’ that is families who could not host refugees themselves but wanted to support host families, both instrumentally and emotionally. It proved to be a good practice. It not only helped to alleviate compassion burnout (Simsa, 2017), but also had a very positive community-building effect: villagers got to know each other better, spent time together, and created bonds. This way, hosting refugees was not only challenging but also beneficial for the local community. For the refugees themselves, living in private homes meant being taken care of, and their needs were addressed individually. Moreover, they participated in the everyday life of the receiving society in its most intimate sphere, i.e. a family circle, and often in the life of the local community as well, attending picnics or going to church. None of this was offered in the CACs.

Risks of improvised hosting

The disadvantages of the private hosting included risks related to improvisation and lack of expertise in assisting refugees, although these were quite skilfully overcome by seeking help from hosts’ social networks. Our research showed that more challenging was the lack of psychological support with regard to both, the refugees who often suffered from PTSD (as a result of war violence, dispossession, death, or a constant threat of it), something that the hosts were not able to handle alone, and for hosts themselves, especially when hosting lasted a few months, and they felt extremely emotionally exhausted and did not know how to deal with this intense, unexpected psychological burden (see Mędrzecka-Stefańska et al., 2022: 21). Also, the everyday tensions and failed expectations were the result of the spontaneous form of this hosting, in particular, of not making hosting agreements which would specify the length of stay and the responsibilities of both hosts and guests (thus many expectations were not articulated but rather implicit which resulted in disappointments). The problem was the mismatch of hosts and guests not only in terms of needs and expectations, but also social class and life aspirations (having well-off guests sometimes made the hosts feel of wrongly invested help) (see Phillimore, 2022: 6).

Other studies show that in some cases hosts used this situation to make a profit, i.e. although collecting a 40 PLN allowance, they expected that hosted refugees would contribute to shopping or pay rent once the state's subsidy is over (Łuczaj, 2024b). Another negative issue unveiled in this study was related to the hosts' expectations concerning performing household chores, especially cooking and cleaning. Altogether, Kamil Łuczaj's research (2024a) identified six kinds of 'difficulties' in the private hosting of refugees: negotiating everyday routines (about different daily routines, eating habits, or ways of child-rearing [see also Łuczaj, 2024b]); dealing with difficult life situations and stress (related to hosting of war refugees); disagreements among the refugees themselves (related to either inter-Ukraine divisions in case of hosting more than one family, or personal matters, something we also observed in our research – those were often more serious than the tensions between hosts and hosted refugees); neglecting one's own family (given that not all family members were equally involved in caring for refugees); too strong emotional attachment to the guests; and irreconcilable sets of expectations. Studies in other contexts indicated also the challenges related to affective responsibility and intimate boundaries in private hosting (Monforte et al., 2021). These tensions, however, were rarely expressed publicly because, on the one hand, of the hosts' tendency to fit the image of selfless helpers in the context of the 'romanticized discourse' of aid (Łuczaj, 2024b: 138) and the refugees performing the role of the 'ideal victims,' grateful to their benefactors (see Ticktin, 2016).

What is crucial is that hosts cannot be left on their own – private hosting of refugees requires the state's support, not only financial but also instrumental (access to information, consulting opportunities, advice, guidance, and training) and psychological support (for both refugees and their hosts). The intervention of the state is also necessary if there is a need to mediate when the hosting relationship breakdown happens. Finally, it requires the state's monitoring to prevent potential abuses, especially when dealing with vulnerable groups, i.e. women and children. At the same time, it is important to avoid an excessive bureaucratisation of the scheme (see Phillimore, 2022 for a list of recommendations and good practices learned from the experiences in refugee sponsorship programmes in the UK).

Conclusion

Our study identified key differences between collective accommodation and private hosting as housing support models for Ukrainian war refugees in Poland. Implemented as emergency measures, CACs varied in quality and often failed to meet basic humanitarian and integration needs such as psychological support, childcare, and language assistance. The offered standard ranged from hotel-like to precarious, overcrowded, and poorly equipped facilities that frequently fostered isolation rather than integration. Moreover, permanent relocations between CACs entailed uncertainty and disrupted refugees' efforts to build stable lives, undermining employment, education, and the social networks crucial for integration. In particular, relocations to isolated provincial centres that offered limited employment and integration prospects exposed the limitations of state-enforced dispersal strategies. Additionally, the legis-

lative changes made some refugees – those exempted from financial contribution in the costs of their accommodation – more desirable clients for the housing sector which resulted in refugee headhunting practices between various CACs. The partial privatisation of refugee housing and limited institutional oversight over CACs led to the phenomenon of refugee commodification. In contrast, private hosting offered highly individualised support. Hosts provided not only shelter but also facilitated integration by assisting refugees with administrative procedures, employment, healthcare, education, and social networking. While more conducive to integration, this model depended heavily on hosts' own resources, social capital, and emotional capacity. In the absence of systemic state support or adequate preparation, many faced compassion burnout, especially as hosting extended over time.

Our study confirmed that 'the grid of [refugee] housing governance is patchy, fragile, with overlapping actors and uncertain time horizons (Darling, 2016)' (Lakševics et al., 2024: 82). In practice, the boundary between private hosting and collective accommodation often blurred. Smaller guesthouses, agro-tourism facilities, and hostels – excluded from the lists of approved CACs, either due to rejected applications or avoidance of bureaucratic burden – frequently hosted Ukrainian refugees under the private subsidy programme, receiving 40 PLN per person daily for up to 120 days. In such cases, the only formal distinctions between these two forms of accommodation were the subsidy amount and housing duration. The state regarded this practice as a misuse of the private hosting subsidy programme. Rather than monitoring and distinguishing between exploitative and effective arrangements – some of which, such as hosting in small family-run tourist facilities, functioned well, with close relationships akin to private hosting – the Polish government opted to terminate the programme by the end of June 2024. This decision primarily affected newly arriving refugees still eligible for subsidised private hosting.

Moreover, employers who had hired Ukrainian migrants before the full-scale invasion encouraged their workers to bring family members from Ukraine, and accommodated them in workers' hostels or rented apartments. These employers likewise were the beneficiaries of the 40 PLN subsidy programme. As a result, rooms were often shared by two categories of Ukrainians: pre-war labour migrants and newly arrived refugees with temporary protection, revealing a blurred distinction between the two categories. Those employers' motivations were not purely humanitarian; concerns about workforce retention were central. Agricultural business owners, in particular, offered accommodation with the expectation that hosted refugees would become their seasonal workers, thus blurring the distinction between refugees and economic migrants. When many chose to move on, these employers expressed frustration and complained at refugees' ingratitude (see Matuszczyk, 2024). These blurred lines between protection and profit produced grey zones of vulnerability and demonstrated how displacement intersects with precarity, informality, and profit.

Despite all the shortcomings of the collective accommodation centres, Poland managed to receive the unprecedented numbers of war refugees without creating classic tent or container refugee camps. To a great extent, it was possible thanks to the fact that the Polish society stepped in and spontaneously offered private hosting. Traditional refugee camps – but also other forms of collective accommodation – have long been criticised as exclusionary 'total institutions' (Goffman, 1961), where refu-

gees are isolated from the receiving society for prolonged, shifting the focus from care to control (Harrell-Bond, 1986; Loescher, 1994). It is thus important to acknowledge the extraordinary scale of Poland's humanitarian response, which represented the largest civil-state relief effort in the country's post-war history. Despite certain shortcomings and inconsistencies in housing governance discussed in this article, the overall mobilisation of society, local governments, and state institutions was remarkable in both its speed and scope. This unprecedented response demonstrates Poland's unique position within the broader European context. As a country sharing a long border with Ukraine, Poland became the first and main destination for those fleeing the full-scale war, hosting millions of refugees within a very short time. What distinguished the Polish case was the absence of traditional refugee camps and the scale of bottom-up, citizen-driven assistance, supported but not coordinated by the state – an unparalleled example of societal mobilisation in the first year of full-scale war. Furthermore, while the linkage between housing and employment may at times lead to the commodification of refugees, it can also be understood as a pragmatic integration mechanism that supports refugees' social inclusion. From a policy perspective, closer coordination between housing provision and employment could serve as a long-term integration tool – provided that relocation practices are stabilised and refugees are granted real agency in choosing where to live and work. Such arrangements – when accompanied by appropriate legal and welfare safeguards – can balance humanitarian protection with economic participation.

Finally, refugee reception in Poland must also be viewed through the prism of security and geopolitics. The ongoing hybrid pressure exerted by Russia and Belarus on Poland's eastern border has directly shaped the state's responses and the limits of institutional capacity. At the same time, while Poland opened its borders to millions of Ukrainian refugees, it simultaneously tightened border controls and asylum procedures for third-country nationals attempting to cross from Belarus. The rhetoric of a 'migration threat', amplified by right-wing political parties and instrumentalised during successive electoral campaigns, contributed to the securitisation of asylum policy. As a result, public attitudes hardened and the overall approach towards migrants and refugees – including those from Ukraine – became more restrictive over time.

At the global level, given that the number of forcibly displaced people will continue to rise – due to not only political crises but also climate change – there is an urgent need to develop more effective alternative or complementary models of refugee housing and its governance. The Polish experience with a spontaneous and informal form of refugee sponsorship – where individuals or communities host and support refugees – proved to have such a potential and can be treated as an inspiration for developing European Union's own model of refugee sponsorship (EC, 2018; Grzymała-Kazłowska et al., 2022). However, its effective implementation requires systemic state support, active involvement of civil society, and coordinated cooperation across sectors, informed by best practices from other countries (Grzymała-Kazłowska et al., 2023; Hryciuk-Ziółkowska et al., 2024).

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Data availability Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethical approval The research project *Private Hosting of Refugees from Ukraine in Polish Homes. Everyday Humanitarianism and Encounters across Difference* obtained approval in 2024 from the Ethical Committee for Research Involving Human Participants at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland (UAM).

Informed consent All participants were informed about the aims and scope of the study, and their voluntary and informed consent to participate was obtained orally prior to the interviews.

Statement regarding research involving human participants and/or animals This study involved human participants. All procedures were carried out in accordance with ethical standards in social anthropology and migration studies, respecting participants' autonomy, confidentiality, and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. No animals were involved in this research.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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