



“I simply cannot live like a guest forever...”: the limits of solidarity in the private hosting of Ukrainian refugees in Berlin

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Abstract

Since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, over 8 million Ukrainians have fled the country, with more than 1.2 million receiving temporary protection in Germany. While formal governance frameworks have shaped the arrival and settlement process, solidarity-based initiatives, particularly homestay arrangements, have played a central role in accommodating refugees. In Berlin, as in many other cities, private citizens offering their homes became a core part of the arrival infrastructure. However, the protracted nature of the war and the uncertain timeline for return have exposed the fragility of this model. Despite state compensation schemes for hosts, cases emerged of refugees being asked to leave, prompting some to return to Ukraine prematurely. This paper aims to critically examine the precarity of solidarity-based private hosting, showing how such arrangements generate tensions rooted in everyday power dynamics, emotional strain, and unequal dependencies. These experiences, shaped by what has been termed “compassion fatigue”, raise questions about the sustainability of private hosting as a long-term policy response. Drawing on three years of ethnographic research with Ukrainian refugee women in Berlin, the paper investigates how housing precarity influences their settlement trajectories, integration prospects, and decisions about return. It highlights the intersection of private housing arrangements with Berlin’s broader housing crisis and critiques the ambiguities within German social policy frameworks for temporary protection holders. The paper contributes to wider debates on the governance of arrival, the limits of solidarity, and the structural conditions shaping refugee accommodation in urban contexts marked by crisis and austerity.

Keywords Ukrainian refugees · Housing · Compassion fatigue · Solidarity · Berlin

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Main goal for me is now to find a job, otherwise I cannot afford a proper housing. Of course, I have already made myself comfortable in my [relatives'] kitchen. But I simply cannot live like a guest forever....

Vira, 39. Interview, November 2022.

1 Introduction

The mass arrival of Ukrainian refugees in 2022 prompted an immediate wave of solidarity in many European countries. What began as a spontaneous humanitarian response quickly transformed into a form of improvised governance, shifting responsibility for accommodation from public institutions to private actors—ranging from NGOs and solidarity groups to commercial platforms, and private individuals. This shift exposes deeper structural and political question: the evolving institutionalisation of practices of hospitality, particularly, but not limited to, homestay arrangements where private individuals, typically without familial ties to those they host, offer accommodation to refugees (Bassoli & Luccioni, 2024; Birger et al., 2024). While rooted in solidarity, such arrangements increasingly blur the boundary between private goodwill and institutional delegation.

Building on the works of Werner (2025) and Prainsack and Buyx (2017), I understand solidarity not as an abstract Enlightenment value but as both a as a practice involving the material support of others in need, and a community dynamic. While various forms of solidarity have been identified (Scholz, 2013; Thijssen, 2012), the provision of active, tangible assistance remains a central element, even if the motivations underpinning such support may vary. Departing from the Humean tradition, in which solidarity is rooted in compassion, I align with the body of scholarship that employs the concept to explore the nexus of migrant reception, humanitarianism, and hospitality (Bauder, 2021; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Musarò & Parmiggiani, 2017). It is within this framework that the perceived ‘deservingness’ of Ukrainian refugees (Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2024), and the selective forms of solidarity extended to them, can be understood as responses shaped by their inclusion within the symbolic boundaries of the moral community, which has influenced public reception and policy support (Frank, 2025).

The links between housing and migration are well researched, with housing seen as key to migrants’ settlement and subsequent integration (Ager & Strang, 2008; Allsopp et al., 2024; Astolfo et al., 2022; Nielsen & Andersen, 2023), and an essential part of arrival infrastructures (Bovo et al., 2024; El-Kayed & Keskinkılıç, 2023; Hanhörster et al., 2023; Phillimore, 2021). At the same time, housing policies are a manifestation of migration governance, and housing can be seen as a resource commodified in neoliberal migration management (Brown, 2022). In particular, the trend towards financialisation affects the welfare rights of migrants—and refugees in particular—and their access to the housing market, hindering their prospects for long-term integration, and exaggerating their vulnerability (Farha & Schwan, 2021). The contradictions between policies and the realities of the housing market can further jeopardise the situation of refugees, leaving them in a limbo-like situation where they are unable to access the housing market and are therefore unable to progress towards obtaining certain legal statuses in the host country, leading to further forms of discrimination and inequality (Allsopp et al., 2024; Bhagat, 2024).

Under the neoliberal humanitarianisation policies, responsibility for ensuring access to housing for newcomers has increasingly shifted to civil society, local authorities and volunteers, delegating a prominent role in policy-making to private actors (Brown, 2022; Swyngedouw, 2005; Tazzioli, 2020). While the private hosting model has long existed in Europe, it was the Ukrainian displacement that scaled it up into a widespread solution for refugee accommodation (Bassoli & Luccioni, 2024). Various states encouraged private actors to host Ukrainians in their homes and adopted ad hoc homestay solutions as official state policies in responding to the mass arrival of newcomers—something Zschomler and Berg (2024) calls *new bespokism*. Some of the states employed personal sponsorship programs (UK), some relied on community sponsorship (Sweden, Netherlands, Belgium). In Germany, the responsibility was divided between medium scale actors (housing platforms renting out furnished apartments providing the housing for free for Ukrainians) and private individuals. All these programs, however, relied on the participation of private actors where hosting was presented as humanitarian work for the greater good—and an act of solidarity—but limited to a particular group of people deemed ‘deserving’ of assistance. Such an approach can be seen as a manifestation of everyday humanitarianism (Richey, 2018), or even as ‘outsourcing’ of humanitarian responsibility to compensate for the state failure (Daoust & Dyvik, 2024; Hierro & Maza, 2025). However, as Haase et al. (2024) point out, private accommodation remains one of the main reasons why housing has not become a much bigger challenge in the host cities.

Research suggests that private hosting can enhance social, psychological, and navigational aspects of refugee integration, though its impact on economic and political integration remains limited (Herpell et al., 2024). However, as Bassoli and Luccioni (2024) note, these initiatives demand closer attention to intersectional power dynamics between the hosts and the guests, the life trajectories of refugees, and the ways private hosting practices operate within broader political and institutional contexts. Although the early months of 2022 were marked by widespread empathy and altruistic intent among volunteers and hosts (Haller & Yanaşmayan, 2024), this initial wave of solidarity was soon accompanied by growing reports of ‘compassion fatigue’ (Hierro & Maza, 2025). Aid workers and hosts alike faced the cumulative pressures of prolonged displacement, bureaucratic complexity, and the emotional burden of sharing personal space under indefinite conditions (Astolfo et al., 2022). This shift reflects what can be understood as a transformation from acute emotional response to a more measured, and at times reluctant, engagement—where social and economic costs begin to outweigh the moral imperative, particularly in a context of limited resources and unclear temporal boundaries. The result is a condition of ‘permanent temporariness’ (Lazarenko, 2024; Rajkumar et al., 2012), experienced by both hosts and guests, which fosters ambiguity, strain, and vulnerability in the ongoing dynamics of homestay accommodation.

With this paper, I aim to critically examine the precarity of solidarity-based housing, arguing that it is both an unsustainable long-term solution and a symptom of a broader shift toward humanitarian outsourcing. I am going to look into the dynamics of solidarity and its commodification, drawing on a three-year longitudinal ethnographic case study of Ukrainian refugee women in Berlin. Utilising Berlin as a focal point, I show how entrenched housing inequalities—exacerbated by ongoing financialisation—intersect with and, at times, contradict extant policies designed not just to tackle the initial reception of Ukrainian refugees, but to support them in long-term, sustainable integration efforts. My goal is to contribute to broader discussions on the structural challenges embedded within contemporary

urban refugee accommodation policies, and to highlight the need for the search for more sustainable solutions.

I see the case of accommodating displaced Ukrainians as inseparable from policies and the post-neo-liberal discourse on housing. Of course, the experiences of the Ukrainian refugees in Berlin show only a particular side of the problem, with many other categories of people being deprived of their housing rights by the intersection of other factors. Nevertheless, their experiences showcase one of the many possible discrepancies between the policies and actual situation in the housing market in a situation of overlapping housing crises.

Before moving on to analysing the context of hosting Ukrainians in Berlin and its repercussions for the individual life trajectories of displaced women, I would also like to clarify the terminology. Although Ukrainians in Germany do not hold formal asylum seeker or refugee status—receiving instead specific rights guaranteed by the Temporary Protection Directive—the term “refugee” is used in this paper to describe those hosted after their arrival in Germany following the outbreak of the full-scale war. This choice serves two purposes: first, it simplifies a complex landscape of legal and political classifications, such as visa holders, asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants, which, while materially significant, are not the primary focus of this study. Second, this terminological approach makes a political point by situating Ukrainians alongside others who have fled war, persecution, or natural disasters (Daoust & Dyvik, 2024). Acknowledging how the German government has applied differentiated humanitarian policies, treating refugees from Syria, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Iraq as distinct from Ukrainians, I also echo critical voices noting double standards and racialization in the reception of refugees, with Ukrainians being seen as white and European, and thus deserving of being shown solidarity with and welcomed at home (Alsbeti, 2022; Burrell, 2024; Frank, 2025).

2 The arrival of Ukrainian refugees as a specific case for reception in Germany

The case of housing for Ukrainian refugees in Germany, and in particular in Berlin, illustrates the consequences of a neoliberal approach to housing and the aftermath of replacing state action with ‘outsourcing’ to the private sector. However, in order to highlight the resulting intersections of vulnerability, it is important to first explain the specificities of the reception and further support of Ukrainian refugees in Germany.

Shortly after the outbreak of full-scale war, in March 2022, the Council of the EU reacted to the mass arrival of Ukrainians by activating the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for the first time in the history of the Union. EU Member States became legally obliged to grant beneficiaries of temporary protection a number of rights set out in the Directive, including the access to adequate accommodation or housing, and access to social assistance. However, the implementation of this policy has varied widely across EU Member States in many respects, thus influencing the trajectories and life choices of Ukrainian refugees (Hernes et al., 2023; Lazarenko & Rabinovych, 2025). Germany took the lead in 2023 in terms of the number of people granted temporary protection, offering it to more than 1.2 million people¹, primarily due to its move from the concept of protection to the concept of integration of newcomers, and offering Ukrainians the same access to the labour market,

¹ Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1312584/ukrainian-refugees-by-country/>.

housing, social benefits, healthcare, and education as long-term residents of the country (Nowicka et al., 2025).

Although settlement within Germany was declared free (meaning that newcomers were free to choose their place of residence, rather than being assigned to a particular state or municipality as in the case of asylum seekers and refugees), the process was not so straightforward, especially in the case of Berlin. From the end of March 2022, registration of newly arrived Ukrainians in the city was only granted to those who could provide a documented host declaration in a standardised form—a procedure that directly highlights the role of pre-existing social connections and informal arrangements in securing accommodation. Those who could not provide a host declaration were offered the opportunity to stay in the Tegel refugee reception centre or to be relocated to other federal states according to Germany's refugee distribution criteria, with state-supported matching platforms such as *UnterkunftUkraine* facilitating connections between hosts and displaced persons.

The allocation policy was driven by local governance considerations, particularly in relation to funding streams for social services (Pilz, 2025). From the outset, Ukrainians were perceived as potential beneficiaries of welfare support and subsidised housing. Thus, once an individual received a residence permit under temporary protection, their stay was limited to residence in the federal state in which they had registered—mostly to simplify the allocation of the costs and long-term budgeting for the municipalities, whose competence was to finance the housing for those in need (Beckmann et al., 2022; Brülle & Gangl, 2024). Due to such an arrangement, however, the provision of social assistance was uneven across municipalities, which may also have jeopardised integration efforts (Pilz, 2025). This had significant long-term consequences, particularly for city-states within the German federal system, such as Bremen, Hamburg and Berlin, which faced disproportionate settlement pressures (Haase & Schmidt, 2024).

According to statistics², there are about 69,000 Ukrainian refugees in Berlin, of whom more than 18,500 receive social benefits. From June 2022, the benefits were operated through the the tax-funded unemployment benefit system for jobseekers (SGB II) for those of working age, while individuals unable to work or in receipt of an old-age pension received support from the social welfare office. Such approach, introduced alongside the subsequent welfare reform in Germany, gave rise to debates about the effectiveness of the idea of subsidiarity (Osiander & Ramos Lobato, 2022; Sallaba, 2023; Steyer, 2023), with some suggesting that Germany was becoming a 'workfare state' (Riedner & Hess, 2024).

The provision of housing, labour market integration and social benefits for Ukrainian refugees in Germany is primarily administered through Jobcentres, which serve as a single point of contact for those receiving unemployment-related social assistance for the period prior to finding employment. Registered jobseekers can apply for a housing allowance, which includes coverage of the rent, heating costs, and relocation-related instalment payments. The reimbursement could be applied to existing housing arrangements, with private hosts already accommodating refugees being able to apply for financial compensation, provided that they formalise the arrangement. In the case of a refugee looking for new accommodation, the proposed housing arrangement must be approved by the Jobcentre before a tenancy agreement can be signed³. However, the Jobcentre can only reimburse the 'reason-

² Source: <https://mediendienst-integration.de/migration/flucht-asy/ukrainische-fluechtlinge.html>.

³ Source: <https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/arbeitslos-arbeit-finden/buergergeld/wohnen>.

able' costs, with a cap on the rent, the size of the accommodation and the heating costs. The notion of 'reasonableness' is not defined at the federal level; moreover, 'reasonableness' is assessed by Jobcentre workers in each individual case, making recipients *de facto* dependent on the decisions of street-level bureaucrats (Ratzmann, 2021). Housing allowances are paid directly to the housing provider on the basis of a formal contract and cannot be partially reimbursed. However, the introduction of a grace period of one year after the signing of the contract was intended to reduce the burden of costs for the beneficiaries, allowing them either to try to reduce the costs or to find more suitable accommodation (Sallaba, 2023).

In the case of Berlin, the maximum amount of housing benefit is limited to €449 per month for the cost of rent excluding heating for a one-person household, plus around €100 for each additional person in the household⁴. This sum is lower than in most other major German cities, and the calculation is based on the median rental price in the city. However, given the developments in Berlin's rental market over the last few decades, which will be discussed later, the refund can barely cover the cost of accommodation in the city, leaving newcomers in need in a precarious situation that delays their access to suitable longer-term accommodation.

3 Housing crisis in Berlin

Despite Berlin being called 'a city of refuge' (Hierro & Maza, 2025), the existing arrangement with the housing market in the German capital makes the city-state a very complicated place for the newcomers to find sustainable accommodation, especially those burdened by the bureaucratic restrictions. Back in 2015, Berlin had already absorbed a higher number of war refugees than any other European city, with the difficulties accessing the housing market for the refugees leaving communal shelters already been well-documented (Bhagat & Soederberg, 2019; El-Kayed & Hamann, 2018). However, as Soederberg (2019) points out, the narrative of the arrival of refugees being the cornerstone of the following housing affordability crisis in Berlin, should be deconstructed—as the crisis resulted rather from the neoliberal and austerity politics shaping the arrival than with the movement of people fleeing wars *per se*.

As recent research points out, refugee accommodation has become a profitable industry in Berlin under the dominance of local governance practices of 'austerity urbanism' (Bernt et al., 2022; Soederberg, 2019). The mass arrival of Ukrainian refugees in Germany, and in particular in Berlin, has further highlighted this problem. As Hierro and Maza (2025) highlight, cities, as the primary destination for refugees, often lack the legal mandate to effectively manage accommodation and integration. However, Berlin serves as an exception here, being governed as a separate federal state responsible for its own policies regarding the reception of newcomers.

The housing crisis in Berlin is both longstanding and deeply intertwined with the city's historical, economic and political transformations. Despite economic expansion, unemployment in Berlin remains higher than the national average, thereby deepening social tensions between those benefiting from economic growth and those increasingly marginalised by rising housing costs. According to recent research, Berlin currently faces both a housing short-

⁴ Source: <https://www.buergergeld.org/news/buergergeld-so-hoch-darf-miete-wohnung-sein/#Mietobergrenzen-in-Berlin-%E2%80%93-Tabelle>.

age and a housing affordability crisis (Aaron, 2024; Sagner & Voigtländer, 2023). Under these conditions, the increase in rent has been documented: for instance, from 2011 to 2018, it increased 65% to 10.70€/sqm in median (Kadi et al., 2021), with access to affordable housing being limited (Holm et al., 2018). With the arrival of tens of thousands Ukrainians, and overall continuous migration to the city, the situation regarding access to decent housing for low-income groups got even more complicated, especially in the highly gentrified neighbourhoods (Holm, 2021).

As previous research has shown, refugee access to the housing market in Berlin has long been shaped by structural barriers and discriminatory practices (Bhimji, 2016; El-Kayed & Keskinkılıç, 2023; Foroutan et al., 2017). For those depending on state support to fund housing, there is a fundamental mismatch between prevailing rent levels and the maximum thresholds eligible for state reimbursement through mechanisms like the Jobcentre's housing support. As much of the housing on the market exceeds these limits, low-income individuals—especially recent arrivals—are effectively excluded from accessing secure, long-term accommodation. Many find themselves caught in a structural gap: unable to secure affordable housing and simultaneously prevented from relocating due to residence permit restrictions that bind them not only to the federal state of Berlin, but also to a district of the city responsible for the provision of benefits (Hanhörster et al., 2022). This systemic misalignment results in a housing bottleneck, rendering even well-intentioned policy interventions, such as rental reimbursements for forced migrants, largely unworkable in practice, and giving rise to informal solutions and alternative housing arrangements. The particular implications of these solutions for Ukrainian refugees will be discussed in the next sections of the paper.

4 Methodology

The findings to be discussed are derived from a research project (completed in 2025) analysing the lived experiences of Ukrainian refugee women in Berlin. Despite the role and importance of sustainable housing for the emergency support and further integration of forced migrants from Ukraine, the focus of the project was not specifically on the housing market, but rather on the broader challenges that contribute to their decision to stay in Berlin, leave the city (and/or the country), or return to Ukraine.

As an 'insider' in the field and a Ukrainian refugee myself, I had numerous encounters with other Ukrainians in informal settings, especially during the early stages of arrival (spring-summer 2022): in bureaucratic institutions, on public transport, or at Ukrainian-themed events. Insights from these encounters were recorded as ethnographic fieldnotes, which included both direct quotes and summarised accounts of the stories told by casual informants. Reflections on the emotions expressed by informants served as a tool to identify the key concerns about their housing situation that were of greatest subjective importance to them, and to formulate the key themes to be addressed during the interviews.

At the same time, I critically reflect on my own positionality. On the one hand, the fact that I share a refugee background with my research participants gave me privileged access to the field and facilitated the establishment of a rapport with them on the basis of shared experience. On the other hand, the potential limitations of the research may cause potential blind spots overlooked by the researcher personally involved in the issue. Additional pres-

asures arose from the need to separate personal and professional life when conducting fieldwork in de facto participatory research (Howlett & Lazarenko, 2023).

The project used a longitudinal ethnographic approach based on the repeated collection of the lived experiences of 12 Ukrainian single women who arrived in Berlin in the spring of 2022 and registered in the federal state of Berlin. By women, I mean those who identify as such and whose passport states their gender as female. By single, I mean those who came to Germany without children and/or dependants and who were not married or in a long-term relationship in Ukraine. By limiting the sample in this way, I focus on different aspects of individual decision making without being tied to the education/social security system and free from the emotions associated with being responsible for others. I also mitigate the factor of transnational ties and the prospect of family reunification, which could have a significant impact on return aspirations. In addition, the focus on single women provides a different perspective on housing, as those living alone have fewer resources to participate in the housing market, and potentially less sympathy from hosts and potential landlords than those who are also caring for dependent family members.

It is also important to note that the female refugee population seems to be overlooked in refugee studies, where men are seen as the trailblazers for their families, and women are seen either in the context of family relationships or in studies of vulnerability and exploitation (Andrews et al., 2023). The approach of hosting new arrivals through private agents has heightened these debates, particularly in relation to women being exposed to potential violence and exploitation (Daoust & Dyvik, 2024). With the majority of Ukrainian refugees arriving in Germany (as of April 2022) identifying as women⁵, and 17% arriving alone, focusing on this particular sub-population of refugees can provide additional insights into the debates around the implementation of the private hosting model in Germany and the following intersections of vulnerability.

The research participants ranged in age from 21 to 62 at the start of the research, came from different urban areas in Ukraine, and had different levels of education. Two of them had experienced double displacement, having first left their homes in Crimea and Donetsk respectively in 2014 following Russian occupation. The participants varied in their social and economic capital, though all relied on pre-existing networks to settle in Berlin, where each was hosted either by someone they knew personally or through second-degree connections. Only three had prior knowledge of German (basic or pre-intermediate level); communication with hosts occurred in English, while interactions with authorities were often mediated by hosts themselves, prior to enrolment in state-funded language courses.

Economically, the group can be broadly characterised as working- or lower middle-class, with limited savings. Ten out of twelve participants relied on social assistance at least for some months in the course of the project. Two participants were able to continue working remotely for Ukrainian employers, two were able to secure short-term employments, and only one reached permanent employment in the course of the project. However, greater financial resources did not necessarily ease access to housing. Participants encountered similar barriers—bureaucratic constraints, language-related exclusions, and landlord discretion—suggesting that exclusion from the housing market was shaped by more than economic and social capital alone.

⁵ Source: Ministry of the Interior report https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/veroeffentlichungen/nachrichten/2022/umfrage-ukraine-fluechtlinge.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2.

The main research method was in-depth interviews. The baseline interviews took place between November 2022 and January 2023, with follow-up interviews taking place in late 2023 and throughout 2024. Each participant was interviewed at least twice, with a maximum of five interviews with one person over the course of the project. The number of interviews varied due to changes in the participants' life situations (e.g. return to Ukraine or move to the third country), and their personal availability. The material collected in the less formalised interactions with the participants constitutes the set of field notes.

The baseline interviews, which lasted from 38 min to 3 h (1 h 10 min on average), were structured around five key themes: reasons for arriving in Berlin, housing situation, interaction with the state, employment, and future aspirations. The follow-up interviews followed the individual trajectories of the participants, with the topic of housing challenges being present in each of the interviews. Eight of the 12 baseline interviews were recorded and fully transcribed, the remainder were not recorded at the personal request of the participants, with the findings collected as field notes. The follow-up interviews were less formalised and mostly unrecorded, with data collected in the form of field notes. This allowed my interview partners to direct the flow of their narratives, bringing to light themes and considerations that might otherwise have been overlooked. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the interview at any time and subsequently provided written consent for data processing in accordance with the requirements of the institution overseeing the research. In consultation with my interviewees, all results were anonymised, with pseudonyms used for respondents. Quotations are translated from Ukrainian and Russian into English and shortened by the author. The data were manually coded and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), focusing on how the participants' narratives reflect the lived experiences of single refugee women in Berlin.

5 Findings

5.1 Structural "trap"

As discussed above, the neoliberal financialisation of Berlin's housing market has led to a significant shortage of affordable housing—both in terms of price and availability of suitable rental units. For Ukrainian refugees, this has led to a particularly paradoxical outcome: what was intended to be a short-term housing solution through homestay accommodation has in many cases turned into a long-term and precarious arrangement. Individuals initially hosted by private actors are often unable to move on to independent housing due to structural barriers and are effectively 'trapped' in these temporary arrangements. During this prolonged period—often of several years—refugees engage in language acquisition, diploma recognition and vocational training, while remaining financially dependent on the Jobcentre. This condition constitutes a form of structural entrapment, where long-term integration efforts unfold within housing arrangements that were never designed for such duration or complexity.

Uliana, a 21-year-old student from Lviv whom I met at one of the social gatherings in Berlin, told me in November 2022 that she had been having protracted problems with her landlady, who was actually the mother of her contact in Berlin when she first arrived. Also stressed by the rhythm of a huge city, she would have liked to move to a suburb, a well-

connected place like Strausberg or Oranienburg, where housing is more affordable. But she was not allowed to, because the suburbs already belong to the federal state of Brandenburg, and her residence permit required her to live in the Land of Berlin. Uliana slept on the floor of the living room for a few months until she realised that her hosts were tired of giving her a place to stay for an indefinite period of time.

Uliana's search for a place to live ran into another problem: the Jobcentre reimbursement could only cover the cost of renting a room in a flatshare (WG) in the neighbourhood where she was registered. However, flatshare landlords were extremely reluctant to rent to Jobcentre claimants: she shared with me numerous discriminatory screenshots she had taken, declaring 'no interest in Jobcentre' and even 'no to Ukrainians'. Perhaps the explanation for such attitudes lies in the existence of the flatsharing market in a grey area, where the main tenants have 'old contracts' at affordable prices and sublet the rooms at a much higher price, lacking formal sublet agreements with the landlords (Aaron, 2024). Finally, Uliana's search had a temporary happy ending: with the support of the queer network, she was able to find a room in a fairly remote area—but only for a year, and was looking for a new place when we spoke in December 2024—this time under different conditions, after enrolling in one of Berlin's universities.

Uliana's story raises the question of the new *gatekeepers* in the overheated housing market of Berlin with demand far outstripping supply in the affordable housing segment. The people who own the resource, in this case the rooms to sublet in the flatshare, can directly involve those dependent on state support in the discriminatory practices of gatekeeping. The housing policy has thus indirectly contributed to the exclusionary practices of the housing market, by abandoning direct reimbursement to the people receiving support and instead using the model of direct contract between the landlords and the Jobcentre (Lidén et al., 2025).

Another implication of the structural trap comes from the strategies my informants used to cope with the problematic situation of living with people who clearly expressed 'compassion fatigue'. Kateryna, 25, from Kyiv, reported to me the situation where her hosts, welcoming and empathetic upon her arrival, turned avoidant after two months of her stay, explaining it with the need to "spend time on their own". With the help of a friend, she was able to find another host, this time an older woman who owned a large apartment in a well-established neighbourhood and was specifically looking for a Ukrainian woman to host. However, Kateryna was reluctant to change her registration to a new place, as she wanted to avoid another round of bureaucratic procedures and had good communication with her advisor from the Jobcentre. As a result, she spent more than a year living under a false address, with her 'official' hosts receiving the reimbursement from the Jobcentre and transferring the money to Kateryna so that she could pay her rent at her actual place of residence.

... I still receive all my mail to the old address in Kreuzberg. And here I am no-one. Sometimes this gives me such an anxiety that the neighbours will complain to the police that a strange unregistered young lady is wandering around

In such a situation, a potential scenario of *hidden homelessness* arises as people live in places without official registration or address. As registration in Germany is a particularly important bureaucratic status that 'performs the existence' of a person (Gargiulo, 2024), living at the wrong address can not only make people question their right to occupy their

home, but also lead to constant anxiety about missing important mail from the Jobcentre, bank, etc., and expose them to additional vulnerabilities. For example, Nadiia, a 28 years old from Kyiv, has changed three real addresses while still being registered at her first address and constantly fearing that her initial host, whom she left after a tense situation, may withhold information about important letters, thus challenging her entire relationship with the bureaucratic institutions.

The rise of illegal brokers, even though not directly reported by my informants, but referred to, and observed by me in the participatory observations in the informal online networks, is another issue to address. Brokers are individuals who gain benefits from mediating access to valued resources they do not directly control (Lindquist, 2015). In the context of migration, Hanhörster and Wessendorf (2020) emphasise the role of arrival brokers in facilitating newcomers' access to essential resources. By connecting migrants with individuals, organisations, or institutions, arrival brokers serve a crucial mediation function by linking newcomers with others and establishing social links by connecting them to formal institutions (Bernt et al., 2022; Hanhörster et al., 2023). However, in the case of Ukrainian refugees coming to Berlin, the informal brokers largely focused on providing registration for a certain sum of money, not only further contributing to the issue of hidden homelessness, but also normalizing it through repetitive offers in the Ukrainian communities in the social media. At the same time, hosts can be also defined as brokers, acknowledging their role as both accommodation providers, the intermediaries between the newcomer and the state in the initial stage of arrival, and the 'address keepers' in the above-mentioned cases. Further repercussions of the power dynamics between the hosts and the hosted are to be discussed in the next section of the paper.

6 Intersection of vulnerabilities

A specific constellation of vulnerabilities has emerged from the structural issues shaping the stay of Ukrainian refugees in private arrangements. I will begin this section by outlining the emotional burden of uncertainty about the duration and nature of their stay, as shared by my participants, and then move on to the issues of vulnerability to eviction and the complicated dynamics of power relations with hosts, which can lead to violence and exploitation in the household.

6.1 Temporal uncertainty

Vira, a 39-year-old editor from Kharkiv, arrived in Berlin in April 2022. She had few belongings with her, having witnessed the start of the full-scale war while on holiday in Asia. She was taken in by distant relatives who had been living in Berlin for some time and offered to let her stay on the couch in their kitchen 'as long as it was necessary'. However, when we met for an interview in November 2022, Vira's living arrangements had not changed:

Main goal for me is now to find a job, otherwise I cannot afford a proper housing. Of course, I have already made myself comfortable in my [relatives'] kitchen. But I simply cannot live like a guest forever....

She had no knowledge of German and had to attend lengthy language courses in order to work. As she was structurally unable to move into her own accommodation, she ended up staying with her relatives. Although she did not report any conflicts with her hosts, she told me in several interviews how stressful the situation itself was, as she felt she was ‘testing the limits’ of her hosts’ generosity. The hosts also did not ask for reimbursement from the state, saying it was ‘inappropriate’ and that they had taken Vira in as an act of pure solidarity. However, Vira told me that her psychological wellbeing was deteriorating because of this constant feeling of unspoken pressure and of being an ‘occupier’ of the place. She also linked the need to move out with the realisation that she would be staying in Berlin for a long time and would therefore need to acquire more belongings than the space in the kitchen allowed. At the same time, driven by the desire to make space for her hosts, she adopted an interesting strategy:

There are lots of offers on the internet: Looking for a person who can stay with our cat for a weekend, or sometimes for a week. I applied, and that’s fantastic! I spend time in other places, take a break, give [my hosts] a break... By now, I am a visiting catmom for three fluffs who feel like mine.

Although such a strategy does not seem like a reliable solution, it worked for Vira at the time as a way to alleviate her daily stress. Ruslana, 65, from Sumy, also reported in November 2022 on the complex emotions she felt as a result of being hosted by her acquaintances:

I’m ashamed that now I have the status of a refugee and live as a guest with the family of these kind people. They changed their lifestyle to host me, and I don’t feel comfortable with this.

This emotional state of ‘permanent temporariness’ and uncertainty about the duration of the arrangements (Haase et al., 2024; Lazarenko, 2024) can have a direct impact on refugees’ wellbeing and can also contribute to their decision-making about whether to remain in their arrangement or, as in Ruslana’s case, to move to a third country where she expected more favourable living conditions.

6.2 Exposure to evictions and violence

Daryna, 36, a former middle-level company manager from Kyiv, was welcomed in Berlin by a friend’s friend in a private flat, establishing a fast connection with her host on the basis of a shared hobby. The hostess helped her with orientation and paperwork. Within two months, however, the situation had changed dramatically:

... she kicked me out somewhere around 25th of May, if I remember correctly. A week before, she mentioned she realised it is not that comfortable for her to share the flat with anyone else, but she gave me time to find something else. And then, one night, she just returned home, yelled at me, and threatened not to let me out of the block unless I pack all my stuff....

Daryna found herself in a completely unpredictable situation, feeling confused and unsure of how to protect herself. In a moment of total emergency, she decided to flee the dangerous environment and seek refuge with her friend. At the time, there were still many offers from private individuals offering their homes to Ukrainians, including through the *UnterkunftUkraine* platform. But it was not all plain sailing.

My second hostess was quite an old lady. It is obviously hard for her to clean the whole apartment, cook every day, do groceries. I offered my help at the beginning, just out of gratitude [...] but then she got used to it. [...] after she returned from vacation and asked me pretentiously, why there is no food in the fridge, I realised I should move elsewhere.

Daryna's story ended with moderate success: after spending some time in temporary shared accommodation, she was lucky enough to find a place to stay, where she can finally feel safe and at home.

A similar story was told by another refugee, Margaryta, 21, whose experience went from a warm and welcoming relationship with the host couple (who also denied the possibility of receiving compensation from the state for hosting the refugee) to a situation of psychological violence where she hid in her room most days to avoid any interaction with the hostess. She was also accused of 'flirting' with the male host and 'damaging the family'." By the winter of 2022, Margaryta had moved out—only to return to Ukraine, where she felt safer and less burdened by bureaucracy.

The mentioned examples showcase significant structural and social vulnerabilities for refugees. In the absence of formal rental contracts—which some hosts actively avoid, framing their hospitality as a voluntary act of solidarity—those hosted are left without legal protection or tenancy rights. This legal ambiguity places the burden of stability entirely on the goodwill of the host, creating a precarious dependency for the guest. Over time, relationships between hosts and hosted often shift, with early moments of empathy giving way to fatigue and frustration, especially when the anticipated short-term arrangement becomes protracted. Moreover, informal cohabitation can amplify existing social tensions and give rise to discriminatory narratives, particularly along gendered lines. These dynamics point to the wider risks inherent in homestay arrangements, where the absence of institutional oversight allows personal judgements, social prejudice, and emotional exhaustion to shape access to housing. Ultimately, they expose the fragility of such arrangements and the need to critically interrogate the broader structures that delegate refugee accommodation to the private sphere.

6.3 Power dynamics with hosts

The stories discussed show how refugee women hosted by private individuals can face overlapping vulnerabilities, ranging from physical threats to the risk of domestic violence, often without alternative accommodation or support networks.

Research into the UK's *Homes for Ukraine* sponsorship scheme has also highlighted the risks inherent in informal housing arrangements, pointing to vulnerabilities associated with the structure, organisation and limited support mechanisms of the scheme (Zschomler & Berg, 2024). These include risks of sexual exploitation and modern slavery, particularly

as the majority of Ukrainian arrivals are women. Reports have highlighted concerns about predatory behaviour by certain hosts, including traffickers and exploitative landlords, targeting Ukrainian women and children (Daoust & Dyvik, 2024). In response, charities have actively campaigned against placing women and children with single male hosts. Given the unequal power dynamics between host and guest—and the host's ability to withdraw sponsorship—the system relies heavily on precarious emotional bonds, putting guests at further risk of homelessness if the host-guest relationship breaks down. A growing proportion of people from Ukraine registered as homeless are already being reported in the UK, possibly as a result of tensions similar to those mentioned by my informants. In the case of Germany, no such cases have been reported in large-scale studies (Herpell et al., 2024). This does not, however, rule out the possibility of violence against refugees and increases the importance of qualitative data in understanding the potential risks of relying on the private hosting model.

The issue of people hosting the refugees remain under-researched—perhaps due to the sensitive nature of the matter and the population being both hard to access and not feeling able or willing to express their opinions on moral grounds. Research suggest the hosts are mostly middle- or upper-class, white, native-born middle-aged citizens—a population able to easily offer accommodation without expecting financial gain (Bassoli & Luccioni, 2024; Daoust & Dyvik, 2024). The only study focusing on hosts examines the Polish context and highlights the emotional labour involved in accommodating strangers. It emphasises the challenges that emerge over time, including the need to align daily routines, establish personal boundaries, manage unmet expectations, and come to terms with the life choices of those being hosted (Luczaj, 2024).

Despite the informal and often compassionate nature of private hosting, the underlying power dynamics tend to reproduce hierarchies rooted in narratives of the vulnerable victim and the benevolent host. In such arrangements, hosts retain control over crucial resources—space, stability, and access to networks—thereby reinforcing unequal relationships (Birger et al., 2024; Monforte et al., 2021). These dynamics are reflected in the experiences of several participants. As mentioned before, Nadia's former host continued to control the official correspondence addressed to her registered address, thereby maintaining power over her ability to receive bureaucratic notifications even after she had moved out, subjecting her to literal and symbolic dependence. Others, such as Margaryta and Ruslana, described a gradual tightening of household rules over time. Margaryta experienced increasing restrictions on the types of food she was permitted to eat, while Ruslana said she was forbidden from showering after 9 p.m. due to alleged noise complaints—a rule introduced six months after she arrived. Meanwhile, Daryna was expected to cook for her host, suggesting an expectation of unpaid domestic labour framed as reciprocity. These examples reveal how informal hospitality can slide into regimes of control and extraction, and shift over time, often to the detriment of those being hosted.

Emotional labour is performed on both sides: guests often adapt themselves to the routines and expectations of the host household, attempting to be agreeable and useful through acts such as cooking or cleaning, while hosts navigate the challenges of sharing private space with individuals living under prolonged stress (Burrell, 2024; Komter & Leer, 2012; Phillimore et al., 2025). This form of cohabitation can contribute to deteriorating mental health for refugees, who already face heightened risks of psychological distress, including depression and anxiety (Buchcik et al., 2023). Additionally, some hosted individuals

take on the administrative role of advocate—navigating bureaucratic systems on behalf of themselves and others—which adds further pressure and emotional strain (Tarshish, 2024). These dynamics can be understood through the lens of gift theory: Komter and Leer (2012) describe hosting as a form of voluntary exploitation framed as a gift, while Merikoski (2021) draws attention to the “debt of gratitude” that refugees may feel obliged to repay, often in subtle and ongoing ways. Such exchanges, while rooted in generosity, risk becoming embedded in moral economies that obscure structural inequalities and emotional costs.

7 Discussion: Commodification of solidarity

Giving up private homes for a public service as an act of insitutionalised solidarity cannot be seen as a long-term solution. Living closely with the host can lead to what Hartmann (2023) calls *empathy gulf*: a situation in which a person feels less empathy for those viewed at close quarters. For example, sharing routines with a refugee and seeing the ‘vulnerable victim’ living a life can challenge empathy and undermine the willingness to express solidarity—and to share the home with someone who is seen as less ‘deserving’ because they engage in a social life and buy themselves small treats.

Relationships and routines between people sharing a home develop naturally over time. Both Daryna’s and Margaryta’s stories of eviction illustrate this, as well as the lack of clear communication and possibly the moral obligation felt by the hosts until the situation exploded. The data collected on those matched with hosts through the *UnterkunftUkraine* platform suggests that the average length of stay reported in the survey was only four months, with many placements ending within a year (Herpell et al., 2024), clearly indicating the timelines for the development of compassion fatigue, as well as the average time needed to find a new place. However, these data are not disaggregated by Land, which leaves room for the assumption that the situation in Berlin was different due to the ‘structural trap’ described.

Nevertheless, an alternative possibility existed. Kateryna, whose story I mentioned earlier in the context of living under a wrong address, rented her room from a host who initially wanted to give her premises on a pro bono basis as an act of solidarity. However, Kateryna insisted on paying the reimbursement—the sum agreed with her previous hosts, and well below the actual market price. However, she did not sign any formal contract with her host until May 2023, when she finally secured a job and was able to pay her rent herself. Nevertheless, the host (or, subsequently, the landlady) remained reluctant for her to do so, citing her unchanged capacity to provide assistance to those in need and her well-established rapport with Kateryna:

As soon as I find the job, I’ll quit Jobcenter and make my official registration here, and will pay the market price for the place. [my hostess] tried to oppose this idea, but at the end agreed it is better to have such relationship between us. I want to be a tenant, not a ward.

It took my informant another year to negotiate a price increase in line with the market. This time both she and the landlady agreed that full formalisation would be a better solution for everyone, especially for Kateryna, who reported that she finally felt that she belonged to the

place where she lived. This change in the relationship made me think about the '*commodification of solidarity*', a situation that contrasts with the inability to talk about the conflicts that arose in previous cases.

As Kadi points out, the commodification of the housing sector, which is not yet organised as a private market, is a feature of neoliberal housing policies (Jacobs, 2019; Kadi et al., 2021; Lidén et al., 2025); on the other hand, such an outcome seems to be one of the few possible responses to the protracted nature of displacement, with no clear perspective on when and how the war will end and how long refugees will remain in the country. In addition, after Kateryna moved out to her partner's place, her former landlady began to consider renting out the room again, realising that she preferred company to living alone in her five-room apartment—thus somehow extending her contribution to solving Berlin's housing crisis by adding another affordable premises to the market.

Introducing the concept of *commodification of solidarity*, I refer to the shifting interplay between moral and economic logics within hosting arrangements. While private hosting is often imagined as an ethical alternative to neoliberal commercialisation, the cases discussed here reveal the pitfalls of delegating state responsibilities to informal actors and relying on a moral economy to sustain long-term housing. The expectation that hosts provide accommodation indefinitely, and often at far below market rates, creates asymmetries that blur the line between altruistic commitment and forms of value extraction or dependency. Drawing on Sayer's (2007) moral economy approach, this perspective highlights how economic life is always morally evaluated—and how arrangements framed as solidaristic can nonetheless induce ethically problematic practices, constrain flourishing, or normalise unequal obligations. At the same time, these dynamics resonate with broader patterns in the global governance of displacement, where economic logics routinely shape the allocation of refugee responsibilities and where monetary exchanges become a means of negotiating obligations (Freier et al., 2021). Seen in this light, the commodification of solidarity in private hosting is not an aberration but a localised expression of wider tendencies in which moral narratives coexist with—and are frequently reorganised by—economic imperatives.

8 Conclusion

The policy architecture underpinning solidarity-based private arrangements for newcomers remains fragile. As Bassoli and Luccioni (2024) rightly argue, greater critical attention must be paid to the political and institutional contexts in which private initiatives are embedded. These arrangements, it must be noted, are not merely acts of hospitality, but rather are embedded within broader systems of inequality, migration governance, and broader urban transformations.

These challenges necessitate a thorough examination of potential policy solutions, which may require a re-evaluation of existing practices and, in certain instances, taking into account the practices of commodification of solidarity to ensure long-term sustainability. It is therefore essential to understand refugee reception and housing integration beyond the binary of formal versus informal arrangements. While the hybrid model of refugee accommodation in Germany has been criticised for outsourcing responsibility and overly relying on private individuals, particularly in the case of Ukrainian refugees, it nonetheless played a crucial role in the immediate crisis response. This underscores the significance of hybrid

models in facilitating effective crisis response and offers valuable insights for the formulation of future policies.

I also critically assess the limitations of the study. The case-study design necessarily narrows the scope of the analysis and cannot capture the full diversity of hosting arrangements, whether in terms of the socio-demographic dispersion of experiences or the specific structural conditions of the city-state of Berlin, which differ from those in other German federal lands. Nevertheless, recognising these constraints helps to identify promising avenues for further research, including comparative work across regions, across cities of different sizes, and across national models of distributed humanitarianism. Additionally, the study foregrounds the perspectives of those hosted, while the hosts' viewpoints remain largely absent—a group that is often difficult to access due to social expectations, reputational concerns, and the moral pressures surrounding acts of solidarity. Incorporating these perspectives in future research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics analysed here.

As the financialisation of housing markets continues to create uncertainty in European cities—particularly Berlin—the role of municipalities in managing migration is becoming increasingly important (Haase et al., 2024; Hierro & Maza, 2025). While the findings of this study, capturing the lived experiences of Ukrainian refugee women navigating private housing in Berlin, are not statistically generalisable, they provide an important lens through which to understand the intersections of migration policy, housing precarity, and grassroots solidarity. While the responses at the federal, state and, especially, municipal level to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees have demonstrated the state's capacity to respond to large-scale displacement, the transition from emergency measures to durable housing solutions has been far from seamless. For this reason, the findings of the study can contribute to future research and policy development aimed at improving the reception and housing integration of refugees in Germany.

The analysis ultimately highlights a broader structural problem: in neoliberal policy settings, the housing of refugees, migrants and other vulnerable groups is increasingly delegated to humanitarian outsourcing, framed through appeals to solidarity with those in need but effectively shifting state responsibilities onto private actors. The case study demonstrates that such reliance on morally inflected arrangements can produce contradictory outcomes, particularly in large cities already strained by acute housing shortages. Solidarity itself is ambivalent. It facilitates the inclusion of some groups while simultaneously reinforcing the exclusion of others, thereby reproducing racialised hierarchies and forms of whiteness—an issue that warrants dedicated investigation beyond the scope of this paper.

Appeals to solidarity also generate specific tensions and power dynamics, making them unsustainable as a long-term solution for refugee accommodation. As the findings show, solidaristic practices—especially within the closed and intimate context of homestay arrangements—evolve over time and gradually acquire features of commodification in the wider context of the financialisation of housing. The concept of the *commodification of solidarity* presented here opens new directions for research, and future comparative work will seek to theorise these processes further and examine their manifestations across different urban, regional and national settings.

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