

Who Accommodates Meaning? The Privileges of Being Interpreted and Housed from the Perspective of Ukrainians in Slovakia

Martina Wilsch*, Miroslava Hlinčíková*, Helena
Tužinská**, Markéta Štefková***

Displaced populations experience heightened levels of inequality and injustice in their access to society, where epistemic dimensions contribute to these injustices. Policies that inadequately address the needs of forced migrants often result in restricted access to translation and interpretation services. By failing to address the lived experiences and voices of these populations, systems further perpetuate social inequalities and obstruct the development of inclusive, equitable practices. This paper argues that epistemic injustices, as a specific, nuanced layer, contribute to the production of vulnerability of refugees. In particular, it examines the systemic disregard for refugees' lived experiences and the misrecognition of language use in administrative contexts and in interpreting, demonstrating these processes in housing practices towards Ukrainian refugees. The empirical examples are drawn from qualitative research conducted in Slovakia from 2023 to February 2025, involving displaced persons from Ukraine, ad hoc interpreters and institutional actors responsible for refugee integration and support. The analysis is grounded in translation policy studies, the ethnography of communication and the anthropology of housing, providing a multidisciplinary perspective on the challenges faced by displaced populations.

Keywords: *epistemic injustice, refugees in Slovakia, communicative space, interpretation, meaning-making*

* Slovak Academy of Sciences, Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology, Slovakia. Corresponding author: martina.wilsch@savba.sk.

** Comenius University in Bratislava, Department of Archaeology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, Slovakia.

*** Comenius University in Bratislava, Department of German, Dutch, and Scandinavian Studies, Faculty of Arts, Slovakia.

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Introduction

Displaced populations, such as refugees and asylum-seekers, are particularly vulnerable to various forms of injustice, including epistemic injustice (Dotson 2011, 2012, 2014; Fricker 2007; Medina 2012, 2022; Pohlhaus 2017). Bureaucratic systems are often designed without accounting for the lived realities and epistemic voices of displaced persons, rendering many of their experiences unintelligible, uncredible or illegible to institutional logics. Despite the differences between national regimes of refugee governance, the diverse forms of epistemic inequality manifest as enduring patterns in societies and structural settings. The agency of marginalised populations as knowers is often impeded and disempowered, as well as included only partly or in pernicious ways (Medina 2022). Epistemic injustice permeates even humanitarian structures whose explicit purpose is to help, as data collection encodes the priorities of its commissioners rather than the knowledge and needs of the refugees themselves (Jones and Squire 2025).

The context of Ukrainian displacement is particularly relevant, as the large-scale arrival of refugees following February 2022 has exposed deeper structural inequalities and the ill-preparedness of existing institutional systems – in Central and Eastern European countries in particular – making visible the broader epistemic and structural conditions under which refugee vulnerability is produced. Since February 2022, research on Ukrainian displacement has extensively examined the structural barriers faced by Ukrainian refugees, including the instability of temporary protection and obstacles to labour-market access, housing and social protection (Haase, Arroyo, Astolfo, Franz, Laksevis, Lazarenko and Schmidt 2024; Schrooten 2025). It has further highlighted how labour-market governance shapes refugee positioning in receiving societies and how feminisation and motherhood structure agency and aspirations (Mezihorák 2025). At the same time, this body of research challenges portrayals of refugees as passive victims by foregrounding their resilience, agency and resistance (Dryjanska, Sanchez and Hagues 2025; Nedelcu and Wyss 2026; Rock and Yanaşmayan 2025). In Central European contexts, the consequences of ill-prepared institutional systems, barriers to stable housing, language barriers, discrimination or insufficient information limiting labour integration were at the centre of inquiry (Bahna, Fedáková, Kentoš, Lášticová, Mezihorák, Očenášová, Papcunová, Petrjánošová, Poslon, Prošek and Wilsch 2025; Necel 2025; Wilsch and Hlinčíková 2024). Despite the growing interest in the structural and agential dimensions of Ukrainian displacement, less attention has been paid to the epistemic dimension of these processes, particularly to the role of communication and interpretation in shaping how power operates through meaning-making, the negotiation of meaning and communicative space in institutional encounters (Tužinská 2025).

Slovakia, frequently perceived as a transit country, exemplifies many of these dynamics. Despite its long history of emigration and immigration (Botík 2021), Slovakia's experience as a country of asylum is relatively recent and still transforming. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to the arrival of almost 133,000 persons granted temporary protection in Slovakia (Ministry of the Interior of the SR 2025), putting unprecedented pressure on the country's underdeveloped migration and integration infrastructure. In this article, the term 'integration' refers to a two-way process in which both newcomers and the receiving society participate, making it a relational process of mutual adjustment (Klarenbeek 2021). Despite the increasing linguistic diversity among asylum-seekers and refugees, services operate without fully acknowledging the lived needs of forcibly displaced populations, monolingual policies persist and services are predominantly in Slovak, resulting in inadequate or inaccessible translation and interpretation services, an over-reliance on formal or bureaucratic language, the omission of critical technical terminology and over-simplified translations (Štefková and

Tužinská 2021; Šveda and Tužinská 2021; Šveda and Štefková 2023). In the absence of a systematic public service interpreting (PSI) infrastructure – that is, organised interpreting provision in institutional settings such as healthcare, legal contexts and social services – communication is often mediated by *ad hoc* interpreters. These are typically untrained bilingual individuals, including volunteers or community members, who provide informal language support in response to urgent needs. Their involvement reflects the lack of an institutionalised PSI system and underscores the reliance on improvised solutions in high-stakes communicative encounters (Angelelli 2016), while they continue to play a central yet precarious role in facilitating communication. In Slovakia, PSI exists largely in fragmented or *ad hoc* forms, without a comprehensive national policy or professional framework. The failure to integrate the lived knowledge and experiences of refugees into service provision and policy-making exacerbates existing inequalities and undermines the potential for equitable and inclusive practices (Wilsch and Hlinčíková 2024). Institutional and political inertia in transforming an asylum-related infrastructure, including interpretation services, remains a critical concern.

Our contribution moves beyond an analysis of communicative failures to examine the broader structural and discursive conditions under which certain voices are rendered unintelligible, certain testimonies dismissed and certain forms of knowledge excluded from institutional processes. The paper, theoretically grounded in the concepts of epistemic injustice, explores these dynamics in the context of Ukrainian displacement in Slovakia, with a particular focus on housing and healthcare as sites where such conditions are especially visible. By foregrounding interpretation as a site of power negotiation, the paper traces how systemic misrecognition, interpretive asymmetries and institutional monolingualism constrain and contest refugees' epistemic agency and extends the discussion of epistemic injustice beyond who speaks to how meaning is accommodated or foreclosed in interaction, offering a critical lens for viewing epistemic authority as constructed and challenged through various asymmetries.

Theoretical framework: epistemic injustice as a nuanced dimension of structural inequality in refugee governance

Refugees and displaced populations face a range of structural vulnerabilities and injustices. While the literature often focuses on broader structural barriers to rights, resources and participation (Almohamed and Vyas 2016; Gill and Good 2019; Knappert, Kroon, Kornau and Abdelmageed 2024; Leboeuf, Brun, Lidén, Marchetti, Nakache and Sarolea 2024), recent scholarship has drawn attention to more-nuanced forms of structural inequality by showing how certain groups are marginalised through the devaluation of their credibility, the silencing of their experiences or the rendering of their knowledge as unintelligible within the dominant frameworks (Dotson 2011; Fricker 2007; Kidd, Medina and Pohlhaus 2017; Medina 2012, 2022). Epistemic injustice, understood as the unjust treatment of individuals and groups in their capacity as knowers (Dotson 2012; Dunne 2020; Fricker 2007; Medina 2012, 2022), arises when social actors, particularly marginalised or vulnerable groups such as refugees, are excluded, misrecognised, silenced or partially included in the process of knowledge production. In such contexts, marginalised testimonies are not only ignored but also distorted or instrumentalised – or harm the original intent and meaning of what is being communicated (Dotson 2011; Medina 2022). These frameworks create epistemological and material barriers that prevent marginalised groups from acknowledging their voices as legitimate or having their knowledge meaningfully integrated into collective understanding. Research in refugee contexts has increasingly addressed epistemic injustices, such as testimonial injustice, characterised by disbelief and silencing in camps and detention centres

(Hänel 2021), the moral economy of credibility in asylum hearings (Govindarajan 2022), the failure of institutional arrangements and refugee policy frameworks to incorporate the testimonies of the marginalised groups and the structural neglect of gender-based experiences in asylum policies (Ingram 2021; Steen-Johnsen and Skreland 2023; Wikström 2014).

In displacement contexts, the systematic exclusion, silencing or marginalisation of certain groups' knowledge, experiences and interpretive frameworks within dominant epistemic systems has material consequences – for example, when refugees are unable to access housing or services because the systems governing access fail to recognise their testimony or lived realities as valid. In our article, we approach epistemic injustice as multifaceted, drawing on several closely related forms to capture the various ways in which knowledge and refugee testimonies may be institutionally under-represented or restricted. Power relations further shape how social relations are interpreted, who is recognised as a legitimate knower, whose perspective informs institutional decisions and how shared meaning enters public policies and institutional discourse (Medina 2012). However, who is institutionally recognised as entitled to define what counts as valid knowledge, credible testimony or relevant evidence is related to epistemic authority – the capacity of an individual, institution or system to be acknowledged as a reliable source of knowledge and to establish what is recognised as 'truth', 'need' or 'risk' (Jäger 2022). In refugee governance, epistemic authority is not only the result of individual expertise but is also socially distributed and shaped by wider norms, institutional arrangements and power relations. As a result, policymakers, state institutions or humanitarian organisations may be granted epistemic authority even when their knowledge is partial, biased or disconnected from the lived realities of refugees (Fricker 2007; Medina 2012).

From structural precarity to epistemic inequality

While the precarity experienced by displaced Ukrainians in Slovakia is produced by broader structural conditions, such as unstable policy arrangements, legal uncertainty, underdeveloped welfare and integration infrastructure and persisting infrastructural problems related to housing, healthcare, care infrastructure and other essential resources (Bahna *et al.* 2025), the epistemic layer further compounds the production of vulnerability. Although structural inequalities within refugee governance cannot be reduced to epistemic inequality, they are often closely interrelated and inseparable. For the purposes of this article, epistemic injustice is understood as a nuanced dimension of structural inequality that operates not only through the silencing or devaluation of refugees as knowers but also through the mediation of meaning itself. We focus on situations in which meaning is unevenly negotiated, rendered partial or refracted through interpretation and institutional communication, thereby intensifying vulnerability and reinforcing broader structural inequalities.

Following Fricker (2007), we focus on testimonial injustice – where refugees' accounts are dismissed or devalued because of prejudices about the social identities they hold – and hermeneutic injustice, where structural gaps in collective understanding prevent their experiences from being fully recognised or articulated. At the same time, our material also points to forms of contributory injustice, in which the interpretive resources of marginalised actors fail to shape dominant institutional understandings (Dotson 2012). This is particularly relevant where refugees' own interpretative frameworks and ways of making sense of need, entitlement or vulnerability remain external to the frameworks through which institutions classify and respond to them. We also draw on Dotson's (2011) concepts of testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering, in which refugees are not recognised as knowers in the first place or withhold or adapt their testimony due to perceived audience incompetence or the risk of being

misunderstood (Dotson 2011). With these concepts, we analyse under what conditions the voices of refugees are becoming credible, intelligible and capable of influencing the production of meaning, whose voices are institutionally recognised, how power circulates through acts of interpretation and meaning-making and under what conditions the knowledge of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia and their testimonies are not taken into account.

Communicative space, interpretation and epistemic authority

These epistemic dynamics are manifest particularly in interpreter-mediated communication, where the lack of structured language support systems exacerbates inequalities in access to essential services. One of the fundamental communication barriers emerging in the early stages of migrant integration arises from the absence of an institutionalised system of PSI and from the lack of a clear and enforceable interpreting policy. This institutional gap often leads to *ad hoc* solutions for language support which, in turn, hinder equal access to essential services, including healthcare, legal assistance and social welfare. Corsellis (2008), Pöllabauer (2005) and Valero-Garcés and Tipton (2017) have highlighted how the systemic failure to provide structured interpreting services disproportionately affects migrants, exacerbating their marginalisation and deepening communicative asymmetries in crucial public encounters. These asymmetries are exacerbated by the power imbalances inherent in interpreter-mediated communication, particularly in institutional settings where one party typically has more authority and agency than the other. According to Mason's (2001) concept of triadic exchanges, interpreters are positioned between institutional agents and service users in a dynamic that reflects and reproduces existing power relations. In such contexts, interpreters may be pressured to align with institutional discourse, consciously or unconsciously affecting the neutrality of their role. Wadensjö (2001) also emphasises how the interactional nature of dialogue interpreting often reveals the interpreter's active role in negotiating meaning, which becomes particularly significant in unequal power dynamics where the institutional voice tends to dominate the exchange. Translation studies provide useful frameworks in which to understand the gravity of this policy vacuum. Meylaerts (2011) defines translation policy as a set of decisions shaping which languages are translated and under what conditions – and how translation is delivered within state structures. These perspectives shift the focus to the interpretation process, where communicative participation, intelligibility and epistemic authority are unevenly negotiated, providing a framework for a nuanced understanding of epistemic inequality adopted in this article.

Research methods

This paper draws on empirical examples from qualitative research conducted in Slovakia between 2023 and 2025. The research samples included three interrelated strands: the lived experiences of Ukrainian refugees in vulnerable situations, the perspectives of institutional actors responsible for refugee integration and support and the interpreters.

Qualitative research on community interpreting in the context of displaced persons from Ukraine was conducted in Slovakia between March 2023 and March 2024. The research sought to address systemic challenges in public service interpreting following the outbreak of war in Ukraine. The methodology combined ethnographic interviews and surveys, followed by a comparative analysis of the collected data, in order to investigate communication barriers in public service encounters involving forcibly displaced persons. Interviews were conducted with key institutional actors who regularly

collaborate with community interpreters, as well as with NGO staff and legal advisors working with refugees. The interviews focused on communication practices, interpreter-mediated interactions, the absence of formal interpreting policies and the practical and emotional challenges arising in high-stakes multilingual contexts. In addition, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 31 interpreter candidates prior to their participation in a certified PSI training course, of whom 21 reported active involvement in interpreting. The sample included interpreters of Ukrainian origin (16), many of whom were themselves members of the displaced community. Their educational backgrounds were diverse; although some had previous training in linguistics or interpreting, the majority lacked formal training in PSI. Notably, only one participant was employed as a full-time public service interpreter, while the rest combined interpreting with other professional roles, such as healthcare or social work. The interviews aimed to capture the participants' previous interpreting experiences, career paths, motivations and expectations. The aim was also to identify challenges in communicating with foreign nationals and to gain insight into expectations and perceptions of interpreter competence, as well as the role of community interpreters in reducing communication barriers for displaced people, particularly in the absence of an established national interpreting policy.

The second study on which this paper draws was qualitative research with Ukrainian refugees and institutional actors, conducted in Bratislava between February 2024 and February 2025. Research methods included ethnography, semi-structured interviews, participant observation and informal conversations. The interviews with displaced refugees thematically explored life and social circumstances in Slovakia, focusing on their care, social support and housing experiences. They also examined access to information, the role of institutions in the integration process at the individual level and the subjectively experienced barriers to meeting personal and family needs in the context of displacement. Additionally, interviews with institutional representatives provided insights into the structural obstacles that institutions face in addressing the needs of Ukrainian refugees. The sample consisted of 25 interviews with Ukrainian refugees – 20 women and five men – and two institutional actors – municipal social workers in the field of supporting Ukrainian refugees. The sample of Ukrainian refugees reflected the diversity of regions of origin, stages of integration, various life situations and positions in the life cycle – and the different living arrangements in Slovakia. Finally, the research sample reflects different aspects of vulnerability, including traumatic war-related experiences, the ability to participate in the receiving society, caregiving responsibilities, healthcare needs, social and cultural capital and the (non-)availability of supportive social networks. Interviews were conducted in Slovak, English or Ukrainian. Ukrainian-language interviews were facilitated by the assistance of an interpreter, a Slovak citizen of Ukrainian origin. The interpreter also acted as a gatekeeper and the people we interviewed knew and trusted her, as she is an active volunteer within the Ukrainian community in Bratislava. We approached the data analysis with caution and reflexivity, being fully aware that the presence of an interpreter during the interview may influence both the dynamics of the exchange and the epistemic quality of the data, as the interpreter mediates meaning in ways that may obscure nuance, introduce asymmetries of power and affect the perceived credibility of the participant's narrative.

The research processes adhered to ethical standards for studying vulnerable refugee populations (American Anthropological Association 2012; Düvell, Triandafyllidou and Vollmer 2010; Jacobsen and Landau 2003). The research situations were designed to create safe spaces where interview partners could share information relevant to their experiences, ensuring that the knowledge of marginalised refugees was granted epistemic authority, legitimised and taken seriously (Samzelius 2020). At the same time, we maintained a self-reflexive approach to our positionality as researchers, power asymmetries and the vulnerabilities of our interview partners, aiming to minimise bias and enhance

transparency and trustworthiness (Amelina 2021; Cassell, Cunliffe and Grandy 2018). Interview partners received comprehensive information about the purpose of the research and how the data will be used, their rights during the interview – including the option not to answer questions or the right to withdraw from the interview at any point; they then signed the written informed consent form. We respect the privacy and maintain the anonymity of all research participants and thus all names are fictitious. All quotations were translated by the authors. Given the centrality of mediated communication in this study, translation represents an additional layer of meaning-making. In some cases, participants' accounts were mediated twice – first through interpretation during the interview and subsequently through translation into English. The authors adopted a reflexive approach to translation, aiming to preserve semantic nuance and contextual meaning; however, participant validation was not systematically conducted, which we acknowledge as a limitation.

Results: identifying epistemic injustices in the context of Ukrainian refugee displacement

Understanding the epistemic injustice in Ukrainian displacement in Slovakia requires a nuanced approach involving a plurality of situated perspectives to deconstruct its multiple layers. The lived experiences of refugees offer a crucial entry point. At the same time, the perspectives of other actors – such as institutional representatives, community interpreters and support workers – reveal the interlocking layers through which epistemic injustice becomes visible. Each perspective reflects distinct mechanisms by which knowledge is constrained, dismissed or unevenly distributed, as well as how communicative asymmetries, institutional discourse practices and the absence of interpreting policy contribute to layered forms of testimonial, hermeneutical and contributory injustice.

Navigating the unknown: knowledge gaps and informational vulnerability

Ukrainian refugees reported various insecurities arising from their vulnerable position, mainly due to their restricted access to information, whether unavailable, poorly communicated or difficult to understand due to the language barrier. These insecurities often stemmed from a gap between the refugees' lived realities and the systemic frameworks meant to support them but which failed to account for their specific circumstances. Yet, these conditions cannot be understood solely as failures or misunderstandings in communication. At their core, they reflect unequal conditions under which different actors are recognised as authorities in defining measures, decisions and policy responses. This broader pattern of structural disregard for the experiential knowledge meant that their perspectives were largely absent from institutional responses. Interview partners described their reliance on non-institutional, informal knowledge networks, such as family members or the community. While these networks often provided crucial support, they also exposed refugees to risks, including misinterpretation, misinformation and manipulation. The failure of the state to create clear, accessible and culturally legible information channels opened up space for third-party intermediaries to play the role of 'epistemic brokers' with unequal power. This constitutes a condition of vulnerability, not merely because of the refugees' own lack of knowledge but primarily because of the structural absence of accessible, transparent and credible information. To cope, refugees did not remain passive in their situation. They actively sought help, gathered information and navigated bureaucratic systems to secure support. This demonstrates not only their agentivity but also the fact that institutions did not operate in ignorance: the repeated attempts by refugees to seek assistance reveal that relevant actors had some awareness of the group's pressing needs, even if these were not reflected in policy responses.

Epistemic silencing: missing public service interpreting policy

The analysis of communicative barriers in interactions between displaced persons and state authorities reveals a significant systemic gap: the absence of a PSI policy as a risk to procedural integrity. This absence compromises the procedural neutrality and fairness of interactions involving displaced persons, particularly those who rely on interpreters to access their rights and navigate complex administrative procedures. In the Slovak context, the lack of a PSI policy has enabled the emergence of unregulated private actors mediating communication between displaced persons and state authorities. Community members themselves or interpreters employed by private agencies – who often lack formal education, ethical training or professional experience – fulfil this role. Importantly, these interpreters are not bound by any professional code of ethics and operate outside any state-controlled quality assurance framework. The findings suggest that there are significant differences in the way in which public institutions approach the provision of interpreting services. In some cases, such as at the Labour Office, the responsibility for arranging interpretation is delegated to the client. In contrast, institutions that engage more systematically with refugee populations, such as the Migration Office, tend to maintain internal databases of interpreters. These interpreters are usually selected on the basis of previous informal collaboration or through outsourcing via translation agencies. However, even in these cases, there is little to no systematic assessment of the interpreters' qualifications, linguistic competence or familiarity with domain-specific terminology. As a result, the quality and reliability of interpreting services remain largely unmonitored.

Selection procedures often prioritise practical considerations such as availability and previous personal familiarity over professional expertise or formal training in interpreting. Ethical concerns, such as maintaining the neutrality of the interpreter, avoiding the use of acquaintances or family members as interpreters and ensuring confidentiality, are seldom addressed. In addition, institutions rarely acknowledge the emotional strain that can accompany interpreting in sensitive contexts, nor do they provide guidance on communication practices and the positioning of the interpreter within institutional interactions. These gaps point to the lack of clearer guidelines, professional standards and training for both interpreters and service providers.

Epistemic silencing is a recurring feature of institutional encounters, where displaced individuals are not participating on an equal footing due to communicative asymmetries. As the police officer, Jena, notes: 'We are stuck in our own terminology! It is specific and necessary but incomprehensible to others'. The institutional language, though internally functional, can exclude those it is meant to serve. In such contexts, community interpreters frequently step in to bridge the gaps left by formal legal and bureaucratic systems, offering forms of support that extend beyond the boundaries of their interpreting roles. This problem is compounded by the lack of equivalent terminology across legal and administrative systems, a point echoed by state social worker – Gustav – and Aneta, a community interpreter:

There are issues with terminology, whether in policing, law or healthcare. Some terms are particularly difficult to interpret, such as birth certificates, guardianship or power of attorney. How do we even explain these to people?

We don't know the terms; there is, for example, no distinction between agreements and contracts in Ukraine. A large part of the workforce in Ukraine works without a contract or agreement, which later causes problems.

These accounts reveal a wider lack of awareness of key translation strategies, such as compensation, explanation or modulation, which are essential to overcome terminological and conceptual gaps. Furthermore, *ad hoc* interpreters often lack the ability to establish a consistent translational approach or interpretive framework, which further undermines the quality and reliability of interpreted interactions. These findings highlight the urgent need for structured training in PSI that addresses both linguistic competence and cross-cultural conceptual mediation.

The testimonial influence of interpreters in institutional settings

The role of interpreters in migration contexts extends far beyond linguistic mediation; they are deeply embedded in the testimonial infrastructure that determines whose voices are heard, whose experiences are acknowledged and whose knowledge is legitimised. Community interpreters often act as intermediaries between refugees and institutional actors, shaping how narratives are conveyed and received. Jasna, a state social worker, highlights the need for an interpretation that captures this complexity:

If something has no direct equivalent in our language, it needs to be explained. Some terms are difficult to translate and there are also cultural taboos – topics that are not considered polite to ask about or things that people are not sure that they are allowed to ask about. These cultural sensitivities matter because they may prevent clients from speaking openly. Interpreters should have the space to indicate when they sense an intercultural misunderstanding, a signal that something specific needs further explanation, because they are often the only ones who can recognise it.

Despite this crucial role, the knowledge production of interpreters is often undermined or erased within institutional structures. As Zuzana, a higher-ranked official, explains: ‘The applicant has no reason to notice the interpreter. What matters is the trust between the decision-maker and the applicant, not the interpreter’. However, interpreters never act as neutral conduits; they bring their own contextual framing and ethical considerations into their work, as social worker Magda articulates:

It highly depends on the tone of communication and the personality of the community interpreter, as they have a significant impact on how the information is received by the other party. It also depends on how the interpreters personally insert their own perceptions into the information communicated and the responses given to the foreigners. Essentially, they also act as cultural mediators.

The interpreter’s mediation can be observed in the ways in which people on the move navigate institutional encounters. Without interpreters acting as informal counsellors, the institutional maze may appear opaque and unresponsive. As community interpreter Aneta notes: ‘Sometimes they have legal questions and we allow ourselves to answer them if we know exactly, even more than the lawyer sitting next to us’. At the same time, as community interpreters have witnessed, the authenticity of testimonies can also be called into question. Some private interpreting agents reportedly instruct the interpreters to shape the responses of displaced persons to align more closely with the expectations of state authorities. This testimonial injustice arises when individuals’ accounts are distorted due to structural inequalities, often manifesting through the overlooked role of interpreters (Rycroft 2005). Therefore, at every stage of the integration process, it is essential to recognise the perspectives of all participants and to actively verify their understanding. The lack of legal recognition for community interpreters

exacerbates systemic gaps in accountability and professional ethics. This leads to frequent, albeit unintentional, breaches of ethical guidelines.

Communicative space: from 'just a number' to dignity

Epistemic inequality is thus manifest not only in the lack of access to information in one's mother tongue or in the reliance on *ad hoc* interpreting provided by untrained bilingual volunteers, community members or service providers operating without formal accreditation, clear role definition or ethical guidelines – often resulting in approximated meanings – but also in the absence of mechanisms to verify mutual understanding among the actors involved. The perspective of applicants for international protection is echoed in the words of the NGO legal representative Laco, who highlights the need for procedural neutrality:

I would change the approach from the very first moment a state authority encounters a foreign national. The focus is always on security, while the potential contributions of these individuals are overlooked. This may seem logical from a state perspective but it is not a humane approach. The first point of contact is crucial. What impression does the foreign national take away? It is important to remember that these are people, not numbers. The interpreter embodies this principle; they personify the individual in the eyes of the state, making him more human. However, they must maintain neutrality and avoid taking sides.

'Being a number' refers to the impersonal approach and a lack of communicative space (Tužinská 2025). At the same time, forced migrants very rarely object to any misconduct: 'They are afraid to express a misunderstanding or say that something is wrong at the beginning because they are in a position where expressing something negative could be directed at the person who holds their fate in his hands' (Laco, lawyer, NGO). Holding institutional power does not inherently entail communicative competence, as Hedviga and Kateryna, Ukrainian community interpreters observe:

Sometimes, clients talk at length and service providers perceive this as excessive or irrelevant. However, they are communicating with highly sensitive individuals for whom these details matter.

This reflects an insensitivity on the part of service providers who are asking questions in a less sensitive way, one after the another, as if they were not different in content: 'Where is your husband? What happened? Where did he die? When did he die? Why did he die?'

Establishing a space in which the meanings are negotiated requires expertise that is often rendered invisible (Tužinská 2023). The accommodation of meaning is a mutual process: lawyers emphasise that justice is produced in relation to the expectations of the administration. Their monolingual standard upheld by the state also impacts on the extent to which applicants' needs are recognised, as Laco, the NGO lawyer, noted: 'Police officers often believe that if they speak in Slovak, the foreigner will somehow understand them. Their attitude changes when they see that the person is accompanied by someone who speaks Slovak. Suddenly they treat them with more dignity'. Learning the language of the receiving country may, over time, reduce certain communication asymmetries at the individual level. Addressing epistemic injustice, however, requires a different layer, an institutional one, such as the development of participatory mechanisms and accessible and professional interpretation, instead of shifting the

responsibility onto the displaced people themselves. However, the relationship between language learning, communicative inclusion and epistemic recognition requires specialised examination that goes beyond the scope of this article.

Healthcare, language and the weight of misunderstanding

Healthcare emerged as a site whereby epistemic injustice was actively produced, as refugees were often denied the linguistic, interpretive and institutional conditions necessary to understand their health situation, communicate their needs and secure appropriate care – particularly those with psychiatric diagnoses, chronic illnesses or caregiving responsibilities for children or elderly family members with complex health conditions. Their experiences reflected both testimonial injustice – in which accounts of medical needs were dismissed – and hermeneutical injustice, in which systemic barriers prevented individuals from understanding and navigating their rights. These were often compounded by institutional framings of refugee needs as merely ‘temporary’, which obstructed the development of sustainable support systems. Refugees reported limited access to essential services, bureaucratic complexity and a general lack of transparency in communication. For individuals with severe disabilities or long-term conditions, the absence of targeted policies and inclusive frameworks led to increased exclusion and chronic uncertainty. This was the most visible in cases requiring specialised or psychiatric care. Inna, the 39-year-old mother of a young son with suspected developmental disabilities, described a prolonged and frustrating search for diagnosis and care:

Since last year, we have been going to doctors constantly. (...) There are multiple diagnoses – so many that it is unclear what the real condition of my son is. (...) But I cannot get an appointment with a psychiatrist. Even after two years, it hasn't been possible, partly due to the language barrier. (...) There is a lack of an organisation or individuals who could help with this process.

Older adults reported similar struggles. Vitalyi, 66, who had been diagnosed with cancer, described how language exclusion made it impossible to understand his condition or treatment options: ‘I often go to a specialist doctor (oncologist). He tells me something but I don't understand what he is saying. (...) The doctor speaks fast and often I don't understand anything’.

Language barriers, contributing to institutionally produced forms of epistemic exclusion, created a double burden: on the one hand, exclusion from institutional communication and, on the other, the inability to act upon one's health knowledge. Therefore, the problem lies in the absence of institutional arrangements that would make the acknowledgement of lived experiences of vulnerable refugee populations possible. The fast-paced, technocratic structure of medical consultations and inadequate interpretation services reinforce testimonial injustice, as patients' concerns are not adequately heard or responded to. The issue is not only individual but widely recognised at the institutional level. One local authority representative acknowledged systemic failure in addressing the needs of refugees with multiple health disadvantages, pointing to a testimonial injustice:

Ukrainian refugees with multiple disadvantages, whether psychological, physical or otherwise, who are not integrated into the state system, face serious issues..., which means they are denied support. (...) There is a massive group of autistic children who are completely overlooked. (...) Many remain undiagnosed. (...) The challenges are three times greater because we don't have official documents

proving that they have autism or any other condition. (...) Beneath the surface, an enormous number of unresolved cases have been completely ignored (Matej, municipal social worker).

The continued lack of access to professional interpreting services in healthcare settings contributes significantly to both testimonial and hermeneutic forms of epistemic injustice, particularly among refugees and migrants with limited language skills. A review of the cost-effectiveness of trained medical interpreters (Brandl, Schreiter and Schouler-Ocak 2020) shows that trained medical interpreters improve the quality of care, reduce diagnostic errors and reduce the risk of unnecessary or inappropriate treatment interventions. As Magda, a social worker, notes: 'The health service particularly valued community interpreters because they recognised the importance of communicating and delivering information correctly to ensure effective care'.

This recognition underlines the fact that interpreters facilitate access to services, shape institutional encounters and, in many cases, safeguard the very right to be heard (Angelelli 2004). In Slovakia, medical interpreting remains absent from institutional frameworks and no systemic provisions have been made to ensure its availability. This institutional neglect, despite clear awareness, constitutes a contributory injustice. Refugees and their advocates often possess relevant experiential knowledge of the barriers they face, yet their insights are systematically excluded from policy-making.

Housing insecurity as a site of epistemic injustice

For Ukrainian refugees, affordable housing is essential to ensure stability and adequate inclusion in receiving societies' social and economic sectors (Habitat for Humanity 2023). Rather than entering a supportive housing environment, refugees have had to navigate a housing market that is already unaffordable and insecure, which has profoundly shaped both their housing pathways (Clapham 2005) and their everyday experiences of settlement. In this sense, housing is a site that exposes how the epistemic dimension of housing-related insecurity is systematically produced in the context of Slovakia, involving unequal power conditions under which rules become intelligible, entitlements are administratively created and interpreted and the testimonies and lived realities of refugees become institutionally (un)relevant.

Therefore, the Housing Subsidy Scheme for Ukrainian Refugees, which was introduced immediately after the outbreak of the war and is a financial allowance (Wilsch and Hlinčíková 2024), has played a crucial role in enabling their stability and security in housing and ensuring access to free accommodation.¹ Since its introduction, the housing allowance for Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia has undergone several short-term extensions and changes in amount and a tightening of eligibility criteria and duration – without a clear long-term strategy (Wilsch and Hlinčíková 2024).² The discretionary approach to policy adjustments and repeatedly applied changes created significant uncertainty among Ukrainian refugees. Housing policy became a site of hermeneutical injustice because refugees were not provided with accessible, timely and actionable knowledge about their entitlements and because administrative eligibility categories were too rigid to capture lived vulnerability, rendering refugees' own accounts unintelligible or irrelevant within institutional processes. Given the severely limited access to affordable housing, the housing programme represented the main safeguard against housing loss for many refugees. Yet its unpredictability and lack of transparent communication deprived them of clear knowledge about their entitlements, limiting their capacity to act as informed agents in housing matters and, in some cases, exacerbating housing precarity. Several of our research partners encountered systemic obstacles in determining their eligibility for housing subsidies. When they approached public officials or legal

services, the responses were often vague, delayed or contradictory, adding to their confusion and undermining their agency. This deepened their insecurity:

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

Crucially, these changes were not communicated in advance and decisions were made at the last moment, severely limiting refugees' capacity for agency. Individuals who lost their entitlement to housing subsidies were given only about a week to secure alternative housing following the 1 July 2024 legal amendment. Such short notice disproportionately affected those without established social networks or financial security, reinforcing their dependence on *ad hoc* community support rather than institutional guarantees:

Everything happened so suddenly... [The family received the information about the need to vacate the accommodation only on 21 June 2024, with the requirement to leave by the end of June 2024]. I was searching for apartments online but I couldn't find anything at all. (...) (P)eople from the church shared the information that the sister was looking for housing. (...) It was fortunate that we found an apartment so quickly (Tetiana, 40).

As a result, several of our interview partners who did not qualify for a long-term housing allowance left Slovakia for good. Others consequently faced significant challenges, such as overcrowded housing, sharing commercial accommodation with other families or being overburdened with work to afford commercial rent. This illustrates how administrative definitions of vulnerability can render the lived realities of refugee households institutionally unintelligible. In one interview, our research partner, Danylo, expressed concern that the eligibility criteria for support programmes in Slovakia fail to recognise forms of loss that are less easily measurable, such as the destruction of home and community or the possibility of return, thereby excluding significant dimensions of refugee vulnerability from institutional consideration.

When the system neither provides a transparent and credible source of information in the Ukrainian language nor acknowledges the needs of vulnerable populations, such as refugees from Ukraine, it creates conditions in which these populations are unable to interpret their rights and obligations accurately. This lack of clarity further fosters uncertainty, forcing them to seek information on their own and rely on sources of uncertain credibility. As a result, they are prevented from acting as informed agents, making decisions, or planning their next steps, which reinforces their sense of powerlessness. During the fieldwork in state-supported accommodation facilities, it became clear that uncertainty about housing support was a shared concern. During one of these visits, our interview partner, Mrs Alina (65), gave us a tour of the premises, showed us the common areas and knocked on the door of a room from which a young woman with a small child emerged. She flooded us with a series of questions in Ukrainian, echoing what the interpreter later confirmed: almost everyone felt insecure about their stay because of the housing allowance. The state of uncertainty resulting from the incomprehensibility of the established rules, unclear communication and the non-transparent process of changing these conditions contributes to the deepening vulnerability of refugees from Ukraine.

Concluding discussion

Epistemic injustice has real consequences for Ukrainian refugees' ability to access housing, services and social recognition. They face hermeneutical gaps, where dominant frameworks do not recognise their perspectives; testimonial exclusion, where their voices are dismissed or mediated; and contributory injustice, where their insights are structurally ignored. While the existing literature on epistemic injustice often focuses on the silencing or discrediting of marginalised voices (Dotson 2012, 2014; Fricker 2007; Landström and Crawley 2024; Medina 2012), our study demonstrates that epistemic harm frequently begins with the absence of a recognised communicative space (Tužinská 2025). The ability of refugees to express their experiences in a linguistically and culturally intelligible way is a prerequisite for being heard. This contributes to an understanding of testimonial injustice, not merely as a matter of credibility but also of communicative legibility. At the same time, our analysis highlights how power is embedded not only in what is said or in who speaks but also in the conditions under which speech becomes intelligible or recognised as meaningful (Meylaerts 2011). Institutional monolingualism and the lack of culturally responsive interpretive practices represent structural communicative exclusions, a dimension of epistemic injustice that has received less attention in mainstream epistemology but is critical in forced migration contexts. Such conditions also constrain the state's capacity for inclusive place-making.

Epistemic injustice is also reflected in the way that migrants are often reduced to numbers, lacking the endeavour to be positioned in a respectful way (Rehnberg 2025). This disconnect between systemic provision and actual individual needs in the context of Ukrainian displacement in Slovakia reveals a more fundamental epistemic injustice – the systematic exclusion of refugees' perspectives from the processes that shape their lives. The lack of transparent participatory mechanisms through which refugees could contest, anticipate or influence decisions deepens their precariousness and heightens their susceptibility to marginalisation and exploitation. In Slovakia, public participation in policy-making is generally minimal, particularly for vulnerable groups (Bargerová 2014). While there are no formal mechanisms for refugees to meaningfully participate in integration or migration policy, state institutions proactively do not investigate or incorporate them. Similarly, despite facing systemic barriers, refugees are not recognised as legitimate contributors to housing policy debates. Instead, policies are shaped by institutional actors who fail to incorporate the realities of refugees' precarious living conditions.³ This dynamic reflects a broader hierarchy, in which certain institutional actors are viewed as legitimate knowers while displaced populations are denied epistemic authority (Samzelius 2020). This results in both hermeneutical and testimonial injustice: refugee experiences are not meaningfully acknowledged or interpreted within dominant frameworks and their knowledge is either filtered through intermediaries or excluded altogether. As our analysis demonstrates, injustices are also deeply embedded in everyday communication and interpretative dynamics. How displaced individuals are listened to, interpreted and institutionally understood is shaped by subtle yet powerful linguistic and interactional processes that often remain invisible in mainstream policy discourse. Misrecognition, silencing or distortion can occur not only through the absence of services but also through the framing, reception and transformation of language within institutional encounters. To mitigate these risks, the adoption of plain language policies is essential to ensure clarity and accessibility in communication across all institutional levels.

Last but not least, despite the deep structural inequalities which they face, Ukrainian refugees actively engage in meaning-making under conditions of systemic constraint. They mobilise informal knowledge networks, navigate complex bureaucratic systems and contest their marginalisation through

everyday acts of negotiation and interpretation, resisting erasure from the spaces in which knowledge is produced and recognised (Dotson 2014; Pohlhaus 2017). Refugees' strategies of sense-making and knowledge-sharing, whether through informal support structures, linguistic self-advocacy or a refusal to conform to institutional scripts, must be understood as situated practices of resistance that challenge dominant hierarchies of knowledge and credibility. Rather than treating refugee voices as data to be extracted, institutions must develop participatory mechanisms for policy-making and service provision, at both local and national levels, that recognise the testimony and experiential knowledge of marginalised groups as a legitimate basis for decision-making.

The accommodation of meaning, much like the accommodation of people, reveals what it means to be lost both in translation and transition. The absence of plain language policies and interpreting services signals a broader institutional ambiguity in which housing opportunities are framed in uncertain terms. For what transforms a house into a home is the capacity to experience oneself as a situated being, as someone who accommodates meaning and, in turn, has the opportunity of being accommodated. Recognising the right of displaced persons to be understood is, therefore, not just a linguistic concern but a fundamental condition for epistemic justice and dignified belonging.

Notes

1. The Slovak welfare system does not ensure that low-income households can afford standard housing (Hegedüs, Somogyi and Teller 2023). The existing housing allowance is limited to recipients of material need benefits, which excludes many working families, parents on parental leave and pensioners (Hegedüs *et al.* 2023; Wilsch and Hlinčíková 2024).
2. Initially set to end in June 2022, the subsidy was extended several times through 2023 and early 2024, often with minimal notice, without public discussion, leading to housing instability. Institutional stakeholders, NGOs and local authorities all criticised the lack of communication and transparency, particularly when key amendments – such as the reduction in March 2024 – were announced only days before implementation (Mittelmannová 2024).
3. In Slovakia, households that do not own their homes have access to either commercial rental or public (social) housing. While the national Housing Policy of the Slovak Republic, until 2030, formally includes migrants among disadvantaged groups, in practice local regulations often exclude them, especially those without permanent residence in a municipality, such as Ukrainian refugees. Even where this condition is not enforced, the severe shortage of social housing makes access nearly impossible. As a result, refugees are largely confined to the commercial rental market, which is increasingly unaffordable.

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ORCID IDs

Martina Wilsch  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6502-5503>

Miroslava Hlinčíková  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3357-7474>

Helena Tužinská  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1135-3007>

Markéta Štefková  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0834-5414>

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