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Refugees as Urban Stakeholders: Lessons From Reception of Ukrainians in German Cities

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Abstract

This article examines how reception and participation practices shape urban futures in Berlin and Leipzig, highlighting Ukrainian refugees as agents of urban change. We adopt a comparative approach to summarise and re-analyse research carried out in several projects on the two cities. Through the lens of urban citizenship, we explore how civic engagement and participation among refugees can facilitate dialogue among urban stakeholders and support the implementation of sustainable, long-term solutions. Unlike refugees from other countries, those from Ukraine have been granted temporary protection, which affords them a broad spectrum of rights. These include immediate access to the labour, healthcare, education, and housing markets, freedom of movement within and beyond the European Union, and the ability to commute between Germany and Ukraine. Concurrently, German host communities have demonstrated an impressive ability to communicate with Ukrainian authorities and stakeholders, facilitating collaborative discussions on long-term solutions and the co-creation of strategies for the future. While the proactive engagement of Ukrainian refugees in Germany invites a critical reassessment of the role of civil society actors as agents of urban transformation, this discourse should also consider double standards regarding the reception of different migrant groups. From the perspectives of forced migration research and urban future-making, this complex scenario requires new conceptual approaches to assess its impact, challenges, and opportunities.

Keywords

agency; Berlin; Leipzig; participation; solidarity; Ukrainian refugees; urban citizenship

1. Introduction

Upon the arrival of more than 1,270,000 Ukrainian refugees after the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 (Eurostat, 2026), German host communities have exhibited a remarkable capacity for communication with Ukrainian stakeholders, fostering discussions on long-term solutions and co-creation of strategies for the future (Haase et al., 2024). While proactive engagement of the Ukrainian refugee community in Germany invites a critical reassessment of the role of civil society actors as emergent agents of urban transformation, this discourse should be aligned with critical reflections on the double standards regarding the reception of different migrant groups. From both the perspectives of forced migration research and urban future-making, this complex scenario calls for new conceptual approaches to assess its impacts, challenges, and opportunities.

The idea for this article emerged during the 2023 workshop "Urban Futures in Times of Disruption," in which both authors presented their research into the agency of Ukrainian refugees in their respective case cities—Berlin and Leipzig. During the discussions, we identified both numerous similarities and important differences between our empirical contexts. This prompted us to adopt what Robinson (2011) describes as a "comparative gesture" rather than a systematic comparison, through which we bring together secondary data generated within ongoing research projects. Against this backdrop, the article critically explores the nexus of belonging, participation, and the struggle for long-term solutions as central challenges of urban future-making. Focusing on the reception of forced migrants from Ukraine in Berlin and Leipzig, we conceptualise refugees as urban stakeholders and active agents of urban transformation, rather than passive recipients of social support.

While migrant-serving organisations are already seen as key agents of migrant urban citizenship-making (Blokland et al., 2015; Holm & Lebuhn, 2020; Krüger et al., 2024), there is a need to look deeper into the processes of how refugees become urban stakeholders in times when urban citizenship is shaped by shifting political constellations and changing relationships between various actors. The question of "who owns the future?" (Urry, 2016) becomes particularly relevant in the cities where forced migrants are already reshaping urban landscapes (Collier et al., 2013; Hamann & Türkmen, 2020; Wilson & Darling, 2016). Even though migrant activism in Germany has been conceptualised through the lenses of visibility and protest movements (Bhimji, 2016), scholarly activism (Huschke, 2015), solidarity in resistance and transnational cooperation (Bauder, 2020; Siim & Meret, 2021), and impact on the policy-making and border regimes (Perolini, 2023), the issue of seeing refugees as urban stakeholders (who, in a more general sense, contribute to urban future-making by going beyond their personal and/or community interests) leaves a conceptual gap we aim to address with this article.

Unlike the other contexts of origin, refugees from Ukraine have been granted a unique set of rights in the receiving countries, with the Council of the European Union activating the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for individuals fleeing Ukraine. Debates have been unfolding regarding the naming of people arriving from Ukraine. Although Ukrainians in Germany do not hold formal asylum seeker or refugee status, receiving instead a specific set of rights guaranteed by the TPD, the term "refugee" is used in this article to describe those hosted 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 forced migrants, which, while materially significant, are not our primary focus of 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).

The unique status of Ukrainians under temporary protection has sparked debates about double standards and the racialization of refugee reception, with Ukrainians perceived as white and Christian, and therefore more deserving of solidarity (Alsbeti, 2022; Frank, 2025; Nowicka et al., 2025). Compared to refugees and asylum seekers from other countries, Ukrainians received a more extensive set of rights guaranteed by TPD, including a residence permit for the duration of the protection period, and immediate access to employment, housing, education, social welfare, and healthcare, as well as freedom of movement within the EU. In addition, Ukrainian nationals retained the ability to return to Ukraine without risking the loss of protection in the host country. However, unlike legal refugee status, temporary protection is not intended to serve as a pathway to permanent residence. Instead, "exit strategies" toward other statuses (including naturalisation) require a change in the legal basis of stay, for instance through employment or studying.

Despite facilitation of employment being celebrated as an exemplary (and scalable) solution, some of the aspects of implementation of the TPD have, over time, raised concerns. One of the examples is the logic of "temporality" of the protection. Since the directive was initially adopted for a time span of two years, and subsequently prolonged every year, the question has arisen on the subject of: How long is "temporary"? Time can be seen, following Foucault, as a technology of governmentality, used to discipline and control migrants (Griffiths, 2013). The logic of "temporary" protection, thus, is one leaving the Ukrainian migrants in a structural and emotional limbo of "permanent temporariness" (Lazarenko, 2024), preventing them from forming strong belonging to the hosting environments (Frank, 2025).

Recent scholarship has examined how temporal regimes structure refugee lives, with a particular focus on the hidden political possibilities and forms of agency embedded within the politics of time (Kallio, 2019; Reneman & Stronks, 2021). The instrumentalisation of uncertainty regarding legal status and prospects produces precarious employment conditions and fragmented integration trajectories (Spada, 2024). Within dominant Western imaginaries, refugeeness is often conceptualised as a linear trajectory—progressing from an unsafe past, through an uncertain present, toward an anticipated future of stability. Yet, for many refugees, temporal experience is more fragmented: Displacement constitutes not only a disruption of the past but also an ongoing condition in the present and a source of further rupture through decisions about return or integration (Leutloff-Grandits, 2025). Despite that, even within the nonlinear timings of their experiences, refugees nevertheless engage in creating alternative spaces of belonging (Kirndörfer, 2024).

In the case of Ukrainian refugees in Germany, both the structures of governance and the refugees' own orientations frame their stay as temporary, and oriented towards the future return to Ukraine as soon as the security situation allows. Nevertheless, with the protracted character of the invasion and the TPD prolonged till March 2027 (Council of the European Union, 2025), it is important to understand both the liminal position of the refugees in the receiving countries and the fact that their everyday presence and participation are already reshaping the social, economic, and political futures of the cities that host them. With this article, we aim to present our cumulative knowledge on what this looks like and in which way the urban citizenship perspective helps us to understand the agency of Ukrainian refugees in the described context.

Yet, the discussion of civil society actors as emergent agents of social transformation cannot be examined in isolation from the double standards that structure refugee reception. These hierarchies have been increasingly noted in academic literature, particularly through comparisons between the expedited,

rights-based reception of Ukrainians and the protracted asylum procedures faced by refugees from other countries (De Coninck, 2023). These differentiated policies produce what Frank (2025) terms a "stratified system of differential non-belonging." While refugees with different legal statuses inhabit some form of liminal position, their manifestations vary sharply. Those seeking refugee status experience prolonged document processing while being denied the right to work or move freely. Ukrainians, meanwhile, lack a direct legal pathway to permanent residency and experience additional pressure to return to the war-torn country: both from the host state, through the logic of the "temporary" nature of their status, and from the Ukrainian government, which actively communicates expectations of return. Such disparities reflect broader patterns of "differential inclusion," generating hierarchised experiences of (non-)belonging reinforced through a "neoliberal deservingness" logic (Fontanari, 2022), whereby states confer greater rights on some groups while restricting others, producing identities and categories rooted in racialised constructions.

The social consequences of these disparities and "reproduction of whiteness" are profound. Refugees who perceive themselves as being treated as "less human" than white, presumably Christian Ukrainians may experience resentment and exclusion, thereby eroding solidarity among refugees, weakening social cohesion, and obstructing collective action (Barwick-Gross, 2025; Frank, 2025).

2. Urban Citizenship Through Civic Participation

Cities can be seen as key laboratories for democratic practices and social innovation (Silver et al., 2010; Swerts & Oosterlynck, 2021), and thus should not be viewed merely as instruments for enforcing international norms but as autonomous actors with growing political influence. In the context of the war in Ukraine, many cities have gone beyond implementing national policies to actively advocate for stronger sanctions and uphold principles such as territorial integrity and the prohibition of unlawful force (Szpak et al., 2023). Through these actions, and by mobilising local communities, cities have demonstrated their capacity to translate international norms into concrete practices across local, national, and transnational scales.

The concept of urban citizenship is central to understanding how migrants, often excluded from national political frameworks, engage in city-based activism and resource organisation. Historically, cities have relied on non-state forms of support, and contemporary urban settings continue to demonstrate innovative, often improvised ways of organising resources (Schilling et al., 2019). Migrant activism, therefore, serves as a form of belonging through participation that challenges the dominant portrayals of migrants as either helpless victims (Ticktin, 2011) or stigmatised outsiders (Nicholls & Uitermark, 2016). An ongoing debate concerns which forms of urban citizenship are regarded as more or less "desirable" within urban societies, for example, whether claims addressing inequality and discrimination are perceived as less acceptable or legitimate than those that emphasise cultural diversity or participation in migrant councils aligned with local policy agendas (Garcia, 2006).

In much of the Global North, restrictive national immigration policies have increasingly limited migrants' and refugees' access to essential services and security (Bauder, 2020). In response, municipalities have formulated their own policies and developed local practices of inclusion designed to facilitate newcomers' participation in the social and political life of the city. These initiatives, variously described as "sanctuary cities," "solidarity cities," or "cities of refuge" (Ataç et al., 2016; Bauder & Darling, 2019), are frequently seen through the lens of solidarity (García Agustín & Jørgensen, 2021), which takes multiple forms on the urban scale, shaped by the

geopolitical configurations, national legal regimes, and local socio-political conditions (Bauder, 2020). While their political objectives and operational strategies vary, research has drawn attention to the persistence of patriarchal and charitable relations between migrants or refugees and their urban "hosts" (Bagelman, 2019; Lazarenko, 2025). Nevertheless, many urban solidarity practices explicitly seek to confront and transform such asymmetrical relationships, working toward more reciprocal and equitable forms of engagement (Haase & Schmidt, 2024).

Bauder (2021) observes that diverse understandings of solidarity circulate not only in scholarly debates but also among urban actors such as activists, NGO workers, municipal politicians, and administrators who rarely follow a single "script" of solidarity. Instead, they coalesce in locally specific configurations shaped by political context, institutional arrangements, and social dynamics. For instance, in Berlin, the election of a left-wing coalition enabled the activist discourse of the "Solidarity City" to enter official policy debates—a shift now being reconfigured under a more right-leaning administration.

Darling (2017) offers a complementary perspective through the concept of *refugee urbanism*, which examines how governance, agency, subjectivity, and urban life intersect. The term does not imply a uniform refugee experience in cities; rather, it highlights the contingent ways in which refugee subjectivities are both shaped by and constitutive of the urban. Drawing on Magnusson's (2011) framing of the city as a "political production" constantly in the making, *seeing like a city* is understood as a political ontology that foregrounds the potential of urban life to challenge sovereign authority and open new political possibilities. Massey's (2005) notion of *throwntogetherness* adds further nuance, describing how heterogeneous elements are brought into proximity in urban space, generating relational connections and demanding negotiation. Such encounters with difference may be disruptive but also hold transformative potential (Wilson & Darling, 2016). For them, fully engaging with *refugee urbanism* requires supplementing *seeing like a city* with a critical focus on the intensities, reach, and influence of urban governance in constituting "urban refugees." This approach cautions against romanticising collective claims-making, recognising the limits of authority emerging from such processes (Magnusson, 2011).

3. Migrant Agency in Urban Settings

Connecting the temporality of "limbo" under temporary protection to the concept of agency allows for a more comprehensive understanding of refugee lives and their capacity to act. Paret and Gleeson (2016) emphasise that migration offers a powerful vantage point to examine the structural processes that produce inequality and shape social change, and advocate for focusing on the institutions and mechanisms that generate and maintain such inequalities. The dominant trend in migration scholarship has associated migrant vulnerability with "illegality" and "displaceability," that foreground the power of the state to surveil, detain, and remove migrants from national territory (Menjívar & Kanstroom, 2013; te Lintelo & Hemmersam, 2024). However, the experience of "limbo" of uncertain futures bridges this discussion with the debates on "agency-in-waiting." Brun (2015) defines it as "the capacity to act in the present, in everyday time, based on the experience of displacement from the subject's history and a critical reflection of the future possibilities framed as waiting and hope" (p. 24). Waiting, in this sense, is not a passive interval imposed by bureaucratic processes, but an active and situated practice involving reflection, resilience (Conlon, 2011), and at times even resistance (Scott, 1990). "Spaces of waiting" thus become spaces of struggle, action, and political possibility (Gill, 2018).

Kallio (2019) further extends this approach by identifying forms of "thin political agency" grounded in what Lear (2006) terms "radical hope." Many asylum seekers and refugees consciously distance themselves from overt political activism, either due to scepticism about its efficacy or because everyday survival in uncertainty demands most of their energy (Meier & Donà, 2021). Yet even outside of public protest, they engage in subtle, often unrecognised political practices: sustaining community networks, maintaining cultural spaces, or contributing to the upkeep of public environments such as green spaces, actions which, though not labelled "political" by their actors, nonetheless influence the social and material fabric of the city (Frank, 2025). Radical hope here is not oriented toward a fixed or fully attainable future, such as secure status, education, or medical treatment, but toward an open-ended, unsettled horizon. By focusing on what can be sustained and negotiated in the present, refugees resist the closure of their futurity, thereby creating room for alternative subjectivities and everyday forms of agency.

This reframing invites a reconsideration of activism. As Scott (1990) noted, much political action among subordinated groups operates through "weapons of the weak": quiet acts of refusal, disengagement, and selective compliance, which can be as politically significant as visible mobilisation. In this light, visible refugee activism, whether embodied protest in public space, transnational rights campaigns, or collaborations with activist organisations (Gabiam & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2017; Owen, 2016; Sandri, 2018), represents only one register of agency. The less visible, everyday forms of care, solidarity, and mutual aid may be equally important, particularly in urban contexts where such practices contribute to social cohesion and material well-being.

4. Analytical Framework

4.1. Case Study Selection

Germany has received the largest number of Ukrainian refugees—1,274,955 people, accounting for 29.4% of the total in the EU (Eurostat, 2026). In the weeks following the start of the war, Ukrainian refugees in Germany could choose where to live without restriction. Since then, those seeking state support have been distributed regionally among the federal states according to the existing legal framework. However, the majority of refugees who secured private accommodation remain exempt from these official distribution policies.

This arrangement made the German context unique compared with other EU member states. Although about 70% of Ukrainian refugees expressed a preference for living in large cities, by the end of 2022 only 42% actually resided there (Kosyakova et al., 2025; Siarova & Mulvik, 2022). Nevertheless, urban areas continued to attract refugees due to existing social networks, employment opportunities, and more flexible housing markets (Sauer et al., 2023). These factors suggest that settlement patterns are gradually shifting as refugees transition from social assistance to labour market participation and relocate to metropolitan areas.

Our analysis relies on official statistics from late 2025, presented in Table 1.

To provide empirical grounding for our argument, we draw on insights from these two cities—Berlin and Leipzig—based on three years of collaborative research conducted through several projects addressing different aspects of refugee reception by the two authors. Leipzig and Berlin can be portrayed through a lens

Table 1. Ukrainian population in Berlin and Leipzig.

City	General population	Population of Ukrainians	Share of Ukrainians	Share of people with migration background	Largest groups of people with migration background
Berlin[1]	3,913,644	75,867	1.78%	24.96%	Turkey (108,077) Poland (50,967) Syria (41,180)
Leipzig[2]	632,562	13,109	2.07%	20.81%	Syria (14,104) Russia (8,282) Poland (7,274)

Sources: [1] Statistischer Bericht Berlin-Brandenburg (2025); [2] Stadt Leipzig (2024).

of contrast. Their migration histories differ significantly: While Berlin's trajectory has been shaped by division and reunification in 1990, Leipzig's migration history is primarily rooted in the GDR period and marked by the profound ruptures following 1989. Berlin, as the capital city, occupies a distinct political and symbolic position, whereas Leipzig functions as a regional hub. The scale and density of actors involved in migration governance, civil society, and urban politics are considerably greater in Berlin.

At the same time, framing the two cities solely in terms of difference would be misleading. Both are large urban centres with established, though differently configured, migration histories and can be understood—albeit to varying degrees—as post-migrant urban contexts, meaning urban settings in which migration histories are embedded in institutions, social relations, and everyday practices (Foroutan, 2019; Haase & Schmidt, 2024). Each hosts a vibrant and diverse civil society landscape, including numerous NGOs and migrant self-organisations (MSOs). Building on these reflections, we approach Leipzig and Berlin not through comparison but through a "comparative gesture" (McFarlane, 2010; Robinson, 2011). Rather than seeking to measure similarities and differences systematically, this approach allows us to place the two cities in conversation to generate analytical insights, and to use their differences and resonances to illuminate broader questions of belonging, participation, and future-making.

4.2. Methodology

The empirical insights presented in the following sections are based on the secondary analysis of existing qualitative data collected within the framework of the authors' respective research projects. Our decision to rely on secondary analysis is not only methodological but also ethical. Given the intense research attention directed at Ukrainian refugees since 2022, we seek to avoid the risk of over-researching and over-interviewing vulnerable individuals. Re-analysing previously gathered material allows us to generate new analytical perspectives while exercising responsibility in knowledge production and minimising additional burdens on participants.

The data were originally collected by the authors in the course of their individual research projects using qualitative and participatory methods. In the Berlin case, data collection included participatory observation (April–August 2022); in-depth interviews with Ukrainian refugee women in a longitudinal design (November 2022–November 2024); interviews with Ukrainian refugees focusing on conditions of remote work and its intersections with participation in neighbourhood life (August–September 2025); and three focus groups with

Ukrainian refugee women and Ukrainian MA students (November 2025) addressing experiences of integration under temporary protection.

In Leipzig, the empirical material was likewise generated through qualitative research conducted within three projects: one completed project focusing on the housing integration of refugees across Europe (2021–2022); and two ongoing projects focusing on the governance of the arrival of Ukrainian refugees in Warsaw and Leipzig (2025–2026) and on reframing refugee migration discourses (2024–2027). Within the framework of these projects, empirical evidence was gathered between summer and autumn 2022, in autumn 2023, as well as between autumn 2025 and early 2026 using various methods, such as expert interviews, document and media analysis, workshops, and other dialogue formats within the context of Urban Living Labs. All projects addressed the topics of the arrival, settlement, and sense of belonging of Ukrainian refugees in Leipzig, as well as related challenges and conflicts, albeit from different perspectives.

Finally, our collaboration is shaped by distinct positionalities. The first author shares a Ukrainian refugee background with many of the research participants, which facilitated privileged access to the field and a nuanced understanding of context-specific experiences. The second author is an experienced migration scholar without personal ties to Ukraine. This combination of insider proximity and analytical distance provides what we describe as "two sets of eyes," helping to mitigate potential blind spots and strengthen reflexivity in the interpretation of the data.

5. Insights From the German Cities' Response

We examine three dimensions that demonstrate various aspects of agency. The first dimension is governance, which demonstrates how Ukrainian refugees are being settled and how this enables them to become active members of the local society. Secondly, we consider their presence in city life and the public sphere, how they organise themselves, and how they experience participation. The third dimension concerns their visibility as a new part of urban society, their active involvement in shaping the present and future of the cities in question, and the roles they and others define in relation to future-making.

5.1. Governance

Leipzig organised the reception of Ukrainian refugees through established arrival centres, concentrating municipal services such as registration, housing, employment counselling, and social insurance in one place (Werner et al., 2018). This integrated approach reflected a coordinated local strategy, benefiting from close cooperation between administrative bodies and civil society. The city residents and voluntary organisations also demonstrated an extraordinary level of solidarity. Spontaneous initiatives such as Leipzig Hilft der Ukraine combined logistical assistance with emotional and social support. Many of these networks have since become more organised and continue to operate (Haase et al., 2024).

During the first months of 2022, most Ukrainian refugees in Leipzig were privately hosted within German households. While some of these arrangements persist, the majority now live in private flats, sometimes sharing with other refugee families. Integration into schools has progressed relatively smoothly, with many children attending German schools while continuing to receive remote lessons from their Ukrainian teachers (Haase & Schmidt, 2024).

However, the strong initial wave of solidarity in 2022 gradually gave way to what observers and practitioners describe as "compassion fatigue." By 2025, this shift was evident in both public discourse and among civil society actors. Alongside this, narratives have emerged portraying Ukrainians as "ungrateful," "abusing welfare," or "commuting" between Ukraine and Germany. These narratives echo stereotypes and, at times, Russian disinformation about the causes and character of the war.

Local support organisations are facing an increasing challenge in managing the consequences of differentiated rights granted for Ukrainian refugees compared to other asylum seekers. These double standards and forms of selective solidarity have led to frustration among NGOs, volunteers, and other refugee communities (De Coninck, 2023; Haase & Schmidt, 2024; Näre et al., 2022). They also highlight a broader ethical tension: how to maintain fairness and empathy in a stratified system of protection.

By contrast, Berlin faced an immediate and large-scale influx that required emergency coordination. Help centres and information points were set up at major railway stations to organise arrivals. Initial support was provided by volunteers, city employees, and NGOs, who directed newcomers to collective shelters. By mid-March 2022, the city's official capacity had been exhausted. Soon, reception depended heavily on private networks: Residents registered refugees at their addresses, hosted them temporarily, and facilitated access to basic services (Lazarenko, 2025). This demonstrated the central role of interpersonal relations and community mobilisation in sustaining the city's humanitarian response.

Despite Berlin's reputation as a "city of refuge" (Hierro & Maza, 2025), the capital's housing market presented severe obstacles for newcomers. While private accommodation initially alleviated pressure on public shelters, many refugees struggled to transition to stable housing, encountering administrative barriers and legal uncertainty. Over time, cases of host fatigue and eviction have exposed the limitations of volunteer-based models, intensifying the debate on the need for sustainable institutional solutions (El-Kayed, 2025; Lazarenko, 2025).

A particularly revealing case in point is the conversion of the former Tegel Airport into a large-scale reception facility. Initially intended for short-term housing, it evolved into a semi-permanent settlement for approximately 3,000 individuals, primarily comprising vulnerable groups and individuals requiring medical care. Reports have highlighted issues such as overcrowding, a lack of privacy, and uncertain prospects for transitioning to independent living (Ünsal & Lushankina, 2025). While most Ukrainians in Berlin live in private housing, the Tegel example highlights persistent inequalities in the reception system and raises questions about the moral legitimacy of long-term collective accommodation.

5.2. Representation

In Leipzig, the arrival of Ukrainian refugees led to the rapid emergence of new MSOs, such as Oseredok, which focus on community support, housing mediation, and psychological assistance. Some Ukrainians have joined established NGOs, contributing to the city's already diverse associational landscape. However, many Ukrainian MSOs remain largely inward-oriented, concentrating on the needs of their own community rather than on broader inter-migrant cooperation.

Ukrainians have also become increasingly visible in local participatory structures. In the most recent elections to Leipzig's migrant council, several candidates of Ukrainian origin were elected, leading to debates

about possible "over-representation." While this demonstrates significant civic engagement, it has also prompted discussion about the pace and extent of Ukrainian inclusion in local governance. Interviews conducted in 2023 and 2025 revealed additional tensions within Leipzig's post-migrant society, particularly in encounters between Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking communities. Conflicts arose around the use of Russian for translation, accusations of insufficient gratitude, and suspicions of welfare misuse. Such disputes reflect differing perceptions of equality and belonging: Many Ukrainians reject the image of the "grateful refugee," instead asserting their right to be treated as equal urban residents.

In Berlin, the presence of a well-established Ukrainian diaspora facilitated an immediate and organised response. The Alliance of Ukrainian Organisations provided an institutional backbone for coordination, while new associations emerged to meet the specific needs of recent arrivals. Mentoring programmes, cultural initiatives, and social projects have proliferated, including Kwitne Queer, which supports LGBTQ+ Ukrainians, and community-based organisations that assist with healthcare and employment (Kashnitsky et al., 2025). This expansion of Ukrainian civil society in Berlin reflects a broader transformation from individual trauma to collective empowerment (Byelikova & Mykhailenko, 2025).

At the same time, internal and external tensions have surfaced over the decolonisation of cultural practices, and autonomy from Russian-led institutions. These debates have encouraged new alliances across communities. Ukrainian organisations increasingly collaborate with feminist and migrant groups such as KuB, International Women Space*, Women in Exile & Friends, and Bikeygees, thus redefining urban solidarity beyond national and ethnic lines.

Ukrainians' political participation in Berlin operates within the framework of the Berlin Participation Act, which establishes advisory councils for residents with migration backgrounds. While there are no dedicated seats for Ukrainians, targeted initiatives, such as the Senate's Mij Berlin fund and programmes by Migrationsrat Berlin e.V., have expanded opportunities for engagement. Politicians of Ukrainian descent have also become visible advocates for refugee rights and Ukrainian interests in local politics.

5.3. Visibility in Urban Life

In Leipzig, the Ukrainian presence has become increasingly tangible in everyday urban life. Ukrainians now constitute one of the city's largest national minorities. Their language, symbols, and cultural expressions are widely visible in public spaces, particularly during national holidays such as Ukrainian Independence Day, when demonstrations and cultural events are held. Since 2022, cooperation between Leipzig and Kyiv has intensified through municipal visits, joint projects, and financial assistance. Local media initially provided extensive coverage of these activities, though attention has declined over time.

Uncertainty regarding the duration of the war and future return remains a central challenge for both refugees and local authorities. Municipal representatives in Leipzig emphasise that questions of return are central in dialogues with their partners in Kyiv, yet the expectations of both cities are diverging. Leipzig perceives well-integrated Ukrainians with stable employment as potential long-term residents, whereas Kyiv continues to prioritise their eventual return. This divergence complicates local planning, particularly in housing and education, where projections depend on refugees' intentions (Lakševics et al., 2024).

In Berlin, expressions of solidarity with Ukraine have become integral to the city's political and cultural landscape. Public demonstrations have played a key role in maintaining visibility for the Ukrainian cause. Since early 2022, large rallies have been held at iconic locations such as the Brandenburg Gate, Alexanderplatz, and Potsdamer Platz, coinciding with major dates like Independence Day and the anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion. These events attract thousands of participants, including members of the Ukrainian diaspora, Berlin residents, and public officials such as Ambassador Oleksii Makeiev. Ukrainian activists have also integrated their presence into broader urban events—for example, by organising a Ukrainian float at Berlin's Christopher Street Day parade, which highlighted solidarity between queer and displaced communities.

Urban symbolism has further reinforced Ukraine's visibility. In January 2023, an unnamed square in Lichtenberg was officially named Odesaplatz to commemorate Berlin's partnership with the city of Odesa. Similarly, in October 2022, a green space in Steglitz-Zehlendorf was renamed Kharkiv Park in recognition of solidarity with Kharkiv.

Temporary but high-profile initiatives have complemented these permanent acts: In February 2023, the Café Kyiv event transformed the historic Café Moskau venue into a symbolic "Ukrainian embassy of culture," combining artistic performance, political discussion, and activism. This event raised questions about how local toponymy and urban symbolism reflect contemporary political realities. Together, these performative and material interventions extend Ukrainian visibility beyond community activities, linking cultural participation to broader questions of belonging, representation, and citizenship.

To summarise the case study insights: Both in Berlin and Leipzig, Ukrainian refugees have already altered the social, cultural, and political landscapes of their host cities. Their arrival has diversified urban demographics, tested support infrastructures, and sparked new discussions about solidarity and inclusion. Refugees have formed and joined organisations, influenced local governance, and introduced new cultural and symbolic elements to urban spaces. However, these developments have also revealed tensions surrounding deservingness, representation, and the sustainability of solidarity. The experiences of Leipzig and Berlin illustrate how refugees, through their everyday practices and civic engagement, have become not merely recipients of aid but active participants in shaping the evolving urban futures of German cities.

6. Concluding Discussion: Refugees as Agents of Urban Transformation

Building on earlier discussions of solidarity, refugee urbanism, and agency, it is essential to consider how the processes of building urban citizenship are embedded within broader frameworks of urban governance and social transformation. Inclusive urban governance cannot be achieved through top-down policy design alone but requires the active participation of a wide range of actors. Such governance depends on the collaborative engagement of migrant organisations and city officials, with mutual trust emerging as a precondition for negotiating shared visions of a common urban future (Brun, 2015; McFarlane, 2025). Equally important is the question of which forms of urban citizenship are considered desirable for co-producing urban futures and how fragile or less visible forms of citizenship can be better recognised (Garcia, 2006).

The experiences of Leipzig and Berlin illustrate that the arrival of Ukrainian refugees can offer a significant opportunity to advance migrant integration policies with the support of non-governmental actors. However,

as Jelínková et al. (2024) observed in the case of Czechia, such opportunities also carry the risk of regression if "good practices" are not scaled up or institutionalised. The reception of Ukrainian refugees has brought the intertwined issues of empowerment and participation to the forefront. The Ukrainian community represents a group that is both vulnerable—having faced trauma and challenges in housing, education, and adaptation—and resilient, as demonstrated by its strong organisation, collective agency, and the widespread narrative of national resilience. However, as we observed in the case of Leipzig, their agency can also be viewed as somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, their networking, mutual support, and assistance, including through newly founded MSOs and digital platforms, is highly valued by the municipality, as it eases the process of settling in, finding accommodation and employment, and fostering the sense of belonging. On the other hand, stakeholders in the host community are wary of Ukrainian refugees expecting to be treated as equals rather than supplicants and seeming to lack gratitude for the help and support they have received. These challenges confuse the widespread perception of refugees' behaviour and reactions. Not only are active engagement, expectations, and the desire to play an active role in shaping one's own future in the host society (i.e., acts of citizenship) welcomed, they are also met with scepticism, astonishment, and rejection. This observed "duality" may contribute to the general debate on how host societies might deliberately support the development of local citizenship, and actively use this approach to encourage the effective settlement of newly arrived refugees, inviting them to play an active role in shaping the local future through a sense of belonging, involvement, and responsibility.

However, these dual characteristics have given rise to three key concerns. The first involves ongoing debates on *deservingness*, particularly regarding refugees who actively advocate for their rights, seek recognition of qualifications, or pursue better employment opportunities. The second concerns *participation* and the politics of belonging that underpin refugee reception in Germany (Frank, 2025). Here, the key questions revolve around whose voices are heard in governance, and how inclusion is structured and governed within formal and informal frameworks. While the transition from protection to participation has created opportunities for Ukrainian-led initiatives, it has also risked reframing solidarity in conditional terms—linking it to productivity, integration, and gratitude (Zuntz & Columbu, 2024). The third concern relates to the significant *uncertainty* faced by Ukrainian refugees and host societies regarding the duration of the war and how people will address issues of return and commuting (transnational lives). It also considers the extent to which this uncertainty affects the power and motivation of refugees to become active citizens and actors in the host society. This is relevant not only for Ukrainian refugees—a similar situation was also observed following the political changes in Syria in 2024/2025. Uncertainty and a lack of planning are constant risk factors that undermine refugees' motivation to become active members of their new communities (Haase et al., 2024; Lapshyna, 2026).

At the same time, this evolving landscape has enabled Ukrainian organisations to establish themselves as recognised actors in urban governance. As state resources and public enthusiasm wane, migrant organisations increasingly fill gaps in welfare provision, advocacy, and representation. Their institutionalisation through participation in migrant councils, partnerships with municipal administrations, and transnational networks illustrates the emergence of refugee-led urban governance, in which displaced communities not only adapt to existing structures but also contribute to reshaping them. Yet, the professionalisation of solidarity through project-based funding may dilute its grassroots and political dimensions, transforming solidarity from a mutual practice into a managerial framework.

The key challenge for both Ukrainian and German actors lies in sustaining a form of cooperation that preserves the transformative potential of solidarity while avoiding its co-optation by bureaucratic or assimilationist agendas. Recognising refugees as urban stakeholders means moving beyond charity towards genuine co-production—valuing their knowledge, experience, and networks as integral components of inclusive urban futures.

Overall, the reception of Ukrainian refugees in German cities has not only tested existing models of arrival governance and integration, but also redefined how cities and urban societies imagine belonging, participation, and future-making. Taken together, several key lessons emerge from the comparative analysis of Berlin and Leipzig. Firstly, Ukrainian refugees are already transforming cities through both their visible and everyday practices—advocating for their interests, engaging in civic and cultural life, and contributing to new forms of collective organisation. Secondly, the ambiguity of solidarity remains: While indispensable during the initial phase of arrival, solidarity has sometimes reproduced paternalistic and exclusionary dynamics that limit refugee agency. The persistence of these hierarchies underlines the importance of developing inclusive, non-patronising frameworks of support. Thirdly, the Ukrainian case shows that when state-led solutions prove insufficient, new civic partnerships can emerge to fill the gap. Finally, as the war continues and the prospect of return remains uncertain, Ukrainian refugees are increasingly likely to settle long-term in Germany, further embedding their presence within urban social and political life. Yet, these processes remain fragile: They can only be sustained where solidarity is mutual rather than paternalistic, and where temporariness does not preclude engagement. The challenge for urban governance lies in maintaining this openness, ensuring that migrant and refugee voices are recognised not as provisional or exceptional but as constitutive of the city's social and political fabric. As the war endures and temporary protection becomes increasingly indefinite, Ukrainian refugees are likely to remain central to shaping Germany's urban futures. Their evolving role invites broader reflection on how cities can serve as laboratories of inclusive citizenship—spaces where the boundaries of belonging are continuously renegotiated and where displaced populations, through their resilience and participation, co-produce more just and sustainable urban futures.

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Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the information and ethical obligations to protect participant confidentiality.

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The authors used DeepL Write to improve grammar and language clarity. No AI tools were used for content generation or analysis.

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