

A bed in exchange for sex or cleaning. The strange housing adverts targeting Ukrainian women in Czechia

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Unaffordability of housing in the Czech Republic has a number of negative impacts. Including offers where it is sometimes difficult to see how they are actually intended.

Two and a half years ago, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian war refugees, mostly women, children and the elderly, came to the Czech Republic, it is time to evaluate their integration. It is obvious that thanks to the great solidarity shown by Czech society after the Russian aggression, many Ukrainians managed to integrate, learned Czech, found employment and are able to live today without state assistance. But there are also many people who still live in hostels, some of which quite decent, but others are in terrible condition and living there is a pain. This includes about 10,000 vulnerable people; those under 18 or over 65, students aged 18-25, handicapped, pregnant women and also people caring for children under the age of six or handicapped. Out of the total number of roughly 338,000 refugees, this vulnerable group in hostel accommodation may seem like a relatively small number, but it is very difficult for these people to do anything about their situation.

Lex Ukraine VI

The Czech state continues to reduce its special support measures for Ukrainian refugees, but without admitting them to the national social benefit system, so that they can, for example, draw housing allowance. The latest amendment brought by the law dubbed Lex Ukraine VI came into force at the beginning of September. The biggest change compared to the previous situation is that the state no longer pays for housing for vulnerable people. Now, people who for some reason have trouble earning enough money have to live off the “humanitarian benefit,” which does include an amount for housing, but really low considering the housing prices in the Czech Republic. It is 4,000 crowns per month, or 6,000 crowns for the vulnerable.

It is difficult to tell if this is an elderly person who needs help or a man who is looking for a maid and maybe something else.

“We were kind of hoping that hostels would become cheaper, which didn’t happen, but at this point it’s too early to evaluate the effects of Lex Ukraine VI. There are no people on the street, but we meet clients who don’t have money to cover their basic needs, so they spend all the money on housing and not on food,” explains Magda Faltová, director of the Association for Integration and Migration, about the current situation of Ukrainians in need. “Some people in need can deal with it by working unofficially. It doesn’t work out for them on paper, but somehow they keep things together. Others have savings, so we will probably only see the impact on them in a few months,” explains Faltová. Alongside emergency cash benefits, her association is also looking into greater involvement of food banks or other forms of food aid that could help people with low incomes.

Also according to Matěj Šulec, the impact of the Lex Ukraina VI amendment cannot yet be accurately evaluated. Thanks to the humanitarian aid, people are not falling into homelessness, but the problem is that they are left with very little means of living. “We are creating a group of people who live in hostels without a chance to move anywhere else. These people come up with various creative ways to deal with the situation. For example, they may conceal a pension or receive money from relatives in cash. As long as these people do not end up on the street, for the politicians, the problem is solved,” explains Šulec. He further points out that the hostels have a very different level, from downright decent to those where it is difficult to live. “And because it’s hard to get out of the hostel, some people will reach for anything, even a strange advert for private sector accommodation.”

The least affordable housing

The Czech Republic leads Europe [in terms of unaffordability of housing](#) , and it is therefore not surprising that various people who have nefarious intentions take advantage of the situation. In order to map out what people who are desperately looking for cheap housing can encounter, I collaborated with a Ukrainian journalist colleague whom I met in one of the worst hostels in Prague.

Anastasiia worked in Ukraine as a journalist, later earned a living as a copywriter. Unlike other Ukrainian women refugees, she managed to rent a small apartment and leave the dormitory. In July, we created a fake Facebook profile and also a fictitious email address. Anastasiia communicated in Ukrainian, Czech and English with people who responded to her ads that she placed in various online groups, as well as responding to suspicious offers on the Internet. At the same time, she talked to her friends who shared their experiences with her. During that time, I interviewed people who were looking for accommodation and asked them what kind of offers they encountered. Our findings can be divided according to several different problems that people, and especially young women, encounter when looking for housing.

Bond and fee fraud

The lack of housing, when dozens of interested parties respond immediately to one offer in a matter of minutes, is used by people who have decided to get rich and demand money for viewing the apartment. Sometimes a smaller amount, but sometimes the entire deposit, with the understanding that otherwise the apartment cannot be inspected. Although most people will see through this trick, if it is a lower amount, they can get caught, as happened to Kateryna, who I met through a mutual acquaintance and was willing to talk about her experience.

“I often came across strange offers. I was completely desperate that I would never get out of the hostel, so I once paid three thousand Crowns for an inspection of the apartment,” she recalls, and now she laughs about it, because she finally managed to resolve the situation. She rented an apartment together with two friends who also have children and manage to pay the rent together. Each of them lives in one room in the apartment with their children. “There are a lot of us here, but at least there is no mold and I believe that the heating will work here in the winter and I can lock myself in the bathroom,” she calculates the benefits of living in an apartment compared to the dormitory where she and her children lived before. “That’s Why I was fooled before, because I convinced myself that it might work, the rent was low and of course I suspected it was going to be a scam, but I needed to get out of that disgusting hostel, so I gave them the three thousand,” she explains .

Looking for maid or assistance

Another offer that women who are looking for housing come across is the exchange of housing for

some kind of return service. It can be people who need some assistance, help with cooking or cleaning, or men who are looking for someone to take care of their household. This is sometimes how senior citizens who are unable to take care of themselves seek help. However, it is difficult to distinguish whether it is an elderly person who needs help or a man who is looking for a maid and maybe something else. If a woman offers such accommodation, it is different. When Anastasiia communicated with an elderly lady in a wheelchair who was looking for someone to help her in the apartment, we agreed that we felt sorry for the lady.

She was understandably more cautious when communicating with men, and only after some time it became clear in one case that an older man was looking for someone to help. "The fact that you speak Czech poorly would not matter, especially if you could take care of me in the morning and in the evening and also a little bit of the household," wrote the man, whom Anastasiia initially suspected during the communication. In the end, however, we evaluated that this is indeed a person who needs assistance.

Thirty-two-year-old Halina, who moved in with seventy-nine-year-old Mr. Karl, has experience with assisting an elderly person and is glad for it. "My daughter and I have been living here for two years and I have developed a relationship with Karl, my daughter regards him as a grandfather and thanks to him I learned Czech well," says Halina in perfect Czech.

A much bigger problem are those offers from which it is not entirely clear what awaits the tenant after moving in. A special chapter is those when men are looking for a maid, babysitting during their alternating care of their own children, and the like.

Occasional sex

Some offers are quite easy to decipher: men ask for a young woman as tenants and write about spending time together. "Hello Líza, housing is free, the form must be filled in, otherwise the ad cannot be sent. If you have a specific question, I'd be happy to answer. Did you read the ad carefully? Do you have a photo to give me an idea?" replied one such advertiser. "Good morning! Thank you for your quick response! Yes, I read your message carefully and noticed that you offer free accommodation in exchange for spending time. I would like to ask, what kind of spending time do you specifically have in mind? Unfortunately, I don't speak Czech very well, so I'm not the best conversation partner. However, I can communicate freely in English. I am 25 years old, I don't smoke. I'm sending you a photo in the attachment," replied Anastasiia, to which came the reply: "Occasional sex..."

"So I don't know if my offer will be interesting, but I will be completely honest. I'm not from Prague, but I bought an apartment there, rather as an investment, and I stay there approximately twice a month, mostly during the weekend, otherwise the apartment is free. I'm not interested in any income from the rental at all, rather I don't want to leave the apartment empty, so I would like to help a nice girl with housing, and in return she would keep me nice company when I come :-). I don't know, maybe she'll be discouraged, no problem, but I prefer to write directly so that we can understand each other. So if it would be acceptable in this way, then I can easily negotiate further. I'm mostly in Prague on weekends, so a tour of the apartment and a possible agreement on the spot is definitely possible. Thanks for now," another man wrote.

There are many advertisements or offers that are explicit in this way, and this phenomenon is also encountered by people from organizations that help war refugees. "We find that the housing market offers housing for sex. It's common, certainly not unusual. It stems from the deepening housing crisis. We came across housing providers who we rejected after a personal meeting, because we understood that there were expectations that were not fully stated, but were evident from the way

the men presented it," explains Magda Faltova.

Some men look for a relationship in this way and write in the messages what the woman they are looking for should look like. "I want a lot of sex and a submissive, intelligent, charming woman who can cook and clean. Are you like that?" asked one man who responded to Anastasia's ad on Facebook.

It's not criminal

"Since the beginning of the war, we have feared that there will be unfair offers and efforts to obtain sexual services in exchange for housing. In several cases, we solved it. Unfortunately, we do not manage to sufficiently identify women in this situation, it is also very difficult to prove such behavior," explains director of La Strada Markéta Hronková, according to whom such abuse of the vulnerability of newcomers is in any case unethical and predatory. "However, offering housing in exchange for sexual services is not necessarily a crime, it is not a crime if it is a consensual agreement between the two parties. We get into the criminal law field when such an offer is accompanied by some form of coercion, when sexual services are offered to third parties or when both of these factors are combined," explains Hronková.

If, for example, the landlord were to force the tenant to have sex under the threat of throwing her out on the street, it could be a crime of extortion or even rape or sexual coercion. If the landlord were to offer the tenant's sexual services to other people, it could be a crime of pimping. "If such an offer was accompanied by coercion, either by violence, abuse of the tenant's difficult situation or by the landlord tricking the tenant into the situation, his actions could constitute a criminal offense of human trafficking," Hronková explains.

Is it what I think?

In contrast [to the experience of her colleague Sára Činčurová](#), who proceeded in a similar way in Slovakia, Anastasiia did not encounter outright coercion - some men emphasized that sex would only take place if there was mutual sympathy. In no case did anyone outright pressure her. The men formulated their offers, which of course could look different in practice, mostly clearly.

The problem is, however, that intercultural communication, and especially in a language that one party does not completely master, can cause real misunderstandings. Anastasiia's friend came across an offer that she didn't understand at first, and Anastasiia herself forwarded it to me asking how I see it. The man wrote: "If you send a photo and there is sympathy, I could make a better proposal." "My friend agreed to see the apartment and the Czech guy wrote her this message. She doesn't know what to say. What do you think?" Anastasiia asked me, who speaks Czech better than her friend, but even I wasn't sure. She spoke very negatively about the man. The fact that he offered such a thing to her friend, who was insecure about it, repelled her more than the lewd offers she received herself during her research.

Such offers are especially offensive to women who have children and know that the other party knows about their children. This is something that initially leads women to believe that maybe they are wrong and misinterpreting men's communication. "How could he offer this to me when he knew I had a child?" Anastasiia's friend could not understand. I haven't been able to talk to any woman who would have accepted such an offer, but I met one who thought about it for a while because she was desperate and didn't know how to deal with her complicated situation.

On the verge of despair

I met Táňa in June at one of the hostels in Prague. At first glance, I could see that something was bothering her, she looked exhausted, and it seemed to me that she would need psychological support. She lived in one small room with her two children. She told how tired she is of always having to speak Czech, how much she misses her country and how tired she is of everything. “My son hates me for taking him away from his friends and away from the town where he grew up,” she explains about what is probably her biggest pain. At the same time, Táňa feels that he is quite happy at school, and that is the reason why he does not want to leave Prague for somewhere where housing would be cheaper. “For the second time, I can’t tear him out of the environment where he’s gotten used to,” he explains. Similar to Táňa, many other mothers I spoke with argued. The moment they see that their children have got used to school, they don’t want to move elsewhere, either for housing or work. They feel bad about taking the kids away and don’t want to cause them more pain by moving.

“We can’t live here in the hostel any longer, I’m paying almost twenty thousand for the three of us and I soon won’t even have enough money to keep paying that anymore,” says Táňa, who, in addition to her twelve-year-old son, also takes care of an almost three-year-old girl, for whom she could not find a place in a kindergarten. “Sometimes I’ll do some cleaning if they let me take the little one with me, but it’s not that often,” he explains about his earning potential. Like other women, I ask Táňa if she has ever come across an ad that she found suspicious, and if she has ever been offered housing in exchange for services such as cleaning or sex. Táňa shuddered and said she knew about it. That offers appear on sites where people offer roommates. “Cohabiting would be an option for me to pay for housing in Prague. If we had a bigger room, one would be enough for us, and I would be happy if it was somewhere in the apartment,” Táňa looks around the unattractive kitchen where we are making coffee. After a while, she starts crying and says that she already thought that she would not to such an offer. But then she said to herself that she would rather return to Ukraine than that.

Táňa comes from an area where, according to her, there is no fighting, but it is necessary to hide from airstrikes. “I have panic attacks when I imagine they’re going to bomb my city,” he confides. “And I don’t want the kids to have to grow up with that. I know a lot of people don’t even go to shelters anymore, but I can’t imagine getting used to it.”

I didn’t take Táňa’s number, but after a month I wanted to follow her. She no longer lived there and no one at the hostel knew exactly where she had gone. So I have no idea if she went back or if she found something and under what conditions.

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