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Discrimination in the rental market in Warsaw

Poland, especially Warsaw, has become a temporary or permanent home for foreigners from various countries. Do these inhabitants face discrimination when renting an apartment in the city? In this issue of CMR Spotlight, [@SaraBojarczuk](#) and [Barbara Jancewicz](#) share the first findings of the [RentMad](#) project, a mixed-methods study which focused on the scale and mechanisms of discrimination of people from Ukraine, Turkey and Nigeria in the Warsaw rental market.



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Discrimination in the rental market in Warsaw

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Introduction

Poland, which was a country of emigration for generations, recently transitioned to being a new country of immigration, with a growing migrant population. In 2023, it recorded over a million foreigners from outside of the EU paying their pension contributions here (out of a total of just over 16 million) (Mrugała et al., 2024). Most were Ukrainian citizens, who have constituted the largest migrant minority for years. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022 resulted in a further influx of war-fleeing Ukrainians, particularly women and children. Initially, many Ukrainians received accommodation support from the state, private individuals offered their homes for free, or rented at reduced prices. However, this support diminished with time, and Ukrainians joined Poles and other migrants in the private rental market.

For landlords and real estate agents, the increased number and variability of people searching for accommodation contributed to increased prices, and thus income. It also meant the necessity to communicate with people speaking other languages and to choose between very different potential tenants. This situation creates grounds for discriminatory practices in the rental market, where prejudices and stereotypes might influence housing allocation decisions.

Discrimination in Poland

Studies show that, indeed, potential migrant tenants are discriminated against in Europe on the grounds of their ethnicity, religion or gender (Ahmed and Nsabimana, 2024; Gusciute, et.al., 2020) but little is known about the Polish context. So far, only three studies have been published. Over a decade ago, Kinga Wysieńska conducted two of these: one regarding refugees – Chechens and Belarusians (Wysieńska, 2013b) and another regarding Ukrainians, Nigerians and Vietnamese (Wysieńska, 2013a). Her testers of different nationalities called rental ad givers, inquiring about apartments' availability, lease agreements, and the option to register at the apartment's address. She found that Poles were always the preferred tenants and typically got better deals. She also noted a certain hierarchy, with white migrants being less discriminated against and non-white migrants facing harsher treatment. A more recent study conducted by Jan Antfolk and his team in 2019, comparing Poland with the UK (Antfolk et al., 2019), did not follow the same nationalities or methodology. Antfolk's team of fictitious candidates with Polish, English and Arabic-sounding names sent email responses to rental ads. They found that men with Arabic-sounding names received fewer positive responses than others. Both studies indicate that discrimination was present, but gave few hints whether it is intensifying or

diminishing. The reasons behind the differential treatment of potential tenants were also not investigated.

The RentMad project,¹ measured if and to what extent rental market discrimination exists in Poland. If the discrimination takes place, we also wanted to explore at what stage of the rental process it happens, how migrants experience it, and why they are discriminated against, as well as how the landlords and agents decide that this person is not right for the apartment. We focused on Warsaw, as previous research found the biggest discrimination of migrants in the capital (Wysieńska, 2013a) and since it is the city that attracts most migrants (Kubicki, 2024).

The advertisements

We started our study where people searching for apartments start, by checking the rental advertisements. In Poland, it is legal to include discriminatory clauses in rental ads – so we expected to find some with “just for Poles” mentions. We read 454 ads posted in August and October 2023 for apartments in Warsaw and its surroundings from two real estate eingsites. The ads did show that the Polish rental market is adjusting to an increased diversity of tenants. This was visible through some ads being listed not only in Polish but also in English, Russian or Ukrainian. Moreover, those listed in Polish frequently mentioned that contact in other languages was

possible. A few advertisements included specific preferences for tenant's nationality, but it was the exclusion of smokers and pet owners that appeared most commonly. Thus, looking at the advertisements, it seems that Warsaw's' rental market is quite open to migrants.

The experiment

After analysing the ads themselves, we started our experiment, by replying to the ads. Each day between 09.01.2024 and 19.01.2024 we collected the newest apartment rental ads for Warsaw and its surroundings and assigned people to answer them. Our testers presented themselves as being Polish, Ukrainian, Turkish or Nigerian (each tester had a background enabling them to pose as such a person). Half of our answers to ads came from women and half from men. Each ad giver was contacted twice. The first tester was of random nationality, sex, upfront information about skills, and mode of contact (calling vs. sending a text message). The second tester differed only in nationality, which was the main factor we focused on.

We defined success as receiving the information that the apartment was available, and then arranging a meeting to view it. Our results show that calling leads to more success than texting. We attribute the difference to the fact that sending messages back and forth prolongs the conversation, making it more likely that the apartment will

¹ Discrimination in the Polish Rental Market

get rented or all viewing times will get booked before the text exchange ends.

Mentioning one's skilled vocation up front increased chances of success only slightly, too slightly to make a statistically significant difference. The skills we used signalled good job opportunities, and thus a stable financial situation, such as doctor, programmer or financial analyst. We expected such people to be preferred tenants and were surprised it mattered little.

What proved to matter a lot for arranging a viewing was nationality. Polish people had an overall success rate of 65,6%, while Ukrainian and Turkish nationals recorded below 40%, and Nigerian nationals managed to secure a viewing only 26.7% of the time.

Gender, which on average was not important, shows an interesting pattern. Polish nationals' chances to secure a viewing barely varied between men and women. However, for foreign nationals being a woman translated into a larger chance of arranging viewing, from a 3.3% difference for Turkish, through a 6.2% difference for Ukrainian, up to a 12.5% difference for Nigerian applicants. Thus, it seemed that while for the majority (Polish) group gender did not matter, it might have increased the viewing chances of those from discriminated groups.

The interviews: landlords' and real estate agents' perspectives

Landlords' and estate agents' behaviours

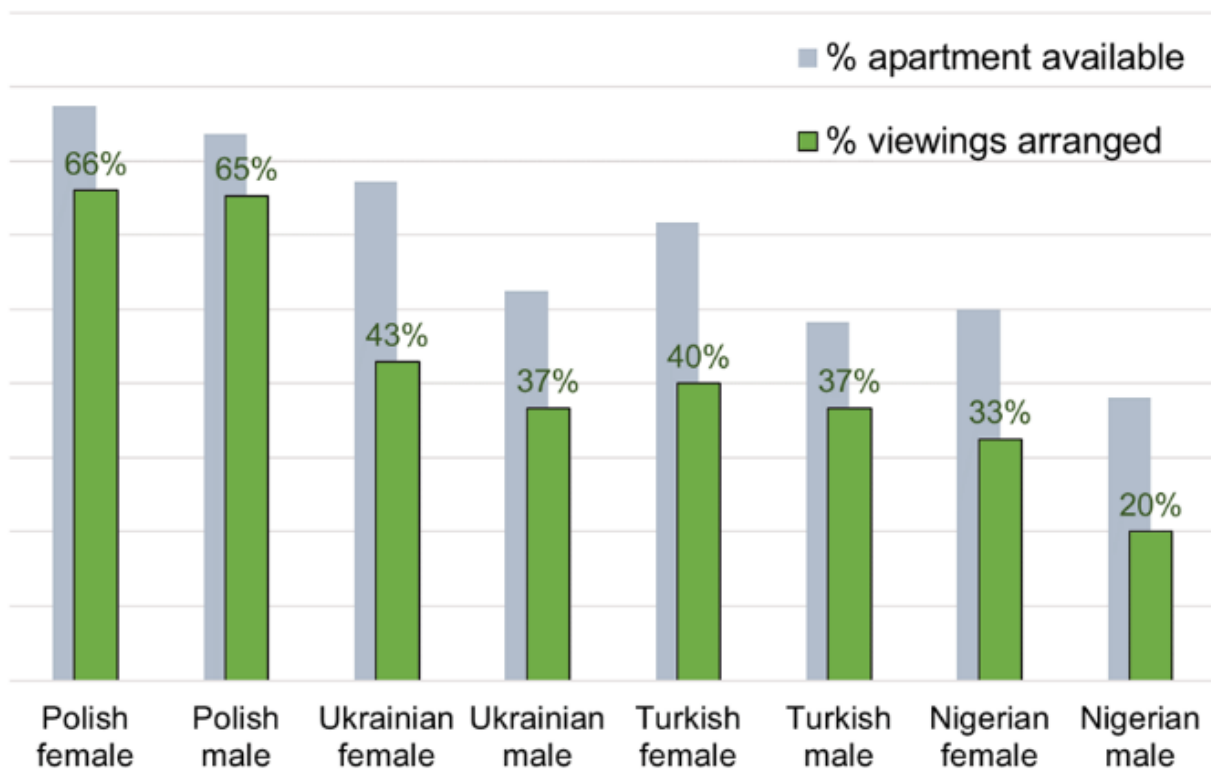


Figure 1. Contacts made with ad givers divided by testers' ethnicity and gender, showing whether the apartment was declared available and apartment viewing was arranged.

align with the concept of cultural closeness or, in other words, perceived cultural distance. Triandis (1994) defined the concept as encompassing differences in language, religion, family and marriage life, and values. According to this concept, larger perceived cultural distance is associated with stronger feelings of threat and more negative attitudes towards outsiders (Guan et al., 2011). Looking at the success rate of arranging the apartment viewing by different nationalities reveals varying perceptions of this closeness. Ukrainian and Turkish nationals, despite being less successful than Polish candidates, were still received relatively positively. Nigerian testers, however, were the least likely to be invited to view the apartment. An estate agent explained that the European culture is relatively similar to the Polish culture, while a distant place of origin implies different cultural values or cooking practices, that might be problematic for the local community.

“(…) when it comes to foreigners, we also divide them into ‘our European culture’, that is, migrants from Belarus or Ukraine, and those who are from, for example, Indonesia. This is also a culture. There are also landlords who are perhaps reluctant to see such tenants because of the preparation of food, meals, and prohibitions. There are neighbours too. So there is a bit of that discomfort here.” [Part2, agent]

Apart from cultural values, both landlords and estate agents emphasised the limited

ability to communicate, which can create misunderstandings at the stage of signing the lease, and even more so in further dealings with this person during their tenancy.

“I’m a bit more cautious when it comes to the regular market, if I have a studio apartment and someone comes up to me who doesn’t speak much Polish or English and tries to make an appointment with me, I reject it at first” [Part4, agent].

Agents and landlords also paid attention to gender, which – in their view – played a significant role in selecting the right tenant.

“And I, if I have to be guided by something, I always prefer a woman to a man. But it’s times like this that men are more and more, more discriminated against. So, I also discriminate a little bit against men, because women, in my opinion, take more care of the home” [Part4, agent].

Although women were perceived to take better care of the property, participants noted the legal difficulties with expelling tenants. Women tenants were hardest to evict, as those pregnant or with children are protected by law. Still, our experiment shows that they tended to be invited for viewings similarly or slightly more often than men.

Summary

Discrimination still exists in Warsaw’s rental market. Despite rental ads portraying an inclusive environment with communication

available in multiple languages for prospective tenants, our migrant testers faced challenges when arranging apartment viewings. Testers from Ukraine and Turkey encountered some difficulties, while those from Nigeria faced severe discrimination. When questioned, landlords and agents pointed towards significant cultural differences as the main reason for such unequal treatment. With more diverse groups coming and settling in Poland, Poles may become familiar with some of the different cultures, making them more open to working with and renting to foreigners from various backgrounds.

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