

Who deserves what?

The struggles between the rhetoric of housing as a right and housing as a merit in the context of housing policy in Slovakia.

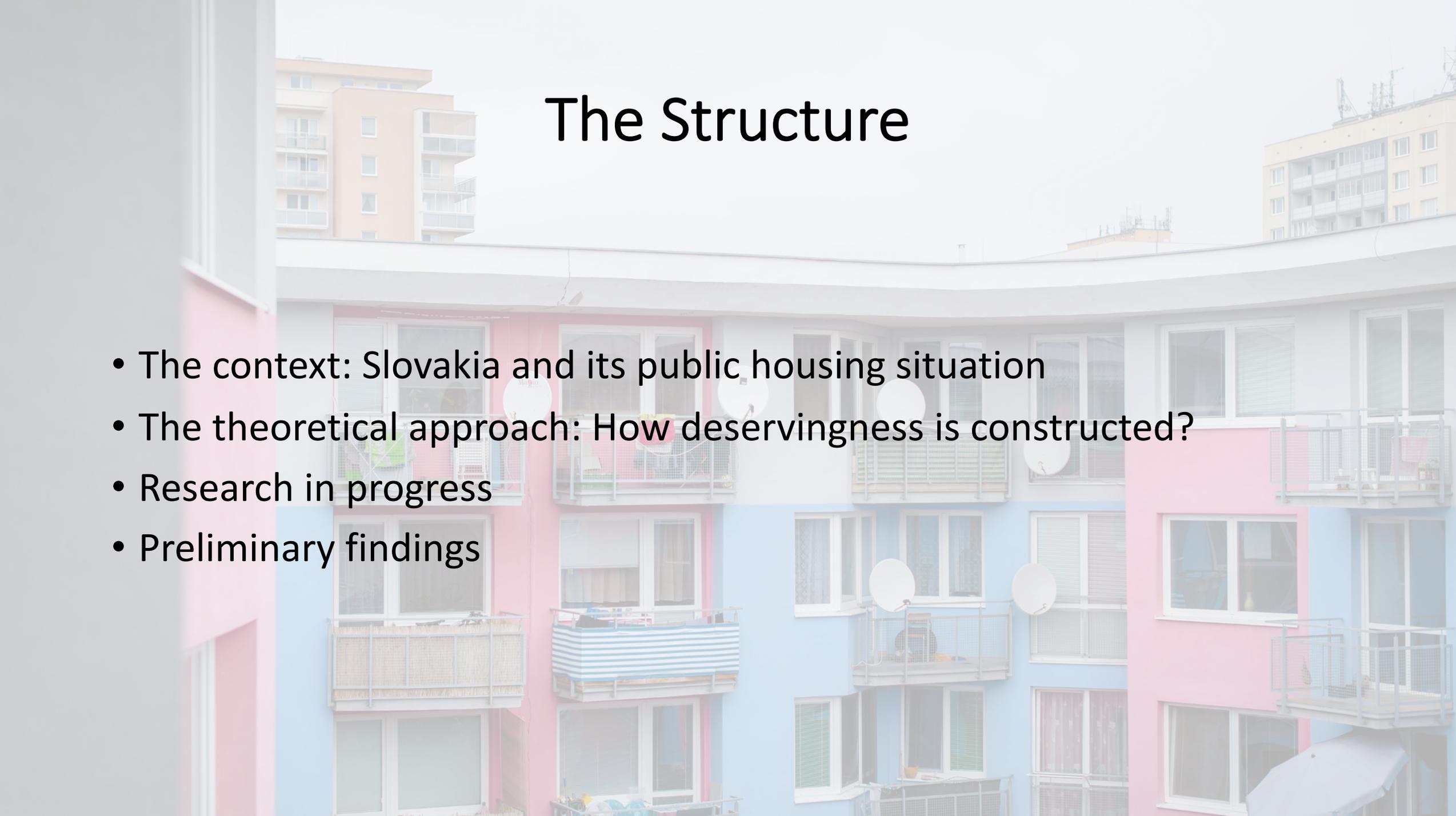
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The Structure



- The context: Slovakia and its public housing situation
- The theoretical approach: How deservingness is constructed?
- Research in progress
- Preliminary findings

Slovakia and its public housing situation

- The overall housing stock in Slovakia in 2020 consisted of **92,3 % owner-occupied** housing, and only **7,7 % of rental dwellings** (6,1 % owned by the private sector and 1,6 % social public housing with reduced rent).
- Owner-occupied housing is also highly prevalent in new construction. In 2021, 20,649 dwellings were completed, of which up to 99.35% were privately owned (Kusá, 2023).

In 1991, 27 % of all of the inhabited apartments were rented (from state, municipal, co-op, or private owners);

- 68,2 % of young people between the age of 18-34 years still live with their parents;
- The housing allowance is very low and is only for people with the lowest income (f.i. for a family with kids – 94,80 EUR);

Slovakia and its public housing situation

- This situation is the result of **post-socialist transformation** and “the suppression of collective property relations and emerging processes of privatization and restitution of public property” (Verdery, 1991).
- In the 90’s - the responsibility for the financing of housing moved from the state to citizens in Slovakia and people do not oppose to it.
- Even though in a 2009 survey of opinions on basic living conditions, over 90 % of respondents agreed that independent living with a shower and a bed for everyone is one of the most basic living conditions (Gerbery 2009; Kusá, 2023)
- The public does not consider the concern for affordable housing for all to be an urgent task for the government (Džambažovič et al, 2009; Kusá, 2023).
- **The culture of deservingness forms an invisible but firm barrier to improving housing for the poorest** (Kusá, 2023).

Slovakia and its public housing situation

- According to the last Population and Housing Census 2021, there were 71 076 people without home in Slovakia (the number includes people in so called secondary homelessness).
 - men constitute the major group (60,7 % men, 39,3 % women)
- In the spring of 2023 Slovakia adopted the first *National Concept for Preventing and Ending Homelessness 2023-2030*.
- **The Slovak Republic did not ratify Article 31 of the European Social Charter**, which obliges the state and municipalities to ensure adequate housing for all residents.

Slovakia and its public housing situation

- According to the findings of the SNSĽP research, **substandard housing hits the hardest:**
 - Persons in poverty or at risk of poverty (16,4 % of all population), where 1 in 5 households live in housing that can be described as substandard.
 - The most vulnerable groups are children under 18 and families with three or more children.
 - 2 out of 5 households at risk of poverty have to spend more than 40 % of their net income on housing.
 - Households with one adult, single male and female parents, and elderly persons at risk of poverty are in the most difficult situation (*Právo na bývanie*, 2019).

Housing as merit: Getting what you deserve?

- In the Central Europe region, **housing is understood as merit**, it is based on the moral assumption that it would be unjust to support those "who are not trying hard enough" (Samec, Kubala, 2022).
- In these conditions, the more private ownership there is in society, the more **the non-owners dream of and strive for buying an apartment** (Lehečka, 2019). Therefore for people, owning their home is usually part of their life-long plan for achieving social security (Lutherova, 2014: 80).
- In this context, **rental public housing is considered to be something temporary, unstable, and uncertain.**
- The current housing policy in Slovakia is based on **the staircase system** - on the principle of deservingness.

How deservingness is constructed?

- **Different actors actively participate in constructing representations of deservingness** through which variety of political, practical and social objectives are achieved and performed (Tarkiainen, 2023).
- Normalization is the endpoint and outcome of a process in which a certain configuration of inequality appears as 'normal' or even 'natural' so that the **very notion of (un)deservingness is sedimented into 'common sense'** (Streinzer, Tošič, 2022).
- The underlying premises of human rights are based on claims of universalism and thus the ultimate claim of equality... **The concept of human rights on the claim that all humans are entitled to basic rights, regardless of any further assessment of deservingness** (Streinzer, Tošič, 2022).

Research in Progress

Amnesty International Slovakia

- **The Research team:** Natália Šmídová, Petra Tamášová, Táňa Hičárová, Miroslava Hlinčíková
- **May – September 2023 in 3 cities** (in progress) – 57 semi-structured interviews– still in progress;
- The main research question: **How do the national and local public housing policies and practices in selected Slovak regional cities impact the accessibility and stability of public rental housing in the context of the right to housing?**
- Interviews with: people with experience of homelessness and/or applicants and/or tenants in municipal housing, with representatives and management of local municipal offices (social affairs, housing), commission of social affairs, local political representatives/mayors, local social workers, NGO's and other stakeholders;
- Desk research in all main regional cities;

Preliminary findings: What we have found out so far?

- There is a long-term neglect in developing sustainable housing policies and the failure to address the housing needs of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion;

“Only cover yourself with the blanket you can afford...” (Bernard)

- The system of public housing is based on the deservingness paradigm and moral reasonings about who deserves help/support and why; with emphasis on individual responsibility;
- Social rental housing hardly develops at all and state/municipalities do not end homelessness;
- The first examples of HF projects come from the NGO sector (only exceptions are f.i. Bratislava, Trnava and Košice);
- The system misses the prevention tools;

Preliminary findings: For whom is public rental housing in Slovakia?

- For whom is public rental housing in Slovakia?

“...I perceive a strong deservingness that is expected even from very vulnerable groups of people who, even often with the best will and appetite, cannot qualify through those rules...” (Zuzana)

- Slovakia still prevails in the format of transitional housing, based on the belief that people should deserve a rental contract with a longer period.
- An applicant for rental housing must meet several criteria: minimum income, permanent stay for 3-5 years in the town, no debts;
- Missing supportive social services for low-income households; people in need; and psychological help and support;
- The existence of accommodation facilities set up by religious associations to care for homeless people in poor health;

Preliminary findings: Suspicious attitude

- The current system is based mainly on control, expected gratitude and unequal positions (tenant vs. city official/administrator/social worker):

“There's an expectation of families to start behaving like the middle class and there are families who can pull it off even in that transitional housing system, but I think they're less vulnerable and that's why they're able to achieve it...” (Zuzana)

- Limited participation or equal treatment - low engagement of residents and their perception as passive recipients of social support in the system (without agency);

Conclusions

- Missing availability of affordable housing – a stagnating situation;
- Too many barriers – the most vulnerable people do not qualify for the public rental housing;
- Segregated localities without social support;
- The right to housing is not recognized by the institutions and it is not implemented in the housing policies;
- The cities are not ending homelessness – it's not the goal of their implementation of the housing policy;
- The system needs a change of paradigm, from a culture of deservingness to the acceptance of housing as a right.

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Thank you!

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