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Sharing is caring: a micro-level analysis of domestic hospitality for displaced Ukrainians in Belgium and Switzerland

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ABSTRACT
To lodge displaced people from Ukraine, national authorities in Europe turned to homestay accommodation to expand reception capacity. This paper adopts a micro-level approach to examine the experiences of local hosts in Belgium and Switzerland using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. Quantitative analysis of 754 survey responses revealed both positive experiences and key challenges, including difficulties with rule-making, intercultural communication, and psychological strain. Follow-up qualitative analysis, based on 58 in-depth interviews with local hosts, provided narrative insights into the most influential determinants and identified three hosting trajectories: harmonious cohabitation, gradual fatigue and exhaustion, and dysfunctional coexistence. Our findings show that homestay accommodation can foster meaningful connections and positive intergroup interactions when supported by a welcoming institutional framework, while also highlighting the temporal dynamics of hosting. Overall, the study underscores the importance of attending to 'micro-moves' in everyday humanitarian practices, and the need to re-politicize domestic hospitality within a multi-level governance framework.

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Access to suitable, affordable, and secure housing is a crucial yet complex aspect of displaced populations' resettlement (e.g. Brake et al. 2023). Asylum seekers and refugees often face inadequate conditions, including overcrowded reception centres, substandard private housing, insecure rental contracts, and temporary shelters (Ziersch & Due, 2018). The large-scale displacement following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has placed additional strain on already overburdened reception systems and housing programmes. As formal services and housing markets reached capacity, homestay

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accommodation by private citizens emerged as a central pillar in the reception of displaced Ukrainians across Europe (Lakševics et al. 2024; Rea, Roblain, and Hertault 2023).

The European response to the Ukrainian reception crisis was unprecedented. In the early phases of the conflict, Ukrainians were welcomed far more positively than other displaced populations seeking asylum (Politi et al. 2025; Schrooten 2025). This exceptional response culminated in the EU's unprecedented application of temporary protection, in sharp contrast to the deterrence-based migration policies that have long characterised 'fortress Europe' (De Coninck 2023). Scholars have linked this differential treatment to entrenched geopolitical considerations and racial hierarchies: Compared to other displaced populations seeking asylum, white Ukrainians were more often portrayed as deserving victims, and their protection was framed as essential to safeguarding Europe (Diab 2025; Politi et al. 2023).

When Syrians fled into Europe in the aftermath of the long summer of migration in 2015, homestay accommodation arose primarily as grassroot responses to government inaction (Rea, Roblain, and Hertault 2023). In stark contrast, hosting Ukrainians became publicly promoted and reframed as a moral obligation by authorities, who actively delegated responsibility to private citizens (Burrell 2024; Daoust and Dyvik 2025). European citizens responded promptly: a survey by the OECD and EUAA in June 2022 found that 29% of Ukrainian respondents stayed with local families, and 20% with relatives and friends. In Belgium, over two-thirds of displaced Ukrainians stayed in private homes, compared to just over half in Switzerland (Caritas 2023; OECD 2022).

As a result, the practice of hosting Ukrainians extended to people who had never previously engaged in solidarity initiatives, bringing humanitarianism into the homes of ordinary citizens. While this form of 'everyday humanitarianism' expanded the boundaries of humanitarian action beyond professional structures (Richey 2018), it proved vulnerable to depletion, leaving 'guests' dependent on hosts' volatile emotional attachments (Burrell 2024; Daoust and Dyvik 2025). Indeed, despite the initial weave of enthusiasm, willingness to host declined after only a few months (Schrooten et al. 2022), echoing the 'compassion fatigue' that has historically undermined humanitarian efforts (Fassin 2011). This pattern raises concerns about the long-term 'sustainability' of such arrangements (Wiltsey Stirman et al. 2012), understood as the continuation of a programme or intervention beyond its initial implementation, even as conditions evolve (Moore et al. 2017). These concerns are particularly important because homestay accommodation will likely continue to exist in the future – whether as grassroots efforts or state-led programmes.

The sustainability of homestay accommodation in the broader framework of national reception systems can be approached at different levels of analysis. In a literature review on hospitality initiatives during the so-called 2015 refugee reception crisis, Bassoli and Luccioni (2023) distinguish between three levels: hosting somebody as an interpersonal relationship between those directly involved in such daily practice (micro-level); the coordination efforts of informal groups, non-profit organisations and public institutions involved in homestay (meso-level); and the tension between state policies and domestic hospitality as a humanitarian effort to circumvent the control and regulation of immigration flows (macro-level).

Drawing on case studies in Belgium and Switzerland, our research primarily adopts a micro-level approach to investigate the concrete conditions that make everyday

hospitality sustainable for those who are hosting (for a similar approach, see Boccagni and Giudici 2022). Accordingly, we study hospitality as an everyday domestic practice, focusing on the complexities and dilemmas involved in sharing private space at home. Our goal is to identify factors that make hosting experiences meaningful and rewarding for hosts, while minimising the risk of reproducing power imbalances, exclusionary logics, or compassion fatigue.

Our analysis contributes to the growing body of scholarship that emphasises the importance of 'micro-moves' in humanitarian practices within a multi-level governance framework (Solomon and Steele 2017; Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten 2017). By centreing on the everyday challenges, affects, and experiences of ordinary citizens in local contexts (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010), we delve into the interpersonal relationships and daily dynamics through which broader structures and policies are enacted, negotiated or contested (Bassoli and Campomori 2024). These insights extend existing scholarly debate by highlighting the micro-practices and everyday dimensions of humanitarianism in crisis situations (Daoust and Dyvik 2025; Richey 2018). Zooming out from these micro-level reflections, we close by pointing to the broader imperative to re-politicize domestic hospitality (Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017; Vandevoordt and Verschraegen 2018), in resistance to the restrictive logics and double standards that continue to shape reception policies (Politi et al. 2025).

Micro-level analysis of hosting experiences and their conditionality

In his seminal work, Jacques Derrida (2000) contrasts the ethical imperative of unconditional hospitality (i.e. welcoming anyone without restriction) with the practical economy of exchange and reciprocity that governs everyday hosting. Because hosts must impose limits to maintain control over their homes, Derrida argues that unconditional hospitality is unattainable. Our research builds on this concept by offering empirical evidence of the factors that shape hospitality, showing how it is conditioned by hosts' capacities and expectations, their interactions with guests, and their engagement with institutional frameworks.

Research has shown how difficult domestic hospitality is in practice (Bassoli and Luccioni 2023; Boccagni and Giudici 2022), requiring hosts and guests to renegotiate domestic life around their respective needs and priorities (Challinor 2019; Monforte, Maestri, and D'Halluin 2021). Hosting can offer a sense of fulfilment, fostering new friendships and a sense of purpose (Simsa 2017). However, it can also trigger intense emotional reactions and psychological strain. Interviews by Merikoski (2022) with Finnish hosts of asylum seekers revealed that initial enthusiasm sometimes gave way to significant psychological fatigue. Hosts found the experience more absorbing and overwhelming than anticipated, leading to a stifling home atmosphere (see also Gerbier-Aublanc 2018; Ran and Join-Lambert 2020). Many hosts were also personally affected by their guests' distressing histories. To cope with trauma, some maintained emotional distance, while others fully absorbed the emotional burdens (Merikoski 2022; see also Doidge and Sandri 2019; Milan 2018).

From a relational standpoint, hosting requires navigating cultural differences and strong communication skills to manage cohabitation rules.[1] Monforte, Maestri, and D'Halluin (2021) found that hosting initiatives in France prioritise asylum seekers who have taken French language courses to ensure easier adjustment for both hosts and

guests (see also Boccagni and Giudici 2022). However, intimacy balance was often perceived as unsatisfactory, particularly when guests were seen as either too reticent or too intrusive (Monforte, Maestri, and D'Halluin 2021). Furthermore, research has shown that repeated interactions foster cultural learning (Merikoski 2022; Ran and Join-Lambert 2020; Vescan et al. 2023), though they could also lead to misunderstandings.

The broader context also shapes hosting. Domestic hospitality is embedded in social networks and institutional infrastructures that can both support and constrain it. Italian hosts, for instance, faced ambivalent reactions from relatives and friends, ranging from respect to hostility (Boccagni and Giudici 2022; Bassoli and Luccioni 2023). Moreover, hosts were often tasked with helping guests navigate asylum bureaucracy (Komter and van Leer 2012), while institutional financial support proved crucial in offsetting the economic cost of hosting, which was particularly prohibitive when accommodating whole families (Caron 2019).

The present study

Previous research has identified micro-level determinants of domestic hospitality but has mostly examined small-scale initiatives and isolated factors (Bassoli and Luccioni 2023). Our study instead analysed a broader set of determinants using large samples. Unlike work rooted in the post-2015 reception crisis, we focused on a distinct context where hosting Ukrainians was rapidly normalised and organised by state institutions. This institutionalisation not only altered which factors shaped hosts' experiences but also positioned them as migration management actors and gatekeepers of resettlement (Burrell 2024; Daoust and Dyvik 2025).

To investigate hosts' experiences in this new institutional context, we employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Ivankova, Creswell, and Stick 2006). The analysis began with a preliminary quantitative phase, which offered a broad, panoramic understanding of the most influential determinants distinguishing positive from negative hosting experiences. These quantitative findings informed the coding scheme for the subsequent qualitative phase, which was then refined to identify distinct hosting trajectories shaped by these determinants.

We applied the same mixed-methods design both in Belgium and Switzerland. This allowed us to identify recurring patterns in the micro-analysis of hospitality practices while accounting for the macro-political idiosyncrasies of each national context. The replication was made possible by an international collaboration between two research groups monitoring reception experiences in the ongoing Ukrainian reception crisis. Both the quantitative and qualitative phases were approved by the ethics committee of one of the authors' main academic affiliations before the study was conducted.

The Belgian institutional response

In March 2022, the Belgian Foreign Office began automatically granting temporary protection to Ukrainians displaced by the war. Between 10 March 2022 and 31 January 2023, over 50,000 received this status, most arriving in March–April (Office des Étrangers 2023). Notably, 90% were hosted in homestay accommodations, without standardised financial compensation (OCDE 2022; Schrooten et al. 2022). The National Crisis

Center (NCCN) coordinated registration, reception, and support at the federal level, while regional governments managed long-term housing. Wallonia, Flanders, and Brussels-Capital Region worked with the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers and local authorities to identify accommodation, including homestay.

This response marked a sharp break from previous hosting practices in Belgium. Before the Ukraine crisis, grassroots initiatives like the Citizens' Platform accommodated transit migrants in irregular situations. Operating in what Mescoli and Roblain (2021) call a 'grey area of responsibility', they filled institutional gaps while negotiating legal boundaries with federal authorities. By contrast, public authorities actively encouraged private citizens to provide accommodation to displaced Ukrainians.

The Swiss institutional response

Following the EU's approach, the Swiss Federal Council began automatically granting temporary protection to Ukrainians in March 2022. Of the 75,000 arrivals, over half were hosted by private citizens (Caritas 2023). The federal government offered financial support to hosts, while cantons decided on tax reductions. After short stays in federal asylum centres, refugees were allocated to cantons by population size (State Secretariat for Migration 2023). As in Belgium – though in a more decentralised way – cantons held substantial autonomy in organising reception (Favre et al. 2023).

Unlike Belgium, the Swiss response largely continued existing institutional practices. Citizen hosting was already partly integrated into public policy and managed by state institutions. In the French-speaking canton where this research took place, the migration and integration authority had run the Héberger un migrant (Host a Migrant) programme since 2016, providing a framework for hosting diverse migrant groups well before 2022. This continuity enabled authorities to build on established systems and more easily support hosting arrangements by private citizens during the Ukrainian displacement.

Preliminary quantitative phase: identifying influential determinants of the hosting experience

Methods

Recruitment

In Belgium, we launched a large online survey in Dutch, English, French, Ukrainian, and Russian in mid-June 2022. Recruitment combined collaboration with municipal authorities and associations, promotion through public and civil society organisations and Facebook groups for displaced Ukrainians, and wider media coverage and press releases. The survey ran from 14 June to 18 August 2022.

In Switzerland, the team engaged institutional actors overseeing reception and integration in a French-speaking canton to design a study on homestay in April 2022. Institutional partners distributed an invitation leaflet with the survey link through their mailing lists between September and November 2022, ensuring participant anonymity.

Survey respondents

The target population included households in Belgium and Switzerland that were hosting, had hosted, or were considering hosting Ukrainians. 'Households' covered couples (with or without children), single individuals, single parents, and other

arrangements. One respondent per household completed the survey, yielding 742 responses in Belgium and 343 in Switzerland. For analysis, we retained current or recent hosts with complete data on key variables ($n = 568$ in Belgium; $n = 186$ in Switzerland).

Most respondents were women (53% in Belgium; 65% in Switzerland) with tertiary education (72% and 75%). The average age was 53 in Belgium and 54 in Switzerland. Half of Belgian households had three or more members, compared to a median of two in Switzerland; 38% in Belgium and 52%% in Switzerland, respectively, included at least one child. In both countries, half hosted more than two guests. Reflecting broader statistics that most displaced Ukrainians were women (Didier 2025; STATBEL 2025), female guests were the majority in both samples (66% in Belgium; 64% in Switzerland).

Survey measures

The measures were kept as similar as possible in both countries. However, in Switzerland, the items were measured on a five-point scale, including the neutral midpoint, while in Belgium the items were measured on a four-point scale, without the neutral midpoint.

General hosting experience. Respondents rated their overall hosting experience on a scale from strongly negative to strongly positive. Based on their responses, they were grouped into two categories: positive (positive or strongly positive) and non-positive (negative, strongly negative, or neutral – only in Switzerland). Overall, 83% of Belgian hosts and 75% of Swiss hosts reported a positive experience. We grouped neutral with negative responses for two reasons: (1) to flag any non-positive experience as a potential sign of reduced willingness to continue hosting, offering useful guidance for support programmes; and (2) due to the small number of very negative responses ($n = 23$), which required merging groups to maintain balance.

Hosting-specific determinants. We developed a new set of 18 items (see Table 1) that reflect common challenges encountered during the hosting experience, such as cohabitation issues (e.g. Monforte, Maestri, and D'Halluin 2021), perceived cultural and language barriers (e.g. Ran and Join-Lambert 2020), personal fatigue (e.g. Merikoski 2022), difficulties in offering support (e.g. Doidge and Sandri 2019), limited social or institutional backing (e.g. Boccagni and Giudici 2022), and financial pressure (e.g. Caron 2019). Given the absence of established quantitative instruments in this domain, we developed these items in close coordination with coordinators of private hosting schemes. This collaborative process was guided by recurring themes and categories identified in the existing literature, ensuring both theoretical coherence and contextual relevance. Positively worded items were reverse-coded.

Analytical strategy. To compare the 18 hosting-related determinants between hosts with positive and non-positive experiences, we conducted Welch two-sample t-tests separately for Belgium and Switzerland, given the unequal group sizes. Standardised effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated to identify key determinants, with values above 0.8

Table 1. Average satisfaction with host-specific determinants in the total sample and by experience group (non-positive vs. positive) in Switzerland (N = 186) and Belgium (N = 568).

	Switzerland			Belgium		
	Welch's t-test (df)^{p}	Non-positive experience (N = 47)	Positive experience (N = 139)	Welch's t-test (df)^{p}	Non-positive experience (N = 95)	Positive experience (N = 473)
Decline of standard of living	2.10 (1.14)***	3.19 (1.15)	1.73 (0.86)	1.79 (0.88)***	2.58 (1.02)	1.63 (0.75)
Difficult to agree about the rules for living together	2.06 (1.17)***	3.17 (1.13)	1.69 (0.93)	1.89 (1.01)***	3.08 (1.05)	1.65 (0.81)
Did not learn a lot about another culture	2.40 (1.09)***	3.38 (1.15)	2.07 (0.84)	2.29 (0.90)***	2.93 (0.95)	2.16 (0.83)
Not enthusiastic about daily tasks	2.89 (0.86)***	3.60 (0.88)	2.65 (0.71)	2.16 (0.82)***	2.78 (0.84)	2.03 (0.75)
Difficult to share spaces and coordinating daily routines	2.02 (1.03)***	2.83 (1.20)	1.75 (0.80)	2.13 (0.93)***	2.98 (0.69)	1.96 (0.88)
Sacrificing private and professional life	2.35 (1.16)***	3.21 (1.14)	2.06 (1.02)	2.26 (1.05)***	3.16 (0.95)	2.08 (0.97)
Obstacles due to cultural differences	2.78 (1.20)*	3.49 (1.20)	2.55 (1.10)	1.71 (0.88)***	2.62 (0.98)	1.52 (0.73)
Not overcoming language barriers	2.22 (1.01)***	2.79 (1.16)	2.02 (0.88)	1.85 (0.73)***	2.20 (0.89)	1.78 (0.68)
Too much responsibility	2.51 (1.13)***	3.13 (1.10)	2.30 (1.07)	2.37 (0.99)***	2.98 (0.86)	2.25 (0.97)
Support not received from organisations	3.02 (1.20)	3.57 (1.06)	2.83 (1.19)	2.02 (1.02)***	2.64 (1.09)	1.89 (0.95)
Lack of support from others	2.31 (1.12)***	2.81 (1.28)	2.14 (1.01)	1.83 (0.92)***	2.27 (0.99)	1.74 (0.89)
Cannot dedicate enough time to oneself and family	2.19 (1.02)***	2.62 (1.13)	2.05 (0.94)	2.37 (1.00)***	3.04 (0.98)	2.23 (0.95)
Not enough information	2.30 (1.07)***	2.70 (1.00)	2.16 (1.06)	2.93 (1.03)***	3.22 (0.94)	2.87 (1.04)
Not able to support	1.84 (0.65)***	2.06 (0.79)	1.77 (0.58)	1.63 (0.65)***	1.85 (0.80)	1.58 (0.61)
Language as a barrier	2.76 (1.34)***	3.02 (1.47)	2.68 (1.29)	2.33 (1.04)***	2.83 (1.11)	2.23 (0.99)
Cannot count on others when support needed	2.54 (1.07)***	2.72 (1.14)	2.48 (1.04)	2.41 (0.97)*	2.71 (0.98)	2.35 (0.96)
Financial situation not good	2.32 (1.08)***	2.40 (1.06)	2.29 (1.09)	1.89 (0.87)***	2.11 (0.99)	1.85 (0.84)
Difficult to react appropriately	2.30 (0.89)***	2.34 (0.87)	2.29 (0.89)	1.88 (0.83)***	2.07 (0.89)	1.84 (0.82)

Notes: The item range in Switzerland is from 1 to 5, and in Belgium from 1 to 4. The total mean in Switzerland was compared to the neutral midpoint of 3 and in Belgium to the neutral midpoint of 2.5. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$.

considered large (Lakens 2013). Standardisation enabled cross-country comparisons despite different scales.

Results

Table 1 presents the average agreement with hosting-specific determinants in Belgium and Switzerland, comparing participants with positive and non-positive experiences. Overall, hosts in both countries reported few difficulties and generally rated their experience as positive. The main exception concerned institutional support: Swiss participants were neutral about the support received, while Belgian participants reported insufficient information from organisations prior to hosting.

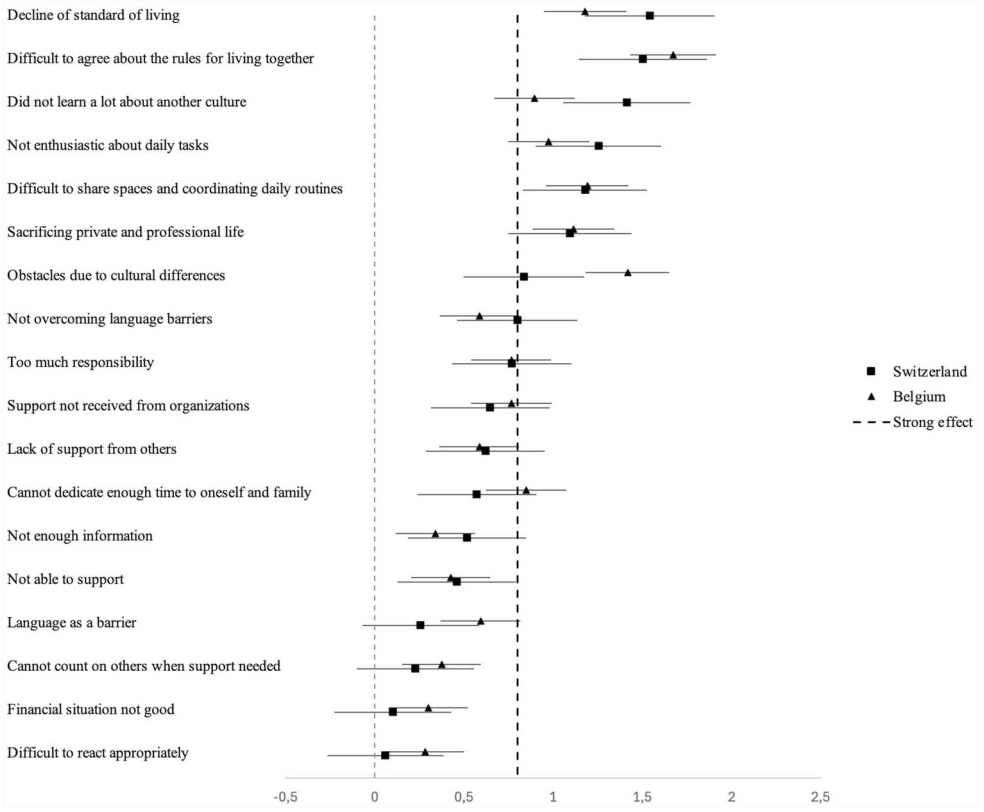

Figure 1. Cohen's distances of host-specific determinants differentiating between an overall positive experience and a non-positive experience in Switzerland and Belgium. *Note*: The confidence intervals that include 0 indicate non-significant difference between the two groups. Cohen's distances above 0.8 are considered a strong effect, indicated by the dashed black line. To increase readability, host specific determinants are ordered by the effect size in Switzerland.

Figure 1 shows Cohen's d values, indicating the effect size of overall satisfaction in relation to each host-specific determinant (for more details, see Table S1, Supplementary Materials). Most determinants significantly differed between hosts with positive and non-positive experiences, with only four items not reaching significance in Switzerland.

Across both countries, the largest differences between hosts with positive and non-positive experiences concerned *exhaustion* (decline in living standards, personal and professional sacrifices, excessive responsibility, lack of personal time), *cohabitation* (difficulties sharing space and coordinating activities), perceived *cultural differences* (as explanations for relational obstacles but also learning opportunities), and *enthusiasm* for hosting tasks, with Cohen's d values of 0.8 or higher in at least one country. Compared to satisfied hosts, those with non-positive experiences reported more exhaustion, heavier responsibilities, and greater sacrifices of personal and family time. They also faced more cohabitation challenges, such as disagreements over rules and space, and were less enthusiastic about hosting tasks. Cultural differences were more often seen as obstacles in Belgium, while in Switzerland such hosts were less likely to report learning about other cultures. These four determinants

(Cohen's d > 0.8) were further examined in the qualitative phase to deepen understanding of hosting trajectories.

Main qualitative phase: merging influential determinants into distinct hosting trajectories

Methods

Recruitment

While both research teams in Belgium and Switzerland used the same interview guide, the recruitment strategies differed. The qualitative phase in Belgium involved in-depth interviews conducted between November 2022 and February 2023, primarily with participants from the Brussels-Capital region. Recruitment combined convenience and snowball sampling through Facebook announcements, direct outreach to known hosts, and leveraging professional networks. This approach resulted in a broad yet potentially self-selected sample, skewed toward more connected and publicly visible hosts. Interviews were conducted in French by trained student assistants, with continuous mentoring to ensure methodological and ethical rigour.

In Switzerland, the qualitative phase took place between February and April 2023. Participants were previous respondents who had completed the quantitative survey and indicated their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview. This approach facilitated data triangulation but may have captured a more active and engaged subset of hosts. Interviews, primarily in French or English, were conducted at participants' homes by experienced researchers.

Interview respondents

In Belgium, 28 local hosts agreed to participate in interviews, while 124 individuals in Switzerland provided contact details for follow-up interviews, with 30 agreeing to participate. This resulted in 58 interviews across both countries, each lasting approximately 90 min. The sample included 22 men (9 in Switzerland, 13 in Belgium) and 41 women (25 in Switzerland, 16 in Belgium). Forty-eight interviewees held university degrees (22 in Switzerland, 26 in Belgium), with 29 working full-time (15 in Switzerland, 14 in Belgium), 8 part-time (5 in Switzerland, 3 in Belgium), 14 retired (9 in Switzerland, 5 in Belgium), and 2 unemployed (both in Belgium). More detailed socio-demographics are available in Table S2.

Interview guide

The same interview guide was used in both Belgium and Switzerland, consisting of five parts: (1) Host motivations and expectations; (2) Initial hosting experiences, including contact with people who were hosted, preparation, and cohabitation negotiations; (3) Evolution of the hosting experience, focusing on positive and negative aspects; (4) Daily coexistence; (5) The conclusion of the hosting experience, when applicable. Interviews were audio-recorded (see Table S3 for full details of the Interview Guide).

Analytical strategy

Interview transcripts were analysed using Atlas-Ti. Initially, we applied a deductive coding scheme based on the four key hosting determinants identified in the preliminary

quantitative phase (i.e. cohabitation, enthusiasm, exhaustion, and perceived cultural differences). We then used an inductive strategy to refine and connect these determinants. This process revealed three distinct hosting trajectories, each reflecting different combinations of the four determinants at various phases of the experience (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). After identifying these trajectories, we continued the analysis until reaching theoretical saturation after 43 interviews (Saunders et al. 2018).

The trajectories presented in the following results section do not claim to capture every nuance of individual hosting experiences, which are inherently complex. Rather, they highlight the key factors that hosts deemed most meaningful to share. While experiences are rarely one-dimensional, these narratives illustrate how hosts selectively emphasise certain aspects, shaping their experiences as more or less challenging or fulfilling over time, and reflecting the unfolding and dynamic nature of their perceptions throughout the course of hosting.

Results

Harmonious cohabitation convergence

The qualitative analysis showed that hosts typically experienced cohabitation as harmonious, marked by enthusiasm and appreciation for cultural differences. Hosts embraced helping, learning from their guests, and adapting to one another. While cultural differences were acknowledged, responses varied, and managing language barriers led hosts to develop strategies to address these challenges (Hebbani, Khawaja, and Famularo 2016). For instance, Jean-Patrick in Belgium hosted a Ukrainian family on a separate floor, promoting a relaxed atmosphere by sharing chores, offering help, engaging in activities, and introducing guests to his social circle.

> *Jean-Patrick*: We love them, they're family, they're our second family.
>
> *Laura*: There was sometimes some arguing about things they cook that we don't like as much, etc. But no worries (…). And we took them to a little party at a relative's house. (…) They came every time there was something happening. (…) We tried to do things, even if they were only small things, parties with them in the summer, barbecues and so on. They always helped us.
>
> *Jean-Patrick*: And the kitchen, in the evening I cooked for everyone and at one point the father got up, he cleaned the table, he's over there and cleaned everything and the kitchen was very clean and every time he said 'no no Jean-Patrick, leave [it] Jean-Patrick'. Really perfect, 10 out of 10. (…) And we brought them a small network of families and friends. My neighbor here, with whom we get along well, invited them several times: 'Come on, let's go for a walk in the woods with the dog, come and have something to eat' and so on.
>
> *Interviewer*: I don't know if they taught you about their culture over there.
>
> *Jean-Patrick*: Of course, yes, yes, yes. For my birthday I got presents from Ukraine with their culture, really very …
>
> *Laura*: … very Slavic
>
> *Jean-Patrick*: Yes, Slavic (…), with the explanation that it's to get rid of bad luck and a little doll, a bit like we have Buddhas and stuff like that. So yes, they explained to us how they lived in their country, yes of course. (Jean-Patrick and Laura, Belgium, hosting since November 2022)

Mona and Brenda's case followed a similar pattern, though their experience was initially framed as less simple. At first, they perceived their guest as 'distant' and 'passive'. Few cohabitation rules were set, and the hosts had hoped daily routines would naturally fall into place, but this did not happen. As a result, Mona and Brenda became more proactive, involving their guest in household tasks, familiarising him with the house, and running errands together to encourage his active participation.

> *Brenda:* In the beginning we had the impression of being a hotel, really (…) He slept a lot, he'd wake up and leave the room at midday and then we'd see him like a ghost and then he'd live in his room, so we had to insist on telling him 'but you're also allowed to come and eat in the kitchen, you're allowed to come to the bathroom, you're allowed to come to the living room if you want but … ' (…). But after that, he moved on! We had to show him the dishwasher, how it worked … He did a bit of cleaning in the kitchen as a favor. (Mona & Brenda, Switzerland, hosting since November 2022)

From the hosts' perspective, initial differences in routines and shared spaces created barriers to connection. Over time, however, these differences led to self-reflection and meaningful conversations, fostering a more intimate cohabitation. Mona and Brenda noticed a shift when their guest found employment, becoming more engaged and better adapting to their active lifestyle. This increased sense of agency aligned with their work ethic, reducing dependency and relational imbalances, a common issue in host–guest dynamics (Komter and van Leer 2012; Merikoski 2019). As their routines synchronised, Mona and Brenda found the experience deeply fulfilling.

This initial tension, followed by mutual efforts to harmonise, aligns with Monforte's view that domestic hospitality requires a 'compromise' between host and guest, each bringing their own culture, habits, and needs (Monforte, Maestri, and D'Halluin 2021). This process gradually transforms the house into a 'place of encounter', where two individualities seek harmony, and reciprocity is key to welcoming a stranger as a guest (Gerbier-Aublanc 2018; Komter and van Leer 2012). To achieve harmony, hosts encouraged reciprocity and reduced asymmetries by involving guests actively in household activities, making their participation central to cohabitation.

Beyond participation, empathic understanding and perspective-taking were key to improving host–guest relationships. Interpreting behaviours through the lens of individual histories rather than stereotypes led to more constructive interactions. Mona and Brenda, for example, saw their guest's initial passivity not as unwillingness, but as disorientation from his migration journey and ongoing trauma. Similarly, Jean-Patrick and Laura understood their guests' silence and withdrawal as responses to past distress. They recognised that engaging with their guests, even when challenging, was crucial to bridging the gap. These cases show that domestic hospitality involves not only sharing space but also emotional labour and perspective-taking, which foster more balanced and respectful relationships.

Gradual fatigue and exhaustion emergence

The second hosting trajectory emerged from experiences where initial enthusiasm gave way to exhaustion. Early cohabitation was often described as harmonious and emotionally close, but the long-term demands of hosting led to fatigue. Driven by a strong desire to help, hosts took on significant responsibilities, including assisting with administrative tasks, teaching the language, and helping with future planning. Balancing these duties

with family and, at times, professional commitments proved draining. The constant presence of others also limited personal space and privacy. As Merikoski (2022) notes, hosts often feel overwhelmed when they realise the emotional and logistical effort required to share their home. This was reflected in the experience of Françoise and Bernard, a Belgian couple who hosted three guests on the upper floor of their home. While they viewed the cohabitation positively, they acknowledged feeling emotionally exhausted and no longer entirely at ease in their own home.

> *Françoise:* There was no real discussion (…) It's going very well, it's a real shared accommodation. We share the kitchen, bathroom, and toilets. There was no conflict at this level. They help us, they clean from time to time. (…) There is good communication between us and no need to say things. (…) Everything is positive because we see that we are helping them and that is very gratifying for us. (…) But yes, at the moment (…), we're tired. We have less space for other things (…). Hosting also takes a bit of energy. But the hardest thing is that you're not really at home anymore. Yeah, it's like coming home and knowing that you're not alone, you're in the living room and they come round. (Françoise & Bernard, Belgium, hosting since March 2022)

As this case illustrates, the emotional and spatial demands of hosting sometimes overshadowed its positive aspects. The experience of Sofie, who hosted a Ukrainian mother and daughter with her family, offers a similar reflection. While she described a strong emotional connection with the guest mother – developed through daily kitchen conversations and shared parenting experiences – she also emphasised the psychological toll of becoming too involved and the challenge of maintaining healthy emotional boundaries.

> *Sofie:* I think we talked a lot with my guest in the kitchen and that was a really nice way to exchange between mums with very different experiences. She was also very open and talked a lot about her emotions (…) But there were things that I found difficult; it was more for her daughter (…). Should we do something to get a place in a school here? But she couldn't speak French, so we had to think about a language school and all that (…). I was worried about her, but at the same time she's not my daughter, it's not my decision, so it was a good lesson. There are limits and sometimes you have to discuss things, I can't take things too personally. (Sofie, Belgium, hosted from July to December 2022)

In this second trajectory, while cohabitation initially went smoothly, hosts found that long-term proximity required ongoing negotiation and boundary-setting. Although fatigue set in over time, some hosts found that empathic understanding helped sustain the relationship. For example, Sofie balanced care with distance, acknowledging her guest's situation while maintaining boundaries. Similarly, Françoise and Bernard saw occasional tension not as a relational failure but as a reflection of their guests' stressful circumstances.

These insights suggest that empathy and reflexivity were key for hosts in managing the experience. However, despite their efforts, the emotional and logistical demands eventually became burdensome. As with other hosting trajectories, initial enthusiasm waned, and the proximity that was once meaningful grew increasingly taxing, echoing common concerns in hosting and refugee initiatives (Doidge and Sandri 2019; Karakayali 2017). Hosts' emotion regulation and interpretive efforts were necessary to preserve the relationship, but the strain ultimately led to a decline in enthusiasm (Merikoski 2022; Milan 2018).

Dysfunctional cohabitation divergence

The third trajectory was marked by lasting difficulties from psychological exhaustion and unresolved tensions, often linked to perceived cultural differences. Hosts struggled to establish a shared framework for cohabitation, which harmed their well-being, daily routines, and living environments. While some aspects were appreciated, hosts ultimately viewed the experience as disappointing or dysfunctional. This was not due to open conflict, but because they couldn't create a mutually satisfying arrangement. For example, Francine and Pierre hosted a Ukrainian man but soon faced relational friction: the guest mainly interacted with Pierre, sidelining Francine and causing her discomfort and invisibility. Despite open communication efforts, improvements were limited.

> *Francine:* But for me, this experience was a disappointment. (…) At the beginning, we invited him to dinner two or three times a week, then less and less. (…) We didn't establish any relationship with this person. I really felt like I was invisible and then when I had to pass messages, it was always through my husband. A very different upbringing from our lifestyle (…) We could clearly see at home that he was served [in Ukraine] by someone who was cleaning, cooking, all that … Quite a disappointment about the cleanliness of the kitchen. (…) On his part, no interest in establishing a relationship so at one point, we said to ourselves that we didn't care anymore.
>
> *Pierre:* (…) Different standards of cleanliness and once we talked about that, he got tidier. We laugh a little at the beginning, the second time we send a message that is a little more direct and then we show that we are not happy.
>
> *Francine:* (…) We had found a compromise. Because in the end, he bought his own dishes. (Francine & Pierre, Switzerland, hosted from June to December 2022)

Such perceived 'cultural clashes' – particularly regarding gender roles – align with findings by Komter and van Leer (2012), who described tensions arising from guests' reluctance to meet hosts' expectations of gender equality. In these cases, tensions were often framed as intractable 'intercultural differences', which reinforced emotional distance and the 'othering' of guests, further deepening the divide. Ultimately, despite initial efforts, the engagement declined as unresolved issues overshadowed the initial enthusiasm for cohabitation.

Lea and Sabine, who hosted a Ukrainian woman in Switzerland, similarly experienced a gradual breakdown in the relationship for similar reasons. Initially small frictions – loud phone calls, extended cooking sessions during working hours – accumulated over time, intensifying existing tensions and the emotional distance between the hosts and their guests.

> *Lea:* (…) Then at the table if someone called her while we were eating, she usually answered over the loudspeaker, which was a bit unpleasant. So, the rules of etiquette are different, no problem, it's a cultural difference, we understand that, but it's true that this was especially difficult.
>
> *Sabine:* (…) It is true there was a moment when it was too much. It was all little things, not a big deal in itself. All together it wasn't working anymore.
>
> *Lea:* (…) I telework 2 days a week and (name guest) had the habit of cooking for 8 hours to get a lot of things done (…) Here too I said: I'm sorry, for me it's important that it is quiet when I work. Is it possible to cook at certain hours? And that's when I started getting surprising answers, saying that my ears were sensitive and … I said yes, yes my ears were

> sensitive, it's true. Do you know the story of Switzerland? People say that the Swiss are discreet (…). In fact, in Switzerland, you stop immediately as soon as you get a message, a signal, a gesture, a look that makes you understand that you're bothering someone. Go for a walk, you'll see (…) If you see someone shouting into a phone or shouting in a square or whatever, we say it doesn't matter, they're foreigners (…) She was shocked. (Lea and Sabine, Switzerland, hosting from March 2022)

Lea and Sabine's case illustrates how unmet expectations were framed as normative transgressions and interpreted through the lens of cultural differences (Maestri and Monforte 2020), with guests perceived as violating key justice principles valued by the hosts' culture. These perceived transgressions led the hosts to view the dysfunctional cohabitation as a clash of values, forcing them to distinguish between nationals, who complied with norms, and 'foreigners', who deviated from them (Bowskill, Lyons, and Coyle 2007). This power to judge guests for failing to meet behavioural expectations inadvertently mirrors and perpetuates state-imposed hierarchies and disciplinary mechanisms in welfare allocation and humanitarian aid (Fassin 2011), as determined by reception regimes (Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017). These dynamics raise important questions about the connection between micro-level domestic practices and macro-level regulatory systems, which will be explored further in the following pages.

Discussion

At the outset of this project, we sought to assess whether the initial wave of hospitality during the Ukraine crisis could generate long-term commitment among local hosts in Belgium and Switzerland, thereby supporting the sustainability of homestay accommodation at the micro-level. Our quantitative results showed mostly positive experiences, including among many with no prior involvement in migration-related issues (Favre et al. 2023; Schrooten et al. 2022). As practical hospitality rarely unfolds without conditions, daily interactions proved both rewarding and challenging (Gerbier-Aublanc 2018). The evolution of hosting relationships depended on hosts' and guests' ability to navigate routines, bridge cultural differences, and manage emotional demands. Sustained accommodation – through acceptance or constructive problem-solving – was crucial for maintaining these relationships over time (Rusbult et al. 1991).

While all hosts expressed a desire to connect with their guests and showed care early on, the analysis of the qualitative data showed different pathways in the hosting experience. We captured this diversity by describing three trajectories underscoring the importance of a temporal dimension in domestic hospitality (see Monforte, Maestri, and D'Halluin 2021, for a similar point about temporality). The first trajectory highlighted enthusiasm and intercultural learning, while in the second enthusiasm morphed into an emotional burden despite good intentions. The third trajectory involved early dysfunctional cohabitation, with strained relationships due to unreciprocated expectations and perceived cultural differences, potentially leading to abrupt breakdowns.

By focusing on hosting relationships – a form of close intergroup contact distinct from cross-group friendships – our study contributes to the literature on intergroup contact and helping. Research on the benefits of intergroup contact (Pettigrew and Tropp 2011) has shown that positive, everyday interactions can reduce threat perceptions and increase support for displaced groups, including those from Ukraine (Górska and

Tausch 2023). Our findings reveal that positive and negative elements often coexist within a single hosting experience, underscoring the need to unpack intergroup contact in all its complexity (Árnadóttir et al. 2018). This calls for phenomenological approaches that capture the nuanced, ambivalent, and evolving nature of human relationships as they unfold in real-world contexts.

While intergroup contact is often assumed to reduce the salience of categorical distinctions and create opportunities to view outgroup members as individuals (Brewer and Gaertner 2003), it is striking that both positive and negative experiences reported by local hosts were predominantly interpreted through a culturalist lens, framed in terms of national cultural differences (Morris, Chiu, and Liu 2015). By contrast, differences related to migration, social class or generation were not considered when reflecting on these experiences. Furthermore, microcultures within families and friendship networks, as well as the renegotiation of cultures through host–guest interactions, were rarely acknowledged.

To foster greater awareness of culture as a complex, multilayered, and dynamic phenomenon support organisations should prioritise training in cultural humility (Foronda 2020) and critical consciousness (Sakamoto and Pitner 2005). Cultural humility encourages hosts to recognise intersecting cultural levels and hierarchies, engage in continuous self-reflection, and approach intercultural relationships with openness and respect rather than relying on presumed competence. This orientation helps hosts navigate cultural differences and reduces the risk of unintentional paternalism (Fisher-Borne, Cain, and Martin 2015). Critical consciousness, in turn, promotes recognition of guests as socio-political subjects (Vandevoordt and Verschraegen 2018), re-politicizing the practice of hosting in ways that resist assimilatory expectations (Lantos et al. 2025), and heighten awareness of power asymmetries (Van Acker et al. 2014).

Reclaiming the political dimension of hosting can also extend solidarity beyond Ukrainians to other displaced groups. Public opinion in Europe often mirrors state-sanctioned hierarchies in refugee regimes, with greater support for Ukrainians than others (Stefaniak et al. 2025). Yet, when paired with critical consciousness (Schwiertz and Steinhilper 2021), positive hosting experiences can challenge such selective solidarity and foster broader support for refugees (Uhr et al. 2025), a dynamic consistent with the 'secondary transfer effects' described in contact theory (Pettigrew 2009).

As our findings suggested, another key factor associated with positive hosting experiences is perspective-taking. Hosts who were able to interpret their guests' behaviours in light of their life histories – rather than through stereotypes or cultural biases – were better equipped to meet each other's needs (Van Acker et al. 2014). Conversely, a lack of perspective-taking often led to frustration and reinforced negative stereotypes. Targeted interventions are essential to sustain perspective-taking and promote affective concern, cognitive understanding, and motivational efforts to improve the sharing and interpretation of diverse perspectives (Calvard et al. 2021). In parallel, autonomy-oriented support enables hosts to offer help in ways that affirm the agency, choices, and capabilities of their guests (Becker et al. 2019). By fostering independence and supporting long-term integration, this approach may prevent host fatigue and emotional exhaustion caused by excessive involvement.

These targeted interventions require a clear policy framework and coordinated implementation, both largely lacking during the Ukrainian reception crisis due to the

rapid, unprepared response (Schrooten 2025). Preparatory programmes should equip prospective hosts to navigate relational challenges and understand the support available to them (Ran and Join-Lambert 2020). Guests also need accessible, culturally sensitive, and non-prescriptive information about what homestay typically entails. Matching procedures should account for shared interests and preferences, involving both parties to ensure compatibility and manage expectations (Bassoli and Luccioni 2023). In addition, hosts and guests need clear guidance and substantial support to navigate administrative burdens and complex paperwork. Supportive housing policies are essential, not only to ease pressure on hosts but also to help guests regain autonomy and transition into stable, long-term housing (Phillimore 2024). This transition remains a major challenge for both displaced Ukrainians and recognised refugees leaving collective accommodations.

Limitations and future directions

This study was not designed for a systematic comparison between Belgium and Switzerland, nor to capture sub-national variations in reception policies (Manatschal 2011). Recruitment also differed: in Belgium, a nationwide call limited assessment of response rates and representativity, while in Switzerland, a more targeted regional strategy improved response rates but reduced generalizability. Despite these differences, contrasts between the two contexts point to promising avenues for research. Belgian hosts reported more difficulties, often citing insufficient support and lack of preparation, likely linked to weaker regional and municipal coordination. Unlike Switzerland, Belgium offered no automatic financial compensation, which may have heightened financial strain. These findings illustrate how national and regional policies shape household-level hosting dynamics (Bassoli and Luccioni 2023). Future work could further examine how historical, cultural, and institutional contexts influence hosting across Europe.

A key limitation is the absence of Ukrainian guests' perspectives, a common gap in domestic hospitality research (Bassoli and Luccioni 2023). Without their input, we could not assess how homestay contributes to their integration or a sense of belonging. Dyadic approaches (Vescan et al. 2023) would offer a more comprehensive view by including both host and guest experiences. Also, our study was conducted during the early phase of the Ukrainian reception crisis, when solidarity was especially high. According to institutional partners, this initial surge gradually stabilised. As the flow of new hosts and arrivals declined, more attention shifted toward supporting existing households, potentially improving the quality and stability of cohabitations. Longitudinal research, with refreshed samples, could track how hosting evolves in changing contexts (Dangubić et al. 2025; Górska and Tausch 2023).

Self-selection bias is another limitation, as individuals with positive experiences or greater interest may have been more likely to participate. Responses may also reflect participants' prior attitudes, motivations, or contact with refugees (Becker et al. 2019; Johnston and Glasford 2017). In Switzerland, some participants may have perceived the researchers as affiliated with institutions, which could have shaped how they framed their experiences, emphasising either positive aspects (e.g. out of pride) or negative ones (e.g. due to disappointment), introducing social desirability bias and performativity.

We also caution against overgeneralising our findings. Our sample overrepresented highly educated individuals, older adults, women, and two-person households relative

to national demographics. Without a central database of hosts, it is unclear whether this profile reflects the broader host population. Furthermore, our analysis focuses on displacement to the Global North. Yet South–South migration – which has a longer history and now exceeds South–North flows in absolute numbers – poses distinct challenges, particularly in low- and middle-income countries with limited infrastructures (Crawley and Teye 2024). As such, our findings may not be transferable to Global South contexts.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes meaningfully to scholarship on domestic hospitality within European reception systems. Theoretically, it sheds light on the micro-practices of everyday humanitarianism by ordinary citizens hosting displaced Ukrainians. Methodologically, our mixed-methods design captures both the key factors shaping hosting experiences and the evolving dynamics between hosts and guests. This micro-level perspective enhances our understanding of how domestic hospitality can help fill gaps in refugee reception and foster more inclusive societies.

Note

1. A national culture can be defined by material, legal, linguistic, historical, and societal features, as well as by social-psychological dimensions such as shared beliefs, values, self-concepts, and interaction styles (e.g. Markus and Kitayama 2010). While these dimensions vary across groups, nations, and regions, they broadly align with lay understandings of national culture and are used in this study to interpret differences in the beliefs and practices of hosts and guests

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Author contributions

CRediT: **Emanuele Politi:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft; **Kaat Van Acker:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Marija Dangubić:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Writing – review & editing; **Rose-Lima Van Keer:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Software, Writing – original draft; **Loïc Pignolo:** Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Jan Claeys:** Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Yoann Favre:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Visualization; **Eva G.T. Green:** Data curation, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing; **Antoine Roblain:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing; **Mieke Schrooten:** Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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Ethical approval

This study adhered to all relevant ethical and legal principles in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. It received approval from the Ethical Commission of the University of Lausanne (CER-UNIL) nr. C_SSP_072022_00003.

Data availability statement

The survey data from local hosts in Switzerland is available on OSF [https://osf.io/djntm/?view_only=e838bb35f9bc41ec887d461291d3d687]. However, the quantitative survey data from Belgium cannot be shared due to agreements with local initiatives and explicit terms in the informed consent. Materials and aggregated analyses are available upon request. To protect confidentiality and comply with agreements with institutional partners, qualitative data will not be shared, as it contains sensitive information that could affect both participant privacy and partner activities.

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