Mobilizing Solidarity in Times of Crisis

Research into the mobilization of host families sheltering Ukrainian refugees at their private homes in Flanders in 2022

Word count: 15 516

Anke Steenwegen

01908777

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Marlies Casier

A dissertation submitted to Ghent University in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Conflict and Development Studies

Academic year: 2022 - 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD

In the spring of 2022, I came across a photograph that deeply resonated with me. It depicted my boyfriend's grandmother, Gisela, surrounded by a group of people in a modest room. Within the confines of that small space, which couldn't have been more than 20 square meters, there was a kitchen, a table, and a bed. Gisela explained that this was her family's apartment at their host family's home in Germany in 1946 after she and her family had fled their hometown in Pommern, which is now part of Poland, following the Second World War. Despite the traumatic experiences she endured during those final months in Pommern and her journey to Schleswig-Holstein, Gisela speaks of her time with her host family with immense love and gratitude.

As Gisela shared her experiences as a guest in a host family, I found myself captivated by her stories. Around the same time, my parents were hosting a Ukrainian family of five - a father, mother, and three daughters – who fled the war in Ukraine. Gisela's enthusiasm and my parents' experiences piqued my interest in these extraordinary circumstances of shared living. This thesis is the culmination of that curiosity.

While delving into my research, I had the privilege of hearing numerous captivating and insightful stories from host families in Belgium. But also many other people – friends, family, and acquaintances – shared their own family stories of hosting refugees or fleeing when talking with me about my thesis. Originally, I intended to conduct and analyze interviews with families hosting refugees from Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, and Ukraine. However, I quickly became immersed in the multifaceted nature of their experiences, the challenges they faced, and the reasons behind their mobilization, narrowing down my research to families hosting Ukrainian refugees only. This thesis can only provide a glimpse into a fraction of their stories.

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Marlies Casier, for her guidance throughout the process of writing this thesis. From the initial stages of narrowing down the research subject to the completion, her expertise and support have been invaluable. Special thanks go to Gisela, my boyfriend's grandmother, and my parents, whose experiences

ABSTRACT

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia triggered a significant refugee influx, prompting widespread mobilization of individuals across Europe to provide assistance to those fleeing the conflict. In Belgium, the government initiated the #PlekVrij campaign, urging citizens to offer shelter to Ukrainian refugees. Within a single day, over 8,000 citizens responded to this call, opening their homes to those in need. This large-spread display of mobilization raised the research question: '*What motivates individuals to volunteer their homes as shelters for refugees, and what factors shape their decisions? How do these motivations intersect with political and societal attitudes towards refugees?*'. To explore these questions, this research conducted open interviews with nine host families, including thirteen respondents, who provided shelter to Ukrainian refugees in 2022 in Flanders. Through a comprehensive analysis, eight prominent themes emerge, which are (1) media representation and crisis perception, (2) cultural affiliation, (3) societal and governmental incentives, (4) access to resources, (5) gender-based vulnerability, (6) enemy images, (7) geographical proximity, and (8) temporality and the reasons for fleeing. These findings shed light on the crucial factors that influence individuals' decision to volunteer to open their homes and which are deeply intertwined with societal and political structures that encourage citizens to mobilize. Thus, host families often align with dominant attitudes towards the involved refugees, rather than challenging these established viewpoints.

INTRODUCTION

#PlekVrij, the Belgian government's campaign launched on March 1, aims to encourage citizens to open their homes for Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war in 2022 (Belgische Federale Overheidsdiensten, 2022). Within 48 hours, already 8.169 places for refugees were made available (De Standaard, 2022). A large number of positive stories were shared; however, this surge of solidarity was creating unforeseen challenges. In a matter of weeks, host families began reporting various issues, ranging from a lack of financial support and communication issues resulting from a language barrier and differences in habits to more significant issues connected to power issues, such as a refugee staying at a host family reporting that the kitchen was locked at night (Roo & Poppelmonde). Despite these challenges, #PlekVrij remained an important tool for sheltering Ukrainian refugees in 2022 (Belgische Federale Overheidsdiensten, 2022).

Sheltering refugees in the homes of private people is not a new approach to tackling the lack of refugee accommodation. In 2015 during the high influx of refugees fleeing the war in Syria, often referred to as the 2015 'refugee crisis', many German citizens volunteered to offer shelter as part of the "welcome culture" (Liebe et al., 2018). Similarly, some families in Belgium opened their homes to Syrian refugees in 2015. With the #Plekvrij campaign, the Belgian government pushes host families forward as a solution for temporary housing for refugees, which is a new way of dealing with housing issues for refugees.

Limited research has been conducted on experiences and challenges connected to this form of temporary housing for refugees, which requires the direct mobilization of citizens for its success. Research has however shown that we do not deal with all refugees as equals. Various studies show that attitudes towards refugees are influenced by geographic, social, and cultural proximity, enemy images, religion, whiteness, and gender (Bode & Abbeloos, 2022; Lahusen & Grasso, 2018; Meidert & Rapp, 2019; Talay & De Coninck, 2020). Furthermore, there is a discrepancy between the call for accepting those in need and individuals' willingness to engage in civil society actions to act in solidarity with refugees. Only a small number of individuals who welcome refugees in their communities actively seek a way to support them and give them guidance in the hosting community (Bode & Abbeloos,

2022; Liebe et al., 2018). Such solidarity actions for refugees can take many forms, such as donations, time engagement, advocacy, and demonstrations, and have the potential to foster social change, strengthen local networks for newcomers, and/or promote social equality (Lahusen & Grasso, 2018).

It is important to acknowledge that, altruism is not always having positive effects for those in need. It can be associated with issues of (among others) disempowerment and white saviorism (Cole, 2012; Toomey, 2011). At an organizational level, it can create dependency relations and power inequalities (Castel-branco, 2008; Lister, 2000). Furthermore, acts of solidarity can both be motivated by both altruistic and egoistic behaviors, influencing the "how" and "why" the solidarity practices take place (Lahusen & Grasso, 2018; Malkki, 2015).

Given the existing research that highlights the inequality in the treatment of refugee groups and sheds light on the complexities and challenges emerging from solidarity and aid practices, this research explores home sheltering from the perspective of the hosts. While former research has been conducted on general attitudes towards refugees, this research aims to examine the large-scale response of citizens to the #PlekVrij call and aims to answer the question *"What motivates individuals to volunteer their homes as shelters for refugees, and what factors shape their decisions? How do these motivations intersect with political and societal attitudes towards refugees?".* This study seeks to unravel the underlying motivations that encourage people to mobilize for the reception of refugees, identify connections between these motivations and existing research related to 'help', and shed light on the challenges of altruism that emerge within the context of sheltering refugees at private homes.

By delving into the motivations of hosting refugees at somebody's private home and examining the interplay between individual motivations, broader political and societal contexts, and the experiences of hosts, this study aims to contribute to understanding which factors motivate people to mobilize in the sheltering of refugees. Thereby it may guide the development of better policies and practices, and give an insight into how to engage people to participate in civil society actions while addressing potential challenges.

LITERATURE STUDY

Migration in Europe: Attitudes to migrants, 'the welcome culture' and the right to migrate

In the last decades, Europe has witnessed a significant rise in the cross-border mobility of people, that shaped migration politics and public attitudes towards migration and migrants. Consequently, there have been growing fears regarding the potential (negative) consequences associated with international migration (Geiger & Pécoud, 2013; Verkuyten, Mepham, et al., 2018). In response, nation-states have implemented policies aiming at "managing migration" - one can even argue "control migration" – in order to prevent the entry of unwanted migrants (Geiger & Pécoud, 2013). By managing or controlling migration, states aim to create migratory conditions without causing 'turbulence' – which is 'the destruction of the national order of things' – that could potentially undermine the socio-economic status of the dominant group or challenge the state sovereignty (Geiger & Pécoud, 2013). To achieve these objectives, migration policies extend beyond a focus on migration regulation itself, including asylum and integration politics. It is however important to highlight that the potential negative consequences of migration are often not based on objective measures. They are heavily influenced by prejudices rooted in xenophobic discourses and a culture of anxiety, that is perpetuated by stereotypical images and narratives. Furthermore, the culture of anxiety is created by the idea of a threat, such as migrants who are creating competition with those who already have low economic stability (Yakushko, 2009). What is perceived as the in-group thereby plays a major role, people who belong to the in-group are not perceived as a threat whereas those belonging to the out-group – what is in most circumstances the case for immigrants – are seen as a threat. The othering of migrants strengthens stereotypes, nourishing these xenophobic attitudes (Yakushko, 2009).

Negative perceptions of migration and xenophobia towards migrants emerge from a diversity of sources. Studies have explored the role of media framing in shaping public opinion towards migrants (De Coninck, 2021; Mccann & Sienkiewicz, 2023). Media representations have a major impact on reinforcing stereotypes of migrant groups. This does not only relate to traditional media sources but also new forms of digital news consumption, such as social media. The role of traditional forms of media can however not be

underestimated due to the widespread use and trust of these sources (De Coninck, 2021). Media can both foster positive as well as negative attitudes towards migration. Those attitudes are associated with the form of media people use. As a result, someone's attitudes to migration and migrants can be predicted based on their media consumption behavior (De Coninck, 2021). Also, the ethnic background of the migrant influences how they are perceived (De Coninck, 2021)

Also, the role of political strategy cannot be underestimated in the admission of refugees (Jackson & Atkinson, 2019). In "*The Refugee of My Enemy Is My Friend: Rivalry Type and Refugee Admission*" J. L. Jackson & D. B. Atkinson (2019) analyze the the role of a strategic calculation in the admission of refugees. They conclude that states are likely to make more risky decisions when refugees are created by an ideological rival and are therefore '*they decide whether to accept refugees from a particular sending state'* (p. 71). By accepting refugees from their rival state, host states engage in ideological rivalry, sending a signal to people from the sending state that people rather live in the host state and thereby showing superiority (Jackson & Atkinson, 2019). Political strategy and rivalry thereby become a strong predictor of welcoming refugees (Jackson & Atkinson, 2019). Admission and rejection of refugees and somebody's migration mobility thereby becomes a visible form of biopolitics determining who deserves to live and who does not, based on broader political conflict and ideology (Minca et al., 2022)

Host states aim to structure and control the refugee influx by determining who has the right to migrate and who does not by implementing various policies. Those migration policies traditionally distinguish between those people who have the right to migrate – or can get asylum – and those who do not possess this right. Thereby the distinction between voluntary and involuntary forms of migration serves as an important guiding principle (Verkuyten, Mepham, et al., 2018). This distinction concerns the question if people have made a conscious choice for international mobility, or if they were forced to migrate. Voluntary migration points to those people who have chosen themselves to migrate, whereas involuntary migration pertains to those who were compelled to migrate due to external circumstances beyond their control (Verkuyten, Mepham, et al., 2018). This widely utilized distinction is valuable, but it has its limitations, as there is only a thin line separating

voluntary to involuntary forms of migration. As a result, public perception and emotions have a substantial role in shaping how migration is perceived as "voluntary" and "involuntary" (Verkuyten, Mepham, et al., 2018). Moreover, the classification of involuntary migration is influenced by contextual factors such as place and time, and it is often the subject of ongoing debate (Verkuyten, Altabatabaei, et al., 2018). A variety of research has demonstrated that migrants who are perceived to carry more responsibility over their situation and thus are carrying more agency in the decision to migrate, are considered less righty to receive support and aid at the host country (Verkuyten, Altabatabaei, et al., 2018). As a result, perceived voluntary migrants are often targeted by feelings of anger and discrimination (De Coninck, 2021; Verkuyten, Altabatabaei, et al., 2018).

A variety of research has shown that attitudes toward migrants are not shaped by this distinction alone. Attitudes and policies towards forms of migration (cf. refugees) are diverse, also within these categories. As explained above, xenophobic attitudes towards certain migration groups, media representation, and political strategy have a major stake in welcoming certain migrant groups (De Coninck, 2021; Jackson & Atkinson, 2019; Minca et al., 2022; Talay & De Coninck, 2020). As a result, not all involuntary migration groups encounter similar challenges resulting from the 'controlled migration' policies than others. Critics in the public debate have increasingly argued that we do not handle all refugees as equal (as explained above). A notable example of these critiques arose in 2022 regarding the openness to welcome Ukrainian refugees in the European Union, in contrast to the oppression of other migration groups, coming from the African and Asian continents by FRONTEX – the European Union Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation of the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union. While Ukrainian refugees could safely cross the border with Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia, FRONTEX implemented increasing controlling policies and pushbacks at Europe's external borders, creating humanitarian disasters at Europe's external borders. A report of the Belgian NGO 11.11.11 counts 225.533 cases of illegal pushback at the European External borders in 2022, revealing the extensive scale of these incidents (11.11.11 vzw, 2023). Additionally, in 2022 evidence has shown that there is segregation at the border between the EU and Ukraine, with people of color experiencing racism while attempting to flee the war in Ukraine and searching for safety in Poland, Hungary, Romania, or another EU-country (White, 2022).

Furthermore, the activation of the state of 'Temporary Protection' by the European Union following the Russian invasion of Ukraine was the first scenario. Before 2022, this law had never been activated. Through this status, Ukrainian refugees are automatically granted access to asylum, housing, education, employment, and other civil rights, which stands in incredible contrast to the asylum procedure and rights of other refugees fleeing similar situations. These refugees, who are not under the 'temporary protection' (e.g. Syrian and Afghan refugees), are required to undergo an asylum procedure without any guarantees before accessing these rights and asylum (European Commission, n.d.). Moreover, the protective status allowed Ukrainian refugees to freely choose their asylum destination within the European Union, which sharply contrasts with the requirement for other refugees to apply for asylum in the first country of arrival, as agreed by the Dublin regulations (European Commission, n.d.; Huggler, 2017).

The activation of the state of Temporary Protection not only highlights the variations in challenges faced during migration by different migration groups but also sheds light on the differences in the 'welcome culture' upon arrival in the host society. The term 'welcome culture' emerged after the 2015 migration influx, referring to the widespread adoption of supportive attitudes towards asylum seekers within German society. This 'welcome culture' was associated with a widespread notion of providing apolitical volunteering for refugees, actively encouraged and promoted by the German government (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Liebe et al., 2018). By implementing the state of Temporary Protection, the European governmental institutions are fostering a more inclusive and welcoming environment for Ukrainian refugees, granting them more direct access to society. Additionally, through the #PlekVrij campaign, the government openly encourages citizens to provide support to Ukrainian refugees and promotes civil society actions in Belgium (Belgische Federale Overheidsdiensten, 2022). These governmental actions show that the European institutions and the Belgian governments aim to work towards a more welcoming culture for Ukrainian citizens fleeing war.

Refugees and Solidarity

While politics play a significant role in shaping the possibilities for enabling or restricting migration, citizens also exert influence on challenges faced during the fled and the chances

of success upon arrival in the host country. Citizen actions of solidarity – which roughly "*refers to the relations and ties in society that bind people together*" (p. 1) – can greatly simplify the challenges associated with migration as well as enhance the likelihood of a successful integration (Krunke et al., 2020). Conversely, acts of oppression can have the opposite effect. This was demonstrated by the events happening at the Greek-Turkish border in 2022, where citizens took up arms to 'protect' the border with Turkey against what they perceived as a 'mass migration' coming from Asia and Africa (Goethals, 2020). The actions and attitudes of citizens, therefore, play a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of migrants and can either facilitate or hinder their journey and integration processes (Goethals, 2020; Krunke et al., 2020). As a result, acts of solidarity can serve as a powerful tool to improve the circumstances of migration faced by people fleeing from war and can foster a more welcoming culture in the host society (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017). These acts of solidarity with people who migrate fall under the category of transnational solidarity, which is connected to transnational humanitarianism. Transnational solidarity is a form of network solidarity that stands in contrast to national solidarity, which is solidarity with people who are geographically and culturally near to us, and cosmopolitan solidarity, which involves solidarity with those who are sometimes different from us or live geography far away. Cosmopolitan solidarity can also be referred to as solidarity with 'the other', such as through development aid from the global north to the global south (Nowicka et al., 2019). Transnational solidarity is not geographically bound, involving the crossing of borders and represents an evolving form of interconnectedness across differences, characterized by translocalities (Nowicka et al., 2019). The case of sheltering Ukrainian refugees is exemplary of transnational solidarity and transnational humanitarianism. As civil society actions can influence the challenges encountered during migration and successful integration, it increases the interest in exploring what motivates the people behind these actions and how 'welcome culture' interacts with these motivations. Moreover, it is a case of transnational humanitarianism, as it is taking place in a context of conflict, taking place in a temporal context, and it does not engage with long-term resolutions of inequality (Ticktin, 2014).

The need to help and the political nature of volunteering

When discussing (transnational) solidarity and (transnational) humanitarianism in the context of individuals providing shelter to refugees at their private homes, it requires a shift

from a focus on the receivers of 'aid' to the aid providers themselves, as the research does not aim to focus on the effects of aid itself but on the social structures and political realities that accompany the positionality of those offering assistance. Extensive research has been done on the positionality of the aid providers in 'The Need To Help'(Malkki, 2015). Malkki (2015) delves into the question of why societies provide help by examining NGO workers, humanitarian aid providers, and nonprofessionals engaging in domestic aid. Malkki (2015 concludes that the motivation to provide aid is often driven by the perceptions of the aid recipient as "mere". She argues that "*in this humanitarian logic, woman is more human than man because she is taken for more vulnerable, more innocent, more mere*" (p. 205), insisting that women are more deserving of aid, connecting a clear gender perspective on the motivation behind humanitarian aid. This gendered perspective extends to children and individuals in a less privileged position, revealing a gendered lens in our 'needs to help'. The aid providers, both in general humanitarian situations as well as particularly in the help for refugees have a vested political interest in ensuring guarantees for refugees. Recognizing the power that is held by the aid providers, can help us to understand that they have influence over who receives their aid and who does not (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Malkki, 2015).

Ticknik (2014) argues that the boundaries of humanitarianism are blurred, encompassing gendered and racialized projects that are interconnected with colonial history (Ticktin, 2014). Ticktin (2014) thereby refers to apolitical volunteering for refugees as being a myth, as it always takes place in a hegemonic political environment. Consequently, such volunteering can either contest and challenge or reinforce the existing migration regime. Furthermore, it can legitimize both asylum granting as well as deportations (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017). Humanitarian action for refugees is therefore strongly political, even though volunteers might claim their activism is apolitical or neutral (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Malkki, 2015).

Helping refugees during the so-called 'refugee crisis' in 2015 as a precedent

The 'helping' response to the influx of Ukrainian refugees in 2022 is not an isolated case of widespread solidarity for refugees. After the 2015 refugee influx, Germany set a precedent

for extensive hospitality within civil society toward refugees (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017). Referred to as the German "welcome culture" phenomenon, a new wave of volunteering for refugees emerged (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Liebe et al., 2018). These new volunteers often had no prior involvement with refugees or other forms of activism and differentiated themselves from left-wing refugee activism by claiming to provide apolitical humanitarianism and aid (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017). They viewed their volunteering as a sign of humanity and their assistance as a human and moral duty (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017).

The research of Fleischmann and Steinhilfer (2017) further reveals that the motivation for volunteering is influenced by the image of the 'crisis'. They discovered that the media coverage depicting the refugee influx as an unprecedented crisis has a significant impact on the volunteers' decision to assist. The new volunteers providing aid for refugees during the so-called 'refugee crisis' in 2015 became actors in the restrictive migration regime, contributing to the differentiation between those refugees who are wanted and those who are unwanted, potentially subjecting the latter to deportation. In this way, they reproduced exclusions and are contributing to the conditioning of deportation. Moreover, the new volunteers reproduce a sense of paternalism by determining individuals as '*passive recipients of aid and charity*' (p. 21). It is important to acknowledge that aid providers always have a relationship of inequality and a sense of superiority toward the beneficiaries (Bertolote et al., 2003; Fassin, 2007). Therefore, despite their claim of being apolitical, they exercise a clear political influence. Awareness about their political influence and 'the myth of apolitical humanitarianism' is necessary for achieving meaningful political transformation (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017).

The research conducted by Fleischmann and Steinhilper (2017) provides a foundation for the subject of this research, which focuses on the home sheltering of Ukrainian refugees. As previously discussed, many citizens volunteered to offer temporary housing to Ukrainians fleeing the war in 2022, which seems to be similar to the rise of a new form of volunteering during the so-called 'refugee crisis' in 2015, as explored by Fleischmann and Steinhilper (2017). This research however specifically concentrates on a particular form of volunteering, home sheltering by individual citizens/families as a solidarity response to the refugee influx

resulting from the war in Ukraine. To conclude the literature section of this thesis, I will delve into the timeline of the refugee influx deriving from the war in Ukraine and the European and Belgian responses to that.

Significant events in the reply by the EU and Belgium to the refugee influx resulting from the invasion of Ukraine in 2022

On March 24th, 2022, Europe was surprised by the news of bombings in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine (Muylem, 2022). This date serves as the official start of the war in Ukraine after Russia occupied the regions of Donetsk and Lugansk on March 21st. The conflict had already started in 2014 and the months before the Russian invasion of Ukraine the ties between NATO and Russia had heated up. The Blitzkrieg that Russia aimed to implement was held back by Ukrainian forces. A period of economic measurement by the EU against Russia, peace negotiations, and war started (Muylem, 2022). As political institutions positioned themselves, also humanitarian organizations started to mobilize, predicting that the invasion of Ukraine would displace more than 4 million people, creating the biggest refugee influx in Europe since the Second World War. In July 2023, the UNCHR reported more than 6 million Ukrainian refugees globally (UNHCR, 2023)

Three significant events relevant to this thesis took place as a reaction to the refugee influx: (1) the activation of the state of protection by the European Union, (2) the implementation of the #PlekVrij campaign by the Belgian Government, and (3) the installation of safe flee corridors by international institutions.

As previously explained, the activation of the state of 'Temporary Protection' by the European Union in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine marked a significant event. The European Union launched this status for Ukrainian refugees on February 24th, 2022 allowing them to easily grant asylum in the European Union. Before 2022, this law had never been put into effect. Under this status, Ukrainian refugees were automatically granted access to asylum, housing, education, employment, and various other civil rights. This starkly contrasts with the asylum procedure and rights afforded to other refugees fleeing similar situations. For instance, refugees who did not fall under the 'temporary protection' category,

such as those from Syria and Afghanistan, were required to undergo an asylum procedure without any guarantees before gaining access to these rights and asylum (European Commission, n.d.) Furthermore, the protective status accorded to Ukrainian refugees allowed them the freedom to choose their asylum destination within the European Union, which sharply contrasts with the requirement for other refugees to apply for asylum in the first country of arrival, as stipulated by the Dublin regulations ((European Commission, n.d.; Huggler, 2017)

A second significant event was the PlekVrij campaign of the Belgian government that was launched on March 1st, 2022, motivating citizens to offer their homes as a shelter for people fleeing the war in Ukraine. With the campaign, the government actively engages citizens to take a stand and engage themselves for Ukrainian refugees (Belgische Federale Overheidsdiensten, 2022). As explained before, the campaign received great success in society resulting in a massive reply of people offering their homes. Within a day, more than 8,000 families opened their homes to welcome Ukrainian families searching for safety (Belgische Federale Overheidsdiensten, 2022). Such a campaign by the government served as a new way of tackling the lack of housing.

Lastly, there was significant support for creating humanitarian corridors in Ukraine, enabling both citizens to flee safely as well as enabling NGOs to provide humanitarian assistance in war zones (VRT NWS, 2022). At the same time as safe flight corridors were created, no political support for safe fleeing routes for refugees from other regions could be established. On the contrary, the EU reinforced its fort at the Mediterranean by illegal pushbacks, leading to many deaths and missing people at Europe's external border (11.11.11 vzw, 2023).

Many other measurements have been reinforced, however, those three were the most discussed ones and these are relevant to my thesis. Moreover, as discussed in the literature section, they are unique for the situation in Ukraine and therefore interesting to consider in the conclusion of this thesis.

KEY CONCEPTS

Several key concepts have emerged from the literature study, and they hold significant relevance for conducting this research and will be of relevance in the discussion. While many of these concepts have been previously underscored in the literature study, this section aims to provide a comprehensive elaboration on the most crucial ones, which are Othering, Welcome Culture, Transnational Humanitarianism, and bio- and necropolitics.

1. Othering

Othering refers to the process during which individuals or groups are excluded from their own group, by pointing to negative characteristics that differ to their own group from the other group. The term derived from De Beauvoir's introduction on the notion of 'the other' who in her turn was inspired by Hegels' 'Master-Slave-Dialectic' (Brons, 2015). Othering can take many forms and can lead to discrimination and dehumanization of groups (Brons, 2015). Furthermore, it is often used to refer to stereotypes and racialization (Thomas-Olalde & Velho, 2011). In the context of othering, Edward Saïd (1979) extensively delved into the historical portrayal and representation of the East by Western societies. He highlighted how the East was often depicted as exotic, uncivilized, and inferior, a process that reinforces the West's sense of superiority. Beyond creating binary oppositions, Saïd argued that othering also played a role in rationalizing power imbalances and perpetuating cultural biases. Consequently, these biases gave rise to prejudices and fostered inequalities among different social groups (Saïd, 1979).

As explained in the literature, the notion of othering is relevant in the case of migrants, as those who are perceived as the out-group, or the other, are more often perceived as a threat, especially in cases of economic stress. Migrants and refugees are often subject to othering, that is reproducing stereotypes and strengthening xenophobic ideas and a culture of anxiety towards migrants (Yakushko, 2009). Therefore, the notion of the perception of 'the other' and its implications are important to consider in this research and are emphasized in both the results-section as well as in the discussion.

2. Welcome Culture

The concept of a 'welcome culture' has been extensively examined and referred to in the existing body of literature. As mentioned earlier, this term originated from the prevailing adoption of supportive attitudes towards asylum seekers in Germany following the significant influx of migrants in 2015 (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Liebe et al., 2018). This societal phenomenon in German society, commonly known as the 'welcome culture,' entailed a widespread belief in providing non-political volunteer support for refugees, actively endorsed and promoted by the German government (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Liebe et al., 2018).

The German 'welcome culture' encompasses several defining factors, among which the active endorsement of refugee reception by the Government stands out prominently. Notably, the well-known statement made by Angela Merkel, 'Wir schaffen das' undeniably represents the government's commitment to fostering a welcoming environment for refugees (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017). Another significant aspect characterizing the 'welcome culture' is the extensive engagement of civil society, where traditional rather leftist activism is replaced by a more mainstream form of activism, advocating that assisting those in need is a fundamental humanitarian duty (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017). Drawing parallels to the case under examination in this thesis, one can easily observe similarities with the PlekVrij campaign in Belgium, which has elicited a widespread response from society. In this context, the German 'welcome culture' serves as a compelling example of how the government's explicit support and civil society's active involvement can shape societal attitudes towards refugees and influence public responses to humanitarian issues. In the analysis and conclusion of the research, I will consider those parallels to the case study in this thesis.

3. Transnational Humanitarianism

Transnational humanitarianism is multifaceted and it is hard to define. It related the humanitarianism which is defined by Ticknik (2014) as *'an ethos, a cluster of sentiments, a set of laws, a moral imperative to intervene, and a form of government. In its dominant characterization, humanitarianism is one way to "do good" or to improve aspects of the*

human condition by focusing on suffering and saving lives in times of crisis or emergency' (p. 274). Giving shelter to people in need serves as one concrete example of humanitarianism. Humanitarianism can be seen as both a moral as well as a political project. Transnational nongovernmental institutions play a major role in humanitarian actions (Ticktin, 2014). The transnational comes in when humanitarianism extends borders. Especially actions with refugees and concerning migration have this transnational character as they transcend borders and often include a movement over borders (Gould, 2014). Transnational humanitarianism takes place in a temporal context of conflict and it does not engage with long-term resolutions of inequality (Ticktin, 2014). As emphasized and explained in the literature review, the case of sheltering Ukrainian refugees is therefore a clear example of transnational humanitarianism.

4. Biopolitics and Necropolitics

Biopolitics and necropolitics is the only concept that has not been thoroughly emphasized in the literature review. However, the notion of these concepts is important for this thesis and it is entangled with the concept of humanitarianism (Fassin, 2007; Ticktin, 2014). In short, biopolitics refers to what can be explained as 'the politics of life' (Fassin, 2007). The term was initiated by Michel Foucault (2008) explaining biopolitics as having the power to govern and shape biological life. It thereby refers to the governing and management of entire populations (Foucault, 2008). Biopolitics is strongly intertwined with refugee- and border studies, as refugee- and border politics have an extensive impact on human lives (Minca et al., 2022). Minca et al (2022) argue refugee politics are a visible form of biopolitics, as it determines who deserves to live or who does not.

Necropolitics is the counterpart of biopolitics, as biopolitics can be explained as having the power of life, and necropolitics can be explained as having the power to decide over death (Mbembe, 2006; Minca et al., 2022). Mbembe (2006) defines necropolitics as not only having the power to kill but also having to power to allow someone to live. Allowing refugees to safely enter a country and granting them rights to life can serve as an example of necropolitics (Minca et al., 2022; Ticktin, 2014). Not only governmental institutions and non-

governmental actors exercise this power, also humanitarian aid workers also inherit this power while performing their practices (Ticktin, 2014).

In the following part of this thesis, I will discuss the aims and subject of the research, as well as what methods were used. In the conclusion, I will regularly refer to the literature discussed above, connecting it to the findings that will be discussed in the result section.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

This research focuses on examining the solidarity and the support local citizens offer refugees, specifically, those citizens who have sheltered or are sheltering refugees in their private homes for a period of at least 3 months. The research targets host families who sheltered Ukrainian refugees in 2022, within the context of war in Ukraine. I thereby explore what drives citizens sheltering refugees and how they legitimate their actions. Thereby I aim to answer the question *"What motivates individuals to volunteer their homes as shelters for refugees, and what factors shape their decisions? How do these motivations intersect with political and societal attitudes towards refugees?'.* I focus on different parameters that influence the choice of families to host refugees and get an insight into how the decision-making on hosting refugees takes place within families. Furthermore, I will analyze how this interacts with existing political and social research on humanitarianism and volunteering as discussed in the literature.

To answer the research question, a qualitative approach was adopted, involving interviews with nine families who have hosted Ukrainian refugees for a minimum of 3 months in their private homes. A total of 13 respondents from nine families have been interviewed. Two of the respondents were migrants themselves but migrated from another Western European country (France and Germany). The interviews, lasting between one and two hours, followed a topic list based on the themes derived from the literature study. The topic list also allowed flexibility for new topics emerging during the interview, and was flexible in the order topics were being tackled. The interviews were conducted in Dutch, although two of the respondents did not have Dutch as their mother language. In the result section, the (English) quotes are translations from Dutch.

The sample of respondents was obtained through two main methods. Firstly, there is a large number of people who were active under the hashtag #Plekvrij on social media, where a call was posted in Facebook groups. Secondly, the city of Ghent agreed to publish the call in their newsletter for host families. Six families replied on this call, located in different parts of the City of Ghent. Other families came from other parts of Flanders. The interviews were conducted at the private homes of the families, the location where they host or host the

refugees. Six of the nine families were no longer hosting Ukrainian refugees at the time of the interviews. The interviews were analyzed through their transcripts, identifying different main themes through coding.

This research ensures the well-being and privacy of the participants through informed consent that was obtained from all interviewees, clarifying the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, and the assurance of confidentiality. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without facing consequences. To protect the privacy of the participants, all personal identifying information was pseudonymized in the reporting of the findings. Therefore, in the quotes that are used, I will always refer to a respondent with a respondent number, and the names of their guests have been left out.

It is important to point out the limitations and potential biases of this research that should be considered concerning the research methods. Firstly, the research focuses only on people hosting refugees from Ukraine in 2022. The findings therefore might not be generalizable to citizens hosting other refugee groups or refugees in other contexts and situations. Secondly, it is important to consider that there is a potential for social desirability bias. Participants may have provided responses they believed were socially desirable or aligned with societal expectations regarding their motivations for hosting refugees. Efforts were made to mitigate this bias by emphasizing the importance of honesty and emphasizing that there were no right or wrong answers. Thirdly, it is important that there were some language limitations, as two of the respondents did not speak Dutch as a mother tongue. This may have influenced the depth of the expression and understanding of the questions. The language levels were from a considerable level and reckoned for during the interviews. Lastly, it is important to emphasize that only nine interviews with 13 respondents took place. It may therefore not be possible to generalize the findings. Despite these limitations and potential biases, the research offers an interesting insight into the motivation of host families sheltering refugees and identifies parameters and incentives that influence their commitment.

RESULTS

Host families point out various factors motivating them to mobilize refugees and leading to their decision to shelter Ukrainian refugees. These can be categorized into eight distinct categories: media representation and the perception of a crisis, cultural affiliation, societal and governmental incentives, access to resources, gender-based perceived vulnerability, enemy images, geographical proximity, temporality and the reasons for fleeing. It is important to note that the weight and significance attributed to each of the categories varied among participants, as they had different perspectives and experiences. However, all of the topics were discussed in multiple of the in-depth interviews. Specifically, media representation and the perception of crisis, cultural affiliation, societal and governmental incentives, access to resources, and geographical proximity emerged as recurring themes in almost all of the interviews, indicating their significance in shaping the motivation of the host families.

1. MEDIA REPRESENTATION AND THE PERCEPTION OF A CRISIS

The influence of media representation emerged as a crucial factor motivating individuals to provide housing for refugees. This theme was consistently reported across all interviews, with many respondents specifically mentioning "het journaal" – the news report of the Flemish national television (VRT) – and the images that were shown there as an incentive of why they wanted to help, but also other sources of media such as newspapers were mentioned. The respondents often referred to the emotional impact of the images and information they encountered in the media. They expressed a sense of empathy and the desire to take action after witnessing the hardships faced by the people in Ukraine. One participant explained her motivation:

> *"I knew it would be a lot of work. But, we were sitting here on the couch, comfortable with food and heating and then you see on TV that people like us are in a terrible situation. Then you say okay, would I be in Ukraine right now, being on TV in fear that a bomb can fall on me… I would also like to have somebody help me."* (Resp. 8)

Respondents refer to both access to knowledge, such as the number of refugees fleeing Ukraine, and to the emotional impact of images spread on television and through press publications. Host families articulated this emotion as wanting to 'do something'. Opening their homes to shelter refugees is their way of responding to this internal call of having to 'do something'. One of the respondents mentioned engaging in other forms of assistance before offering their home.

Several respondents made references to the Second World War, drawing comparisons between the current conflict in Ukraine and the acute crisis during the Second World War. They believe that the conflict in Ukraine is unique and represents a tipping point in the world, thereby seeing the conflict in Ukraine as different from any other conflict currently happening. One respondent explained it as follows:

> *"Ukraine, for me, is the only current conflict at the moment [...]. Cities are being bombed to the ground. Yes, and you have another conflict, Yemen, yes, it's lurking there now. And then I think of Palestine and Gaza, but that's different. That's not about hundreds of millions of people, who suddenly must go somewhere. [...]. That people with children are suddenly on the street, that's what makes it acute. [...]. That makes me feel the need to do something. [...] That also has to do with media coverage. You get to know more about it. It is also in that sense historical conflict. So, it's a tipping point in the world and you feel that in everything. That's why. That's what makes it so acute for me, this conflict." (Res. 4)*

The respondent above clearly articulates the feeling of having to 'do something' that emerges from the perception that what is happening in Ukraine is a unique crisis situation. This perception of a crisis played a significant role in mobilizing. Additionally, the respondent above highlighted the vulnerability of families with children fleeing war, intensifying their motivation to 'do something', which will be elaborated upon further in this research.

Interestingly, two host families directly linked their own family's experiences during the Second World War to the plight of Ukrainian families today, establishing a sense of urgency.

> *"Both of my parents' stories of fleeing during World War II. My father's escape was more romantic, while my mother's was quite traumatic. [...]. She had to flee abroad. My father only traveled about*

fifteen kilometers and was able to play and sleep in a farmyard in straw as a small child. But had they
not been taken care of; I might not have been there. Then I thought, yes, if it is indeed that bad over
there. And that was actually quite fast. It's very bad there, the war, we thought, we talked about it,
then I had said OK then we'll do it." (Res 5a)

These recurring "feelings of crisis" were a prevalent theme throughout all the interviews. However, it is important to note that parallels to the Second World War were only drawn concerning refugees coming from Ukraine and not refugees from other countries and conflicts. Respondents believe that this differentiation distinguishes Ukrainian refugees and heightens the urgency of their situation.

Various respondents emphasized the importance of whom they saw on television as an incentive to want to act, although the specifics that were significant varied between respondents. Some refer to "people just looking like us" or "cities just looking like ours", while others mention witnessing women and children crossing borders, knowing that their fathers had to remain behind. These nuanced aspects will be further discussed in the next sections.

2. CULTURAL AFFILIATION AND THE ORIGINS OF THE REFUGEE

Cultural affiliation points to the feelings of a mutual cultural identity the respondents have towards the people fleeing and emerged as a significant factor in all of the interviews influencing respondents' attitudes towards the people fleeing Ukraine.

"I've been asking myself the same questions [about why hosting for Ukrainians now, and not before
for other groups of refugees], but I can't answer and I think because those people are more like us.
Yes, whereas. I have absolutely nothing against other cultures or anything. But to have people at my
house under my roof for six months, yes then I want to be able to estimate a little bit how, how can it,
how will it be was that I can then? Can I trust those people or something?" (Resp. 8)

Respondents expressed a sense of mutual cultural identity with the Ukrainian refugees, some drawing on their experiences, some only on the limited knowledge they have of

Ukraine. Some respondents dismissed the notion of significant cultural differences and emphasized their shared European culture. One respondent stated:

"I often heard of yes, the Ukrainians have a different culture bla bla bla. I didn't think of that at all. Yes, okay, they have a certain way to celebrate Easter. It's different from here. What does it matter? Yes, they sometimes went to the Orthodox church. That wasn't culture shock." (Resp. 8)

Though only one respondent had prior experience in Ukraine and two others had (limited) Ukrainian contacts in Belgium, most of the respondents reported feeling culturally connected with the Ukrainian people, despite having limited knowledge of Ukraine and not having met any Ukrainians. Their idea of the common cultural identity in most cases did not rely on actual knowledge of Ukraine but on a sense of a shared European culture. The respondent explains:

"Now you can say yes, it's not the first time that somewhere in the world is a war, why didn't you do that for Syria, for example? Well, I don't know. I think it has to do with culture. Yes Syria, that's far from my bed. But Ukraine, it's a European country. It's a stupid reasoning, but, there's rationality and emotionality. And often the emotional wins over the rational." (Resp. 8)

Some participants reported the common religion – Christianity – as an important factor. However, religion did not play an important role in most of the respondents' lives. It is important to note that the respondents saw Ukrainian refugees as a distinct category, in contrast with all other refugees fleeing conflicts, falling into one big category. Many of the respondents reflected on why they made the decision to host Ukrainian families and not others, pointing to various factors related to cultural identity. The following quote shows the awareness of these contradictory ideas the respondents have.

"Religion does not play a role, but if you take someone under your roof, yes, of course, you can get along with everyone. That I know. But it is easier if you can drink a bottle of wine together. Yes, that is a bit stupid. Yes, it actually sounds terrible." (Res. 4)

Many respondents acknowledged the existence of racism in society and how society treated Ukrainian refugees differently from refugees of other nationalities, such as Syrian refugees. However, they did not always reflect on their own actions and their potential contributions

to this unequal treatment. This notion of racism in society, including the differentiation in migratory policies between migration groups was brought up by all but one of the respondents themselves. They thereby do not only refer to wider political discourses but also to lived experiences while hosting Ukrainian refugees and supporting them in finding their way to Belgium. A very clear example of this was brought up by a respondent supporting the refugees staying at her home with some administrative tasks.

"If I went with them to the service for refugees, at 't Zuid, for them to enroll. I sat there waiting. I thought that was terrible, how many refugees from elsewhere [other places than Ukraine] with their belongings, with little children... Yes and they all have one counter there and for the Ukrainians: nine counters. But there was only us at one point and then also a couple aged 30-35. [...] I was indeed cruelly confronted. All the others were there waiting in lines. Yes, then I thought: Can't that be flexible? Is that so different on paper?" (Resp. 5b)

They criticized the unequal treatment of refugee groups by governmental institutions but did not consider the impact of their own actions and their own unequal treatment. Some respondents did point out their own unequal treatment, but clarified why they did so, legitimating the unequal treatment of refugee groups by themselves. Underneath a quote that is exemplary of how people aim to legitimize that they are open to Ukrainian refugees and not to all other groups, in this case, Afghans:

"These family from Afghanistan [former tenants], then I would not want to host here, in my house. Why not? Well, they would transform your own house, they would take control over everything." (Resp. 6a)

Knowledge and connections to Ukrainian people and having visited Ukraine were mentioned as one of the reasons that led to hosting Ukrainian refugees. That stands in contrast with the quote above, where people use those earlier contacts to legitimize why not host certain groups of refugees. With Ukrainian refugees, respondents focused on the cultural similarities, whereas concerning other groups of refugees they mainly mentioned differences, often not being more specific than 'just being too different'. Exemplary for this contradiction is that one respondent had already been in Ukraine before the invasion (for work), arguing that this is of importance in why she is hosting refugees. On the contrary,

another respondent (Res. 4) had already been to Damascus several times, he argued that the people from Damascus are just 'too different', and thus it had rather the opposite effect.

"We both [about Belgians and Ukrainians] watched the same movies. When I was in Damascus, they watched different movies. We both [about Belgians and Ukrainians] watch Netflix. […] Someone who lives in Berlin or Paris, that is like Charkiv and Brussels actually. But someone who lives in Aleppo, that is it. That is a big difference" (Res. 4)

Another family was reporting that they expected that the Ukrainians would be culturally very similar, though once they started to host the Ukrainian family – consisting of a grandmother, mother, and (grand)daughter – they saw that there were cultural differences, especially referring to a 'Sovjet culture' and large respect to authority. Respect for authority was mentioned by several host families, pointing to it as a positive or important difference. None of the respondents pointed to cultural differences as having a significant impact.

One of the respondents pointed to the political status of the people she was hosting as important, pointing out the importance of the political discourse as well as the surroundings of the respondent in the decision of why or why not to host someone. This respondent was hosting a young couple that fled Ukraine, of which the man had the Azerbaijani nationality, but had a work permit for Ukraine till 2030. She argues as follows:

"Had I known that beforehand [that the man was from Azerbaijan], I might have thought about that longer. Because I thought, that was a Ukrainian couple, but now that was just a little bit more difficult. [...]. And also, from my position as an alderman, that you bring in someone who is actually a political refugee. It was all right, all official, but I was like oops. [...] It was because they had that status that I was open to it, but then it was different for him. [...] I didn't want to fall into that grey zone, but it was not my choice at that moment. […] The mayor also said that it was a bit annoying. But I'm not going to put those people out on the street." (Resp. 7)

The quote above does not only show that the respondent did clearly differentiate between people with different nationalities but also what influence the surroundings had over her decision, arguing she can or cannot do certain things as a person with her political status and laying much importance on this status. Also, other respondents mostly reported positive attitudes towards their engagement in sheltering refugees, and only a few reported having

negative comments, though that still happened in a mainly positive environment. She moreover points to the legality of the actions as an important factor, only putting Ukrainian refugees in the clear legal frame

Finally, the respondents often cited common interests and educational background as important aspects of cultural identity. For example, in one host family, both the Ukrainians and the hosts were artists. They only discovered these commonalities, and the importance of those in a successful experience, after starting to host the Ukrainian refugees.

> *"The mom was only a little bit older than us, you could say a bit the same background in terms of education also. [...] I mean she has done higher studies too."* (Resp. 8)

One of the respondents said they were open to hosting Ukrainian refugees, but not towards "*an unemployed, homeless Belgian that has a drinking problem*" (resp. 5a), pointing to the importance of the common background in terms of interest and social status. Many respondents saw the success – or failure – of living together stemming from having common interests or a common socio-economic status.

3. GOVERNMENTAL INCENTIVES

As discussed earlier, the conflict in Ukraine and the refugee influx resulting from that created a sense of what respondents describe as wanting to 'do something', referring to the sense of wanting to take action. While many respondents reported that this was not the first time this feeling derived after seeing injustice in the world, this was – for most of them – the first time they committed voluntary action, largely due to the accessibility and the clarity of the #PlekVrij initiative. Before this, none of the respondents had ever considered hosting refugees as a possibility, as exemplified by the following quote:

> *"Yes, but it is also the first time that there was something concrete, like #PlekVrij. That was new; it had never happened. I still remember that, in 2015, I also had conscience problems that we didn't do anything. But concretely, I did not know how. I thought, what can we really do? Now, It was much clearer what we could do."* (Resp 6b)

Likewise, only three of the respondents (from two families) participating in this research reported having volunteered for refugees in the past, while none of the respondents considered hosting refugees before. However, one of the families – the one quoted above – had previously rented a house to Afghan refugees and in that sense came in contact with refugees from a hosting perspective. Two families already rented a room to foreign nationals, such as students and artists, staying (temporarily) in Belgium. Though these were not refugees, but people migrating for other reasons.

The respondents identified two main reasons for taking action by hosting refugees this time. Firstly, in the past, they felt a sense of powerlessness. While they were aware of injustices and had the desire to do something about them, the feeling of not knowing how to address the issue outweighed the feeling of wanting to 'do something'. The active call of the government (referring to #PlekVrij) provided a concrete opportunity to translate their desire to "do something" into practice. All the respondents argue that they never thought of that being an option before. However, they also admitted that even if they had known about it earlier, they were unsure if they would have hosted people. often referring to cultural reasons or their own living situation in the past. This leads to the second reason for involvement – the access to resources – which will be discussed in the next part.

> *"I actually thought the call from politics was a fair call. Because I'm convinced - and I've been a school principal myself – that you can't regulate everything from policy and get it regulated alone. I am convinced that if you always look to politics – if politics must solve it and the minister must find a solution to everything at any time – that is something that cannot be done. So there must be a citizenship and it has to come from an engaged citizenship. I thought that was actually a reasonable call." (Res 5b)*

The awareness of the possibility of hosting people through the #PlekVrij campaign was not the sole factor in the success of this governmental incentive. Some host families – like the one referred to above – emphasized the importance of expected support from the government and its structures. They believed that these would them with access to support and the ability to get advice if needed. Likewise, they expressed disappointment in the limited or nonexistent support from governmental institutions once the Ukrainian refugees arrived. Some families registered themselves on the governmental website but never

received a response. They got in touch with their guests through other organizations or social media platforms like Facebook.

4. ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Access to resources emerged as a crucial factor in the decision-making process of host families. The availability of three main resources played a significant role in shaping their willingness to host Ukrainian refugees: the availability of time, the individual financial situation, and the space at one's disposal. Many respondents argue they had a lack of access to those resources in the past, making their situation different than during prior refugee influxes. The availability of space was the most prominent factor. Many hosts emphasized the importance of having adequate space to accommodate several people. One respondent referred to her own personal health which influenced the timeframe.

For instance, one respondent expressed their surplus of time and the spaciousness of their home as motivations for hosting, and another one also emphasized space:

> *'We have surplus time. And by the way, we live huge here. That's to share that, isn't it?'* (Resp. 4)

> *"I say it because yes, we all have that a little bit that you like to help people. And yes, this house here is almost empty and those people have no place."* (Resp. 7)

Another respondent highlighted the presence of vacant rooms in their home:

> *'We have two children who are out of the house. Yes, we have two rooms free so that also plays into it.'* (Resp. 5b)

In addition to space, host families also considered their individual financial situations, as illustrated in the following example:

> *"And yes, we never had a negative reaction. But what I did find a bit bizarre, is that everyone is still saying, it's nice what you have done for those people and so on. But I said: No, we are lucky that we have a big house, that we have enough space, that we could do it financially – because that did cost*

us a little bit of money – that we could free up enough time. So yes, for me it's not especially nice what we did. We were able to do it, so it was kind of also our duty to do it." (Resp. 8)

All but one of the families received a small amount of rent from the Ukrainian refugee, they argued that it did not cover all the costs. The decision to ask for rest was influenced by several factors. Firstly, hosts were informed that not asking for rent would result in a reduction of the refugees' living allowance, leading them to decide to collect rent and get the money themselves, rather than giving it to the government. The following respondent explains:

"We did that [asking rent] because we were told if we don't do that, then they get less living allowance or less money. And then we thought, if they shouldn't get the money anyway then we'll take it. […] But actually, if they could keep the money. Then we wouldn't have asked for rent." (Resp. 8)

Secondly, the respondent noted that the payment of rent was initiated by the Ukrainian refugees as they wanted to contribute and change the nature of the dependency relation.

"So in the beginning of everything we became a small fee and then they also said we're a bit embarrassed. We feel a bit like freeloaders because we live here almost for free. We said, we'll ask a bit more and they'll pay a bit of rent. Yes, and that does help on both sides because it also doesn't make sense that those people then feel bad. […] Paying rent thereby plays a role. It changes the relationship. It is not 'we give and they take' anymore." (Resp. 6a)

Families however did not see rent as a motivation of why they hosted, but saw this rather as an extra help to make it possible on a longer term, they however did explain that the guests were expressing a form of 'thankfulness' through other acts, like helping the family, as explained by the following respondent:

"That man did not have anything to do. And then he felt valuable. I never asked anything from them, financially. I also think that if you do this, you have to do it from your heart and that you should not as money for that. But what he did in return, that were things such as cooking once in a while." (Resp. 4)

When talking about resources, some host families also pointed to the support that was promised by the government. The (promised) support was for some important reasons to become a host family, but as previously discussed, respondents reported that the actual support was insufficient and almost non-existent, once refugees arrived. Two families reported they found more efficient and reliable support from non-profit organizations, rather than government institutions.

"It was so fast, so acute and it was also clear that it is a crisis shelter for three months and you will be supported, you don't do it on your own. Yes, you are going to be supported by the city services." (Resp.5a)

When talking about resources, it is important to also emphasize that respondents pointed to their own social capital as a support mechanism in the hosting of refugees. For multiple respondents, other people in their surroundings were hosting refugees, playing a role in the mobilization of themselves to become host families.

"A friend of mine said, we're going to take in three Ukrainian women, very shortly after the war started. And I said, 'oh, cool, nice that you're doing that. We would like to do that too. Because we have a place at home.' So he explained to me how he did and he had a non-profit organization, in Zelzate. Those people were looking for shelter families, so I contacted them" (Resp. 8)

Access to resources, particularly space and financial resources, was essential to all respondents in their decision to shelter Ukrainian refugees. Likewise, access to resources also plays a role in discontinuing the engagement. For example, in some cases, the availability of a house with a garden was sufficient during summer but became inadequate during winter. Another example is the arrival of a grandchild resulting in a lack of time. When talking about resources, one has to consider the social capital of the host family, enabling easy access to support and creating inspiration for to host.

5. GENDER-BASED VULNERABILITY AND SAFETY

In most host families, the Ukrainian refugees being sheltered were women, and some of them were accompanied by children. Only three host families extended their hospitality to a man, of whom one was a single father and one was a student. Those families shared that the

authorities mentioned that it is hard to find a host family willing to host a man. The families attributed this gender preference to the initial step taken by Ukrainian law at the onset of the war. This law stipulated that men could not leave the country without risking being called upon to join the army in the ongoing conflict. While some families questioned the fairness of this rule, most were concerned about the implications of having men seeking refuge in their homes and possibly neglecting their duties. They did show understanding for men who wanted to flee but thought it was, for a man, ethically wrong to flee the country that is at war.

Despite the debates surrounding this rule, host families also pointed out two additional reasons for prioritizing women for hosting in private families. However, they only mentioned these reasons more secondarily, the Ukrainian law was a more central argument for why they were hosting women.

Firstly, they emphasized the vulnerability of women and children during times of war and as refugees. Host families believed that women and children were more susceptible to harm and violence, making them deserving of priority in receiving asylum and proper housing. The perception of women and children as less physically strong and more likely to become victims of violence further bolstered this viewpoint. As a result, they were seen as more in need of protection and support, the support the host family was giving by offering shelter. This concern for safety and protection was captured in the following quote:

> *"Yes, an Afghan boy of 20. The one [about one member of the family] who does the crossing usually speaks English. Yes, the bulk of those Afghans come from the cities. [...]. But that one [about an English-speaking man] has a much greater savvy. Yes, than a mother with a six-month-old child. There is a security aspect then. They are weaker. That's an even weaker group. That tremendously influences how I look at refugees. As a man, you are always stronger as a refugee. Pure, physical, and especially alone on the run, she can fall prey to many things. Which a man alone is not going to have. But as a woman alone with children. Then you are even more vulnerable and you have to have a solution. You can sleep under a bridge, a few nights as a man alone, but with two children you can't do that."* (Res. 4)

The respondent employs the gender aspect as a means to justify why he provided shelter exclusively to Ukrainian refugees while not providing the same assistance to Afghan or Syrian refugees. Moreover, during the course of the interview, he broadens his perspective on the matter, arguing that the perceived vulnerability of women and children goes beyond just their physical strength. He highlights that they are also more frequently targeted as victims, thereby justifying his decision to prioritize them in his assistance.

Secondly, it is noteworthy that three other respondents also emphasized their sense of safety as a critical factor in their decision-making process. They expressed uncertainty about whether they would have felt secure having a male guest living in their homes. Notably, these respondents were all females, and their feeling of safety held significant importance in allowing people to enter the home. One family even had a 'rule' in the home that the guests couldn't take male guests home. The gender of the prospective guests played a substantial role in shaping their perception of safety within their households.

Gender considerations intersected with notions of vulnerability, safety, and personal comfort in shaping their willingness to offer refuge to Ukrainian refugees.

6. ENEMY IMAGE AND GEOPOLITICS

The image of Russia as the 'enemy' or the 'bad' and Ukraine as the victim or the 'good' was present in all conversations. Host families express their engagement as part of taking it up for the 'good', they take a clear political stance in the conflict, and likewise see their engagement as part of their civil duty to provide a safe haven for those people who are fighting a common European war and defending our own values and ideals. Although respondents generally did not initially pay much attention to their geopolitical arguments, the idea of having a shared enemy was often indirectly emphasized, also pointing to the Russian invasion as an attack on Europe. One respondent, in particular, expressed a heavy weight on those arguments, having a strong political opinion and seeing his hosting as resistance against the Russian invasion:

> *"It felt as an attack on the values of Europe and as an extent on my own values. I never had this with other conflicts, such as in Syria or other parts of the world."* (Resp. 4).

This quote represents two major arguments that were represented in most of the interviews. Firstly, it shows how the respondent was feeling a connection to the Ukrainian struggle and saw this struggle as a struggle of himself. Secondly, the respondent points to other conflicts as not having this connection, that the victims of other wars are not defending his values and principles.

Even more central to the geopolitical incentive of connectivity, was the geographical proximity that played a major role in hosting or not hosting refugees. An argument that was mentioned by all of the host families and that will be discussed in the following section.

7. GEOGRAPHICAL PROXIMITY

Geographical proximity is a very clear factor, it namely refers to Ukraine as part of Europe and being very near to us in kilometers. Respondents question that, if we -pointing to Europe – do not offer shelter to the Ukrainian refugees, where else should they go? But geographical proximity does not only refer to the proximity of the conflict. One respondent pointed to the differences between seeing something on television and seeing something real as a reason why this conflict comes so near. She explains as following:

> *"[About refugee's arrival at her home] When they suddenly pounce after midnight. I found that very*
> *confrontational. I mean, I found that very confronting. Such a minivan, such small children getting*
> *out of it, with nothing to go with them, I found it terrible. So only 9 people, you have to offer these*
> *people a little comfort, you can't just put them here in the living room. So that's what I thought. […].*
> *And of course, there are conflict zones everywhere, but that's not so close. You can see it on television*
> *or hear it on the radio or in the newspapers. But then it is very clear that a group of people get off a*
> *minibus with almost nothing with them. Then it is very clear that it is something terribly radical."*
> (Res. 2)

That she saw child refugees in Belgium increased the geographical proximity and the feeling of wanting to do something. Although not much more can be said about the impact of geographical proximity, one cannot underestimate the prevalence of this factor as it was mentioned by all families, pointing to this as increasing the shock of the invasion.

8. TEMPORALITY AND THE REASONS FOR FLEEING

The temporality of their engagement influences why and how the host families engage themselves. Temporality thereby refers to both the temporality of their engagement as well as the temporality of the predicted time the refugees would stay in Belgium.

Firstly, the duration of the host families' engagement has been mentioned by many of the respondents. While they viewed their engagement as a temporary solution to a housing problem, the duration often extended beyond their initial expectations. They did not consider it as a long-term solution, but they anticipated that the conflict in Ukraine would persist. Additionally, the option of discontinuing hosting on short notice, knowing that the city would take over and prevent the refugees from ending up in the streets, provided reassurance.

> "What also helped [in deciding to host] is that the contract explicitly stated that, if it would really clash or if there are things which you do not agree upon, you can basically directly show them the door. […] The notice is very short. You can say, we don't do it anymore, and the city takes over."
> (Resp. 6a)

Host families actively participated in finding more long-term housing for the refugees, varying between assisting in the search for a rental house on the private market and applying for governmental housing. Thereby, they provided shelter until suitable alternatives were secured. While only one family found governmental housing for the refugees, other families found a rental house on the private market, the refugees moved out to go back to Ukraine, joined family members or friends elsewhere, or were still staying at the host family's home.

> "Yes, you think that it is temporary. I did think that they would live here for at least a year. But, it was our intention to help them find a place of their own from the beginning. That's what they would like."
> (Resp. 4)

Various host families referred to their home as a "waiting room", not only indicating the house as a place of temporary residence but also as a "pause" in the lives of the Ukrainian refugees. They viewed their house as temporary safe havens until the refugee families could

return to Ukraine, or establish a new life in Belgium. However, this perception evolved over time. One respondent mentioned that this was a factor in why to offer shelter to Ukrainian refugees at their homes, distinguishing them from refugees originating from other regions and conflicts.

> *"It's the feeling of a waiting room. They would like to go back immediately [about Ukrainians]. Before still I have met people from Syria who fled here, but they lived here. It's a big difference between groups of refugees. I also know some people from Iran. That relationship, that with Ukrainians is mainly like, we want to go back and back and back.* (Res. 2)

> *"I worked in Afghanistan. I have also been in Syria. I have done a lot in Africa. Those different migration streams have different motivations, backgrounds, and dynamics. Together these form a group of people that are fortune seekers. […] But with those people [about refugees not coming from Ukraine], of course, it is a systemic crisis. Same in Iran, it's always getting worse. And Syria and Afghanistan. They can not just go back right away either. That's a big difference I think. […] The Ukrainians don't migrate. They are going to wait somewhere, or at least most of them. […] For Syrian, Afghan, and Iranian refugees, it is mostly economic migration. It is a different story than these people [about Ukrainian refugees], who are here to wait"* (Resp. 4)

Although respondents contrasted the motivations of Ukrainians with those of other refugee groups, questioning the motives behind migration for refugees from other regions such as Iran, Syria, or Afghanistan, they showed understanding and accepted the desire of Ukrainian refugees to stay in Belgium, which often was the case for the refugees staying at their homes. The respondents never questioned if the motives of Ukrainian refugees were seeking a temporary safe haven, which they often did with refugees from other regions. The following quote represents this empathy:

> *Yes, I think that they [refugees that they host] will stay here [in Belgium]. She said going back does not make any sense. The country is devastated and also when the war ends, the country needs to be rebuilt. So I see why she wants to stay.* (Resp. 7)

On the one hand, people engage themselves because they see Belgium as a temporary safe haven for the refugees, but on the other hand, they also understand why Ukrainians would like to stay, also after the end of the war. One of the host families even expressed that she

would prefer that the people she hosted would stay in Ghent, as strong ties had been built throughout the process of hosting, justifying different rights for an individual family she came in contact with.

"We would like those to stay here of course. I hope everything will be resolved and we can go back to Kyiv. Yes but if it's not possible then I want them to feel good here. That they can start a new life. Yes, by doing things with other people. Then you get to know the city. There you get to know the country. Then they can practice yes and a little bit of Dutch." (Resp. 8)

DISCUSSION

By conducting interviews, I explored the research question: *"What motivates individuals to volunteer their homes as shelters for refugees, and what factors shape their decisions? How do these motivations intersect with political and societal attitudes towards refugees?"* To answer this research question, the research focuses on the widespread mobilization of Belgian citizens who hosted Ukrainian refugees after the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 resulting in a high refugee influx to the European Union. It is an explorative research that uses interviews with host families as a research method.

I identified eight prominent themes that emerged from the interviews, shedding light on crucial factors relevant to the research question. These themes include media representation and the perception of a crisis, cultural affiliation, societal and governmental incentives, access to resources, gender-based vulnerability, enemy images, geographical proximity, and temporality, and the reason for fleeing. The awareness of these elements can be of interest if trying to understand why people mobilize for refugees.

The themes derived all play a role in the decision and motivation of hosting refugees. Detailed insights and findings regarding these themes are presented in the results section of this thesis. I will synthesize the research insights, and connect those with existing literature, to derive meaningful conclusions.

Firstly, the research shows the importance of the information through media that is reaching the volunteers on their willingness to open their homes. The perception of a crisis that is created by the media is especially important. This supports the thesis of Fassin (2007) who argues that crisis has a mobilizing effect on the politics of life. In the case of hosting Ukrainian refugees, host families argue that the media reports were shocking and made them reflect on what they could do, motivating them to mobilize themselves. This perception of a crisis is an important factor in mobilizing people (Fassin, 2007), and was also found in this research. Fleischman and Steinhilper (2017) made the same conclusion for volunteer actions responding to the refugee influx coming from Syria in 2015 arguing that the image of a crisis that is acute activated citizens. This research found a general perception

of the Ukrainian War as an unprecedented crisis, for some even comparable to the Second World War, with the hosts. There is the perception of Ukrainian refugees as being in an exceptional position, an exceptional crisis, that created the urge to take action for host families. The perception of a crisis in the case of the Ukrainian refugee influx was influenced by images being shown by the media, creating a more welcoming culture towards those refugees, showing that the media has a clear influence on public perception. This builds upon existing research on the impact of media representation on the welcoming culture of refugees (e.g. Yakushko, 2009).

Secondly, having a shared identity is an important element in the mobilization of host families for refugees. Ukrainian refugees are perceived as being part of the in-group, and former knowledge or experiences of Ukrainian culture are not needed to welcome them into one's in-group. They oppose Ukrainian refugees against refugees coming from other areas, such as Syria and Afghanistan. Both cultural elements, as well as geographical elements, play a role in why the respondents refer to Ukrainians as the in-group. Culturally, the expectation of having similar religion and history are mentioned as important factors, as well as the belief of having a shared European identity and values. The geographical proximity also plays a role in this shared identity, as being part of the same continent, Europe. Former research has shown that migration is seen as a security risk and a danger to the sovereign power (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017). The findings of this research stand in contrast with the research of Fleischmann & Steinhilper (2017), who argued that refugees are seen as 'the other' which fosters feelings of anxiety and risk and increases negative perceptions about them (e.g. Yakusho, 2009). In this research, Ukrainian refugees are not perceived as 'the other', they are seen as the in-group, the one that belongs to our group. The perception of risk, and the culture of anxiety created by it, is not present for refugees coming from Ukraine. This brings Ukrainian refugees in a privileged position in comparison to refugees who are perceived as 'the other', giving Ukrainian refugees more rights to receive help than others.

Third, the government can exercise influence on the willingness to host refugees of citizens and promote a more welcoming culture in society. Similar to what is described as the "welcome culture" that derived from the 2015 refugee crisis in Germany, the welcome

culture was supported by the government for hosting Ukrainian refugees in Flanders (Belgische Federale Overheidsdiensten, 2022; Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017). This shows that civil mobilization, in the case of hosting refugees, takes place in a larger political context and migration regime, which is in line with the conclusions of Fleischmann and Steinhilper (2017) in the context of the 2015 refugee influx. In the case of Ukrainian refugees, the government undertook a few very concrete actions that enabled large-scale hosting, such as the #PlekVrij campaign, providing institutional and legal support, and setting up a system through which families could provide their assistance. Furthermore, the 'state of temporary protection' that was implemented by the European Union played a major role in how the refugees were perceived and welcomed. Thereby they fostered a 'welcome culture' in society mobilizing citizens to take action. This political strategy and tools such as the #PlekVrij campaign serve as a strong tool in the mobilization of people for refugees, showing that the government possesses a biopolitical power to help Ukrainian refugees to survive.

Fourth, an individual's position and resources are crucial factors in the ability to host refugees, thereby referring both to one's social ties as well as to financial resources and availability of time. Social ties create a support system around the host family, both emotionally and by assisting. The research thereby shows that there are major limitations when it comes to the availability of resources on who can and cannot offer shelter to refugees. Simultaneously, people who do have these resources, receive positive responses from their surroundings. This could uplift their social status in their surroundings, but simultaneously it can also endanger one's status if it is not in line with hegemonic ideas on who has the right to migrate. Fleischman and Steinhilper (2017) argue that new volunteers, such as the people who provided shelter for Ukrainians, do not challenge social and political hegemony, but they rather reinforce it, which is also the conclusion of Ticknik (2014). This research shows that also for people who hosted Ukrainian refugees, the support of the government and society was essential, in case society rejected them – often referring to refugees coming from different regions, and being seen as the other – host families were less likely to have hosted the refugees. The role of uplifting one's social status has not been delved into very deeply in this research but is in line with the findings of Fleischman and Steinhilper (2017).

Fifth, the research strengthens the argument of Malkki (2015), who argues that women and children are perceived as more needy for help than men, as discussed in the literature. The research showed that host families are more welcoming to women and children than to men, as they see women and children as more needy. That most Ukrainian refugees were women and children fleeing - men had to stay to fight in the war – strengthened the perception of refugees in need - what Malkki (2015) describes as 'mere', - and fostered the hosts' need to help. There is however a second gender component that plays a role. For females, the research found that the is an anxiety for the disturbance of the feeling of safety in the house. The security of one's own safety is crucial in the openness of hosting refugees at someone's private home. As a result, men were less openly welcome than children and women. If safety, and the feeling of safety, cannot be guaranteed, people will be less likely to open up their homes.

Sixth, volunteering for Ukrainian refugees can be motivated from a (geo-)political perspective, which stands in contrast with the findings of Fleischmann and Steinhilper (2017). The research shows that host families took a political stand in the conflict in Ukraine. Russia is portrayed as the aggressor, Ukraine – and thereby the Ukrainian population and people fleeing Ukraine – as victims of the war, and Ukraine as defending our shared European values. Therefore, Ukrainians are not seen as the enemy or the evil; there is more nuance when talking about refugees from other areas, people express uncertainty about their 'identity' and reasons for fleeing for others. Hosts do not know if they have to see them as a friend or enemy, whereas they express having a certainty about the political side Ukrainian refugees are on. Therefore it is not only the government that is more like to shelter the refugees that are created by their ideological enemy (Jackson & Atkinson, 2019). Also, citizens who mobilize for refugees follow this thinking pattern of being more likely to help refugees who are created by their political enemies. Therefore, volunteering for Ukraine is not only a way to 'do something' and 'help' – in a humanitarian way – but also a way to show their support for Ukraine in the conflict. This stands in contrast to the findings of Fleischmann and Steinhilper (2017), who argue that the rise of voluntary action during the 2015 refugee influx was motivated by an 'apolitical' stand. They argue that volunteers did not want to take a stand in the political situation but saw their humanitarian action under the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and humanity. This research contradicts that these

conclusions are valuable for all cases of volunteering for refugees as neutrality and impartiality are two principles the host families in this research do not sympathize with, on the contrary, in this research host families take a clear stand, describing the enemy as 'inhumane' and see their actions as supporting wider political goals, which is supporting the Ukrainian case. This political interpretation of their voluntary action is strengthened by the various mechanisms by both the European as well as de local governments installed, such as the state of protection, as mentioned earlier.

Seventh, the feeling of proximity is of major importance. That the conflict takes place in one's own continent deeply impacts the willingness to take action, and strengthens the perception of the Ukrainian refugee as belonging to the in-group (as explained above). Furthermore, it is linked to the political conviction of sheltering refugees in their own region, seeing the European Union as this own region.

Eight, the temporal nature of the stay of the Ukrainian refugees played a significant role. Families both refer to the temporality of their stay in Belgium - as they are sure that the refugees will turn back to Ukraine after the war ends - and the temporality of always having the possibility of stopping their engagement to host the Ukrainian refugees. Having a safety net from the government thereby has a crucial role. On top of this, it was never questioned if the refugees from Ukraine had other motivations than just to find a safe haven, away from war, for their flee. This stands in large contrast to how host families perceive other refugees, questioning their reasons for fleeing and pointing to them as 'possible fortune seekers'. A doubt that is never expressed about the Ukrainian refugees. This is strengthening the welcoming culture for Ukrainian refugees and as a result, fosters the mobilization of people.

CONCLUSION

The large-scale mobilization of host families in Belgium for Ukrainian refugees after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia can be explained by a complex interplay of various factors creating a welcoming environment for Ukrainian refugees in Belgium and strengthening the motivation to volunteer to shelter refugees at one's home. Both individual factors, as well as societal structures, influence the willingness to host refugees. These factors are media representation and the perception of a crisis, cultural affiliation, societal and governmental incentives, access to resources, gender-based vulnerability, enemy images, geographical proximity, temporality, and the reasons for fleeing. Furthermore, the motivation of people to volunteer for refugees and offer their homes as a shelter is deeply intertwined with societal and political structures that encourage citizens to mobilize. Thereby host families stick to hegemonic attitudes towards the refugees involved and do not challenge hegemonic attitudes to migration. Consequently, private home sheltering of refugees takes place in a political and societal context that promotes a welcoming culture for the refugees involved.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The generalizability of the research conclusions to different contexts, locations, periods, forms of volunteering for refugees, and reasons for mobilization might be limited, as the research only took place in Flanders and interviews were performed from November 2022 to March 2023 in the concrete context of the invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, since the research specifically focused on sheltering Ukrainian refugees, caution must be exercised in generalizing the findings to the hosting of other refugee populations. Nonetheless, the study provides valuable insights into significant motivating factors for the mobilization of citizens in hosting refugees, laying a foundation for understanding what factors foster the mobilization of people for refugees.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has provided valuable insights into the mobilization of host families for Ukrainian refugees in 2022. However, several recommendations for future research have emerged during the course of this thesis. The following areas are suggested for further exploration.

A first recommendation is to further research the effectiveness and experience of private hosting, evaluating the impact of private sheltering on refugee integration, well-being, and societal dynamics. Understanding the challenges and successes faced by host families and refugees could provide essential insights into the viability and desirability of private sheltering to address housing shortages in refugee-focused public policies.

A second recommendation is to conduct research on the power dynamics and imbalances in hosting relationships. This line of research may contribute to developing strategies that mitigate potential power disparities and enhance the positive outcomes of in citizen solidarity actions for refugees.

A third recommendation is to study the factors identified in this research as a foundation for policy research on countering the negative perceptions about migrants, challenging stereotypes, and alleviating anxieties surrounding migration, that could foster more inclusive and welcoming societies.

A fourth recommendation is to research the role of an individual's safety perceptions in mobilization for societal issues. This could unravel if safety is a major threshold in mobilization and how this could be countered to realize equal participation.

A fifth recommendation is to conduct further research on the motivation of host families, who accommodate refugees from different regions and conflicts, or in different regions. Investigating whether the conclusions drawn from this study hold relevance in various contexts can contribute to a broader understanding of the motivations of citizens to accommodate refugees.

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