From Safe Homes to Sponsors

Lessons from the Ukraine hosting response for refugee sponsorship programmes

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR PRIVATE SPONSORSHIP IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Executive Summary

As of mid-2023, more than 5.8 million people had fled Ukraine and been displaced throughout Europe. Already facing overwhelmed housing and reception infrastructure, countries greatly relied on private individuals and community-led efforts to host Ukrainian refugees—an approach supported by the European Commission, which issued guidance on safe hosting as part of its Safe Homes initiative in July 2022. These hosting projects allowed residents to offer their homes for temporary stays, lessening the strain on formal housing and asylum systems. For instance, in Poland (the EU Member State that received the most displaced Ukrainians initially) 1.6 million found refuge with local families between Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and early 2023. In stark contrast to the scale of these hosting initiatives, community sponsorship programmes in Europe, initially meant to bolster refugee resettlement, have struggled to expand beyond small-scale efforts.

The widespread use of private hosting in response to the Ukraine crisis provides valuable lessons for welcoming refugees through resettlement, sponsorship, and asylum systems. In the majority of cases, the shape and structure of hosting programmes naturally evolved in reaction to the capabilities and preferences of the local groups and individuals

leading them. Their swift development, meanwhile, has been key in addressing the reception needs of displaced persons from Ukraine, by rapidly accommodating refugees and attracting a varied pool of hosts. Other important features that have supported these hosting initiatives' unprecedented scale and expansion include: their flexible requirements and swift procedures, the limited responsibilities placed on hosts, their emphasis on quality matching between hosts and refugees, the involvement of new actors, and the use of digital technologies. Nonetheless, the flexibility and lack of oversight in many of these initiatives has also produced issues around safeguarding vulnerable individuals, host burnout, and difficulties transitioning refugees to long-term housing.

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As hosting enters a new, more mature phase, there is an opportunity to both reflect on how to preserve and strengthen the tremendous innovations it has brought, as well as what these innovations mean

for how other similar initiatives, such as community sponsorship for resettled refugees, are operated. To capitalise on the lessons learnt from hosting efforts, policymakers and stakeholders in hosting, sponsorship, and reception programmes could consider the following measures:

1   **Support the creation of a civil-society community of practice that allows for the exchange of lessons across hosting and sponsorship programmes.** Various initiatives are developing and streamlining their operations, creating opportunities for peer-learning. There is a need to capture this momentum and to share knowledge and tools among stakeholders. This could take the form of a platform to regularly convene hosting and sponsorship stakeholders to encourage the exchange of lessons and knowledge among both sets of actors.

2   **Create a single entry point for citizens interested in engaging in welcoming initiatives.** Governments could establish country-level virtual hubs to help interested individuals learn about and sign up to participate in refugee support endeavours, whether as volunteers, sponsors, or hosts. These platforms could gather information about individuals' interests and availability, and help them understand which opportunities best fit their preferences and capacity. Additionally, they would facilitate knowledge-sharing around training, vetting, and resources for sponsors and hosts across initiatives. Such platforms could also play a crucial role in directing volunteers and resources to areas with the most urgent needs.

3   **Update sponsorship programmes based on lessons and innovations from hosting initiatives.** Hosting efforts demonstrated that lowering barriers to participation and easing and speeding up programme procedures have a positive impact on volunteer recruitment and engagement. Sponsorship programmes should consider how these lessons can be applied to speed up and lighten sponsor recruiting procedures, while maintaining safeguards. Other innovations, such as sophisticated procedures for matching Ukrainian guests and hosts based on detailed criteria and the preferences of both parties could also add value to sponsorship programmes. And technological tools developed for hosting (such as portals, chatbots, and algorithms) could also be deployed for sponsorship to support better application, vetting, and matching processes.

4   **Make sure that private hosting is monitored and that hosts are supported.** Due to a general lack of monitoring of and support for hosts, many hosting initiatives have seen considerable host burnout as well as some acute safety issues. In contrast, community sponsorship programmes have in place ready safeguarding mechanisms and civil-society organisations to support sponsors and prevent or reduce risks around safety. In future crises, governments and hosting programmes should integrate these safeguarding, monitoring, and host support elements into their operations.

Hosting initiatives' flexible arrangements, easier procedures, engagement of varied actors, and use of digitalised mechanisms have truly been innovations in the refugee welcoming space that should not be quickly dismantled or forgotten. At the same time, there is a need to reflect on the role, and potential shortcomings, of private hosting as a temporary tool for refugee support. Going forward, policymakers and operational stakeholders in the field of community sponsorship and resettlement should seek

to transfer the most promising of the tools and approaches developed during this period to help scale and improve community sponsorship programmes, while also similarly working to strengthen hosting efforts.

1   Introduction

By mid-2023, more than 5.8 million people had been displaced from Ukraine and sought safety in countries across Europe.[1] Faced with unprecedented demands on their housing and reception infrastructure, most countries turned to private individuals to host Ukrainians and community-led initiatives to coordinate their reception. These initiatives provided platforms through which receiving-country residents could offer space in their homes or other private properties to individuals and families who had fled Ukraine and needed somewhere to stay temporarily. The outpouring of public support and offers of accommodation through these initiatives, which crucially did not utilise the resources of social housing or asylum reception systems, was astonishing. In Poland, for example, the government estimates that between Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and early 2023, Polish families hosted 1.6 million Ukrainians.[2]

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While the use of such large-scale private hosting has been unique to the Ukraine displacement crisis, these initiatives offer lessons relevant beyond it. Indeed, they could help countries rethink and refine their approaches to welcoming refugees through resettlement, community sponsorship (also known as private or refugee sponsorship), and asylum systems. These systems have been under tremendous strain in recent years. In 2022, EU and associated countries received nearly 1 million asylum applications, the most since 2016.[3] At the same time, many European community sponsorship initiatives, which were initially launched with the intention of supporting the growth of refugee resettlement programmes, have struggled to grow beyond small-scale, boutique add-ons to mainstream resettlement efforts. Some of the innovative practices developed as part of hosting efforts for Ukrainians could be adapted to support the capacity of community sponsorship or refugee reception programmes, while hosting's more cautionary tales could help other protection efforts avoid similar pitfalls.

Meanwhile, the landscape of private hosting itself is changing rapidly. Some hosting initiatives have sought to develop partnerships with more established nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) to deepen their know-how and expand their capacity, while others are planning to expand their services to new refugee populations or situations. Recognition has also been growing at the policy level of the potential value of hosting in addressing future displacement crises. For example, the European Commission announced in November 2022 that it had called upon the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to examine hosting practices to date and issue recommendations on the role hosting can play going forward.[4] The time is thus ripe to consider how hosting has evolved and how it could potentially help countries strengthen their humanitarian protection systems.

This policy brief provides an overview of how private hosting of displaced people from Ukraine has been implemented in Europe by governments and civil society. It compares these initiatives' common models and reflects on their outcomes. Finally, the brief provides recommendations for civil society, governments, and the European Union to further develop hosting as a method of refugee welcoming and emergency reception. This analysis draws in part on a mapping of major hosting initiatives across Eu-

rope, interviews with representatives of civil-society organisations and individuals who implemented hosting initiatives, and a June 2023 roundtable that brought together key stakeholders to discuss the potential lessons of the Ukraine crisis for hosting and community sponsorship initiatives.

2   Tracing the Evolution of Private Welcoming Initiatives in Europe

The Ukraine response echoes and, in some cases, has built directly on the civil-society initiatives that emerged during the 2015–16 European migration crisis. Both then and now, these initiatives emerged to address gaps in the ability of government services to keep pace with the needs of humanitarian arrivals, while also providing an outlet for widespread public support for and desire to assist newcomers.

Many of the initiatives created in that earlier period are still operational and provided a foundation in some countries for the Ukraine response. Refugees Welcome, for example, which began facilitating private hosting of refugees in 2014, has facilitated access to accommodation for more than 2,500 refugees since its inception and is now working in ten European countries.[5] Over the years, the organisation has also begun working to address newcomers' needs with training and other forms of assistance.[6] One of the largest examples of hosting in 2015 emerged in Ireland, when the Irish advocacy organisation Uplift developed the 'Pledge a Bed' campaign and received more than 6,000 offers.[7] The campaign prompted the creation of the Register of Pledges, coordinated by the Irish Red Cross at the request of the government, through which Irish residents could offer goods, services, and accommodation to arriving asylum seekers and refugees.[8] More recently, this Register of Pledges was used to manage hosting efforts in response to the Ukraine crisis. After being

reinforced and renovated, the system registered 25,553 offers of accommodation between March and May 2022,[9] and it eventually led to the hosting of 6,420 Ukrainian refugees in 3,000 Irish homes by June 2023.[10]

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European community sponsorship programmes also have their roots in the 2015–16 period, having emerged as another way to capture and channel private citizens' desire to support arriving refugees.[11] Community sponsorship, as it has come to be practiced in Europe, involves a partnership between a resettlement country's government, civil-society actors, and private individuals who commit to supporting resettled refugees financially, socially, and emotionally as they settle and integrate into a new community. The level of financial responsibility placed on sponsors and the length of their engagement varies, but the core objective of European community sponsorship programmes has typically been to foster refugees' integration through tailored private and community support. Two of the most long-running sponsorship initiatives in Europe are those in Italy and the United Kingdom. Italy's Humanitarian Corridors, for example, were established in 2015 to provide safe passage for Syrian refugees in Lebanon to Italy, facilitating the arrival of more than 1,000 Syrians as part of the first cohort.[12] And in the United Kingdom, a community sponsorship programme was initially set up in 2016 to provide an opportunity for communities, businesses, and charities to support the resettlement of Syrian refugees.[13] Since then, a number of EU Member States (including Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, and

most recently, Finland and Sweden) have launched their own sponsorship pilots and initiatives.[14]

Many of these sponsorship programmes have, however, encountered difficulties in expanding their reach, limiting the number of refugees being welcomed. For instance, Germany pledged to admit up to 500 refugees between 2019 and the end of 2021, but it had only welcomed 152 sponsored refugees as of early 2023.[15] And while Belgium intended to support up to 100 sponsored refugees per year, it has only welcomed 61 refugees since the start of its programme in 2020.[16] The recruitment and retention of sponsors have been among the key challenges to scaling up sponsorship schemes. Research and evaluations of European sponsorship programmes suggest that sponsor recruitment has fallen short due, in part, to the limited scope and diversification of the civil-society networks through which recruitment often takes place, burdensome programme requirements for sponsors, and complicated application procedures.[17]

Hosting and sponsorship programmes have operated, by and large, in separate spheres. During both the Syria and Ukraine responses, hosting programmes were stood up primarily by organisations or individuals without a background in refugee sponsorship. Who Will Help Ukraine, a hosting platform based in Slovakia, for example, was created by a group of colleagues working in the IT sector. As of mid-2023, the organisation had placed more than 4,000 displaced Ukrainians with hosts, and it has expanded its offerings to help match Ukrainian guests with social and other needed services.[18] For their part, community sponsorship organisations have often drawn on established refugee-assisting agencies for their infrastructure. In Germany, for example, the sponsorship coordination platform Neustart im Team (New Start in a Team, or NesT) is led by a group of civil-society organisations, including Caritas and the Red Cross, most of which are experienced refugee resettlement service providers.[19] There has often been little overlap and few opportunities for interaction between these two types of initiatives.

3 The Ukraine Crisis: Hosting hits the mainstream

In the initial days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, millions of people sought refuge in neighbouring countries on the European Union's eastern borders. For the most part, these countries had been relatively untouched by the last decade's increases in the number of refugees and migrants arriving in Europe, and their reception and asylum systems had limited capacity to accommodate arriving Ukrainians. For example, while Poland received a total of 7,698 asylum applications in 2021,[20] it received 2 million Ukrainian arrivals within the first four weeks after war broke out in Ukraine.[21] Systems in Poland, Lithuania, Romania, and elsewhere were simply not equipped to register and provide housing to such a large number of people so quickly. As Ukrainian arrivals spread out to seek longer-term accommodation in other EU countries, they encountered other difficulties. Their arrival in the wider European Union coincided with a renewed increase in arrivals of asylum seekers from other countries,[22] and with a widespread shortage of both public and private housing.[23] There was thus an urgent need in both eastern EU countries and the wider bloc for a different approach to help Ukrainians secure temporary housing.

Almost immediately, private citizens stepped forward to offer their homes to people fleeing the war. Across nearly every European country, a plethora of initiatives emerged through informal networks, social media, and community groups to connect private citizens willing to open their homes with refugees seeking accommodation. These private hosts ultimately proved to be an important part of the

Ukraine response in many EU Member States, providing a short-term solution to the lack of reception places. According to a joint study from the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), International Organisation for Migration (IOM), and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), between April and August of 2022, 27 per cent of Ukrainian refugee respondents were being hosted in a private household.[24] Hosting has been particularly prevalent in eastern European Member States, which have received the most Ukrainian refugees. Data from the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) show that, in June 2022, 37 per cent of Ukrainians in Czechia, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia were staying in privately offered accommodation.[25]

These hosting programmes for Ukrainians have taken on a variety of forms, even within countries. In most cases, the contours of these programmes evolved organically in response to the capacity and interests of the groups and individuals driving the efforts at the local level. It is worth noting that, alongside more recognised and well-known initiatives, large numbers of people also hosted Ukrainian newcomers informally, without going through any platform.

Broadly, private hosting programmes have varied along three dimensions:

1 **The role of government.** Some programmes were initiated by receiving-country governments and entailed government coordination and oversight. In Spain, for example, the programme Familia Necesita Familia (Family Needs Family) was developed as a collaboration between the Spanish Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security, and Migrations and the foundation La Caixa, at the request of the government. The foundation was responsible for recruiting hosts and vetting them through cooperation

with local social entities across Spain. For its part, the ministry was responsible for identifying Ukrainian refugees in need of housing and matching them with hosts approved by the foundation.[26] Similarly, the UK government scheme Homes for Ukraine allows recognised organisations to identify displaced Ukrainians and match them with suitable hosts, while local councils carry out background checks on sponsors and house visits for offered accommodation.[27]

In other instances, hosting initiatives emerged with lower levels of government engagement. In Ireland, for example, the government provided resources to support pledging and hosting efforts.[28] However, the Ukraine hosting effort began as a civil-society initiative, and the leading actors were mainly NGOs, most notably the Irish Red Cross, which operated the Register of Pledges, visited properties, organised meetings with hosts, and matched hosts and refugees. Other initiatives operated entirely without government involvement. In some cases, this was due to limited government capacity. In Slovakia, the hosting platform Who Will Help Ukraine was developed and run by private individuals, and the Slovakian government declined to take on a role on the basis that state services did not have the resources to engage in such efforts. Elsewhere, as in Finland, governments limited their involvement for liability reasons, citing an inability to assume responsibility for individuals residing in private homes.[29]

2 **The role and responsibilities of hosts.** Some programmes, particularly those stood up in the immediate aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine, were purely focused on addressing housing needs. Programmes such as #UnterkunftUkraine in Germany,

Who Will Help Ukraine in Slovakia, and Our Choice in Poland did not place any additional expectations on hosts beyond providing a place to live. In some cases, programmes did not specify a minimum or maximum length of time for which hosts were required to provide housing; instead, hosts and Ukrainians were free to determine the duration of the hosting arrangement themselves. Other initiatives, such as Homes for Ukraine in the United Kingdom, the hosting programme led by the Irish Red Cross, and Familia Necesita Familia in Spain, required hosts to commit to providing housing for a specific duration, often at least six months, but did not require hosts to provide other forms of support (such as financial or social assistance) to their guests.

Though less common, a few initiatives established more extensive and formalised requirements for hosts that approach the level of support required of sponsors in community sponsorship programmes. For example, HIAS Europe's Welcome Circles programme,[30] which is built on HIAS's experience supporting sponsors in the United States, connects Ukrainian newcomers with groups of volunteers from Jewish communities who provide more extensive support and whose work is overseen by a paid coordinator. In addition to providing housing, hosts are required to create a welcome plan and provide support to Ukrainian guests with language learning through specialised courses, job searching, and broader community integration.[31]

3   **The level of vetting of and support for hosts.** Some initiatives closely managed the process of matching hosts and refugees and provided thorough support to hosts for the duration of their engagement. As part of the Spanish Familia Necesita Familia programme,

for example, La Caixa individually vetted hosts and approved hosting agreements. HIAS Europe also carries out a detailed matching process for hosts and refugees in its Welcome Circles and assigns experienced coordinators for each Welcome Circle.[32] In other programmes, the coordinating organisation has a more limited role, often focused on basic security checks of hosts and refugees, simplified matching based on major needs, and limited follow-up. In Germany, #UnterkunftUkraine, for example, managed matching through call centres that collected basic information about refugees' needs and the capacity of hosts, with agents following up a week after the match.[33] In Slovakia, Who Will Help Ukraine also utilised call centres for matching, employing a voice bot that automated host–refugee pairings based on the suitability of the accommodation on offer. The organisation sent automated messages to refugees to gather information about their experiences after they were placed.[34] At the most basic level, some initiatives operated purely as platforms to enable refugees and hosts find one another. For instance, the initiative Shelter4Ukraine, a completely virtual platform that facilitated matches across Europe, had minimal oversight of matches. Verification of hosts' and refugees' identification documents was done manually by the platform's founder, the platform allowed individuals to match themselves, and the initiative did not follow up with either party after a match was made.[35]

The format of the hosting initiatives that emerged during this period was often determined by the available resources and actors involved, resulting in highly tailored programmes developed to respond to specific needs and local circumstances. Some prioritised quality and security in housing (often, those emerging later in countries experiencing

secondary displacement), while others focused on quantity to address urgent, large-scale demand, even if this came with less oversight. The structure of these programmes and, in particular, the choices made regarding the vetting of and support for hosts also had an influence on the outcomes of hosting arrangements.

4 Weighing the Successes and Trade-Offs of Private Hosting

Private hosting programmes proved crucial to promptly accommodating people displaced from Ukraine and engaged a wide range of hosts. However, in many cases they also generated challenges around safeguarding vulnerable individuals, host burnout, and difficulties transitioning refugees to long-term housing. These successes and challenges offer lessons on such initiatives' added value, the potential risks, and how these risks could be mitigated.

A. The successes

One of the most notable and visible accomplishments of private hosting programmes during the Ukraine crisis was the swiftness with which hosting facilitated the housing of an unprecedented number of displaced individuals, rapidly meeting an acute need. In the early stages of the crisis, delays in official response measures in many European countries spurred the creation of many of these informal private hosting initiatives, and they became a vital source of immediate relief.[36] In the initial weeks of the crisis (11–24 March 2022), an estimated 200,000 to 400,000 Ukrainian refugees sought refuge in Warsaw, while the city had just 30,000 available shelter beds.[37] In Poland and elsewhere, hosting programmes proved able to mobilise private resources with the speed needed to fill this gap. In Germany, #UnterkunftUkraine, one of the biggest support ef-

forts for Ukrainians, received 160,000 offers of beds within weeks of launching and had found private accommodation for 49,000 Ukrainians by September 2022.[38] And in Italy, within four months of Russia's invasion, just 13,304 out of more than 137,000 Ukrainian refugees were living in government reception facilities, with the rest relying on private individuals for housing.[39] By the one-year mark, the Polish government estimated that 1.6 million refugees had been hosted by Polish families since the war started.[40]

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These efforts were an important means of translating public desire to support refugee newcomers into action and also led to the engagement of a wider set of private individuals and civil-society actors than those typically involved in refugee responses—an accomplishment that has eluded many community sponsorship programmes to date. Surveys show that these initiatives have engaged new segments of receiving societies, with just 4 per cent of hosts in the UK Homes for Ukraine scheme having previously taken part in refugee welcoming efforts and about 5 per cent of hosts in Belgium having prior experience housing newcomers.[41] Similarly, the German #UnterkunftUkraine reported that 58 per cent of hosts were engaging with displaced persons for the first time during the response to the Ukraine crisis.[42] Those involved in hosting Ukrainians have in many cases also had a different profile to people involved in supporting refugees via sponsorship programmes. While sponsors have typically been older, often retired, adults, hosting initiatives for Ukrainians in

Poland and Slovakia have reported notable involvement from students.[43] In Germany, the average age of hosts for Ukrainians was 50 years old[44]—almost ten years younger than the average age for sponsors in the country's community sponsorship programme (59.5 years old).[45] And in the United Kingdom, 38 per cent of hosts were between ages 30 and 49, a group that has had little involvement in UK sponsorship efforts.[46]

Many of those engaged in hosting efforts have said they would be willing to host again, suggesting that hosting may have mobilised a pool of private resources and energy that could be tapped into in the future. In Germany, for example, 80 per cent of those who hosted Ukrainians said they would do it again, and most (around 66 per cent) showed interest in hosting forced migrants from other conflict areas.[47] In the United Kingdom, 81 per cent of survey respondents reported having a positive experience as a host, 52 per cent wanted to continue hosting their guests after the initial six months period, and 75 per cent said they were willing to host a new Ukrainian refugee or refugees from Afghanistan.[48] And in Belgium, 25 per cent of surveyed hosts said they would extend their hosting offers to non-Ukrainian refugees.[49]

These successes may be attributable, in part, to the design of hosting programmes. While they varied in a number of ways, many shared certain common features that kept the barriers to entry low, particularly compared with sponsorship programmes, and facilitated the rapid recruitment and deployment of a diverse pool of hosts:

1   **Application procedures were kept relatively simple, allowing applications to be processed quickly.** Most programmes created user-friendly application forms to enable hosts to sign up quickly. These typically ask for information about the available accommodation (e.g., location, how many people could be accommodated, and for how long) as well as hosts' motivation for volunteering. Some programmes also have called potential hosts to confirm their willingness to participate and have vetted hosting offers through identity checks and online or in-person checks of the accommodation. Citizens UK, for example, has in place a '5-minute form'[50] that hosts can use to register their information. The whole process, from application to the arrival of Ukrainians, can take between two and six weeks.[51] Similarly, the initiative RefugeeHome NL, which stopped taking host sign-ups in August 2023, had an online sign-up form through which hosts provided information about their available accommodation, household characteristics, and location. Applications were expected to be processed within a few days, after which prospective hosts participated in a screening interview and provided a Certificate of Good Conduct (similar to a background check).[52] According to a study by the University of Nottingham, ease of access has been one key factors in motivating hosts to participate in the UK programme.[53] These simple application procedures stand in contrast to the often lengthy ones for community sponsorship programmes, which studies have found to be a deterrent for some sponsors and limited the growth of these initiatives.[54] In the German community sponsorship programme, for instance, sponsors wait on average nine months to be confirmed as eligible to participate in the programme.[55]

2   **Hosts had limited initial responsibilities.** Very few hosting initiatives placed responsibilities on hosts beyond the provision of accommodation. For example, the fact that hosts did not need to take on financial responsibility for securing independent

housing or cover the costs of some aspects of refugee integration (as is done by sponsors in some sponsorship programmes) may help explain why large numbers of younger individuals stepped up to host. The limited time commitment involved in these initiatives may have similarly made participation more feasible for more people. For example, hosts in Germany expected the hosting period to last on average six months.[56] This is a fairly short commitment compared to what is required of sponsors in the German community sponsorship programme, in which a group of volunteers commits to supporting a family for 12 months, including covering rent and providing nonmaterial integration assistance.[57]

3   **The organic growth of hosting programmes allowed for the engagement of new civil-society partners.** Community sponsorship programmes are often based on formalised relationships between government entities and NGO partners selected to support the programme's implementation, and many of these partners have extensive refugee resettlement experience. Hosting programmes, by contrast, evolved organically and typically from the ground up, facilitating the involvement of a range of organisations, including some without past experience supporting refugees. The fact that hosting initiatives generally let hosts identify or select from a list the refugees they would like to host (known as 'naming' within sponsorship programmes) also motivated some new civil-society partners. The NGO HIAS, for example, has not been a partner in European sponsorship programmes to date, but stood up its Welcome Circles programme in part to help Jewish congregations receive Jewish individuals displaced from Ukraine.[58] This

programme feature also encouraged diaspora communities to engage in hosting, while diaspora engagement has often been limited in sponsorship programmes. In Poland, for example, Our Choice was established by the Ukrainian diaspora in Warsaw and went on to lead the mobilisation of thousands of hosts and volunteers to both house refugees and offer skills training and leisure activities.

4   **The emphasis on quality matching and refugee agency in some programmes supported successful hosting relationships.** Hosting initiatives, especially those that were community rather than government operated, had a great deal of flexibility in determining how to place refugees with hosts, particularly when compared with sponsorship programmes that must rely on the often limited information about resettling refugees they receive from UNHCR and government partners or that have a much smaller pool of potential sponsors to match with arriving refugees. For some hosting programmes, particularly those with active management, this has led to the development of matching mechanisms that account for a wide array of characteristics and preferences, and that allow for quite a bit of agency on the part of refugees and hosts to accept or decline a match.[59] For example, the organisation Citizens UK, which matches Ukrainians with hosts under the UK Homes for Ukraine scheme, asks hosts to sign up through an online form that collects information on topics such as their household profile, the accommodation (e.g., size and location), specific preferences (e.g., whether smoking or pets are allowed), and length of commitment.[60] After proposing a provisional match, Citizens UK organises a meeting between the two parties and a translator, after which the organisation consults

separately with both refugees and hosts, who can approve or decline the match.[61] Likewise, in the Irish programme coordinated by the Red Cross, prospective hosts, refugees, and a caseworker have an online or in-person meeting, after which they can decide whether to accept or reject the match.[62] Such pre-meetings and the collection of detailed information on preferences is uncommon in sponsorship initiatives. However, evidence from sponsorship programmes suggests that matching processes that consider refugees' agency and preferences are associated with better sponsor–refugee relationships and better integration outcomes.[63]

5 **Digital technologies were used to speed up placements and facilitate vetting and follow-up.** Many of the new actors that mobilised to support hosting efforts brought in digital tools and technologies to help recruit and vet hosts and refugees. For instance, the Slovakian Who Will Help Ukraine initiative connected with the Slovakian business sector and had IT experts volunteering to build databases of Ukrainians seeking accommodation and those offering it. Various programmes also deployed technology in the host–refugee matching process. Pairity, a leading developer of algorithmic matching, has collaborated with the Berlin Governance Platform and the Salam Lab in Poland on the Re:Match programme, which relocates Ukrainians from Poland to German cities. Re:Match uses an algorithm to account for the characteristics of refugees (such as family ties, work experience, or special needs) and the capacity of participating cities (such as the availability of housing, jobs, and language courses) when making a match.[64] Meanwhile, HIAS developed a system called RUTH that has been employed to match Ukrainians from,

for example, Poland, with private sponsors in the United States via the Uniting for Ukraine parole sponsorship programme, which operates similarly to HIAS's Welcome Circles hosting programmes for Ukrainians in Europe. RUTH incorporates Ukrainians' relocation preferences and allows U.S. sponsors to express their preferences on, for instance, how many people they can host. Notably, RUTH allows Ukrainians to disclose vulnerabilities (such as medical concerns) so those can be taken into account in the matching process.[65]

B. Limitations and ways to mitigate them

While the flexibility and grassroots nature of the hosting-based response to displacement from Ukraine enabled it to reach an unprecedented number of beneficiaries in a short time and to engage a wide range of actors in receiving societies, this approach also came with limitations.

The need for safeguards

The very attributes that have contributed to the success of the reception of Ukrainians—namely, speed and flexibility—also pose significant challenges for the well-being and safety of refugees and hosts. The absence of thorough vetting and oversight, coupled with loosely defined host responsibilities, are important risk factors and, in some instances, have resulted in serious abuses. Creating safeguards to mitigate these issues is thus a clear concern.

Hosting efforts are often well-intentioned, but they have inherent power dynamics—with refugees dependent on their hosts for shelter—that can create tension or even facilitate exploitation. Ukrainian refugees also constitute a particularly vulnerable group. A July 2022 report by the UNHCR found that 90 per cent of newcomers from Ukraine in Czechia,

Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia were women and children[66]—a markedly different profile to other recent refugee influxes in Europe, such as the 2015–16 crisis when men made up a larger share of arrivals. This raises particular concerns regarding the inadequacy of vetting and safeguard procedures in some programmes, which often involved limited if any screening of hosts, background checks, and follow-up monitoring mechanisms. Indeed, some initiatives encountered severe instances of abuse. For example, one matching service discovered cases of hosts locking Ukrainians in apartments and compelling them to work for free.[67] Moreover, the flexibility inherent in hosting commitments has in some cases created uncertainty about how long hosts would continue to provide refugees housing. When hosting arrangements have ended without sufficient notice, this has left many Ukrainians in precarious situations, with some ending up homeless.[68]

Many programmes have tried to mitigate and respond to such risks. Governments have created central platforms to provide information to newcomers about basic labour rights and directed individuals to emergency resources (such as Germany4Ukraine.de). And in the United Kingdom, the Homes for Ukraine programme decided to relocate 600 Ukrainians soon after the programme launched after determining that they had been placed with unsuitable hosts, some of whom had criminal records.[69]

However, regulating grassroots private hosting initiatives presents significant challenges for governments. Spontaneous citizen-led initiatives do not often have the resources to maintain comprehensive records of their hosts and newcomers or to conduct sufficient monitoring, suggesting an important role for government in resourcing or even taking on these functions. While public–private partnerships would seem to be an ideal model to address this gap, hosting initiatives that adopted this approach encountered their own trade-offs. In particular, initiatives that involved significant government oversight often encountered delays and struggled to match hosts and refugees as swiftly as the pace of the crisis demanded. In France, for example, where the government-supported hosting programme included a months-long vetting procedure, many hosts abandoned the programme or chose to host through citizen-led initiatives instead.[70] And in Ireland, where local governments were responsible for vetting, the Irish Red Cross, which operated the Register of Pledges, criticised the local governments for being too slow to manage pledges, reporting that some hosts waited for months to be matched.[71]

BOX 1
Safe Homes Guidance

To respond to the risks associated with hosting refugees in private homes, the European Commission introduced the Safe Homes guidance in July 2022. The guidance aimed to provide recommendations and examples of best practices for those engaged in housing initiatives for Ukrainian refugees. Among its suggestions: background checks, vetting of criminal records, conducting house visits before and after matching, and providing information on national helplines for hosted persons. The guidance represented the first EU-wide approach to coordinating the hosting movement and ensuring basic standards were met.

Source: European Commission, 'Solidarity and Housing: Supporting Safe Homes. Considerations, Key Principles and Practices' (guidance document, July 2022).

Host burnout and unmatched expectations

Particularly in initiatives that took a light-touch approach to managing and supporting hosts, a lack of comprehensive training and support has at times given rise to cultural misunderstandings and challenges in addressing the trauma experienced by refugees.[72] This limited programme infrastructure has also raised concerns about insufficient integration assistance for refugees, unmet expectations on the part of both hosts and refugees, and host fatigue

and burnout. In Ireland, for example, hosts have received limited training and follow-up support, and some have described their experience as 'lonely'.[73]

> *Without training or ready resources to turn to for guidance, taking on these roles could become overwhelming.*

Part of the issue is that while hosts officially only committed to providing housing in most programmes, many found themselves taking on more expansive and unexpected roles such as supporting their guests with job applications, accessing education or social services, and finding long-term housing. Many hosts were new to working with refugees and thus unfamiliar with how the social security system works for nonresidents. And without training or ready resources to turn to for guidance, taking on these roles could become overwhelming. A University of Nottingham study of the UK Homes for Ukraine scheme revealed that many hosts, who initially signed up to provide short-term housing assistance, had found themselves providing extensive support, including navigating complex bureaucracies and helping guests find jobs. In the same study, hosts reported making significant changes to their lives, such as repurposing rooms and spaces in their homes—in one case, even moving their children out of the home to accommodate displaced Ukrainians—travelling to other countries to pick up their guests, or purchasing new furniture to refurnish rooms.[74] These changes could be sources of stress that eventually took an emotional toll. Belgian host families also expressed a need for better information on the supports available to refugees.[75] And in Germany, people who had negative hosting experiences often cited unclear expectations and a lack of support.[76]

Providing training, addressing cultural misunderstandings, and having a plan for when hosting agreements break down can help. An organisation in

Ireland reported that Ukrainian guests are often unsure about the boundaries hosts can set, highlighting the importance of clear guidelines.[77] Support for hosts, such as assistance from local authorities in finding permanent housing, can also contribute significantly to a positive hosting experience. In Germany, access to legal support was linked to a greater willingness to host again.[78] However, building on the infrastructure around hosting relationships (including greater training and coordination) can also make achieving scale more challenging, creating a trade-off. HIAS, which has programmes in 11 countries that involve more support, has facilitated the hosting of more than 700 Ukrainians since these efforts began in May 2022.[79] Meanwhile, the volunteer-led Who Will Help Ukraine has managed to match thousands of refugees and hosts but struggled to provide personalised support to hosts.[80]

Lack of off-ramps and long-term planning

Another key challenge in the reception of Ukrainians has been the lack of clear future plans as hosting arrangements have reached their initial endpoint and the displacement crisis has stretched on. In Czechia, Germany, Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia, 13 per cent of surveyed Ukrainians were still living with volunteers a year after being displaced. The share still living with hosts was highest in Romania (30.2 per cent), followed by Czechia (21.5 per cent) and Slovakia (21.1 per cent).[81] This is double the length of time that hosts in some countries (such as Germany) initially expected to house refugees, and can place significant strain on both parties involved. In the United Kingdom, hosts reported receiving inadequate support as they helped their guests find suitable longer-term accommodation, with one in eight hosts stating that their local council had not provided assistance in securing rented housing.[82]

Ukrainians face various other challenges as well that can hinder their transition to their own accommodation. Their displacement occurred at a time when

official reception capacity for refugees was already strained in many countries and housing markets across Europe were struggling to provide enough affordable, quality housing to meet demand. The energy and cost-of-living crisis and uncertainty regarding the length of Ukrainians' stay in the European Union have also added to the challenge. For example, landlords might be hesitant to provide rental contracts to Ukrainians, especially considering their legal status in EU Member States will end at some point, though it was recently extended to March 2025. In the United Kingdom, Ukrainian refugees face uncertainty about their ability to renew their visas and 100,000 risk having to leave Britain in 2025.[83] Furthermore, UNHCR surveys of Ukrainians about their plans for the future have consistently reported that many hope to return to Ukraine someday, and a notable share are undecided about doing so versus remaining abroad. Between April and May 2023, for example, the majority of survey respondents said they planned to return (14 per cent within the next three months and 62 per cent at some point in the future), while 18 per cent said they were undecided about returning and just 6 per cent said they had no plans or hope to return.[84] This uncertainty can deter some newcomers from investing in integrating into their host societies.

5   Recommendations

More than a year and a half on from the onset of the crisis in Ukraine, the myriad hosting initiatives that emerged as part of the initial response are entering a more mature phase. As these initiatives navigate this transition, there is a clear opportunity to both learn from their experiences and work to ensure that the infrastructure and knowledge built as part of these programmes are maintained for the future. In part, this means considering whether and how the thousands of hosts who have been mobilised during this period could be called upon to support other refugee populations—and there are indications that

many hosts would be willing to do so.[85] But fully capitalising on the learning and momentum of the Ukraine response will also entail specific and targeted investments in opportunities for shared learning and capacity building to help these initiatives maintain, improve, and iterate on their operations. It also requires an honest reflection on what the Ukraine experience means for the wider approach to sponsorship in Europe—something that policymakers in the resettlement field have so far been reluctant to acknowledge.

There is, however, political momentum to collect learnings from hosting initiatives and utilise these for future reception operations, as evidenced by the decision by the European Commission to commission a review of hosting by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. As policymakers and programme implementers enter the next phase of hosting efforts—and of their community sponsorship programmes—there are a number of measures they may wish to consider to strengthen both hosting and sponsorship efforts.

1   **Reduce silos between hosting and sponsorship efforts at the national level.** At present, hosting and sponsorship communities often operate in silos, and state agencies and policymakers themselves have tended to treat these as separate endeavours. Yet there is tremendous overlap in the infrastructure, know-how, and networks required to coordinate both types of programmes. To reduce silos, states or private funders could consider supporting national-level platforms that regularly convene hosting and sponsorship stakeholders to facilitate exchange on specific challenges, perhaps alongside a portal that would allow for the sharing of tools or templates for tasks such as training volunteers, vetting, or matching. One example is already in the making: the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative[86] is currently

developing a community of practice among hosting programmes in Poland. Such efforts could be expanded to allow for cross-national learning across the European Union, perhaps with the support of future funding under the EU Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund.

2 **Streamline the recruitment of volunteers by creating a single entry point for citizens to engage in welcoming initiatives.** States could consider setting up virtual country-level platforms to serve as a single entry point for people looking to engage in refugee relief efforts, whether as volunteers, sponsors, or hosts. These platforms could collect information about individuals' interests and availability, and would allow individuals to explore different opportunities to find those that best suit their preferences and resources, while also enabling the sharing of training, vetting, and knowledge resources across initiatives. Some good examples already exist. For example, the Welcome Alliance in Germany has created a digital platform (building on the resources and networks of its Ukraine hosting initiative)[87] that will provide a centralised contact point for safe refugee sponsorship or hosting. The programme will be operated as a collaboration between the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth; the Federal Ministry of Interior; and sponsorship organisations.[88] In the future, such platforms could also play a crucial role in directing volunteers and resources to areas with the most urgent needs.

3 **Update community sponsorship programmes to incorporate the successful elements of hosting initiatives.** Many of the innovations developed in the context of hosting have applicability for sponsorship as well and could be readily deployed to reduce

some of the barriers to scale sponsorship initiatives have encountered. First and foremost, sponsorship programme entry requirements should be streamlined to shorten the duration and complexity of the application process, which can be a deterrent, and be made more user-friendly. Processes for matching of sponsors and refugees should also be made more sophisticated, taking into account a wider range of refugee and sponsor characteristics and preferences. The technological tools (such as online portals, chatbots, databases, and algorithms) developed to efficiently manage applications, vetting, and matching for hosting initiatives could also be deployed in support of sponsorship.

4 **Ensure private hosts are sufficiently trained, monitored, and supported.** Community sponsorship programmes typically use safeguarding mechanisms (e.g., vetting, sponsor agreements, training, helplines) and involve civil-society actors that coordinate closely with sponsors. These mechanisms ensure the safety of newcomers by mitigating risks such as exploitation. They also ensure that sponsors have a comprehensive understanding of their roles and responsibilities and can provide appropriate support to arriving refugees. Ensuring that hosts also receive sufficient and appropriate support from civil-society and other relevant stakeholders is key to preventing them from burning out or running out of resources. As such, states should ensure such support and monitoring mechanisms are put in place for private hosting initiatives as well. To do so, they could consider supporting greater collaboration between established civil-society organisations with sponsorship experience and newly emerged hosting initiatives to

share capacity for key tasks such as security vetting or training of sponsors and hosts.

The enormity of the needs facing Europe's asylum reception systems, as well as the scalability challenges encountered by community sponsorship programmes, suggest the potential value of capitalising on these lessons and identifying opportunities to apply them elsewhere. The infrastructure and individual capital developed as part of the Ukraine response are tremendous. If societies can effectively preserve and build on this momentum, this presents a real opportunity to create resilient hosting and sponsorship programmes that will serve as resources in future crises.

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