

The intimate geopolitics of hosting Ukrainian refugees in Lithuanian homes

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Abstract

The article examines the experiences of Lithuanian residents who hosted Ukrainian refugees in their homes in the immediate aftermath of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. First, it argues that the commonly used migration and refugee terminology may be a misfit for this situation, as Lithuanian hosts did not view Ukrainians primarily as refugees, nor were they treated as such legally. Instead, hosts often saw Ukrainians as wives and children of soldiers of a related polity defending Europe's frontier, with hosting framed through the lens of war and having agency in it. Second, the article examines how the perceived 'fit' between the Lithuanian and Ukrainian polities – historical and geopolitical – was experienced and reconfigured through hosting. Although guests occasionally, albeit to varying degrees, did not meet hosts' expectations, this did not affect the overall sense of affinity between the two polities. At the time of my fieldwork, the affinity rested on the commitment to and faith in Ukraine's victory – though rarely defined – which is why hosts often viewed stories of 'misfitting' as distractions from this existential goal. The article sheds light on the epistemic and affective labour that goes into positioning oneself and others in relation to war.

Keywords

hospitality, intimate geopolitics, Lithuania, refugees, Russo-Ukrainian war, virtue

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Introduction

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Laura and Inga felt a desperate urge to ‘do something’.¹ They donated part of their savings to a humanitarian non-governmental organisation (NGO). They gave away their unused clothes and bedding to the refugees arriving from Ukraine. They purchased and hung a blue and yellow flag from the window of their flat in Vilnius, Lithuania’s capital. Unable to work, they spent days glued to their mobile phones, following gruesome media reports. ‘Like everyone,’ they emphasised.

In Laura’s and Inga’s words, the invasion activated their ‘genetic memory’. Family stories of Soviet mass deportations and anti-Soviet insurgency after the Second World War came flooding back (for a historical account, see [Balkelis and Davoliūtė, 2016](#)), as did their experiences of participating in the rallies of the popular independence movement in the late 1980s (for a historical account, see [Davoliūtė, 2013](#)). These were memories of *fighting* and *suffering* for *freedom*, which is how the past is often remembered in Lithuania ([Budrytė, 2023](#)). They served as an affective framework to interpret what was happening in the present, according to which, ‘like us’ in the past, Ukrainians were *fighting* and *suffering* for *freedom*. The war fuelled anxiety that Russia might invade the Baltics (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) – all NATO and European Union (EU) members since 2004. And anxiety, in turn, fuelled Laura’s and Inga’s urge to ‘do something’.

In March 2022, they came across a Facebook post and sensed their moment had arrived. It read approximately: ‘Two middle-aged women from Kherson are searching for a temporary refuge abroad.’² Laura and Inga lived in an 80-square-metre flat, which was just the right size for them. But the war gave them a new perspective on the space. Their living area now seemed to have extra room for refugees, which they demarcated with an IKEA shelf. Lithuania, together with Czechia and Estonia, soon received more Ukrainian refugees in proportion to their population than any other OECD country ([OECD, 2023](#)).³ According to Lithuania’s Ministry of Social Security and Labour ([lrl.lt, 2022](#)), in August 2022, around half of them were accommodated in residents’ homes.⁴ Laura and Inga, too, became hosts.

They had some concerns. Alongside the potential for care and generosity, there is an inherent risk and uncertainty in living with strangers. And the women who were coming were strangers, even if they seemed ‘like us’. Such risk tends to be especially pronounced for guests, but was also palpable for Laura and Inga. If hosting rests on a continuum of hospitality and hostility ([Derrida, 2000](#)), they worried that being a same-sex couple could swing the pendulum towards the latter. At the same time, there were cues that the four women could get along, as the Ukrainians also worked in education.

But in the end, such projections were secondary. What mattered was the existential compulsion to help and its geopolitical underpinnings. Laura and Inga, like many others along the border with Russia and Belarus, perceived the war in Ukraine as ‘ours’. Alongside a sincere urge to relieve suffering, what drove many hosts was an implicit expectation that Lithuanians welcome women and children and otherwise support Ukraine, as its men fight Russia (see [Drażkiewicz et al., 2023](#); [Dzenovska, 2022](#)).

When the Ukrainians – let’s call them Halyna and Yaroslava – arrived, Laura’s and Inga’s queerness turned out to be the least of anyone’s concerns. What eventually strained the relationship – alongside domestic tensions similar to those of living with kin – was that Halyna and Yaroslava had a different story of the war altogether. Perhaps suspiciously so,

given their daily conduct, the hosts thought. After repeated consultations with friends and much deliberation, they decided to reach out to the state's security agency.

The article focuses on the moment when Lithuanians welcomed refugees from Ukraine into their homes following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. It traces Laura's and Inga's hosting experience ethnographically, examining how it came together, evolved in everyday life, and ultimately dissolved. In line with the special issue theme, I focus on (mis)fitting as an affective, epistemic and political process negotiated through the hosting encounter between Lithuanian hosts and Ukrainian guests, in which the intimate, the local, the global, and the hauntings of the past are all ensnared (Stoler, 2006). In this case, 'fitting' is synonymous with the vernacular of being similar – 'like us'. I examine how hosts came to perceive Ukrainians as an intimately related polity and how this perception underpins hospitality. What happens when guests do not meet expectations? How does it reconfigure the overall sense of affinity between the two polities?

My argument is twofold. First, I suggest that the language of mobility or refugee studies may not fully capture the reception of Ukrainians in Lithuania. That is, Ukrainians are 'misfits' in the analytical sense. This is because Ukrainians were not principally welcomed as refugees in Lithuania, given the entrenched cultural, political and even legal meanings of the category in Europe. To use the language prevalent in migration or refugee studies, Ukrainians were not primarily viewed through the lens of the 'deserving refugee' – a figure typically imagined through narratives of vulnerability and legal recognition. Their refugeeness is not essential to explaining the way they were received. Instead, Ukrainians were thought of, and thus expected to be, 'like us'. That is, they were met as citizens of an intimately related polity, whose present evoked Lithuania's past, fuelling an affective sense of injustice – or as wives and children of soldiers stationed at the assaulted frontier of Europe, whose defence is a shared interest. Thereby, hosting in Lithuania became a way to have agency, even if only minimally, in a war to which most hosts felt existentially linked – rather than in a displacement situation, as explored in analyses such as Merikoski's (2021), where hosting functions as resistance to migration policies. Hosting emerged as a way to support Ukraine in the same manner as donating or constructing drones did.

Second, I show that, to varying degrees, it was not uncommon for guests to fail to meet hosts' expectations. In hosting situations, this meant shortcomings of personal conduct and political virtue in words and daily actions. It is perhaps unsurprising that intimate encounters often disrupt the neat binaries of heroism and cowardice or absolute virtue and vice that wars rely on (Carpentier, 2011). However, I argue that the mismatches did not disrupt the overall sense of affinity between the two polities. At its core, the sense of relatedness between the two polities experienced by my interlocutors hinged on commitment and faith in victory. Maintaining that faith requires ignoring or downplaying certain mismatches, like those discussed in the article.

I situate the article within the feminist strand of geopolitics, which makes sense of geopolitical processes in the intimate and the everyday (for an overview, see Smith, 2020; for critique, see Toal, 2021). Dissatisfied with overtly state-centred accounts (Dittmer and Gray, 2010), scholars shifted their attention to sites such as homes, which were traditionally perceived as apolitical (Dowler and Sharp, 2001). Intimacy, they argued, is 'contoured by historical residues, sociocultural norms, state-centric policies and global economic dynamics' (Barabantseva et al., 2021: 344). It is 'not simply the terrain on which

broader sets of power relations are written' (Pain and Staeheli, 2014: 3). In fact, it is where geopolitical processes and grand narratives – like the binaries mentioned above – take shape, are grappled with, and negotiated, holding the power to subvert or reinforce governing norms (Jacobsen, 2023). The analytic of feminist geopolitics – and its cognate strands – illuminates how relations may become another venue for navigating ideological and territorial tensions (Uehling, 2023). The promise of feminist geopolitics, as I see it, is twofold. First, it is to shed light on precisely this: on how these intimate encounters between guests and hosts became connected to broader national and geopolitical imaginaries. Second, it allows one to investigate what is actually designated as geopolitical – moving beyond prior conceptions – by the very people in question, when this occurs and to what effect (Spencer, 1997).

My interlocutors perceived the full-scale invasion as a threshold (Bryant, 2016). That is, a decisive and liminal moment in history where the opportunity for action is brief, but the consequences could be epochal. This sense of historical significance often turned everyday conduct into acts of political virtue or lack thereof. Emotions, symbols, what one said and what one omitted became ripe with meaning and importance. The sense of being intimately related to Ukraine does not require physical proximity, but physical proximity at the scale at which Ukrainians arrived in the country and were hosted in private homes necessarily impacts it. Thus, the lens of feminist geopolitics encourages attention to expectations, practices, discourses, silences and feelings as they emerged in hosting encounters, were interpreted, and ascribed meanings – often animated by history and geopolitics. 'Misfitting', in this ethnographic context, refers to the dissonance produced when guests' conduct or attitudes did not align with expectations that reflected broader questions already being asked within the host society about how one *ought* to live along Europe's eastern frontier in times of nearby war.

While I remain faithful to the key moments in the story shared with me by hosts, I have redacted it and woven in elements from multiple hosting experiences (Willis, 2019). I did this primarily to protect the privacy of both hosts and guests and to capture the richness of the ubiquitous yet fleeting moment of hospitality that arose in the immediate aftermath of the full-scale invasion. I documented fifty hosting experiences, mostly involving hosts who shared their living space with their guests. For most of them, hosting was a past experience by the time of our interviews, which I conducted in Lithuanian, my mother tongue. I recurrently interacted with three hosts as they made sense of their experience in real time.

I learned about hosting predominantly through hosts. Although guests' recollection of experience would, to a lesser or greater degree differ from hosts', my goal is not to examine what *really* happened in homes. It is to shed light on repertoires which make hosting experiences meaningful and reveal a great deal about the ongoing (geo)political reconfigurations in the country. Although hosts were my main focus, I also met some guests in a variety of circumstances. Fieldwork on hosting was part of a larger ethnographic study I conducted between January 2023 and September 2024, exploring how the imperative to help Ukraine, which emerged in response to Russia's full-scale invasion, is reconfiguring the Lithuanian polity. I followed individuals and groups engaged in supporting Ukraine through various means, from accommodating refugees to knitting socks and making camouflage nets for Ukrainian soldiers. The article also draws on these experiences.

Ukrainians did not need to be ‘deserving refugees’ in Lithuania

Refugees are imagined and expected to look and behave in certain ways. There is a growing body of literature exploring what constitutes a ‘deserving’ or a ‘good’ refugee and drives humanitarian response, in turn (e.g. [Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2014](#); [Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010](#); [Holmes and Castañeda, 2016](#)). For instance, refugees increasingly have to prove their current vulnerability and potential assimilability in the future to be considered deserving of assistance, both in legal as well as cultural and political terms ([Welfens, 2023](#)). Refugees are often depicted as a ‘miserable sea of humanity’ ([Malkki, 1996](#)) but are expected to transform into law-abiding and culturally ‘fitting’ neoliberal subjects ([Clark et al., 2024](#); [Welfens, 2023](#)). The perception of innocence, embodied by women and children, also plays a role in inciting or dissuading humanitarian response ([Ticktin, 2016](#)), and, like deservingness, is influenced by identity markers such as gender, age, class or race. Refugees ([Clark et al., 2024](#)) and even smugglers ([Ticktin, 2016](#)) may seek to mimic ‘deserving’ conduct and appearance. Failing to do so evokes the ‘ideal refugee’s’ counterpoint – one who is perceived as ‘bogus’ or failing. ‘A man with an iPhone’ is one such trope ([Pellander and Kotilainen, 2017](#)). An ‘ungrateful refugee’ is another example (see [Nayeri, 2019](#)). Scholars have also used these or synonymous frames to explain the welcoming reception of Ukrainians in Europe, arguing that they have been perceived as highly deserving (for instance, [Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2024](#); [Zogata-Kusz et al., 2023](#)).

But Ukrainians were not exactly perceived as refugees in Lithuania. That is, they were imagined differently from the cultural and symbolic image of a ‘refugee’ that is embedded in European politics and the popular imaginary, increasingly dividing the publics into the camps of pro and against. Rather than ‘refugee-like’, Ukrainians were expected to be ‘like us’. Even if Ukrainians do not have an unambiguous status of ‘full-fledged Europeans’ ([Cantat, 2022](#); [Krivonos, 2022](#); [Lyubchenko, 2022](#)), media coverage and popular discourses emphasised their likeness – that they are white and Christian ([Berg and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2023](#)), middle class and European. Even though ‘they’ and ‘us’ – and ‘Europe’ – are, of course, homogenising and contingent categories, which are dismantled and reassembled as crises unfold. Neither are Ukrainians themselves as homogeneously white and Christian as such reports might suggest (for discussions of the experiences of Ukraine’s ethno-cultural and ethno-religious minorities after the full-scale invasion, see [Muratova and Zasanska, 2025](#); [Sapritsky-Nahum, 2023](#)). Second, Ukrainians were not greeted as refugees in legal terms. In 2022, the EU activated the Temporary Protection Directive, which, instead of assessing individual asylum applications, granted collective protection. Unlike asylum, temporary protection allowed Ukrainians and other nationals fleeing Ukraine to apply for jobs directly upon arrival and to move between countries. This arrangement coexists with the fact that their legal status, albeit privileged, is uncertain, as it is being determined as circumstances evolve. Also, the everyday experiences of Ukrainian refugees are far more complex than the self-celebratory narratives of Europe’s openness suggest ([Krivonos, 2022](#); on the treatment of Ukrainian Roma refugees, see [Sarafian and Caban, 2024](#)). Even so, Ukrainians were not primarily thought of as refugees in Lithuania, either in legal terms or in the cultural and political imagination.

While emphasising their likeness was common across Europe, in Lithuania, there is an added dimension of history and geopolitics, which came to life in hosting encounters through words and conduct, encapsulating certain political virtues. In the vernacular, Ukrainians were usually simply referred to as ‘Ukrainians’; in public speeches and other instances in which *pathos* is foregrounded, as ‘brothers and sisters’. In other words, as people ‘like us’, who were at different times but repeatedly assaulted by the Russian enemy, which many in Lithuania claim to have warned the West about, feeling that those warnings fell on deaf ears. Writing about Latvians’ sense of relatedness with Ukraine, [Dzenovska \(2022\)](#) calls it a political kinship. Being kin may mean being entangled through blood and lineage, the blood and lineage, in this case, being history and geopolitics. Being kin may also mean being thrown together, regardless of whether that produces affection or animosity. That is, being related almost by default.

So, the refugeeness of Ukrainians was often an afterthought in their reception in Lithuania. Whether in media, policy or everyday conversations, the language of refugeeness was more common when comparing Ukrainians with other displaced groups, where the former were called ‘war refugees’. Since other displaced people are usually simply called ‘refugees’, the compound ‘war refugees’ gently presupposed that the given situation was different – graver and perhaps more genuine, unlike the other displacement situations the Lithuanian polity used to argue about in the past dividing people into camps. If many felt that Ukrainians were people ‘like us’, brothers and sisters, fleeing and fighting ‘our war’, people from the Global South crossing into Europe from Belarus were portrayed in the political and public discourse as war itself.⁵ Dubbed ‘human weapons’ in the media and political discourse, most of them were detained or pushed back to Belarus ([Kekstaite and Vandevoordt, 2025](#)).

Also, while refugees are often expected to be grateful, in the case of Ukrainians in Lithuania, my Lithuanian interlocutors were also grateful. According to the predominant story in the Baltics, the full-scale invasion was a barbarian assault on Western civilisation, which, as war discourses often do ([Carpentier, 2011](#)), split the world into two. The evil and the good. The civilised and the barbarians. The latter, to many in Lithuania, seemed threateningly close – 35 km away from the capital Vilnius, where the road hits the marshy border with Belarus. Or, around 200 km from the capital westwards, where Kaliningrad, Russia’s militarised exclave, nests within Europe. So, the Ukrainian citizen emerged as a figure that not only defends the territorial integrity of Ukraine from the shared enemy, but also protects *us*, so that those 35 km and 200 km distances do not shrink. As if Ukrainians were a frontier army of Europe, whose women and children had to be temporarily relocated deeper to the continent (see [Drażkiewicz et al., 2023](#)). While hospitality is often perceived as a gift ([Alkan, 2021](#)), in this case, so is security. In my interlocutors’ words, it is a gift of time or ‘lessons’, both of which can be used to prepare for a similar scenario on Baltic soil. A gift, which, as one host put it, ‘we can never give back’.

Hosting should also be seen through this lens. As one host put it, ‘someone was knitting camouflage nets [to hide strategic objects in Ukraine], someone was constructing drones, and I was hosting Ukrainians’. By this, she did not mean that hosting was purely instrumental. One must allow ‘the possibility that the compulsion at the heart of obligation is existential – that is, it is constitutive of, rather than external to, those who give and receive’ ([Englund, 2008: 36](#)). Yet, simultaneously, hosting came to be perceived as one of the items

on the menu of supporting Ukraine's fight. As one host vividly put it: 'I was praying to God to do something to help Ukraine, and imagined Him replying, "You do something to help Ukraine."' And that 'something' was hosting. To most, hosting was primarily about the war, not about mobility. That is, hosts did not perceive hosting as seeking agency in a situation of displacement per se, as, for instance, hosts who welcomed refugees into their homes as an expression of mistrust in state asylum policies after the 2015 refugee crisis did (see, for example, Merikoski, 2021). Hosts hoped to have agency in a war which, through history and geopolitics, felt like a personal assault on a related polity. It 'activated genetic memory', as Laura and Inga said in the opening vignette. The end goal of that agency was to contribute, even if minimally, to Ukraine's victory.

I often asked my interlocutors what that would mean. While history animates visions of how Ukraine's loss may reverberate across the region, what would victory look like? I rarely received a straightforward answer. Rather, responses along the lines of: 'I do not think about the future, but about what I can do today to help Ukraine win.' Some hosts even imagined that the arbiter of today's conduct would be history, God, or their predecessors. While the aspiration for victory was not tied to a singular vision, it was tenacious enough to move my interlocutors to do concrete things. It was faith-like – something to latch onto – and, to my interlocutors, it is also what binds the two polities, among other things. The vernacular, what happened in bedrooms and kitchens as Ukrainians arrived in the country, can shed light on how this relatedness plays out in the day to day. To do so, in the next section, I continue with Inga's and Laura's story.

'Are we helping the *right* people?'

It took a week for Halyna and Yaroslava to arrive from Ukraine. They reached Lithuania via Poland and were picked up from the border by a volunteer – another way Lithuanians sought to 'do something' in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. Yaroslava had some possessions, but Halyna, as Laura and Inga remembered, arrived only 'in bathrobe and slippers', having been unable to safely return to her apartment before leaving Ukraine. Initially, Halyna and Yaroslava, like many other guests, thought of Lithuania as a temporary asylum before a permanent return to Ukraine. Nevertheless, they had to start anew.

Laura's fluency in the Russian language, which Halyna and Yaroslava spoke as their mother tongue, made it possible to approach their settling down as common project. Inga, who came of age after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, was less proficient, and participated with brief phrases and nods. Many hosts imagined that their guests would be Ukrainian-speaking or intending to gradually abandon Russian, since they perceived language as a potential tool of political domination that may gradually 'change the way that spaces are ordered' (Valentine et al., 2008: 376). Also, some were slightly disappointed if their guests viewed language as merely personal rather than a (geo)political choice. Nevertheless, it was the Russian language that made hosting easier. With some exceptions, this was the common language for communication between Lithuanian hosts and their guests.⁶ Conversations about language per se and political orientation emerged later.

First, the four women sorted out ‘the bathrobe and slippers’ situation, as well as administrative migration matters. Then, they entered into a three-month hosting contract.⁷ Trying to mitigate the power differential inherent in hospitality (Derrida, 2000), Laura and Inga insisted that its duration was *vremenni* – ‘temporary’ in Russian. They could change it along the way, depending on everyone’s plans, which, in turn, depended on the war. There were eight of them, counting the four pets, so the apartment felt cramped. But that would change, the Lithuanian couple thought. Helping Halyna and Yaroslava find jobs was the next step.

Shortly after that, Halyna started working in education, just as she did in Ukraine. The couple passed along job offers to Yaroslava, but she seemed uninterested. Laura and Inga assumed it was the matter of finding the right opportunity, but soon realised that she was reluctant to work altogether. Instead, among other things, Yaroslava’s routine consisted of agitatedly strumming the guitar, going on walks, and spending a similar amount of time on her laptop at the same time each day. It became difficult for Laura and Inga to concentrate while working from home, which – they were quick to add in unison – was a negligible disturbance measured against the war. Laura and Inga moved their office to the bedroom, but Yaroslava’s inexplicable laughter would occasionally escape the living room. The atmosphere in the flat felt odd.

‘Should we have been more assertive about the duration of the hosting contract?’ the couple asked themselves. They noticed that their guests spent money on items that they could not help but consider imprudent: regular trips to perfume shops, specialty coffee and wine. Their purchases were a reminder that the money could have been spent on drones and tourniquets for the frontline. Initially, Laura and Inga questioned each other’s assumptions about how a Ukrainian national fleeing war is supposed to act and interpreted their guests’ purchases as a way to feel like themselves again. Even so, Yaroslava’s and Halyna’s consumption seemed excessive. They were a duo with a solo income and their country was at war. In other words, Yaroslava’s and Halyna’s purchases introduced uncertainty regarding their political virtue, although this remained hidden at that time. Moreover, Laura and Inga occasionally came across other social media posts looking for hosts. The stories described in them moved Laura and Inga, amplifying their doubts: ‘Are we helping *the right people*?’

The question became especially acute at the dinner table. As mentioned earlier, my interlocutors felt a historically and geopolitically undergirded commitment to support Ukraine till victory – expressed in the popular mottos ‘whatever it takes’ and ‘for as long as it takes’. Being merely anti-war was not enough. At best, it seemed naive. At worst, detrimental to Ukraine’s sovereignty and the region at large. Indeed, the view that has been prevalent in popular debates in the Baltics is that Russia not only has to be stopped, but defeated, and that can only be achieved through unrestrained support. Otherwise, any peace would be temporary. There is another prominent camp in Lithuania and other like-minded countries in the region, which could be called revisionist (Krastev, 2022). This camp views the war as the responsibility of the Russians – not just the government and its entourage – and believes that only by irreversibly weakening Russia can peace be achieved. Hosts expected to meet their guests somewhere within these debates.

To Laura and Inga, standing in opposition to Russia’s aggression also translated into standing in support of the government of Ukraine, which meant not being overly critical

of its choices. They were genuinely moved by President Zelenskyy, which made Yaroslava's impassioned tirades against his government – 'Thieves! Bandits! Criminals!' – unsettling. Moreover, after news about Bucha and Irpin, where Russia's forces massacred civilians, arrived, Yaroslava questioned its validity, making their disagreements even more devastating. Halyna tried to calm Yaroslava down and avoid political topics altogether but was often unsuccessful. After disagreements, the four women would slurp their dinner soup in silence, digesting the realisation that they may not be all that similar.

While it was interesting to Laura and Inga to discuss Ukraine's internal problems with Yaroslava, they assumed they would arrive at the same conclusions. But they did not. Yaroslava thought that the West should not arm Ukraine, which Laura and Inga thought was not only beyond discussion but were also proud that the Baltic governments were among Ukraine's most vocal foreign policy activists (Budrytė, 2023). In 2022, the commonly used motto in public rallies, as well as in popular and governmental pleas for Lithuania's solidarity with Ukraine was 'For our freedom and yours' (*Už mūsų ir jūsų laisvę*).⁸ If our freedom means 'your freedom', the saying suggests, the destruction may also eventually be mutual. If Yaroslava's views were devastating to Laura and Inga, they also seemed dangerous.

By then, a couple of Inga's and Laura's friends – also hosts – were reporting that the historical and cultural intimacies they were sharing with their guests grew personal. Their guests were no longer just citizens of a related polity, they were 'like relatives'. The language of kinship served 'as a barometer of proximity' (Obeid, 2019: 21). They took strolls in the city and went on weekend trips together with their hosts. They marvelled at linguistic similarities: 'Did you know that *Velykos* – Easter in Lithuanian – is *Velykden*' in Ukrainian?' They had similar ways of relating to the past. In line with the dominant memory regime, hosts remember the Soviet rule as an occupation – a 'politically illegitimate, socially perverse, and culturally inauthentic' regime – which had violently torn the country away from Europe and stunted its development (Davoliūtė, 2013: 4). So did their guests. They detected in each other a similar awareness of the ways in which their past and present lifeworlds, across generations, have been moulded by global power hierarchies (cf. Dzenovska, 2014, who observed a similar dynamic in the context of a border encounter in Latvia), a shared understanding of how the world hangs together – geopolitically and economically – and how to go about it in everyday life (see Glaeser, 2011). Social and other forms of media amplified such stories, and I, too, recorded some during my fieldwork.

In the meantime, Laura and Inga were searching for ways to make sense of the growing distance. Halyna and Yaroslava were not exactly 'like them' – neither personally nor politically. What would have made their relatedness evident was unambiguous support for Ukraine and – arguably even more importantly – unequivocal condemnation of Russia. Additionally, Yaroslava and Halyna would have been perceived as 'like them' if they adhered to a similar set of virtues, both in words and everyday actions. Specifically, if they shared a similar approach to the past, donated to war-related causes when possible, recognised the need to distance themselves from the enemy in various ways – including through language and culture – and were pro-victory. It became clear that Halyna and Yaroslava did not fit the somewhat idealised image of a Ukrainian.

The degrees of misfitting

Soon, Laura and Inga learned from Yaroslava that she had a mental illness, which resulted in psychotic episodes, and felt pity. Politics aside, she came across as a warm and caring person. Her illness explained the strumming and the laughing, as well as her hostile outbursts and reluctance to look for a job. But it did not explain everything. In the Baltics, Russia's power is often perceived as omnipresent and daring, yet clumsy. One that is capable of meddling elections abroad. Yet, one of whose henchmen could be duped into confessing an attempt to kill a political opponent during a staged phone call.⁹ What if their guests had secret ulterior motives? At first, the question seemed absurd, but, in their words, Laura and Inga were 'fatigued' – 'on the edge'. Later, the war would gradually fold itself into the everyday, reappearing through media headlines, through social media calls to donate, through emergency sirens being tested in the city, and then again recede to the background. But in 2022, when Laura and Inga were figuring out what was happening at their home, its presence was still overpowering. Indeed, they thought, what if their guests had ulterior motives, but were not hiding their traces too well?

Albeit destabilising, the question the hosts arrived at was not without its context. According to Klumbyté (2018), Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 had already erected a war frontier in the Baltics. She defines the concept of the war frontier as a social institution that generates fear over the country's sovereignty, mobilises history to imagine what its loss may look like, and gives rise to divisive politics of historical justice (see also Troščenko, 2026). No actual fighting took place in the Baltics. Yet, although the war frontier could be ignored by some citizens, Klumbyté writes, it had substantial effects on government policies, public space and everyday life. For instance, the Lithuanian government reintroduced military conscription. The anticipation of 'being next' led to the loyalty of the Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltics being questioned and gave rise to discussions about threats, such as disinformation campaigns or trolls. Threats along the Baltic war frontier came to be imagined not only as spectacle-like violence, but also as something that has a more haunting, perhaps even ghost-like presence (cf. Ståhlberg, 2023, on pre-2022 Ukraine).

Once the suspicion sneaks in, it spreads quietly and gradually, much like mould, feeding off what is already there. Why was Halyna downplaying Yaroslava's illness? Where were they getting their money from to support their lifestyle? From Halyna's seemingly well-off relatives in Belarus? Who were they? What was Yaroslava doing on her laptop at the same hour every day, which she elusively referred to as *rabota* – 'work' in Russian? What if she was an internet troll? Why would she inquire about important objects in the city before her walks? Why was Halyna so evasive about her politics? What was the relationship between the two women? Finally, what if Inga and Laura were, in fact, supporting the enemy – Russia – by hosting? According to Pelkmans (2018), suspicion leads to an epistemic crisis, whose interrogation is not only logical and detached, but also affective, political, moral and aesthetic. In winter 2023, during our interview, Laura and Inga were still pondering these questions, though the passage of time had diminished their intensity and introduced a note of self-irony into some of their reflections. I also found myself wondering.

Perplexed, Laura and Inga reached out to state security for advice. Its workers stepped in and eventually calmed the couple down. Yet it was clear that, although they were unaware of the call, Halyna and Yaroslava had to look for new accommodation. They left on decent terms – to the extent that this was possible, given the stress of their circumstances. They even kept in touch until another disagreement revealed that Halyna's politics were similar to Yaroslava's. Since they were no longer bound by the same space, the conflict severed what was left of their relationship. That was the last time the four women saw each other.

Laura and Inga did not find definitive answers but seemed to perceive their actions as cautionary. In the polarised field of good and evil, they suspected their guests might have sided with the latter and, thus, appeared to view their actions as responsible and indicative of their loyalty and virtue as members of a polity that feels endangered. [Verdery \(2018: 38\)](#), who was famously spied on, writes that when she was about to start her fieldwork in socialist Romania, she was warned of potential risks by US embassy workers but, naively in hindsight, dismissed them 'as paranoid, stuck in an old Cold Warrior mind-set that saw conspiracies and surveillance everywhere'. Many in the Baltics, both individuals and politicians, claim to have a 'realistic' view of Russia, shaped by history and embodied experience (see [Budryté, 2023](#)), and contrast it with the 'Western naivety', which they partly blame for the current geopolitical situation. Perhaps what Laura and Inga wanted least was to realise in hindsight that they had been naive and unsuspecting. The claimed knowledge of Russia provided cues to resolve the epistemic crisis presented by the awkward combination of Halyna's and Yaroslava's failings in political virtue and daily conduct.

What perplexed Laura and Inga was not only what Yaroslava said, but also what Halyna did not say. Her initial silence had multiple possibilities. For instance, it might have been a deliberate attempt to avoid a confrontation. [Uehling \(2023\)](#) describes how in Donetsk, where stakes are incomparably higher – her interlocutors, who could have their get-togethers one day and then be put in a position to kill one another the next – would choose not to discuss politics, trying to carve out a space of everyday peace in their lives. Laura and Inga were no strangers to this strategy. Laura's own mother was sympathetic to narratives conveyed in state-funded Russian media, and the two made a deliberate decision not to talk about politics. That, as [Uehling \(2023\)](#) also describes, required an active effort to avoid potential pitfalls. To Laura, her parents were 'zombified'. While it is a common way to articulate distrust in post-Soviet societies (see [Borenstein, 2019](#)), it can also be a way to clear the person of blame by perceiving them as a victim who can be salvaged (see [Uehling, 2023](#)). The guests could have been 'zombified', the hosts thought. But the oddities of their personal comportment and their political declarations, as well as their silences, made the hosts think that the combination was perhaps not accidental. What if Halyna's silence meant malintent? How does one know if it is silence?

As mentioned earlier, this is a case of a very drastic 'misfitting'. In my fieldwork I came across many other guests who upset expectations in less dramatic ways. In fact, when it comes to political virtues, there is room for deviation and, in that case, sympathy. For instance, some guests condemned Russia but were not eager to abandon the Russian language. Some guests were not overtly patriotic, or were too critical of the Ukrainian government for their hosts' liking. Some guests disappointed by expecting too much from the Lithuanian state, which their hosts associated with the Soviet subjectivity of 'waiting'



Figure 1. The photo features a domestic scene with a newspaper cut-out stuck on a wooden board that says in Lithuanian: ‘Send money for the fight. Your bank account is your arm in Ukraine’ (July 2024). *Source:* Photo by the author.

(see also [Ozolina, 2019](#)). This did not make them enemies or dangerous in the eyes of the host. It did not make guests entirely not ‘like us’ either. Instead, hosts referred to their guests as ‘like us 30 years ago’, a vernacular expression for being ‘not yet sufficiently European’, which may also, in part, reflect a class mismatch between hosts and guests. If Lithuania’s independence after the fall of the Soviet Union was framed as a return to normality – that is, a return to Europe ([Davoliūtė, 2013](#)) – undoing the past was also perceived as a project of ordinary citizens, requiring the transformation and distancing of oneself from what were seen as Soviet forms of personhood (see [Ozolina, 2019](#); [Skultans, 1998](#)). To be like a Lithuanian ‘30 years ago’ meant not having undertaken this project to fashion oneself as a national and (neo)liberal subject. Although patronising and reproducing the hierarchies of Europeanness, the trope also aimed to reduce friction by asserting that Ukraine will ‘catch up with Europe, once it beats Russia’. Becoming ‘full-fledged Europeans’ involved transforming subjectivities and behaviour, a path that my interlocutors felt intimately familiar with and even acted as self-appointed mentors of ‘proper European behaviour’.

On the one hand, ‘misfitting’ reshaped hosts’ mental maps and created new ways to make sense of who is and who is not exactly ‘like us’, and why. ‘Misfitting’ reintroduced the familiar ways of differentiation, suggesting that the division between Ukraine’s East and West could be a heuristic of political virtue (for critique see [Zhurzhenko, 2002](#)). It also generated new vernacular categories, such as Ukrainians versus ‘Ukraine passport holders’, to contrast formal citizenship with the political virtues that underpin it. The ‘misfits’ were equated with Lithuania’s own subjects whose political virtues are often

questioned, such as its Russian- and Polish-speaking minorities. On the other hand, hosting sometimes challenged the very expectations that underpinned it. For instance, a host described a situation where he inquired why his guest's husband was not a soldier but a worker in logistics abroad. 'I already lost my first one. Do you want me to change husbands every three years?' she replied without hesitation, and the host, embarrassed by his question, never returned to the topic again.

Although Laura's and Inga's story is rather extreme, the distrust that emerged is also part of the broader landscape of political and public life across the Baltic frontier. While the invasion of Ukraine's East in 2014 laid the foundations of a war frontier (see [Klumbytė, 2018](#)), the full-scale invasion set the bricks in place, dividing the world into two in even more drastic ways, while also penetrating more deeply into spaces such as kitchens and bedrooms. At the end of the interview, Laura and Inga tried to sum up their experience: 'I guess, when bombs fall, you leave,' they said. 'Regardless of who you think is to blame for it.' With the story of their hosting behind them, they now focus mainly on making financial donations to support Ukraine.

Conclusion

Hosting was characteristic of the early response to Russia's the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While this allowed for an experience of the heterogeneity of Ukrainians, they remain the most positively perceived group of foreigners in the country ([IOM, 2023b](#)). Although quite common and discussed among relatives or friends, the stories of 'misfitting' in hosting situations did not lead to significant public expressions of disappointment. By the time of my fieldwork, placing too much emphasis on 'misfitting' seemed petty to hosts, given the terrifying violence in Ukraine and the perception of Ukraine as Europe's decisive frontline. They did not want the stories of 'misfitting' to undermine the sense of solidarity with Ukraine in Lithuania. There is an awareness of how one's words may be tweaked to play into the enemy's narratives. Also, insisting on the failings of conduct and political virtues of Ukrainians in Lithuania could be seen as deviating from proper wartime behaviour on the part of hosts themselves – a regrettable or even dangerous lack of virtue. In other words, it could be perceived as a 'misfitting' attitude, which might not only disrupt the ideological purity of categories that wars rely on, jeopardising the fighting polity of Ukraine, but also cast doubt on the loyalty of the hosts.

These dynamics of 'misfitting' offer a better understanding of the epistemic and affective labour that goes into positioning oneself and others in relation to the war. As the war continues, commitment to and faith in a favourable outcome for Ukraine remain dominant in Lithuania's popular and political discourse. In this context, stories of 'misfitting' were often seen by hosts as unnecessary distractions from this existential goal – one whose pursuit, in both words and actions, is not only indicative of virtuous citizenship in Lithuania but is also perceived as a matter of the country's own self-preservation ([Figure 1](#)).

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Ethical considerations

This research was approved by the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC). Its approval reference is: R87803/RE001. All research interlocutors gave informed consent in line with the ASA Ethical Guidelines (2021).

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets produced or examined in the course of this study are not available for public access.

Notes

1. All the names mentioned in the ethnography are pseudonyms.
2. Most hosts I interviewed were matched through the organisation ‘Stiprūs kartu’ (Strong Together). It teamed up with other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the government, matching Ukrainian refugees with private accommodation offered by over 10,000 Lithuanian citizens (Stiprūs kartu, n.d). Although the government paid stipends to hosts starting from the second month, the measure was introduced after the first matches had been made, and many did not know about the measure when they decided to host. The monthly stipend amounted to 150 euros for the first person accommodated and 50 euros for each additional person in the same house or apartment (Ministry of Social Security and Labour, 2023).
3. By September 2023, more than 80,000 Ukrainians had arrived in Lithuania. As of October 2023, there are around 50,000 Ukrainians in the country with valid residence permits (IOM, 2023a).
4. This can mean that hosts either share the same space or live separately.
5. In 2021, the Belarus border with Latvia, Lithuania and Poland turned into a migration route to the EU. The governments of the three countries and the EU accuse Belarus of having instrumentalised migration to retaliate against sanctions imposed by the bloc.
6. Among people in Lithuania who are not native Russian speakers, 76 per cent report knowing Russian to some extent. 70 per cent of people in Lithuania speak English to some extent. The gap between the two languages is rapidly closing, as younger Lithuanians are more proficient in English (Ramonienė et al., 2023). It is also important to add that, in the Baltics, language is often directly associated with ethnicity.

7. The three-month duration of hosting contracts was recommendatory rather than binding and could be adjusted after the contract was signed.
8. The phrase 'For our freedom and yours' originated during the November Uprising of 1830–31, an insurrection against the Russian Empire, which controlled the territories following the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The uprising involved participants from present-day Lithuania, Poland, Belarus and Ukraine. This motto highlights a common fight for independence and mutual support among these nations, and has resonance today.
9. In 2020, Alexei Navalny, the now deceased Russian opposition figure, tricked a Federal Security Service agent into revealing details about his poisoning plot in a phone call, an event that became significant in exposing the attempted assassination.

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