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Welcome Home: Community Resilience in Hosting Ukrainian Refugees

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ABSTRACT

Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, over 170,000 Ukrainian refugees have sought protection in Italy. In response to this emergency, thousands of Italian citizens opened their homes to host them, facing various challenges such as financial strain, disrupted routines, and emotional burden. This study examines the perceived community resilience of Italian host communities during the reception of Ukrainian refugees following the Russian attack on Ukraine. We argue that community resilience offers a useful construct to understand how local communities cope with the demands of sudden large-scale reception. Based on 24 semi-structured interviews conducted between December 2022 and May 2023 with Italian hosts, thematic analysis revealed key factors shaping their experience: the definition of community, perceived social support, access to information and communication, and sense of belonging. Our findings highlight that both material resources and emotional connection to the community were key in sustaining hosts engagement. These insights can inform reception policies and support mechanisms for host communities in future emergencies related to forced migration.

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Introduction

Community Resilience in Migration Host Contexts

Forced migration exposes migrants to numerous stressful events that they must face throughout the entire migratory process (Jankovic-Rankovic et al. 2020). However, host communities, those receiving a sudden influx of refugees, also experience collective stress and must reorganize their routines and resources (Maystadt et al. 2019). The term host community is commonly used in refugee studies to refer to the population of a given country or area that receives and interacts with incoming migrants and refugees (Gardner et al. 2022). This may include both institutional actors and private citizens,

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and can range in scale from national to neighborhood levels. In this article, we define host communities as Italian individuals and families who directly hosted Ukrainian refugees in their private homes during the first year of the war. These hosts engaged in everyday support, cohabitation, and informal care, often within broader local contexts composed of associations, neighborhood ties, and informal support networks. In this paper, we argue that understanding community resilience in private hospitality requires analyzing the interplay between host and migrant communities, acknowledging that newcomer groups may be internally diverse, and situating hospitality practices within broader institutional frameworks. By focusing on this host community, we explore how community resilience manifests in private hospitality settings. This study contributes to the literature on refugee reception by applying the concept of community resilience to the perspective of host individuals engaged in private hospitality. While community resilience has been widely studied in disaster and public health contexts, its application to host communities in the context of forced migration remains limited. To address this gap we examine the community-level factors that promote or hinder community resilience among host families engaged in private hospitality during large-scale forced displacement. Accordingly, our research question was: What are the key community-level factors that support or constrain the community resilience of host households welcoming refugees in private homes?

Community Resilience as a Theoretical Framework

The way in which host communities respond to these challenges is also influenced by their perception of the community and the community resources available (Migliorini et al. 2023). While social cohesion and shared values can favor the reception of migrants, the perception of scarcity of resources can lead to greater difficulty. Furthermore, communities with high resilience, characterized by the availability of community resources and the presence of social support, are better able to face the challenges of reception (Verbena et al. 2021). Importantly, the resilience of host households is not developed in isolation, but in constant interaction with state and municipal reception systems, whose policies and resources can either strengthen or undermine local adaptive capacity. Community resilience is a multidimensional and dynamic construct that refers to a community's ability to respond, adapt and recover from stressors or traumatic events and to prepare for future critical events (Pfefferbaum et al. 2017; Migliorini et al., 2024). Norris et al. (2008) define it as a process that connects adaptive capacities to positive recovery trajectories following stressful events. Similarly, Patel et al. (2017) describe it as the ability of communities to maintain stability and functionality despite stressors. However, more recent scholarship has emphasized that resilience involves not only adaptation, but also the potential for transformation in response to crisis (Boston et al. 2024). From this perspective, resilience includes the capacity to 'bounce forward' by reorganizing social relations and developing new, more adaptive forms of collective functioning. Such transformation is shaped by both internal dynamics and external influences, including institutional policies and public discourse (Carrasco et al. 2024). In the context of migration, this means that host communities can develop new practices, solidarities and forms of cooperation that go beyond their pre-crisis structures. This construct is promoted by different factors including economic resources, access to community resources,

social support networks, having received effective communication and a strong community competence to manage stressors (Olcese et al. 2024a). Among the key adaptive capacities that promote community resilience, community competence plays a significant role. This refers to the collective ability to make decisions, solve problems and take action to cope with community challenges (Norris et al. 2008). In addition, social networks and support enhance collective efficacy, enabling communities to respond more effectively to adversity (Kirmayer et al. 2009). Communities with access to timely, accurate and reliable information are better able to make informed decisions, mitigate risks and organize coordinated responses (Zautra et al. 2008). Finally, mental outlook, which includes individual attitudes, feelings and hopes, plays a key role in promoting community problem-solving capacity, highlighting the link between individual and community dimensions in promoting community resilience (Patel et al. 2017). This evolving understanding of resilience also calls attention to the interplay between internal and external drivers. Host communities do not respond in a vacuum; their capacity to act resiliently is shaped by broader institutional frameworks, policies, and narratives. As such, analyzing community resilience in private hospitality settings also requires attention to how public systems, civic organizations, and migration governance contribute to (or constrain) local adaptive responses (Carrasco et al. 2024). There is a strong relationship between the resilience of host communities and that of migrant communities. In fact, if the host community is resilient in the face of the challenges of welcoming newcomers, the migrant community is also resilient, and inversely (Migliorini et al. 2023). Nonetheless, it is important to note that newly arrived migrant groups are not always homogeneous or cohesive; even in the case of Ukrainian refugees, internal differences (e.g. regional, linguistic, political) can shape interactions with host communities. These internal dynamics can affect the ways migrants engage with local actors, influencing mutual perceptions, relational patterns, and ultimately the potential for shared resilience. Recognizing this interaction, it becomes clear how important it is to analyze and understand not only the resilience of migrant communities but also of host communities. Strengthening social support, ensuring equitable access to resources and promoting a collective sense of belonging are important strategies for mitigating the challenges associated with forced migration and creating more inclusive and resilient communities (Moore 2018). Moreover, while our focus is on private hospitality, we stress that the role of institutional actors and public reception systems remains essential in shaping the broader context in which hospitality practices unfold. The resilience of host communities should not be considered in isolation from national and local policies and institutional responses.

The Italian Reception of Ukrainian Refugees

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022, has triggered the largest displacement crisis in Europe since World War II forcing millions of Ukrainians to flee their homes (Yaroshenko et al. 2024). By 2024, Italy had welcomed around 175,000 Ukrainian refugees, the majority of whom were women and children due to martial law restrictions preventing men from leaving the country (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2024). In response to this emergency, the Italian government and various non-profit organizations implemented reception measures, including both

institutional responses and local municipal efforts. In Italy, the reception of asylum seekers and refugees is generally organized through a multi-level system that combines collective facilities and more community-based forms of accommodation. In ordinary circumstances, housing and basic services are largely provided through institutional reception channels managed by public authorities in collaboration with third-sector organizations, with limited reliance on private households. While domestic hospitality practices have emerged in several European countries during recent refugee crises, a peculiar feature of the Italian approach lies in the scale and spontaneity of such efforts. In the absence of a structured institutional framework during the first phase of the emergency, thousands of private citizens mobilized independently to welcome refugees into their homes, often supported by local associations and informal networks (Oviedo et al. 2022). This widespread participation reflects a longstanding tradition of civic solidarity in Italy, particularly visible during previous crises such as the Balkan wars of the 1990s, has played a key role in providing immediate social support to refugees and facilitating their integration (Boccagni and Giudici 2022). As an alternative strategy to state-run reception programmes, private hospitality can allow for a more direct and personalized approach to assisting refugees (Merikoski 2021). This kind of hospitality, known as homestay, refers to the welcoming of migrants into private homes, where the hosts make their own domestic space available. This model reflects the willingness of a family to share their living environment with a person from another country, often someone who was previously unknown to them (Bassoli and Luccioni 2024).

Motivations for offering hospitality can vary, from the desire to assist those in need to the promotion of altruism and empathy towards migrants (Doidge and Sandri 2019). Living with people from the host country offers tangible benefits to refugees, allowing them to actively participate in social life and to establish meaningful interactions with their hosts, thus reinforcing their sense of integration (Altinay et al. 2023). Furthermore, cohabitation facilitates bureaucratic support and daily management, which is particularly relevant given the language barriers and lack of familiarity with the administrative procedures of the host context (Bassoli and Campomori 2018). Although private hospitality has been shown to mitigate refugees' sense of isolation, improve their access to essential services, foster positive attitudes towards refugees, increase empathy and strengthen the sense of satisfaction that guests feel in providing support (Arcadu et al. 2024), it also presents challenges.

Living together requires managing cultural differences, concerns about privacy and different expectations, which can sometimes lead to stressors if not managed with mutual understanding and clear agreements (Ran and Join-Lambert 2020). Hosts may experience strain due to the ongoing demands of cohabitation, the renegotiation of domestic routines, and uncertainties in institutional support (Alrawadie et al. 2024). However, while private hospitality can offer important support to refugees, it may also place significant strain on hosts, making community resilience and its enabling factors, such as access to community resources, information, and social support, essential in sustaining this form of hospitality. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that refugees are typically in a more vulnerable position within the homestay arrangement. The hosting relationship is characterized by inherent power asymmetries, as refugees depend on hosts for housing and daily support, which may expose them to increased risks, including potential forms of abuse. Recognizing this imbalance is essential to ethically situate private hospitality

practices, even when the analytical focus is on hosts' experiences. The stressors to which hosts are exposed highlight the role of the community in addressing the challenges of domestic hospitality. Moreover, as we argue in this paper, host households do not operate in isolation: their capacity to provide support depends also on the social and institutional ecosystem in which they are embedded. The literature on refugee studies generally uses the term host communities to describe the citizens of a country who interact with migrants and are involved in their reception (Gardner et al. 2022). The availability of social support networks, shared community resources and institutional information and communications can help mitigate the emotional burden on hosts, enabling them to maintain their commitment to hospitality while preserving their own well-being (Al-Hamad et al. 2024). Understanding the resilience of the host community therefore requires looking beyond individual experiences and considering the broader socio-cultural environment in which these dynamics of hospitality take place.

The Present Study

In this study, we explore how Italian citizens who hosted Ukrainian refugees in their private homes perceived the resilience of their communities. Drawing on key contributions in the field (Norris et al. 2008; Patel et al. 2017), we analyze community resilience by focusing on factors that promote or hinder hosts' capacity to cope, including social support, access to community resources, and information and communication systems. Previous studies on forced migration have primarily examined the resilience of refugee communities (Olcese et al. 2024b), often overlooking the perspective of those who provide hospitality. At the same time, recent scholarship (Bassoli and Luccioni 2024) underscores the need to deepen our understanding of private hosting practices. Despite growing attention to community resilience, empirical research focusing on host communities engaged in private hospitality in contexts of forced migration remains limited. We aim to fill a gap in the research literature and strengthen existing studies by examining hosting practices from the perspective of community resilience. Recognizing that the reception process can involve significant emotional, logistical, and social challenges for hosts, we adopt an ecological perspective to explore how host communities mobilize resources and collective capacities to respond to these stressors, in line with previous research emphasizing the importance of promoting host resilience to support the integration of migrants (Verbena et al. 2021; Migliorini et al. 2023). In this study, an ecological perspective refers to an approach that situates hosting experiences within multiple, interconnected levels of influence, including individual, relational, community, and institutional contexts. This perspective allows us to examine how hosts' capacity to cope is shaped not only by personal motivations and household dynamics, but also by broader social networks, community resources, and reception systems.

Method

Who Hosted: Participant Characteristics

The study includes 24 Italian adults who took in Ukrainian refugees in their homes after the outbreak of the war. The participants were aged between 31 and 77 (average age 52.2

Table 1. Participants profiles.

Participants (N = 24)	Gender	Age	Marital status	Educational level	No. of Guests (Adults)	No. of Guests (Children)	Duration hospitality
P1	Woman	77	Married	University education	2	1	5 months
P2	Woman	75	Widowed	University education	1	1	3 months
P3	Woman	50	Married	University education	2	1	6 months
P4	Woman	49	Married	University education	1	/	9 months
P5	Woman	46	Single	High school diploma	2	2	10 months
P6	Woman	50	Married	University education	1	1	3 months
P7	Woman	52	Single	High school diploma	2	2	11 months
P8	Man	77	Single	High school diploma	1	1	2 months
P9	Man	69	Separate	University education	2	2	6 months
P10	Woman	67	Married	University education	1	2	3 months
P11	Woman	65	Widowed	High school diploma	1	/	7 months
P12	Man	62	Married	High school diploma	1	1	3 months
P13	Woman	31	Married	University education	1	2	2 1/2 months
P14	Man	40	Single	University education	1	2	9 months
P15	Woman	51	Married	High school diploma	1	1	3 weeks
P16	Man	60	Married	High school diploma	1	2	2 months
P17	Woman	52	Married	High school diploma	1	2	2 months
P18	Woman	57	Married	High school diploma	1	2	More than one year
P19	Man	49	Married	High school diploma	1	1	2 months
P20	Man	50	Married	High school diploma	2	2	3 weeks
P21	Woman	58	Married	Middle school diploma	1	1	5 months
P22	Woman	44	Married	University education	1	1	4 months
P23	Woman	59	Married	University education	2	1	6 months
P24	Woman	56	Married	University education	2	/	More than one year

years) and hosted refugees between February and December 2022 (Table 1). The majority were women, with a university education and were married (71 per cent). The duration of the hospitality varied from 2 to 9 months. Furthermore, most participants hosted both children and adults.

How Data Were Collected: Interviews and Reflexive Approach

The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Genoa (protocol 2022.50). Data collection took place between December 2022 and May 2023, during the post-reception phase. The research aimed to explore the resilience factors of the Italian host community, as perceived by the people who provided accommodation to Ukrainian refugees. The inclusion criteria required participants to be adult Italian volunteers who had hosted Ukrainian refugees in their homes following the outbreak of the conflict. A targeted and snowball sampling approach was used. Initial participants were recruited through the volunteer organizations they were affiliated with, such as Caritas, and these participants then referred others who met the inclusion criteria and were interested in taking part in the study.

The interview questions were extensively discussed among the researchers and developed in accordance with the existing literature on community resilience (Norris et al. 2008; Olcese et al. 2024b) to ensure their relevance and theoretical consistency. The interview protocol was structured in two main sections. The first collected sociodemographic details, including gender, age, education, occupation and marital status. The second

section first explored the meaning participants attributed to the concept of community, before examining their experience of hosting refugees and the factors contributing to community resilience, using open-ended questions designed to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences. The interview covered key aspects such as social support, access to information and communication, as well as community perception that hosts could rely on during the hosting process. The semi-structured format allowed for both a focused discussion and the flexibility to explore emerging themes in depth. Participants were free to respond as they wished, with interviewers able to move on to the next question or delve deeper into relevant topics. All interviews were conducted in person in Italian, lasted about 40 min and were conducted at the times and places chosen by the various participants. Informed consent was obtained before each interview. Although the process of data collection proceeded smoothly overall, it also required a continuous effort of reflexivity. An unexpected aspect was that, despite the interviews focusing on community-level dynamics, many participants spontaneously shared deeply personal stories, often linking their hosting experience to earlier life events or values, which brought to light dimensions we had not anticipated. Several participants shared emotionally intense accounts, prompting the researchers to maintain a delicate balance between empathetic listening and analytical focus. At times, this also meant managing moments of silence or visible emotion, which could briefly slow the conversation and required sensitivity to decide whether to probe further or allow the narrative to flow naturally. The emotional resonance of some narratives reinforced the complexity of private hospitality and the personal implications it carried for hosts. On a practical level, recruitment required persistence, as some potential participants preferred not to revisit their hosting experience or felt it was not significant enough to share. These moments highlighted the relational depth of the research and the need for attentiveness to participants' vulnerability. Interactions were generally marked by openness and trust, facilitated by the cultural proximity between researchers and participants; however, some respondents initially expressed caution, particularly when touching on topics related to critiques of institutional responses. With regard to positionality, the research team was composed of Italian scholars experienced in the fields of migration and community studies, yet not directly involved in private hosting. This insider – outsider position allowed for cultural familiarity and contextual sensitivity, while also facilitating a critical distance and reducing the risk of over-identifying with participants. However, it may also have limited the depth of shared cultural references and the ability to capture certain nuances in hosts' lived experiences. We addressed this by investing time in building rapport with participants, engaging in iterative member checking, and triangulating data across multiple interviews. We acknowledge, however, that our interpretative lens – shaped by our disciplinary background and prior engagements – may have influenced how narratives were heard, coded and interpreted. A limitation of the study concerns the self-selected nature of participation, which may have led to the inclusion of individuals more willing or able to reflect on their experience. Additionally, the emotional involvement of the researchers, while managed through reflexive practice, could have subtly influenced the direction of the interviews and the emphasis placed on certain themes during analysis. To mitigate these limitations, the research team engaged in regular debriefing sessions to critically examine emerging interpretations and ensure consistency in coding. Reflexive notes were kept after each interview to capture impressions and potential biases, which were

then discussed collectively. In addition, the use of open-ended questions and the flexibility of the semi-structured format aimed to give space to diverse perspectives, including those of participants less accustomed to verbalizing complex experiences.

How Themes Were Generated: Grounded Theory – Informed Coding Process

All interviews were recorded and transcribed word for word to ensure data integrity and accuracy before proceeding with analysis. The textual data was examined using the Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) (Charmaz and Belgrave 2019), with the support of NVivo 11 software to facilitate the systematic organization and thematic development of the material. Following GTM procedures, two researchers independently performed the initial open coding, identifying the key concepts that emerged from the interviews. To ensure a comprehensive and structured analysis, these concepts were then grouped into broader thematic categories using axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990), which helped identify patterns and relationships between themes. The use of NVivo 11 was key in structuring and managing the coding process, enabling the visualization of emerging connections between themes and supporting the development of a preliminary thematic map. The analysis followed an iterative process, in which the initial thematic structure was continually refined and adapted based on discussions among the researchers. Discrepancies in coding were resolved through triangulation and consensus seeking among researchers, ensuring that the final categories accurately represented the data. Coding continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no new themes or concepts emerged from the data set (Strauss and Corbin 1994). This methodological approach allowed for a rigorous and in-depth exploration of the social dynamics under investigation, ensuring a data-driven and transparent categorization of community resilience factors.

Results: Four Community-level Resources Shaping Hosts' Resilience

Four main themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews. The themes are definition of community, social support, information and communication and community belonging. Figure 1 presents the map of themes that emerged.

Definition of Community

In the context of hosting, 'community' emerged as a key reference point in participants' narratives. Participants defined community primarily through shared values, interpersonal networks, and acceptance of diversity. These elements mirror a vision of community as a relational and symbolic space, consistent with ecological and constructivist approaches to community resilience (Bishop et al. 2006; Norris et al. 2008). Rather than referring to geographical or administrative boundaries, the participants articulated a more dynamic notion of community grounded in active participation and mutual commitment. Community was often described as an ethical and civic project, centered on shared responsibility and common values. 'I think the community has to do with the word co-responsibility. In the sense of a group of people who take joint responsibility for a common project' (Italian man host, 50 years old). 'For me, community means a

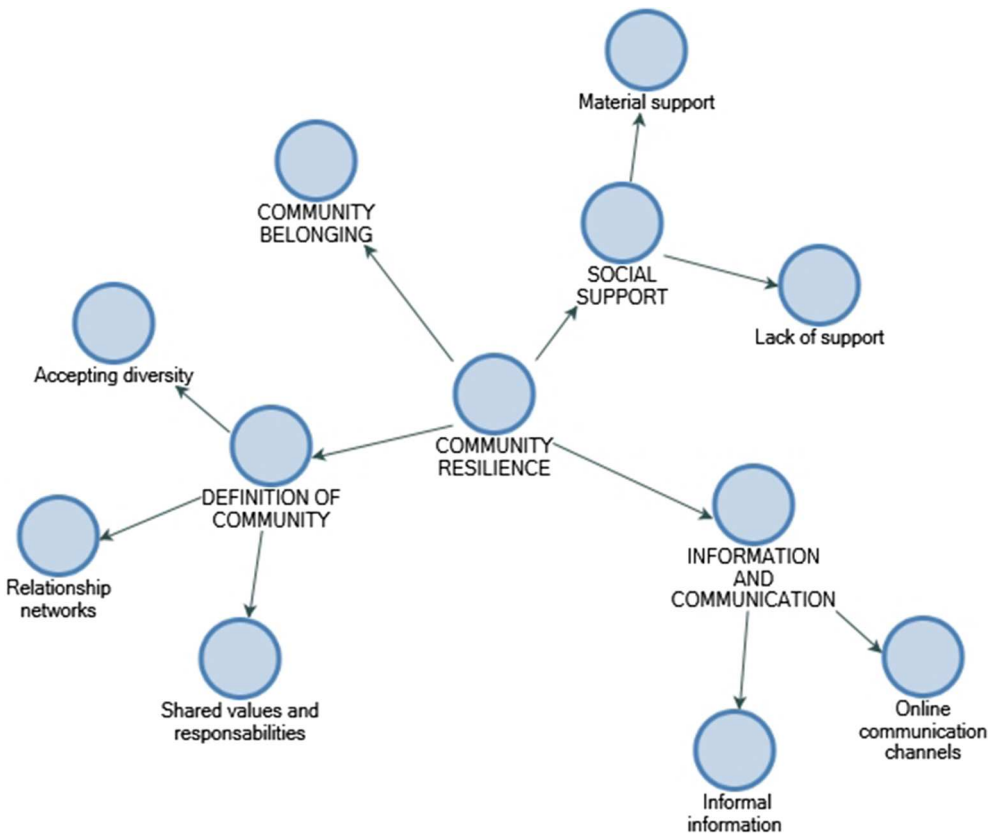


Figure 1. Thematic map.

group of people who share the same values.’ (Woman host, 65 years old). These accounts show how civic responsibility and the sense of shared purpose shaped the meaning of community, recalling literature on civic engagement and collective efficacy (Monsalve et al. 2024). Community was also described as a relationship networks. In participants’ narratives, community existed only through ongoing interactions and everyday relational practices. ‘A community is a network of relationships, if this doesn’t exist, there is no community’ (Woman host, 77 years old). ‘Community means relationships between people, being in relationship with others’ (Woman host, 31 years old). This emphasis on relationship networks supports the idea that community resilience is rooted in everyday practices of connection and trust, even more so in the absence of institutional infrastructures (Kirmayer et al. 2009). Interestingly, participants also emphasized the importance of acceptance of difference: ‘A community is about people who are together and in order to be a community they accept each person’s differences’ (Woman host, 52 years old). In practice, this inclusive vision often translated into coping cultural differences with the refugees in daily life, such as adapting meals, schedules, or ways of celebrating events. These small but constant negotiations reveal that ‘community’ was not only an abstract value but a lived, and sometimes challenging, practice.

This orientation toward inclusion, framing community as a space where diversity is embraced, expands existing understandings of resilience that often assume social

homogeneity. In the context of homestay, it also highlights the relational negotiations hosts were engaged in, redefining their own boundaries of belonging.

Social Support

During the reception process, hosts encountered concrete and practical forms of support, or their absence, including material aid and assistance in navigating bureaucratic or logistical demands. Unlike Definition of community, which addresses the meanings and values attributed to community, Social support here refers to the actual networks and mechanisms that either sustained or undermined hosts' capacity to manage daily challenges. Social support emerged as both a resource and a challenge. While some hosts reported receiving substantial help from informal networks and associations, others felt left alone to face the demands of hospitality. This duality reflects the tension between perceived community solidarity and the limits of institutional engagement, one of the key stressors in reception processes (Patel et al. 2017; McAreavey 2022). Several participants expressed discouragement linked to the absence of institutional support, describing situations in which support from the State was perceived as largely unavailable. 'We are very discouraged by the lack of support from the State itself, nobody has helped us' (Woman host, 58 years old). Other hosts reported reaching out to community voluntary organizations mainly to navigate bureaucratic procedures, but without receiving ongoing assistance during the hosting period. 'I contacted them (community voluntary organizations) as soon as the Ukrainians arrived at my house just to understand what I had to do, the bureaucracy to follow, but then I didn't receive any support from them during the reception' (Man host, 40 years old). In some cases, this absence of support was experienced as a complete lack of community in practical terms. 'There was no community, I don't know if the others had concrete support, but as far as I'm concerned, I didn't receive any help from anyone, not even material help' (Woman host, 52 years old). For many, this absence of structured support created a constant background of uncertainty and stress, affecting not only the logistics of hosting but also the emotional climate at home. Some hosts described feeling 'on alert' every day, unsure how to respond to new needs or crises. 'Every day I woke up wondering what would happen, if there would be any new problems to solve' (Woman host, 67 years old). These testimonies highlight how hosting has become emotionally and practically demanding, especially in the absence of institutional support. Hosts have had to deal with unfamiliar bureaucracies, cope with emotional exhaustion and adapt their domestic routines, making the presence or absence of community support a critical factor in their resilience. 'Between the unfamiliar bureaucracy and the changes at home, I always felt tired and under pressure' (Man host, 40 years old). The reception, often initiated as a gesture of solidarity, became a solitary endeavor, especially in the absence of guidance or material aid. This confirms previous findings on the limitations of relying solely on informal actors in the absence of institutional infrastructure (Patel et al. 2017), and aligns with literature showing that resilience processes can be undermined by unclear roles, excessive individual responsibility, and a lack of distributed support (Kirmayer et al. 2009). Despite these challenges, some hosts were able to mobilize personal and informal networks that provided essential assistance, revealing an uneven distribution of resources and support. At the same time, several participants

described receiving tangible forms of material support, either through informal networks or faith-based organizations. ‘We received support from our network. We collected some money, which was useful to cover the expenses’ (Woman host, 49 years old). In other cases, informal mobilization was described as rapid and extensive, highlighting the importance of social ties in sustaining hosting efforts.

All I had to do was send a message to my friends, who in turn sent it to lots of people, and my house was invaded by prams, dolls, toys, clothes, blankets, sheets ... everything. It was important, we couldn’t cope with all that on our own. (Woman host, 44 years old)

Others acknowledged formal support, mostly from religious institutions: ‘Caritas supported us by helping out with food packages.’ (Man host, 50 years old) ‘Caritas helped us, my guests could go and collect food and various useful items from the organization for the period they were staying at our house’ (Woman host, 51 years old). These accounts suggest that in the absence of systematic state intervention, the resilience of the host community relied on pre-existing civic and religious networks. Informal solidarity systems, family ties, friendship networks, parish support, functioned as crucial sources of resilience, consistent with literature that highlights how community resilience can be built through non-institutional but trust-based relational infrastructures (Frounfelker et al. 2020; Alrawadieh et al. 2024). However, the asymmetry in support calls attention to issues of accessibility, visibility, and social capital. These factors shaped differential capacities for coping with the emotional and logistical challenges of hosting, reinforcing the idea that resilience is not evenly distributed but contingent on pre-existing resources and positions within social networks (Bauder and Juffs 2020; McAreavey 2022). Moreover, this evidence invites a reflection on the material dimension of community resilience. While resilience is often conceptualized in psychosocial or relational terms, material conditions, such as access to food or financial support, can deeply influence the sustainability of pro-social engagement. As noted by Patel et al. (2017), support systems that lack adequate resources risk overburdening individual actors, leading to disengagement. Recognizing and addressing the material needs of host families is therefore essential not only to sustain their involvement, but also to promote equitable and inclusive forms of hospitality.

Information and Communication

Hosts accessed and exchanged information through both formal and informal channels, with communication playing a key role in enabling coordination, reducing uncertainty, and fostering trust. Here, the focus is specifically on the flow of knowledge and how it shaped hosts’ capacity to respond to the demands of hospitality. Access to timely and reliable information has played a key role in determining the ability of host countries to manage the reception process. Participants often relied on informal sources: ‘I spoke to my friend the priest who was in charge. He gave me some information about hospitality. He told me informally how many people would be arriving and how they would be divided between the houses’ (Woman host, 67 years old). These moments of uncertainty created stress and confusion in the early stages of reception, as hosts struggled to make quick decisions without clear institutional guidance. This uncertainty often spilled into the domestic space, influencing how hosts prepared their homes and

how they set expectations with the refugees themselves. ‘I didn’t know what to expect or how to organize myself. I prepared the house blindly, without really knowing what they would need or how long they would stay’ (Woman host, 51 years old). The emotional load of such ambiguity often spilled into everyday life. ‘A friend of mine from the voluntary organization that looked after the Ukrainians told me more or less how long they would stay and how I could help these people’ (Woman host, 58 years old). Informal communication filled a vacuum left by official institutions, echoing studies on disaster response that emphasize the role of local knowledge and non-institutional actors (Hambati and Yengoh 2018). In this context, communication became not only an operational tool but also a form of community building. Several participants described digital environments as key spaces for accessing information and initiating hosting practices.

When I started reading on social media that there was the possibility of hosting, I began to find out through social networks how I could go about hosting a mother and child, since I have an extra room at home. (Woman host, 51 years old)

‘The Ukrainian consulate had set up a forum right from the start. I started communicating with them through this forum and gathered information to start the reception’ (Woman host, 56 years old). These examples show how digital tools, especially social media and online forums, facilitated coordination at the local level and fostered a sense of autonomy and agency among hosts. Similar to findings in the literature on crisis communication and community empowerment (Ogie et al. 2022; Spialek and Branton 2024), digital infrastructures functioned as bridges between isolated efforts, enabling the rapid dissemination of knowledge, mobilization of material support, and emergence of temporary leadership structures. Yet, several participants indicated that communication and coordination waned after the initial stages. ‘At first, they kept us updated frequently, but then nothing. I felt left out and didn’t really know how to deal with the new situation’ (Man host, 77 years old). This temporal imbalance, intense engagement at the start followed by progressive disconnection, raises questions about sustainability and the capacity of communities to maintain support over time. Importantly, this form of ‘bottom-up’ communication also carried a symbolic dimension: it nurtured a feeling of participation and contribution to a collective cause, reinforcing the hosts’ civic and ethical commitment.

This trajectory mirrors what Spialek and Houston (2018) described in post-disaster contexts: early digital and relational mobilization can enhance a sense of community belonging and shared purpose, but risks weakening in the absence of institutional reinforcement and structured pathways for continued engagement. It suggests that for community resilience to persist over time, informal and digital communication channels must be integrated into more stable and inclusive infrastructures of support, rather than operating in parallel or in substitution of institutional systems. In sum, this theme highlights that communication, whether informal or digital, is not only a logistical asset in times of crisis, but a key mechanism through which trust, identity, and collective efficacy are produced and sustained within communities. Investing in accessible and multilingual information systems, while valuing informal knowledge brokers and digital communities, may therefore be central to designing more resilient and equitable reception models.

Community Belonging

Finally, hosts' sense of being part of a community emerged as a key factor that motivated and protected them during the hosting period. Distinct from Definition of community, which concerns the idea of what community means, Community belonging focuses on the lived experience of inclusion or exclusion, and its role in sustaining commitment to hosting.

Community belonging emerged as both a motivator and a protective factor. Participants reported that feeling part of a community helped them endure the emotional and logistical challenges of hosting, reinforcing the relational foundation of community resilience (Kirmayer et al. 2009; Bauder and Juffs 2020). In participants' narratives, belonging was closely associated with motivation, perseverance, and the capacity to cope with everyday difficulties. 'Feeling that I belong to the community has led me to do a lot for my community. Thanks to this, I have managed to overcome difficulties such as the language barriers that we had with them (the Ukrainians)' (Woman host, 65 years old). Other participants similarly linked their sense of belonging to the ability to adapt to changes in daily routines and domestic life. 'Of course it hasn't been easy. We've had to review our habits and routines, but the motivation that has driven us to overcome these difficulties is the feeling of being part of the community and taking part in it' (Woman host, 31 years old). For some hosts, belonging was described as a precondition for engaging in hosting despite the emotional and relational challenges involved.

You can decide to host refugees who have experienced trauma and related difficulties in your home if you feel that you are part of the community and feel that you want to do something for the community. This helps you to move forward and cope with difficulties. (Man host, 60 years old)

Belonging, however, was not experienced uniformly. For some, close ties to local networks provided emotional anchoring and a sense of purpose; for others, weaker connections meant facing the challenges of hosting in relative isolation. As one participant noted, 'In my case, I didn't really feel part of any group. I did everything on my own, without anyone to share the experience with' (Woman host, 52 years old). In contrast, another participant reflected, 'I was lucky because I had friends and neighbours helping me all the time, but I know others who had to manage everything alone' (Man host, 49 years old). This unevenness shaped not only resilience, but also how hosts evaluated the overall meaning and impact of their hosting experience. These relationships with the hosted refugees, often marked by vulnerability and intercultural complexity, amplified the emotional labor involved and shaped the hosts' need for external support and a strong sense of collective belonging. 'I experienced some very intense moments with them in my home, which were also culturally different from what I was used to. Without the support of friends, it would have been much more difficult' (Woman host, 51 years old). These narratives show how collective identity and social embeddedness can buffer stressors and sustain individual efforts. Belonging fostered a sense of purpose and coherence, essential elements of community resilience. However, this raises important questions about who is included or excluded from this sense of community, and whether such belonging is situational, conditional, or enduring.

Conclusion: Strengthening Host Communities' Resilience Through Shared Infrastructures

This study highlights the multidimensional nature of community resilience in the context of private hosting during a large-scale humanitarian emergency. In line with recent perspectives on resilience as a transformative process (Boston et al., 2024; Carrasco et al., 2024), our findings show that hosts not only adapted to the challenges of private hospitality, but in some cases generated new relational practices, networks, and forms of solidarity that extended beyond pre-existing community structures. This 'bouncing forward' dynamic highlights the potential of crisis-driven hospitality to reconfigure community bonds and create novel pathways for civic engagement. Drawing on the testimonies of Italian citizens who welcomed Ukrainian refugees into their homes, we explored how resilience is built, negotiated and sustained at the community level. In summary, this study contributes to the literature on homestay practices by showing that community resilience among host populations is neither static nor uniformly distributed. It is shaped by civic values, unequal access to support, digital infrastructure, and a shared sense of belonging. By examining the perspectives of hosts, this research fills an important gap and suggests that refugee reception policies should also consider the support needs, motivations, and emotional labor of host families, not only to support their efforts, but to promote more inclusive and resilient communities. At the same time, the data illustrate how community resilience was shaped by external factors, including the absence or presence of institutional guidance and local government support. These structural conditions acted as either enablers or constraints, provoking resilient responses such as the mobilization of informal networks or, conversely, contributing to feelings of isolation and overburden among some hosts. Ultimately, hospitality was not just a gesture of solidarity, but a transformative experience that reshaped daily life, personal identity, and the emotional economy of the home. These complex dynamics underscore why community support, both symbolic and material, was so critical throughout the process. Each of the four thematic dimensions identified, community definition, social support, information and communication, and community belonging, aligns with core adaptive capacities described in the resilience literature (Norris et al. 2008; Patel et al. 2017). Community definition resonates with the notion of community competence and shared values; social support reflects both resource availability and the distribution of social capital; information and communication corresponds to the capacity for coordinated action; and community belonging illustrates the role of collective identity and shared meaning in sustaining motivation. The findings suggest that community resilience is not a fixed attribute, but a dynamic process rooted in social bonds, moral commitment and shared meanings.

It emerges from the intersection of individual action and collective responsibility, informal networks and institutional infrastructures, emotional closeness and structural support. The four thematic dimensions identified provide a framework for understanding how host families have addressed the practical and emotional demands of living with refugees. Participants described the community as a space of shared values and mutual responsibility, rather than a mere geographical or administrative unit.

Social support emerged as a fundamental but unevenly distributed resource. Informal communication and digital platforms compensated for institutional gaps, while a sense of

belonging acted as a psychological anchor that sustained motivation and resilience throughout the hosting process. Importantly, the findings reveal that resilience was unevenly distributed across the host community, echoing McAreavey (2022) and Bauder and Juffs (2020), who note that access to networks, visibility within the community, and prior social capital significantly influence adaptive capacity. This suggests that strengthening resilience requires targeted strategies to support those in more isolated or resource-poor positions.

These findings invite us to rethink private hospitality not as an isolated or spontaneous gesture, but as an experience embedded in a broader social, cultural and political context. Hosting, particularly in crisis situations, requires more than just goodwill: it requires access to resources, coordination, emotional containment and a long-term vision. The concept of community resilience helps to make visible the invisible work carried out by guests and the collective infrastructures that support or undermine their efforts.

By applying the lens of community resilience to the aspect of hosting in forced migration, this study contributes to an emerging but still limited body of research. It challenges binary views that frame hosts as altruistic heroes or passive providers of services, and instead highlights their active role as agents situated in complex relational contexts. Moreover, the analysis supports the idea, outlined in the introduction, that the resilience of host communities is interdependent with that of migrant communities (Migliorini et al. 2023). Where host networks were strong and inclusive, refugees reported better integration and emotional adjustment, reinforcing a virtuous cycle of mutual resilience.

The findings show that resilience is not evenly distributed, but is shaped by factors such as social support, digital connectivity, and civic infrastructure.

Therefore, policies that aim to empower or support private hosting initiatives should not rely solely on individual commitment but invest in strengthening the care and support ecosystems in which hosting practices take place. From a policy perspective, the study highlights the need for integrated hosting strategies that include host communities as co-protagonists rather than invisible facilitators.

A resilient host community is not one that quietly adapts to the pressures of hosting, but one that is empowered, recognized and supported in its role. Promoting sustainable hospitality therefore requires fostering civic engagement, building inclusive communication infrastructures and ensuring that the responsibilities of hosting are shared equitably, not only between families, but also between civil society and public institutions.

Ultimately, this study reveals that private reception is a deeply relational and transformative experience. It reshapes identities and routines not only for the refugees who arrive, but also for those who welcome them. In this encounter, the community becomes both the context and the subject of resilience: a space where vulnerability and solidarity coexist and where the capacity to care collectively becomes a form of resistance to fragmentation and fear. Understanding and supporting this process is essential not only to respond to emergencies, but also to build more inclusive and resilient communities in the long term.

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