Airbnb's humanitarian aid during the war in Ukraine: Indispensability, dependence, and platform politics

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Introduction: Vernacular vs. scaled digitally organized humanitarian aid

When Russia attacked Ukraine in late February 2022, I immediately saw an outpour of bottom-up organizing amongst my Polish friends and colleagues that was oriented at providing shelter, food, and clothing to the hundreds of thousands of incoming refugees. Their work relied on an array of generic collaborative platform tools, such as countless Google docs and spreadsheets that were circulated via social media. Their actions relied on their embeddedness in the local context: their networks of contacts, including previous collaborations with non-profits, the resources at their workplaces, and the information about most pressing needs coming from emergent volunteer groups. For instance, Warsaw's Grupa Zasoby, which launched on Facebook on the day the war began, turned into a professionalized volunteer collective that helped find homes for 5530 refugee families by April. The collective of about 600 volunteers set up a hub at Warsaw West Station, created an "online office" and its own bottom-up platform infrastructure connecting refugees with hosts (Bień-

kowski 2022). This is just one of the rapidly formed and effective civil society initiatives that helped some of the 8.5m refugees who crossed the Polish border in 2022,[1] indispensable especially in the early weeks of the invasion when large-scale humanitarian aid institutions were nowhere to be seen (Dunn and Kaliszewska, 2023).

Their *vernacular* organizing practices, employing digital platforms "on the ground," can be contrasted with a *scaled*, top-down approach to helping those in need, leveraged by some of the biggest digital platform corporations. SpaceX provided Ukraine with Starlink terminals, which has not only been critical to the war effort but also kept the government and citizens connected (Iyengar 2022).[2] Social media clamped down on Russian state-run news outlets. Tech companies and their founders donated millions of dollars to humanitarian aid. Amidst those efforts, Airbnb announced it would shelter 100,000 refugees just four days after the war broke (Airbnb 2022a) and reported its dedication to further support Ukrainian refugees after fulfilling that goal (Airbnb 2022c). These are just some examples illustrating the point that digital platforms play a vital role during the war in Ukraine.

However, their engagement triggers questions regarding platform *dependence* in the context of war effort and humanitarian aid. In this paper, I analyze the activity of Airbnb in response to the war in Ukraine as an example. Drawing on Airbnb press releases, previous research on Airbnb's growth, and platformization more broadly, I place its current actions in the ecosystemic context of the company's earlier trajectory and its role in the growing platform dominance. The aim of the paper is to shed light on what it means for democratic societies when for-profit platforms become engaged in humanitarian aid – or participate in "philanthrocapitalism" (McGoey, Thiel, and West 2018).

I zoom in on three developments: the Airbnb users' initiative to "book" nights with Ukrainian hosts without intending to visit; the pledge of Airbnb.org, a charity associated with Airbnb, to house 100,000 Ukrainian refugees; and the platform's decision to deactivate listings in Russia, Belarus, and the Donbas region. I draw on the notion of platformization as an ongoing process of configuring people and things into specific kinds of economic relations by means of digital technology (Mackenzie 2018) and the notion of platforms as an emergent third institutional form alongside states and markets (Bratton 2015). In that context, Airbnb has been analyzed as a novel "constitutional actor" (Sheffi 2020), carving new modes of political action, such as "platform-mediated citizenship" (van Doorn 2020). With that in mind, my analy-

sis remains attuned to the ecosystemic effects of platformization (Márton 2021; Mikołajewska-Zając et al. 2022). First, I analyze the pitfalls of directly donating to Airbnb hosts as likely supporting rather wealthy citizens and fueling Airbnb's corporate narrative that may help the company's lobbying efforts. Second, I posit that large-scale humanitarian aid organized *via* a charity with privileged access to the Airbnb platform not only redefines charitable activity but also runs the risk of making governments dependent on dominant platforms' humanitarianism. Finally, I discuss platform power that comes from deciding where to engage in relief efforts as part of the emergence of platforms as global political players, pointing to the danger of further reinforcing the cleavage between the Global North and South.

"People-to-people": Donating to Airbnb hosts

In early March 2022, over 60,000 nights with Ukrainian hosts were booked by Airbnb users around the world, about half of them by US clients (Airbnb 2022b). The initiator of this action suggested this would be an effective way to "send immediate monetary assistance to people in hard-hit areas" (@quentin.quarantino 2022). Seeing an uptick in bookings with Ukrainian hosts, Airbnb quickly waived its fees.[3] While recognizing the genuine intentions of donors, the action became critiqued as an example of "thoughtless activism" fanned by "action bias," as doing something feels better than idly reading the news (Comerford 2022). This argument is underpinned by the recognition that those donations could be channeled to less privileged segments of the Ukrainian society, as Airbnb hosts are, for the most part, owners of investment properties.

But there is more to this critique if we consider Airbnb's search engine. While the details of its algorithms remain opaque, there are certain categories of hosts and properties that get promoted. These include "Superhosts," who need to have at least 10 bookings per year and to maintain an impeccable digital reputation (which requires responding to emails rapidly), and curated, high-end "Airbnb Plus" properties (whose hosts pay a fee to benefit from top placement). These are just two examples of mechanisms that promote *professional* Airbnb hosts, who oftentimes manage multiple listings. Airbnb has recently been described as putting in gear uneven business development using such computational mechanisms (Bosma and van Doorn 2022). Evidence from 167 countries shows that,

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on average, 59% of Airbnb listings are "professional accommodation offers" and only 8% are a room in a single home (Adamiak 2022). Moreover, professional hosts who operate multiple listings bring most earnings. New York City offers an extreme example of this dynamic: together, its top 10% hosts make nearly half of revenue and the bottom 80% earn just above 30% (Wachsmuth et al. 2018). In 2019, as much as 80% of Ukrainian Airbnb listings were based in cities (Adamiak 2022). Even if we do not know the exact breakdown of hosts' earnings, it is safe to assume that many donations reached some of the most privileged Ukrainians.

What we should also consider are the broader consequences of this initiative for the platform corporation. The idea to donate directly to Ukrainian Airbnb hosts was quickly picked up on Twitter by Airbnb co-founder Brian Chesky, who praised it as "such a cool idea from our community" (@bchesky 2022). In a press release, the bookings in Ukraine were described as a "grassroots movement" oriented at supporting local hosts (Airbnb 2022b). The grassroots movement is a trope with a longer history at Airbnb. The company has been positioning itself as a "people-to-people platform," a global movement aimed at positive social change, which involves economic and civic empowerment (van Doorn 2020). Over the years, it has been presenting carefully curated groups of middle-class homeowners renting out a spare room and using this side-revenue to provide for their families, suggesting they are representative of the entire community behind the short-term rentals platform (Yates 2021) – a picture that remains in stark contrast with the evidence from 167 countries cited above. Research shows the company has been engaging in "grassroots lobbying," that is, strategically mobilizing the hosts' communities as political advocates to lobby for lenient short-term rental regulations (van Doorn 2020; Yates 2021).

Such efforts have been particularly intensive in cities around the world experiencing over-tourism, which has been exacerbated by Airbnb's growth. There is growing evidence that amidst the broader "assetization" of housing stock (Birch and Muniesa 2020), Airbnb is one of the forces driving gentrification. The

platform intensifies mass tourism and creates a "rent gap," as landlords recognize it is more profitable to turn rental units into holiday apartments. This results in the growth of rents for *all* long-term tenants, which over time erodes the affordable housing stock in cities (Garcia-López et al. 2020; Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018). Furthermore, many cities see a replacement of essential services (such as grocery shops) with insta-grammable cafes, especially in areas with an influx of "lifestyle migrants" occupying Airbnb rentals (Maldo-nado-Guzmán 2022). In a self-reinforcing dynamic, this further boosts tourism, resulting in even higher accommodation prices and an intensified loss of residential housing (Yrigoy 2019). Some tourism-heavy cities, such as New Orleans, which initially welcomed the revenues from short-term rentals, began to see this dependency as increasingly problematic, as it intensifies housing problems (Lindeman 2019).

Cities such as Barcelona, Paris, Berlin, or San Francisco have been fighting against Airbnb growth on their own, but that has proven to be an uneven battle with uncertain outcomes. Seeking a systemic solution, 18 European cities formed a coalition to exert pressure on the EU to regulate short-term rentals transnationally (Erdem 2021), which made Airbnb shift the main focus of its lobbying in Europe to the EU level. The charitable engagement of Airbnb hosts may render the platform's "corporate harms less apparent to the public" (McGoey et al. 2018, 29) and as such may come in handy when the platform needs to battle against EU-wide regulatory frameworks curbing their business. In that context, the initiative to directly donate to Ukrainian hosts sets in motion a legitimacy exchange (Bowker 1993): the donors are validated, while Airbnb gains a novel narrative of members' generosity that is likely to boost its "grassroots lobbying" efforts to stifle short-term rental regulation.

Airbnb.org and the "generative entrenchment" of individuals and states

The pledge to provide free temporary housing to 100,000 refugees in vacant Airbnb rentals across the world, including Poland, Germany, and Hungary, which was orchestrated by the charitable organization Airbnb.org, further extends this narrative. Airbnb.org collaborated with 40 humanitarian aid organizations and reported it had reached its target at the end of August – and that it would continue to support Ukrainian refugees (Airbnb 2022c). To be clear: there is nothing disingenuous about this initiative, which relied on a global outpour of support, including not only free ac-

commodation but also care work performed by Airbnb hosts, on top of donations to Airbnb.org. But it is crucial to consider the long-term effects of plat-formized humanitarian aid for the future resilience of democratic societies. Two elements in the earlier trajectory of aid programs at Airbnb are important in that context.

Airbnb describes its first humanitarian aid action as an idea of one of its New York hosts, who reached out to the platform's headquarters, asking "if she could offer her place for free to people who had to evacuate" in the wake of Hurricane Sandy in 2012 (Airbnb.org, n.d.). Apart from how this feeds into the narrative of Airbnb's "platform-mediated citizenship" (van Doorn 2020), the wording is very telling: a home owner *asked for permission* to let people other than Airbnb clients into her private property. The platform celebrates its hosts as industrious micro-entrepreneurs, but this narrative unveils them as subordinate to a de facto property arrangement encoded in the platform's Terms of Service – a user agreement that remains "contractual in form but mandatory in operation" (Cohen 2017, 154). It demonstrates the depth of hosts' "generative entrenchment" (Bratton 2015), that is, the consolidation of digital systems to reduce users' costs to invest more transactions into a platform and increase the costs of moving to another provider. A warning often raised in the context of the broader platform capitalism's logic of "trapping" or "captivating" people (Seaver 2019) is that participants become reduced to "users" whose protections are eroded when a dominant platform changes the rules of the game (e.g., the Terms of Service). An argument brought up less often is that the erosion of freedoms which comes with entrenchment pertains not only to consumption choices but also to civic society, a point to which I shall return shortly, after shedding light on the second element in the context of Airbnb's housing of Ukrainian refugees.

As indicated above, the initiative to host 100,000 refugees was coordinated by Airbnb.org, a public charity in the US established in 2019, which describes itself as an entity independent from Airbnb corporation but leveraging its digital platform. Before the formalization of Airbnb's charitable activities as a distinct organization, Airbnb launched numerous programs to help people fleeing wars and disasters, as well as front-line workers (for an overview, see Dolnicar and Zare 2021). But the legitimization of Airbnb.org as a charitable organization by US authorities is much more than merely another step in this unfolding trajectory. It sets a precedent whereby platform dominance in business terms, often achieved by evading or breaking local laws, becomes sanctioned as a valuable (or even indispensable) resource for humanitarian relief. Airb-

nb's tactic in many US cities is a case in point. For instance, in San Francisco, anti-hotelization provisions, shielding housing stock from being transformed into holiday rentals, were introduced decades before sharing economy platforms were established. Any use of Airbnb in its hometown prior to 2014, when short-term rentals first became regulated was simply illegal (Mikołajewska-Zając 2022). The foundation's humanitarian aid boosts Airbnb's legitimacy while strategically obscuring Airbnb's engagement in illegal business practices or in undermining the emergent regulations (see Beckert and Dewey 2017).

When Airbnb becomes a player in humanitarian aid, it may set in gear a self-reinforcing dynamic whereby it will increase its importance in that sphere by leveraging *data, scale,* and *rapid access.* Given its previous engagement – including the most recent program for housing Ukrainian refugees across the world – Airbnb.org is likely to build its legitimacy by emphasizing its *efficiency* in organizing aid *at a scale,* thanks to massive troves of data it amassed as a by-product of its previous humanitarian aid, a result inaccessible to smaller organizations without a privileged access to a dominant for-profit platform. This has a potential for dislodging smaller charities whose knowledge of local contexts may be critical for providing relief, or pushing them towards collaborating with Airbnb.org.

Previous research on platformization traced how platforms extend into ever more industries and sectors of society (Srnicek 2016; van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal 2018), emphasizing unique qualities of digital technology, such as open-endedness or product agnosticism (Kallinikos, Aaltonen, and Márton 2013). Adding to this debate, my argument echoes Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) concerns of platform capitalism working to undermine democratic institutions. Airbnb.org will be able to respond *rapidly,* offering access to vast resources which can be mobilized during a disaster: housing resources which are either dormant or can be temporarily reoriented to serve a non-business purpose, and hosts' free care work. In that way, it carries a double promise to act faster than bureaucratic states, thus relieving the latter from (part of) their responsibility and to reproduce civic, bottom-up mobilization *at a scale*. When lives are at stake, no government or civil society organization will say "no" to such help, and this is fully understandable.

However, leveraging short-term rentals in another domain is precisely what allows Airbnb to become "an increasingly central part of global urban infrastructures" (van Doorn 2020, 1815), as it enters a domain other than the business of short-term rentals. While this may not yet be raised often, there are suggestions that *governments* should pay the hefty bills for platform-mediated humanitarian aid (e.g., see Dolni-car and Zare 2021). Such a development would further exacerbate the self-reinforcing logic described above. And – returning to Hurricane Sandy and user entrenchment – it has also the potential to reinforce the notion that civil society engagement happens *via* corporate platforms. This would contribute to the erosion of the public sphere: those coming of age amidst platform dominance may increasingly encounter platforms as a "one-stop-shop," an infrastructure for all sorts of pursuits, including charitable and other civic engagement. This could not only diminish the visibility of established charitable organizations; it might also erode the collective knowledge of how to effectively organize. A study of social media organizing during Occupy protests serves as a cautionary tale: it shed light on a mass mobilization which quickly folded due to the lack of strategic organizational capacities (Tufekci 2017). These considerations should be brought back to the future of the democratic state. The potential erosion of civil society's capacities, including the loss of knowledge and of the diversity of organizational forms platforms are likely to contribute to, may make the latter even *more indispensable* for states.

Philanthropic platforms as global political actors

The points above should be considered together with Airbnb's role as a global political actor in the context of the company's decision to withdraw from Russia, Belarus, and the Donbas region (Airbnb 2022b), which came as part of a wave of multinational corporations shutting down their business in Russia, not only in compliance with sanctions imposed by their home counties but also on their own initiative (Isidore 2022)[4]. Recent research describes the dominant digital platforms as emergent transnational sovereigns, extending but also rebuilding the notion of transnational corporations as *private* sovereigns competing with the state (see Cohen 2017, 2019). Like corporations, platforms leverage economic power to enter relations with states outside the country where they are headquartered. But unlike multinationals, global digital platforms have *territories* (albeit created by means of protocols, data systems, and algorithms) and *populations*, whose day-to-day experience is shaped by platform corporations to an unprecedented degree (Cohen 2017, 199-203). As evident in the case of platforms' withdrawal from Russia, Airbnb and other platforms engage in *diplomacy* (Cohen 2017), leveraging precisely their territory and population characteristics (for instance, Facebook claims about 2.5b users, more than the combined population of China and India,

and suggests it is more akin to a government than a company, see Pistor 2020). These developments invite a careful consideration of the effects that such platform diplomacy may give rise to in a longer perspective.

Preceding helping Ukrainian refugees was Airbnb's engagement during the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, the refugee crisis in the Balkan countries, in the aftermath of the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting that affected the LGBT+ community in Florida, and hosting Muslim travelers affected by Trump's travel ban in 2017, to name just a few examples. Previous research analyzes the role these causes play in forging Airbnb participants as political subjects. The platform's Terms of Service become a "constitution" that creates "Airbnb citizens," who have consumer rights and civic obligations (Sheffi 2020). The latter include fighting discrimination and fostering "diversity, equity and inclusion" (Airbnb.org, 2022). But what I am also hoping to illuminate here is that Airbnb – as well as other platforms and multinationals – has great powers in deciding where to engage or disengage. I would argue that the list of conflicts or disasters where Airbnb has been offering aid is rather noncontroversial in the sense that it focuses on causes broadly supported in the Western liberal/progressive public sphere. Airbnb does not appear to take sides in long-lasting, complex conflicts. For instance, it was called out for offering listings on Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). Amnesty International described the platform's business there as illegal under international law (Amnesty International 2020). Airbnb reacted by declaring it would take those listings down, but that, in turn, triggered accusations of discrimination from Israel. Caught between a rock and a hard place, Airbnb announced it would not delist properties in OPT but would send all the profits from West Bank rentals to international aid organizations (Williams and Pierson 2019). In that case, Airbnb chose a solution that appears temporary and reversible, arguably to remain "neutral" and satisfy conflicting accusations.

Altogether, the criteria by which Airbnb.org decides where to help are nontransparent and may fluctuate over time. But we may suspect that the choices will not endanger Airbnb's bottom line. If Airbnb.org continues to grow by strategically leveraging the Airbnb platform, we may observe a bias towards humanitarian aid in the Global North, where Airbnb business has been well-established. In other words, platformed humanitarian aid has the potential to further exacerbate inequalities between the developed and developing regions of the world rather than diminishing them.

Conclusion

Russia's attack on Ukraine in early 2022 triggered widespread mobilization, which largely relies on digital technology, to help Ukrainian society. In contrast with local, bottom-up activism such as that of Grupa Zasoby in Warsaw during the early weeks of the war, the actions of global digital platforms attract much public attention due to the scale of their interventions. Importantly, their engagement increasingly redefines humanitarian aid in terms of *platform access*: as in its regular short-term rentals business, Airbnb connects those seeking shelter with its hosts. Its free care work is an indispensable part of Airbnb.org's offer. Their solidarity allows Airbnb to extend the narrative of its participants as a "people-to-people movement" that ultimately supports the company's bottom line. Airbnb's engagement in humanitarian aid – including the effort to house 100,000 Ukrainian refugees – is likely to be leveraged to support its "movement for deregulation" (Yates 2021), which contributes to the erosion of housing resources, especially in cities experiencing over-tourism. But this is not the only reason we should be wary of the growth of platformized "philanthrocapitalism": if the tech industry – such as Airbnb – is to "disrupt" charity and humanitarian aid, we should be vigilant of its potential to make governments ever more *dependent* on their systems.

The ethnographer Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2019) suggests that the notion of "growth" and its sibling "scalability" have been deeply ingrained in Western culture ever since the colonial plantations and the industrial revolution. What is the legacy of this growth today, she asks, and what might be the legacy of platformized digital growth as we know it? In the context of digitalization, as in the earlier history of growth, "scalable" projects can be expanded without changing their properties. In that way, Tsing posits, where scalability acts, meaningful diversity that is capable of deeply transforming society, is erased (Tsing 2019, 145). In the long term, we should be concerned about the effects of platform growth, which have the potential to erode the diversity of organizational forms (and the strategic capacities they carry) in the wider civil society. Their unchecked growth can contribute to the rejection of non-scalable knowledge apparent in local organizing practices and foster the notion of solidarity, care work, and charity as inevitably mediated by dominant commercial platforms. Altogether, we should be worried about the danger of a new form of platform dependency (Márton 2021; Mikołajewska-Zając, Márton, and Zundel 2022) fueled by wide-

spread impulses of solidarity. Rather than relying on a single type of digital organizations, we should actively preserve a diversity of (digital) organizational forms in the charity and aid sectors, including highly effective ad hoc, ephemeral collectives like Grupa Zasoby, to maintain social resilience when facing the next crises to come. Over-specialization, such as reliance on a single type (and a limited number) of scaled-up digital organizations, does not equip us to cope with them well (Mikołajewska-Zając and Márton 2022).

Acknowledgement

Endnotes

1 The current estimate is that about 1.5m of the refugees stayed in Poland for at least six months (see Buras 2022).

2 However, in early February 2023, SpaceX curbed Ukraine's use of Starlink for operating drones, stating that the company never allowed use of their technology for military purposes, only for civil and military communication purposes (Roulette 2023). While this remains outside the scope of this article, it is a case in point of platform dependence.

3 Airbnb has a split-fee business model, whereby the platform charges both clients and the hosts a percentage of the booking sum (the percentages may vary between countries, but the former group bears most of the fee costs). Waiving intermediary fees meant that the payments were transferred to Ukrainian hosts in their entirety.

4 However, a study published nearly a year after the invasion began states that only 8,5% of Western firms have divested from Russia (Evenett and Pisani 2023).

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