

# CONSTRUCTIONS AND SUBVERSIONS OF REFUGEES' LIMINALITY WITHIN THE DISCOURSE OF HOSPITALITY: THE CASE OF AFGHAN REFUGEES IN ALBANIA

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In the ethnographic tradition, hospitality is commonly understood as the structuring principle of the guest–host relationship, implying unequal power distribution. It can also be seen as a process by which the host appropriates a space as home, while the guest is relegated to a precarious, temporary, and liminal position. This paper analyzes the structural position of Afghan refugees evacuated to the Albanian town of Shëngjin by various (mostly US-based) organizations after the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan in August of 2021. It traces the discourses, ideologies, and practices of hospitality enacted by different actors: the Albanian government, the local authorities, international organizations, and the displaced Afghans themselves. The paper contrasts the political discourse of hospitality with the refugees' practices of hospitality. When mobilized by state authorities, hospitality serves as a powerful tool for constructing the refugee as a liminal and precarious social subject, while also strengthening the notion of the nation. At the same time, refugees' practices of homemaking and hospitality challenge this framework, destabilizing the static and territorialized notion of home and rejecting the representation of refugees as passive recipients of foreign generosity.

Keywords: homemaking, construction of place, makeshift restaurants, street art, migration management

## THINKING (THROUGH) HOSPITALITY

It is a winter afternoon, and shy December sun begins to set. Three young men whom I met an hour earlier kept ordering drinks at our bar table, eager to treat us. We are in the Albanian town of Shëngjin, and for a moment it feels as though we were brought here by nothing more than curiosity and picturesque sunsets.

This, however, is far from the truth. Only I came out of curiosity. My new friends escaped an oppressive regime, fueled by decades of colonial interventions. In media and political speeches, they are refugees, evacuees, or – at best – guests.

In the following months, however, they go out of their way to be hosts. More drinks are ordered, barbecues are improvised, makeshift restaurants spring up, and delicious food is cooked and shared. Unfriendly places are domesticated through the work of hands and imagination alike.

From this space of liminality and assumed rootlessness, new homes are created – precarious and dynamic, yet beaming with the potential to enact hospitality, negotiate ascribed liminality, and restore agency. (Fieldnotes, May, 2022)

Hospitality, at first glance, seems easy to grasp. A stranger knocks at my door. I welcome them to my home. Home is my house, the gift is my bread, my guest's counter gift – respect and gratitude. But when one's home is a nation-state, the arrangement ceases to be simple, and it is suddenly clear that it never was. Today, even deportation centers, the epitome of *hostility*, are inaugurated as centers of *hospitality* (Rozakou 2012). How come? Is this a rhetorical trick to mask institutionalized violence and a misuse of an otherwise innocent concept? Or is it a reflection of the fact that hospitality is not only about generosity, but power as well?

This article focuses on representational and discursive aspects of hospitality. It draws on ethnographic accounts of Afghan refugees in Shěngjin to explore how various actors enact and reframe hospitality. It also employs the concept of homemaking to illustrate the ways in which Afghan refugees negotiate ascribed liminality through homemaking practices.

Many anthropologists (Evans-Pritchard 1993; Mauss 1954; Geertz 1973; Pitt-Rivers, 2012; Herzfeld 1987; Shryock 2008; Agier 2021) dealt with the topic of hospitality, yet the term remains contested (Boudou 2021). Julian Pitt-Rivers (2012) understands hospitality as a mechanism for managing the relationship with the unknown. It transposes potential conflict into a socially acceptable format and prevents open hostility. A guest is both sacred and dangerous: entitled to honorable treatment, but not to full societal membership.

Jacques Derrida distinguishes between the ethics and the politics of hospitality (1999, 2000a). While the ethics of hospitality demand unconditional openness, the politics of hospitality operates within the framework of borders, laws, and regulations. The unconditional offer (the Law of hospitality) is constantly undermined by laws (plural) that operationalize it through the nation-state's mechanisms of control. The nation state enacts (the politics of) hospitality through border control and asylum law, extending welcome only under conditions that reaffirm its sovereignty.

Contemporary scholars examined how hospitality is assumed by state institutions. Michel Agier (2021) shows how hospitality is replaced by asylum rights. When these are placed within the politics of control of borders and territories, they are weakened and now barely resemble the original meaning of hospitality. In this model, the guest is politically dependent on institutional frameworks that define their presence and rights. This trans-

formation marks a crucial shift in the understanding of hospitality. Once institutionalized within the framework of citizenship and border management, it is no longer a voluntary act, embedded in broader patterns of social life, but a mechanism through which the state defines the limits of belonging. For this very reason, it can also become a political act: a refugee's everyday homemaking and hosting can be read as subtle assertions of agency within the system that denies them formal belonging – citizenship.

Examples from the Balkan route (Stojić Mitrović and Meh 2015; Beznec et al. 2016; Lipovec Čebren et al. 2019, 2020) show how private hospitality towards migrants is also surveilled and how EU border closures transformed welcome into hostility. The mere possibility that “guests” could be staying longer than expected, and potentially seek political participation, can cause hospitality to turn into hostility, blurring the boundary between the two.

These perspectives move us beyond essentialist notions of the guest, highlighting hospitality as a process through which guest and host identities are produced. Hospitality's dual nature exposes how generosity coexists with surveillance and subordination. Like a gift that can always be revoked, it renders the guest a liminal figure. Victor Turner (1969), following Arnold van Gennep, suggests that the attributes of liminal people are ambiguous, since they cannot be integrated into a network of classifications. They are “merely entities in transition”. Such liminal individuals must be “managed” by rules that contain their ambiguity (Turner 1969: 103). If we bring together the conceptual lenses of hospitality and liminality, we can see that the guest is simultaneously sacred and subordinated, much like the liminal subjects and guests in the writings of Turner and Pitt-Rivers. The liminal status of the guest is not incidental but woven into the very fabric of hospitality.

As Derrida (1999) provocatively suggests, hospitality is not only an expression of ownership, but it is also the act of *appropriating* a certain space as home. For refugees, who were stripped of their political rights, hospitality can also be a way to reinsert themselves into society as equals. Through the ethnographic glimpses that follow, we will attempt to consider hospitality through their experiences, while simultaneously considering their experiences through the notions of hospitality and liminality.

## THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SETTING

My arrival in the town that became the field site of my research was almost coincidental. I first came across an article featuring Afghans housed in Albania's seaside resorts (Higgins 2021). The largest group of people (approximately 2,000, even though the number was constantly changing) resided in the Rafaelo Resort (hereafter also Rafaelo) in Shëngjin, a coastal town in northwestern Albania with a population of 6,963 (the 2023 census; INSTAT 2024). Nestled between hills and the sea, the town is shaped by seasonal rhythms of mass tourism and dormant off-season months.

Drawn by a “too good to be true” intuition, I arrived in December of 2021 and stayed until May of 2022, conducting participant observation, supplemented by seventeen semi-structured interviews with key interlocutors, and many more informal and unpredictable conversations.<sup>1</sup> It soon became clear that the portrayals of lavishness (Higgins 2021; Waldman 2021; Conelly 2022) obscured more complex dynamics.

Afghan refugees residing in the Rafaelo Resort were previously evacuated by international, primarily US-based, organizations with whom they had been affiliated. Many of them had already initiated immigration processes to the United States or Canada – the countries that externalized their border to Albania, where the refugees were waiting to be vetted and granted the necessary entry documents.<sup>2</sup> The cost of accommodation and food was covered by the evacuating organizations, some of which also oversaw aspects of the immigration procedures. Sometimes, they provided limited financial assistance. Nevertheless, many refugees relied on the Rafaelo Resort to meet their basic needs.

Upon arrival, Afghan refugees received temporary protection status in Albania but were initially confined to the resort. According to the mayor’s assistant, whom I interviewed, the purpose was for them to “recover from trauma” and to “protect them from themselves”. After a few weeks, individual movement was allowed, though options for self-sufficiency, housing choice, or influence over immigration procedures remained limited. Rafaelo, though nominally a resort, functioned as a refugee facility, managing people “as unified objects of control and provision” (Katz 2022: 167). Common spaces in the resort were occupied by international organizations offering psychosocial, legal, and educational programs. Later, an informal school for children opened with UNICEF and USAID support. Families shared rooms or small apartments, individuals shared multi-bedrooms. Facilities were basic, impersonal, and unsuitable for long-term living. Meals, served three times a day, were adequate in quantity but modest in variety and quality.

## CONSTRUCTIONS OF LIMINALITY

The prime minister framed the decision to host 4,000 people from Afghanistan as “a matter of respect for Albanian history as a hospitable country”. He invoked both the Albanian protection of Jews in World War II and the Kanun, an ancient code of customary law, saying that “the house of the Albanian belongs to God and to the guest” (Ceta 2021a, 2021b).

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<sup>1</sup> Based on short ethnographic fieldwork, this article offers a glimpse into a particular time and place, without claiming to comprehensively represent the experiences of Afghan refugees in Albania. The context has continued to evolve in terms of the number of refugees and their accommodation and treatment. The ethnographic present is therefore used only for practical reasons. Nonetheless, even relatively short-term fieldwork providing selected case studies can illuminate broader social dynamics surrounding displacement, hospitality, and homemaking.

<sup>2</sup> Their situation was therefore rather unaffected by migration politics and pressures of the European Union, that created unhospitable camp environments in Greece and externalized its border to some of its neighboring countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina (Meh 2016; Bezec et al. 2016).

The Albanian concept of “guest” (*mik* in Albanian; also translated as “friend” or “traveler”) embodies a moral and social category, central to the code of honor and hospitality, that binds the host to protect and honor the guest, even at great personal cost (Tarifa 2008).

In political discourse, often echoed by the Shëngjin locals, hospitality toward Afghans is essentialized as an ethnic trait or as an act of compassion grounded in memories of hardships of the communist era (Ceta 2021a, 2021b; Coakley 2021; Rama 2021). Such narratives mobilize the preexisting context of Albanian post-socialist migration. On the one hand, parallels are drawn between Afghans fleeing the Taliban and Albanians who fled the “Red Taliban” (Rama 2021) three decades earlier. On the other hand, this analogy obscures the continuing reality of Albanian emigration, marked by a low asylum acceptance rate, devious routes, and precarious lives (Gëdeshi and King 2022). It also omits that Albanians are subject to the same restrictive regimes and securitization measures that the Albanian state (through border externalization protocols with the USA and especially Italy) helps uphold.

The media acknowledge the hardships of Rafaelo residents (Coakley 2021; Waldman 2021; Conelly 2022; Sinoruka 2023, 2025; Loguercio 2024; Bytyci and Goga 2025) but refrain from criticizing the refugee management model that treats people as a homogenized object of control. Even though many Afghans internalized the discourse of charity and felt gratitude towards Albania, the lack of autonomy was palpable. “It feels like being in the military here”, a friend said, describing life in Rafaelo after a year and a half of waiting in Shëngjin.

The discourse of hospitality functioned as a nation-building tool that obscured the fact that the refugees’ stay at Rafaelo was not funded by the Albanian state, but by external organizations. Hospitality, discursively constructed as an expression of national identity, was therefore also commercially mediated. According to some of my interlocutors, the price of lodging at the resort was disproportionately high compared to the local cost of rent and even exceeded double the average Albanian monthly salary in 2022. At the same time, Afghans with independent financial means contributed to the local economy, which was particularly significant during the typically lean off-season months.

Within the hospitality discourse, Albania is constructed as the host – even when the dynamics of giving and receiving are reversed. The discourse of hospitality romanticizes the national territory and further sacralizes it as a gift. Hospitality is thus reduced to the act of (conditional) territorial admission. The ethical substance of hospitality, grounded in risk, generosity, and unconditionality (Derrida 2000a) is replaced by a rhetorical and discursive performance of hospitality.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This became obvious with Shëngjin recently becoming a site of a very different type of “hospitality”. In 2023, Italy and Albania signed an agreement allowing Italy to transfer asylum seekers rescued at sea to two detention centers in Albania, located in Shëngjin and Gjadër. The protocol is legally questionable (Broerse 2024) and treats people as passive cargo, denying them dignity and agency. By hosting these centers, Albania supports the externalization of Italy’s border control and becomes part of the broader European migration regime. In this context, hospitality becomes at best an empty signifier, and at worst a tool for justifying exclusion and violence.

We now turn to examine how guests, supposedly welcomed with honor, become instruments of manipulation under shifting political and financial conditions – dynamics that reflects the liminal position of the refugee-guest, whose right to remain is not guaranteed, but contingent on external forces.

In May 2021, a small Afghan protest took place in the courtyard of the Rafaelo Resort, reflecting a growing dissatisfaction among the Afghan guests. Feelings of insecurity were mounting. The duration of their stay in Albania, originally expected to be short, extended significantly. Meanwhile, many refugees were left with minimal information about the immigration process and their future prospects. Upon further inquiry, I discovered that one of the organizations sponsoring their stay stopped covering the resort's expenses. In response, Rafaelo Resort staff reportedly entered the rooms of those whose accommodation was no longer being paid for and confiscated their passports. This switch from care to coercion exemplifies Pitt-Rivers's notion of guest as both sacred and dangerous, as well as Derrida's paradox of hospitality, in which the law of unconditional hospitality is always in tension with the conditional laws of hospitality that authorize surveillance, control, and even violence.

Structural and spatial conditions surrounding various cultural expressions of Afghan refugees – as well as the “cultural exchange” between the presumed hosts and guests – reveal a similar pattern of management, control, and produced liminality.

At first glance, the intangible cultural heritage of the people from Afghanistan seemed to be welcomed. There were numerous events intended to honor the Afghan culture. Afghan dances followed International Women's Day celebrations. When the US ambassador to Albania visited, Afghan and Albanian children dressed in their traditional attire and posed side by side, each holding their national flag. A prestigious local restaurant hosted a culinary evening featuring both Afghan and Albanian dishes. The event, organized by the municipality in collaboration with two NGOs from the USA, was promoted under the slogan “a unification of the tastes of two populations into one rhapsody”. “They served the Afghan dishes first”, said the mayor's assistant, who had helped organize the event. “Because the guest always comes first”. The restaurant shared a video of the evening on social media, captioned: “This dinner proves that hospitality is a value of every Albanian”.<sup>4</sup>

These displays of food, dance, and costume did little to challenge the dominant image of a peaceful cultural exchange – one that emphasized the generosity of the host and the gratitude of the guest. Yet such performances of cultural difference required specific spaces and material resources, and those were managed by the Albanian local authorities and US organizations with financial and cultural capital. They selected elements of the intangible cultural heritage (traditional food, dance, and costumes) for public presentation. These elements could be anticipated, abstracted from their original context, and exhibited like museum artifacts. They celebrated the notions of equality and mutual enrichment but remained silent

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<sup>4</sup> <https://fb.watch/DAc9OV-zEH/>.

on the complex political conditions that had forced members of one community to flee their homes, countries, families, and friends. They also ignored the prolonged waiting for visas and the oftentimes humiliating bureaucratic processes, which kept many refugees living in overcrowded hotel rooms for months, in fear for their loved ones and their futures.

Cultural exchanges that could unfold spontaneously and beyond institutionalized spaces were evidently less welcome. As summer approached, concerns arose over potential interactions between tourists and Afghan refugees. In my interview, a volunteer from the USA who taught English and organized informal activities for Afghan refugees insisted that the beach was “not a healthy environment” for them, claiming that the sight of “naked people must be traumatic” and could “deepen their post-traumatic stress disorder” because “they are conservative”. A similar view was held by the mayor’s assistant, who noted that Afghan women did not dance at the International Women’s Day event organized by the municipality and concluded they were not *allowed* to dance. “If they’re not allowed to dance, they would be traumatized to see people naked in the street”, she explained when I asked from where the idea of relocating the refugees during the summer originated.

According to Maurice Godelier’s (1999) analysis of the gift, building on Marcel Mauss and Annette Weiner, social relations are sustained not only through what is given in a gift exchange but also through what is deliberately withheld. What remains *inalienable* connects social life to its sacred or moral origin and provides continuity across time. Although Godelier’s analysis refers to traditional societies, it remains strikingly relevant: state hospitality operates through the same paradox of giving without alienating. The gift of hospitality encompasses conditional access to the national territory but not the right to full political participation. In this sense, it produces hierarchy and enduring power asymmetries. The very act of giving – through the evocation and mythologization of Albanian traditional hospitality – strengthens national identity and attachment to territory. It therefore delineates the boundaries of belonging and creates exclusion precisely when it discursively constructs itself as inclusive.

On the one hand, with all the spaces within the Rafaelo Resort being occupied by organizations offering structured activities, the Afghan refugees had few opportunities to gather and sustain a cultural community without outside management. On the other hand, their culture was discursively and aesthetically homogenized and curated for the public display of cultural exchange. It was deemed appropriate in contexts and spaces controlled and organized by the local government and international organizations, but inappropriate for spontaneous and unpredictable everyday interactions.

Liminal subjects are not individuals, but rather “entities in transition” (Turner 1969: 103). Their personhood is replaced by the symbolic roles that they are assigned – in our case, the roles of grateful guests and bearers of culture. Stripped of internal complexities, contradictions, individualized expressions, and agency, *culture* and *cultural exchange* become mere tools in the production of liminality within the broader framework of refugee management.

## SUBVERSIONS OF LIMINALITY

The liminal status of the guest is inextricable from their assumed displacement and placelessness. The acceptance of territorially bounded states as the norm allows migrants to be othered, especially when the boundaries of home extend to nation states (Ahmed 1999; Taylor 2013). In this section, we explore how Afghan refugees engage in processes of emplacement, homemaking, and hospitality. I understand homemaking as a practice that brings the lived environment closer to a sense of normality (Boccagni 2022). The focus on homemaking allows for a more nuanced conceptualization of people's relationship to place and home.<sup>5</sup>

Many people from Afghanistan created opportunities for hospitality, hosting mostly each other, and sometimes NGO workers and Shēngjin locals. I became a grateful guest as well. Hospitality meant inviting me for an Afghan dish, cooked in my kitchen, finding a rental apartment outside of Rafaelo to “have friends over”,<sup>6</sup> convincing Rafaelo staff to let me stay for dinner, improvising meals in the privacy of their rooms or outside on remote beaches. It came in many shapes and forms, but it almost always involved certain elements: spatial transformation (sometimes material, sometimes symbolic), a clear relationship between giving and receiving, employment of the language and gestures of hospitality, associated acts of micro-agency (pouring tea, serving food, choosing music...) and a reference to their home in Afghanistan. Let me illustrate this with a short ethnographic vignette about my interlocutor and friend Jamal.

Jamal found a local fish restaurant on the outskirts of Shēngjin. The restaurant resembled a family dining room, especially during sleepy off-season months. It was owned by an elderly couple. By the time Jamal first took me to the restaurant, he had already started calling the couple “*mama*” and “*baba*”. “*Mama*” let Jamal use the kitchen, and some ingredients for which she charged a modest price. Often, Jamal would take us there in the morning and cook breakfast for me and other friends in “his way” – the way he used to do it in Afghanistan.

This story reflects why such actions are best theorized as “hospitality” rather than through similar frameworks, such as generosity. There was a reformulation of the spatial relationship and emplacement that happened prior to these events: Jamal (symbolically) inserted himself into the family and gained access to their kitchen. He also had agency over the food (the gift) that he was preparing for us. He enacted the role of the host by

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<sup>5</sup> Ingold's (2000) notion of dwelling that emphasizes how humans and environments are mutually constituted through everyday actions is also relevant. Shēngjin and Rafaelo are not merely pre-existing settings where refugees' agency unfolds but are also co-shaped by it. However, I prioritize the notion of homemaking, as it aligns with Derrida's (1999) idea of hospitality as an act of appropriating space as home and offers a response to representations of refugees as “homeless” (Malkki 1997). I also see the notion of homemaking as more suitable for the provisional, affective, and mobile practices of migrants.

<sup>6</sup> A rare luxury, afforded by one of my interlocutors with independent financial resources. Most Afghans could not afford that and therefore created other spaces of hospitality.

inviting, cooking, setting the table, and bringing the food, which often delayed his own meal. And lastly, the food, prepared in the way Jamal would “do it at home”, carried a reference to his home in Afghanistan.

As opposed to the national discourse, where the state positions itself as the host and refugees as perpetual guest, everyday relations between Afghans and Albanians revealed a more layered and reciprocal hospitality. The English-speaking owner of the office supply store informally helped with bureaucracy and translations, provided emotional support, gifted clothes, and baked cookies. She invoked the Albanian proverb, also mobilized by the prime minister (Politiko 2021), to frame the situation as an expression of mythicized and radical Albanian hospitality. Nevertheless, by questioning the decision of hosting people from Afghanistan in a resort while some of the 2019 earthquake victims still lived in tents, she also reproduced hierarchies of deservingness. Local businesses adapted to the new customers and “welcomed” them by putting products of their interest – Afghan bread, long-grain rice, headscarves – on the shelves. While unconditional and selfless hospitality of Kanun was often brought up as a reference point, everyday encounters revealed a more calculated side of hospitality.

Even though hospitality and homemaking oftentimes occurred in interpersonal encounters, there were also instances of larger social significance, where spatial transformations occurred in a more tangible way. Let us look into two of these examples – street art and makeshift Afghan restaurants.

## STREET ART

Homemaking within migrant communities can also mean endowment of the new land with home landscapes and art, done by the work of imagination and creation of social imageries (Leonard 1997). This section explores how the idea of home was integrated into a Shěngjin cityscape through imagination and memory, but also through more tangible artistic interventions such as creating murals that represent the refugees’ experience and their relation to their home.

Some of the evacuated Afghans were members of an art collective that, in an ironic allusion to Drug Lords and War Lords, called themselves ArtLords. Founded in Kabul in 2014, the ArtLords used to transform blast walls of the city into spaces for public reflection. By inviting the public to join the process of painting, the “right to the city” (Lefebvre 1996) was socialized and everyone was invited to take part in forming a response to the lack of control on the streets of Kabul (Ghani 2021). In Shěngjin, the ArtLords painted a mural near the entrance to the military zone. Alongside the mural’s protagonist, a girl pushing a vibrant map of Afghanistan in a wheelbarrow, there was a sentence in Albanian saying: “Thank you Albania. We will not forget you”. On the bottom, Persian script quoted a verse from an informal anthem of Afghan exodus (Makoi 2021): “I have become homeless”.



Figure 1 – The Mural in Shëngjin by ArtLords. Shëngjin, May 2022. Photo by Vincent Allis.

In addition to the mural in Shëngjin, the artists created a similar one in Tirana, also depicting a map of Albania. The media and politicians (Farrant and AP 2021; Semini 2021) emphasized the expressed gratitude towards Albania and minimized or misinterpreted the refugees' self-representation. The figure of the refugee was presented as “an Afghan man working” (Farrant and AP 2021), which differs significantly from the interpretation of one of the artists, who described the man as taking the entire country with him and “saving it from the war”.

When the attention is focused primarily on Albania as the receiver of gratitude, the refugee subject, together with the political situation of Afghanistan, slowly vanishes from the picture or becomes an anonymous Afghan worker. Approaching the mural as both artwork and a social agent (Gell 1998) reveals how refugees carry with them both the roots from their home of origin, and the agency to create a new life and home. The mural navigates between the seemingly contradicting notions of mobility and rootedness. The refugee figures – depicted in motion – are not confined to a fixed territory, yet they are far from stateless. Carrying the map of Afghanistan, they symbolically transport home with them, enacting a form of emplacement “in flux” (Haboucha 2020). The mural resists simplistic binaries of rootedness and uprootedness, expressing a nuanced, affectively charged articulation of homemaking in displacement.

The involvement of other members of the Afghan community who were not part of the ArtLords, (symbolically) established shared ownership of the mural and of collective (self)representations inscribed in the public space. The artists did not sign the mural. In

Kabul, signatures were unnecessary, as their work was widely recognized. Repeating this practice, as one of the artists explained, brought “the same feeling” of hominess and familiarity. Painting the mural allowed some of the involved artists to reimagine their new environment. My interlocutor described how she and her friends would walk through Shēngjin and identify spaces that visually or atmospherically resembled particular streets in Kabul. In this way, the mural and its surrounding environment became a canvas for collective homemaking and the inscription of meaning and familiarity into an otherwise foreign urban landscape.

The artists continued to paint murals: one on a school in Shēngjin and another in a hospital in the nearby town of Shkodër. The local community asked the artists to paint a scene that would inspire doctors to stay at home and help “their people”, instead of migrating to the EU. The creation of the design was a thoughtful group effort, aimed to convey a message that was encouraging rather than moralizing. This striking image of Afghan refugees being asked to inspire Albanian doctors to remain at home reveals entangled social roles and intersubjectivities that transcend binary oppositions of staying and moving, host and guest, or rooted and uprooted.

## MAKESHIFT RESTAURANTS

This section analyses food-related practices that exist both in relation to their home in Afghanistan and the refugees’ new environment in Shēngjin. Food is often a vehicle through which immigrants and diasporas preserve and express their national identity, form connections to the new environment, and create a sense of home (Sutton 2000; Powell 2018; Haboucha 2020).

Rafaello had several dining rooms and offered three meals during designated mealtimes. The dining rooms maintained a hotel-like look, but the configuration of power relations reflected in the food service created conditions of dependency and provided no room to express collective or individual subjectivity. The food in Rafaello was the cause of dissatisfaction among many residents. The topic of food also ran particularly deep, possibly due to the unique connection between the embodied and cultural self, enacted through nutritional practices. The food at Rafaello was not scarce and many recognized that steps were taken to accommodate the taste of the people. Still, it lacked something essential: the right ingredients, cookware, or simply “care” through which food becomes a vehicle of interpersonal connection. In a word, Rafaello food lacked hominess.

Some of the members of the Afghan community found ways to start cooking and serving Afghan dishes. The first Afghan eatery in Shēngjin operated within the local fast-food place called Bellavita. The Afghan presence was discreet. Afghan dishes, cooked by a team of three people, did not appear on the menu, but were available upon request. Bellavita was also the only place in town where one could occasionally get “the dish for when

you have guests”. *Kabuli pulao*, an aromatic rice dish with lamb, carrot, and raisins, was the most widely missed and also the most deeply associated with hospitality. Perhaps not by coincidence.

Customers ordering Afghan dishes would pay directly to one of the Afghan chefs. Establishing a restaurant inside a restaurant overcame limitations connected to the temporary protection status, which did not grant the right to employment. The initiators of the Afghan part of Bellavita were two friends and roommates, Nagina and Hasiba. Hasiba was known as a journalist who used to cover political and social topics. Nagina was a lawyer and worked as one of the few female prosecutors in Afghanistan. “When we were in Afghanistan, it was clear what we could do for the people”, they told me. Upon arrival in Shěngjin, their desire to respond to needs of their community persisted. They sensed that people longed for homey food and social places beyond the structured setting of Rafaelo. The restaurant was a form of service in at least three ways. It helped in bridging the gap between “back home” and “here”. Public presence in Shěngjin was also a way to address negative stereotypes about Afghanistan. “Albanians didn’t know about Afghanistan. Food is a way of showing people that the picture they get of Afghanistan based on Taliban and terrorists is wrong. We are humans and we want peace”, said Nagina. The Afghanistan they were (re)presenting was the one that “has a rich history and is very famous for its hospitality. Even if people have nothing, they will still give you something... Albanian people come, we introduce our food to them, and it makes them happy”. The third way in which Nagina and Hasiba served their people was their modest revenue that went towards an all-girls school that they established in Afghanistan and that operated clandestinely.

The second Afghan restaurant in the town, Shěngjin-Kabul, was founded by two former students in their early twenties, Maryam and Walwala, who received permission to use a small pizzeria in the off-season. Maryam used the restaurant’s income to send remittances to her relatives in Afghanistan. Their effort to create an Afghan atmosphere involved balancing imageries of home with limited means. They imagined a space with a *dasterkhan* – the traditional eating cloth laid on the floor – but, aware of the restaurant’s temporary nature, they opted for simpler solutions: An Afghan flag on the wall and Afghan music to set the mood. To accommodate the common request for a meat dish by the local Albanians, they added a German meat roll to the menu, which was popular in Afghanistan as well. This culinary fusion reflected both the restaurant’s responsiveness to the Albanian clientele and the globalized dimension of Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, the cooks made great efforts to recreate the familiar tastes of Afghanistan. At the same time, they used food as a medium of self-representation, seeking to present their “Afghanness” in a positive light. In this way, culinary traditionalism functioned as both cultural continuity and a form of translocal practice.



Figure 2 – Shēngjin-Kabul restaurant. Shēngjin, April 2022. Photo by Vincent Allis.

The political dimensions of the restaurants were perhaps best captured by my Afghan friend's observation: "People eat in these restaurants not only because they miss the food, but also because they want to do something that isn't just a physical need". Thus, the two restaurants should not be understood solely as sites of nostalgia or attempts of integration. They also stood in contrast to the impersonal dining halls in Rafaello, embedded in biopolitical regimes of management. People were reclaiming their political and social existence by the "practice of communality" (Hage 1997) of gathering and eating together.

These spaces allowed people from Afghanistan not only to reshape their image in the eyes of the local community, but also to enact hospitality and transcend the passive role of aid recipients. Within the context of migration management, even seemingly minor practices of homemaking can be seen as resistance to the ascribed liminal status of the guest and the confines of bare life.

## CONCLUSION

Ethnographic glimpses into the life in Shēngjin present an image of hospitality as elusive and impossible to capture in an unequivocal sense (Agier 2021). Hospitality is integrated both into the private sphere and into state policies. The state regulates the possibilities of hospitality in interpersonal encounters. Yet, it also frames institutional hospitality as an extension of interpersonal hospitality in small-scale social settings, thus simultaneously

limiting and appropriating private forms of hospitality. Dichotomizing acts of hospitality by the refugees and by the local authorities and other social agents with institutional power is therefore a simplification. However, remaining attuned to differences and similarities can help us understand entanglements of belonging, emplacement, power, and ideas of home across various social groups.

Hospitality reflected in political and media discourse and enacted by Albanian and international organizations stems from the notion of cultural and national identities as stable and impermeable. It is carried out with strong reference to traditional hospitality and it primarily emphasizes the identity of the “host” nation. “Home” is a territorialized concept, applied to private dwellings and the nation state alike. Discursively, the agency of the generous host therefore extends from the former to the latter. Hospitality of the Afghan refugees in Shëngjin is also concerned with agency over a certain space, but not national territories. The associated homemaking practices stem from the more dynamic and translocal notion of home, which alters the nation states’ exclusionary logic of borders and fixed identities.

Metaphorically speaking, the refugees’ homemaking in Shëngjin is close to the idea of home described by John Berger (1984) who, drawing on Mircea Eliade, understands home as the ontological center of the world: Home was traditionally understood as an intersection of a vertical line that led towards the sky and to the underworld, and a horizontal line that represented possible pathways across the Earth. At home, one was closest to gods and deceased ancestors, but also most closely connected to earthly roads and lines. Refugees’ enactments of hospitality and homemaking are sites of home precisely because they are intersections of subjectivities that are bound to lands, families, and ancestors, and those in constant movement, on the quest for better lives.

However, small acts of resistance and subversions of liminality should not be romanticized. This article attests to their potential to restore a sense of agency and provide a meaningful continuation of life trajectories, but they did little to influence the immigration process and its promise of a dignified life in peace. The latter is most often not hindered by individualized stereotypes (which “cultural exchanges” of all kinds may address), but rather by structural and systemic exclusion from citizenship rights. Hospitality, in times of oppressive and militarized border regimes, is therefore not only an interpersonal commitment, but also a political one.

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## KONSTRUKCIJE I SUBVERZIJE IZBJEGLIČKE LIMINALNOSTI U DISKURSIMA GOSTOPRIMSTVA: PRIMJER AFGANISTANSKIH IZBJEGLICA U ALBANIJU

U etnografskoj se tradiciji gostoprimstvo obično shvaća kao strukturno načelo odnosa između gosta i domaćina, što podrazumijeva nejednaku raspodjelu moći. Može se promatrati i kao proces kojim domaćin prisvaja neki prostor kao dom, dok se gostu dodjeljuje prekaran, privremen i liminalan položaj. U ovom se radu analizira strukturni položaj afganistanskih izbjeglica koje su razne (uglavnom američke) organizacije evakuirale u albanski grad Shëngjin nakon što su talibani u kolovozu 2021. godine ponovno preuzeli vlast u Afganistanu. Članak se bavi diskursima, ideologijama i praksama gostoprimstva različitih aktera: albanske vlade, lokalnih vlasti, međunarodnih organizacija i samih raseljenih Afganistanaca. Politički diskurs gostoprimstva sučeljava se s praksama gostoprimstva unutar izbjegličkih zajednica. Državne vlasti gostoprimstvo koriste kao moćno sredstvo konstruiranja izbjeglica kao liminalnih i prekarnih društvenih subjekata, istodobno osnažujući ideju nacije. Nasuprot tome, izbjegličke prakse stvaranja doma i gostoprimstva potkopavaju takvo shvaćanje, destabiliziraju statičnu i teritorijaliziranu predodžbu doma te odbacuju reprezentaciju izbjeglica kao pasivnih primatelja tuđe velikodušnosti.

Ključne riječi: stvaranje doma, konstrukcija mjesta, improvizirani restorani, ulična umjetnost, upravljanje migracijama