

Building bridges between diasporic and hosting cultures

How VATAHA Foundation and Ko-Station, as platforms for
Ukrainian art and culture, enhance intercultural understanding
in Rotterdam

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how Ukrainian cultural initiatives in Rotterdam foster mutual understanding and enhance dialogue between Ukrainian and Dutch communities. Focusing on two case studies, VATAHA Foundation and Ko-station, the research investigates how these organizations foster knowledge exchange, and act as civil agents of cultural diplomacy. The research question of this study is as follows: How do Ukrainian initiatives in Rotterdam build bridges between diasporic Ukrainians and host Dutch cultures and communities? Using a qualitative approach, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with individuals actively involved in both initiatives. Additionally, field observations at several events organized by VATAHA foundation and the so-called walk-through method to examine the social media accounts of the initiatives were used.

The findings reveal key differences in organizational orientation: VATAHA is perceived as an outward-facing initiative, focused on public engagement and external collaborations, while Ko-station is seen as a more inward, community-centered space. Despite this contrast, both initiatives are driven by passionate individuals with strong cultural expertise, whose leadership and vision shape the nature and success of the activities they organize. These include workshops, lectures, and cultural events that bring together Ukrainian and Dutch participants, offering spaces for mutual engagement, artistic collaboration, and shared cultural experiences.

The research highlights that cultural practices - such as music, visual arts, poetry, and crafts- act as powerful tools for connection by tapping into universal themes and shared human experiences. Initiatives also draw on common interests, shared memories, and collaborative creation to foster meaningful exchanges. Additionally, collaborations with local Dutch partners and neighborhood initiatives such as Het Wijkpaleis, Dok Huis, and Ter Bevordering enhance the capacity of Ukrainian initiatives to create inclusive micro-spaces of encounter.

Ultimately, the study shows that grassroots cultural initiatives not only preserve and express diasporic identity but also contribute to broader processes of integration and intercultural understanding. By facilitating face-to-face interactions, they offer a form of bottom-up cultural diplomacy that builds trust and bridges across cultural boundaries.

KEYWORDS: *Diasporic communities, Ukrainian Initiatives, Cultural diplomacy, Rotterdam*

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Pre-face

Acknowledgement to Lera Manzovitova, who provided access and agreed on including to my thesis the posters from her photo exhibition *Power of Unity*, where she highlighted the stories of Ukrainian community leaders, volunteers, war veterans and Dutch individuals who supported Ukraine in the Netherlands. Her posters of *VATAHA foundation*, *Ukrainian House* and *Ko-station* were included in the appendix of this thesis to provide visual representation of the initiatives.

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1. Introduction

Migration due to war is not a new concept: Appadurai (1996) lists it as one of the reasons people move, referring to “a flow of people” (p. 33) in his study about globalization (Appadurai, 1996, p. 33). Throughout history people have fled their homes as a result of wars, seeking refuge in other lands, and shaping the world that we live in. Once again, this became apparent on 24 February 2022, when Russia began a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. An enormous amount of people had to leave their country in search of safety. On March 4 2022, the European Council made an emergency decision to provide people from Ukraine temporary protection: *“Temporary protection is an exceptional measure to provide immediate and temporary protection in the event of a mass influx or imminent mass influx of displaced persons from non-EU countries who are unable to return to their country of origin”* (Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs in EU). Temporary protection was a directive, initially created as a response to the large number of individuals who needed immediate protection during the Yugoslav War in 2001. The same directive was adapted for the people fleeing from Ukraine. The temporary protection directive was activated for the first since 2001 in response to the “mass arrivals of displaced people from Ukraine”, which posed a significant the risk of overwhelming the asylum systems of EU member states (Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs in EU). According to Eurostat statistics (2025), on 31 March 2025, *“around 4.25 million non-EU citizens, who fled Ukraine as a consequence of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, were under temporary protection in the EU”* (Eurostat, 2025, Appendix C, image 1). Thus, it is clear that such a big wave of sudden migration influences the population, as well as, the social, cultural, and political landscape of the host EU countries at different levels. The need to communicate and build mutual understanding between host communities and the increasing Ukrainian diasporas is apparent. Consequently, the recent influx of Ukrainians to EU countries has raised an urgent question about this specific diasporic community and their interaction with host societies.

One of the counties that hosts displaced people from Ukraine is the Netherlands. The Netherlands ranks eight among EU countries in hosting Ukrainians under the Temporary Protection directive (Eurostat, 2025). According to Statistics Netherlands, 157 000 people from Ukraine with temporary protection status were registered in Dutch municipalities between February 2022 and June 2024 (Statistics Netherlands, 2025). Some Ukrainians have since returned to their country of origin (Statistics Netherlands, 2025). On 31 March 2025, 123 000 displaced people from Ukraine still lived in the Netherlands (Eurostat, 2025). The presence of the Ukrainian diaspora in the Netherlands is quite visible and requires

dialogue between communities. Ukrainians live all over the Netherlands (Appendix C, Image 2): municipalities with a low population more often have a high proportion of Ukrainians per 10 thousand inhabitants. The majority of Ukrainians who received temporary protection reside in Amsterdam, The Hague, and Rotterdam (Statistics Netherlands, 2025). This study is interested in the latter city, as Rotterdam has a unique reputation for its demographic composition. Rotterdam is considered “a super-diverse city” (p. 15) with 180 different nationalities living there (Scholten et al., 2018, p. 15). Being a port city, it has a long history of migration of different kinds, including labour migration, and displacement due to war and conflict. Nowadays, Rotterdam includes a big percentage of first and second generation migrants (Scholten et al., 2018, pp. 9-15). Considering Rotterdam’s long history of migration, Rotterdam serves as a compelling setting for investigating the dynamics of the relationship between host (Dutch) and diasporic (Ukrainian) communities.

Before 22 February 2022, there were already some Ukrainian individuals in the Netherlands, but on a much smaller scale. It was 7,5 times less than the amount of people who arrived in the country after February 2022: Statistic Netherlands claims there were 21 000 inhabitants of Ukrainian origin living in the Netherlands on 1 January 2022 (Statistic Netherlands). This number consisted of people living in the country for different reasons: studying, work, family, etc. After Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine started, high-profile individuals from the Ukrainian diaspora in the Netherlands organized several initiatives in different parts of the country. In the context of Rotterdam, it is imperative to mention the VATAHA foundation and Ko-station as two major entities in this regard. Additionally, there is a Ukrainian student association at Erasmus University, called Spilka. Another other organization that is crucial for the Ukrainian community in Rotterdam is Ukrainian House (Oekraïens Huis). In contrast to the previously mentioned initiatives, it was not initiated by Ukrainian individuals living in the Netherlands, but established by the Municipality of Rotterdam. Launched in 2022, the Ukrainian House functions as a crisis center designed to support newly arrived Ukrainians by providing access to reliable information from government and verified sources, as well as opportunities for social connection (WMO Radar, n.d.). Many recent migrants from Ukraine constantly join Ukrainian House as volunteers, running a wide range of workshops or activities both for kids and adults from the Ukrainian community. These include first aid training, language courses, theater classes and even military nets making. Additionally, informative lectures are offered, for example, on differences between the Dutch and Ukrainian educational systems (Ukrainian House, n.d.). These events help people to adapt to new environments and feel supported.

This study is interested in the places where both cultures - host and diasporic - can meet. Cultural mediators such as art can bring people together (Bersani, 2018, p. 19). Thus, VATAHA foundation and Ko-station were chosen as the case studies for this investigation, as

they are the most active and visible organizations in Rotterdam that focus on cultural exchange with Dutch society (VATAHA, n.d.; Ko-station, n.d.). Investigation of these initiatives contributes to understanding how a diasporic and local community can interact with one another through organized cultural experiences. Additionally, the investigated initiatives will be analyzed through the lense of bottom-up, non-governmental cultural diplomacy. VATAHA foundation and Ko-station are seen as the civil agents of cultural diplomacy, as they intentionally initiate the cultural interactions between Ukrainian and Dutch communities (VATAHA, n.d.; Ko-station, n.d.). Moreover, these initiatives purposefully target local Dutch audiences and extend their focus beyond the Ukrainian diaspora, in order to foster connections between both societies and spread Ukrainian narratives through cultural expression (VATAHA n.d.; Ko-station, n.d.). This thesis aims to illuminate the role of the aforementioned initiatives in building bridges between diasporic Ukrainian and hosting Dutch cultures and communities.

The main **research question** is as follows: *How do Ukrainian initiatives in Rotterdam build bridges between diasporic Ukrainians and host Dutch cultures and communities?*

In order to answer this question, the following sub-questions were formulated:

Sub-question 1: *How activities (e.g. workshops/events) enhance dialogue and mutual understanding between Ukrainian and Dutch cultures and communities?*

Sub-question 2: *In what ways do collaborations with local partners foster knowledge exchange?*

Sub-question 3: *How do Ukrainian cultural initiatives in Rotterdam serve as civil agents of cultural diplomacy?*

The concept of diaspora has been widely examined by scholars, with some researchers viewing diasporic communities as non-governmental or unofficial agents of cultural and public diplomacy. For example, Brinkerhoff (2019) refers to diasporans as “unique actors in public diplomacy” (p. 34) and argues that, given ongoing global migration, “public diplomacy will become increasingly diasporic” (Brinkerhoff, 2019, p. 34). This underscores the importance of exploring the opportunities and challenges that diaspora presents in this context.

The case-study initiatives are often rooted in artistic and cultural activities. However, they are not just “fun” or recreational events, but also carry political and social messages of identity, solidarity, and inclusion. As diasporas bring their own cultural and historical perspectives, they frequently operate with their own distinctive agendas (Gülmez & Budryté, 2022, p. 14), positioning them as important actors in civil public diplomacy. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate these initiatives through the lens of bottom-up cultural diplomacy, which is driven by civil actors instead of state institutions (Goff, 2013 p. 421).

Cultural diplomacy “refers to the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other

aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding” (Cummings, 2003, p. 1). The main element of cultural diplomacy is cultural exchange, and “the target groups for such exchange are foreign societies, groups (scholars, artists) or even individuals.” (Uminska-Woroniecka, 2016, p. 5).

As Mark (2010) notes, the role of civil agents of cultural diplomacy attracted comparatively little scholarly attention (Mark, 2010, pp. 62-63). Therefore, this case study of VATAHA-foundation and Ko-station seeks to contribute to the theoretical discourse in this field, by providing a contemporary, real-world example of civil agents actively initiating cultural exchange between Ukrainian and Dutch communities in Rotterdam.

To address the research question and sub-questions, a qualitative thematic analysis will be conducted. The primary method of data collection will involve semi-structured interviews. Additionally, field observations at several events organized by VATAHA foundation and the so-called walk-through method to examine the social media accounts of the initiatives will be used as complementary methods of data collection.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework that guides the research about Ukrainian initiatives aimed at building cultural connections with the host Dutch society in Rotterdam, following the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which led to a large number of Ukrainians migrating to the Netherlands.

The first section will focus on the concept of building bridges between diverse societies, with a particular emphasis on host-migrant relations. It begins by exploring the role of encounters as a key factor in fostering interpersonal and intercultural connections. This is followed by a discussion on enhancing intercultural understanding through recognition of similarities and differences, shared experiences, common work and collaboration, creativity, and cultural adaptation. This section will provide the framework for understanding how events organized by the selected Ukrainian initiatives contribute to bringing together Ukrainian and Dutch communities and fostering connections and cultural exchange between them.

The second section offers a comprehensive overview of the concept of diaspora, focusing on the literature regarding diasporic cultural heritage and the role of diaspora in representing the country of origin. These theoretical perspectives will provide a useful basis for examining the nuances of how diasporic communities express and negotiate their diasporic identity within the context of the host country, here, the Ukrainian diaspora in Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

The third section explores the concept of cultural diplomacy and distinguishes it from related notions and approaches. This section investigates a broader, bottom-up definition of cultural diplomacy, in which the main role is played by civil agents rather than formal diplomatic institutions. Additionally, this section highlights nation branding as a form of cultural diplomacy and provides examples of civil actors operating as informal cultural diplomacy agents. This framework contributes to understanding how civil initiatives such as VATAHA foundation and Ko-station function as agents of cultural diplomacy by actively participating in opening dialogue and fostering cultural understanding and exchange between Dutch and Ukrainian communities in Rotterdam, as well as raising awareness about Ukraine.

2.1. Building bridges

The concept of building bridges refers to the development of bridging capital - social connections that are formed across diverse social groups, enabling individuals to overcome boundaries of ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status (Madhavan & Landau, 2011, p.

476). It aligns with the notion of bridging social capital, which refers to “ties between individuals or social groups who are dissimilar and which cross socio-economic and cultural divides” (Doornbosch-Akse & Van Vuuren, 2019, p. 477).

Communication is one of the main ways to build bridges between different groups of people. Doornbosch-Akse and Van Vuuren (2019) state that “dialogue is a promising intervention to create connections between people with different backgrounds and identities”. (Doornbosch-Akse & Van Vuuren, 2019, p. 493). Moreover, they highlight the importance of face-to-face communication in fostering understanding, trust, and relationships across different communities (Doornbosch-Akse & Van Vuuren, 2019, p. 493).

Similarly, the intergroup contact theory suggests that if people from different groups have the opportunity to interact socially, it leads to a reduction of prejudice between them (Lytle, 2018, p. 419). Pettigrew (2011) asserts that intergroup positive contact plays an important role in the other group's perspective taking and empathy enhancing: “One begins to sense how outgroup members feel and view the world. This increase in empathy and perspective taking diminishes prejudice” (Pettigrew et al., 2011b, p. 277). Thus, communication and intergroup social interaction have a positive effect on fostering understanding between different social groups.

Building trust is another element in the dynamics of host-migrant relations. According to Madhavan and Landau (p. 477), trust is often associated with shared attributes such as ethnicity, nationality, and residential history, and can be lacking in relationships between migrants and host communities (Madhavan & Landau, 2011, p. 477). A clear distinction often exists between host and migrant communities (Madhavan & Landau, 2011, p. 477).

“Migrants always bring with them a variety of customs, traditions, languages and experiences” (p. 1068), contributing to the diversification of the population in “their socio-economic, cultural, religious and linguistic profiles” (Peterson, 2016, pp. 1068-1069).

As a result, diverse societies have different activity patterns, attitudes and lifestyles. Encounters between people from these different backgrounds have a profound impact on them living together with differences and navigating shared spaces.

2.1.1. Encounters

According to Askins (2015) “living with difference” (p. 473) is a key subject in discourse about migration and encounter (Askins, 2015, p. 473). Discussing the role of encounters in hyper-diverse neighborhoods of Rotterdam, Peterson (2016) asserts their function to negotiate cultural differences at the local level. Especially, he emphasizes the role of fleeting encounters that contribute to a sense of familiarity with difference, and therefore “positively influencing people’s capacity to deal with otherness” (Peterson, 2016, p. 1079). Familiarity with difference and diversity is essential in cultivating a sense of ‘home’ and

belonging in diverse societies. Moreover, fleeting encounters “have the potential to turn into meaningful interactions by providing the first step towards building relationships across differences” (Peterson, 2016, pp. 1079-1082).

Askins (2016) in her study of encounters between refugees, asylum seekers and more settled residents within a local community organization-run befriending scheme in England, argues that interpersonal encounters in everyday spaces foster a nuanced understanding of differences and similarities between people and have potential to grow in more meaningful social relations, like friendship (Askins, 2016, pp. 515-525). During encounters in mundane spaces, people discover each other as “multifaceted, complex and interdependent” (p. 476) as these places allow for shifts in perceptions of Self and Other, challenging established ideas of alterity (Askins, 2015, p. 476). Askins states that: “emotional encounters evidence desires to (re)make society at the local level, beyond normalized productions and practices of citizenship as bounded in/outside” (Askins, 2016, p. 515). That is beneficial for encountering feelings of belonging and bringing multicultural and multi-ethnic communities together.

Transcultural spaces allow individuals to examine various paths of communication between different cultures (Chao & Xie, 2024, pp. 110-111). According to Amin (2002), differences are negotiated most effectively in everyday, local settings, where regular encounters and shared experiences happen. It is through these day-to-day interactions that individuals learn to engage with diversity, using practical approaches to connect and exchange with those who are culturally different (Amin, 2002, pp. 959-976). Meaningful interactions between diverse groups often happen in micro-publics, common social spaces such as neighborhood associations or university campuses. (Gawlewicz, 2015b, p. 258). Peterson likewise emphasizes the importance of such micro spaces, claiming that they “allow people to disrupt familiar patterns and form new attachments” (Peterson, 2016, p. 1069).

2.1.2. Intercultural understanding

There are various factors that facilitate understanding between people from different cultural backgrounds. Van Bakel et al. (2015b) argue that both cultural similarity and differences have a positive impact on intercultural relationships. While similarity brings some common ground, cultural differences can evoke interest in individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Van Bakel et al., 2015b, p. 26). Investigating collective activity through and beyond differences, Cunliffe et al. (2024) found that sameness and differences coexist as two complementary elements. They contend that “while a degree of sameness is needed to achieve communality, togetherness, solidarity and collective harmony, there will always be differences” (Cunliffe et al., 2024, pp. 354-355).

One way to foster intercultural understanding is through shared work and collaboration among people from different cultural backgrounds. Collaborations tend to “establish informal relationships and communication links” (Perrault et al., 2011, p. 296), which can lead to the development of personal connections. Another beneficial outcome that collaborations can bring is “development of mutual respect, understanding, and trust” (Perrault et al., 2011, p. 296). However, Dibble and Gibson (2013) point out that multicultural collaborations may also face challenges, such as “conflicts between collaboration members arising from different cultural perspectives, values, or orientations” (Dibble & Gibson, 2013, p. 770).

Additionally, Braslauskas (2021) emphasizes the role of creativity in ensuring effective intercultural communication (Braslauskas, 2021). She highlights the importance of creating thinking in informal communication between individuals of different nationalities. As she explains “In intercultural interaction, various problems arise constantly. The problem arises when a person does not know how to move from the current undesirable situation to the desired situation. If the solution of the problem corresponds to the criteria of the creative work, in intercultural interaction, as in other life situations, the solution of the problem (as a process) can be considered as creative thinking” (Braslauskas, 2021, pp. 200-201).

Intercultural understanding can be reached through the dimension of familiarity and cross-cultural adaptation in the context of the migrant and host society relationship. Cross-cultural adaptation can result in different outcomes. One such outcome is separation, which occurs when migrant individuals have minimal contact with the host culture while maintaining strong ties to their culture-of-origin. Chao and Xie (2024) describe this as a process in which migrants distance themselves from the host environment (pp. 110-111). In these cases, migrants often form “bubbles” (p.26) with others from their country of origin (Van Bakel et al., 2015b, p. 26), as this kind of ties provide them valuable emotional and social support (Johnson et al., 2003). However, while such networks offer comfort and familiarity, they can also limit opportunities for meaningful engagement with the local population. In contrast, integration represents a more balanced outcome, where individuals maintain their cultural identity while engaging with the host society, creating a bicultural orientation that allows for connection with both worlds (Chao & Xie, 2024, pp. 110-111).

2.2. Diaspora

There are various definitions of the notion of diaspora. Epstein and Heizler (2016) outline diaspora as “people who have migrated away from their homelands, as well as their descendants, but who maintain a connection to their home country” (Epstein & Heizler, 2016, p. 1136). Cohen (2008) provides more detailed characteristics of this term. According to him,

“diasporas often mobilize a collective identity, not only a place of settlement or only in respect of an imagined, putative or real homeland, but also in solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries” (Cohen, 2008, pp. 7-8). Moreover, he emphasizes “bonds of language, religion, culture, and a sense of a common fate of diasporans” (Cohen, 2008, pp. 7-8). That is why diasporans tend to have a strong network among themselves (Epstein & Heizler, 2016).

Diasporas can be defined according to ethnocultural or country-defined characteristics. According to this division, “the academic literature includes references to Belarusian, Brazilian, Cambodian, Colombian, Egyptian, English, Estonian, Ethiopian, Gypsy, Hawaiian, Igbo, Iranian, Iraqi, Japanese, Javanese, Kazakh, Latvian, Lithuanian, Mayan, Polish, Romanian, Scottish, Senegalese, Somali, Soviet, Sudanese, Syrian, Tutsi and Ukrainian diasporas” etc. (Brubaker, 2005, p. 3).

2.2.1 Cultural heritage of diasporants

Scholars agree that the process of migrating is an integral moment for diasporans and that many individuals face feelings of isolation upon their arrival, and that some undertake activities to mitigate these feelings: “Often, these feelings drove my interviewees to engage in practices that make them feel at home in their new settings.” (Abdelhady, 2006, p. 437). Abdelhady (2006) found that, for his respondents, engaging in activities that they already had in their home countries gave them a sense of continuity, and that advancing a positive image of their home countries was often a common goal. He found that joining formal organizations was seen as a means to achieve this goal. Civil organizations serve as a means of preserving cultural traditions and introducing them to a new audience in the host country. This is also seen as a way to keep the cultural memory of the home country present in the minds of the diaspora (Abdelhady, 2006, p. 437).

The notion of keeping their cultural heritage alive while engaging with society in the new country is an important point to note. This is reiterated by Chao and Xie (2024) when they write that “cultural adaptation is determined in part by two independent processes: the extent to which one preserves their native identity and the level of interaction with the host culture and micro-cultural groups” (Chao & Xie, 2024, p. 110-111).

2.2.2. Diaspora as country of origin ambassador

Diasporic individuals often do not have a choice when it comes to staying aware of their place of origin. Familial obligations, monetary reasons, or even emotional ties, such as nostalgia, force them to maintain contact with their homeland while simultaneously navigating life in the foreign one (Brinkerhoff, 2019, p. 58). As a result, these individuals are important as country of origin ambassadors because they have experience in both the home

country and the foreign country - they can translate the culture for the locals in ways that are more readily understandable or, as Brinkerhoff (2019) calls it, more “culturally appropriate ways” (Brinkerhoff, 2019, p. 60). Diasporic communities often organize amongst themselves to preserve their national or ethnic identity in a foreign land. As Holmes (2007) observes, “Diaspora groups possess a capability to organize and strategize abroad, while maintaining and reinvigorating culture at home, abroad, and in spaces in between” (Holmes, 2007, p. 134). Through such efforts, diasporic communities occupy a bridging position between their countries of residence and origin (Akçapar & Aksel, 2017, p. 138). Moreover, Dinnie (2022) emphasizes the unique value of diaspora networks, describing them as powerful resources for place branding. One of the benefits of these networks is that they bring together “people with strong intrinsic motivation” (Dinnie, 2022, pp. 225-226) who are willing to represent their country of origin in the host country setting. Diaspora members frequently engage both directly with their home country and indirectly as cultural intermediaries abroad, with their efforts often yielding tangible results. They can also build reputations and connections that enhance their homeland’s national brand (Dinnie, 2022, pp. 225-226). The concept of the diaspora is closely tied to the process of maintaining, negotiating and in some cases reinventing cultural identities (Fazal & Tsagarousianou, 2002, pp. 5-16). Within this context, several scholars regard diaspora as civil players of cultural diplomacy.

2.3. Cultural diplomacy

One of the frequently used definitions of cultural diplomacy, applied by many scholars and non-governmental organizations such as UNESCO (2022), originates from Milton Cummings. Cummings (2003) states that cultural diplomacy “refers to the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding” (Cummings, 2003, p.1).

However, the definition of cultural diplomacy remains contested, with no clear scholarly consensus. Rivera (2015) opposes Cummings’ explanation, arguing that it more accurately describes cultural relations rather than cultural diplomacy. Rivera argues that Cummings’ denotation which does not include the role of the government is just another definition of cultural relations rather than cultural diplomacy, emphasizing that, “It is the introduction of government, national interest, and support of policy which makes such exchange cultural diplomacy” (Rivera, 2015, p. 11). It is apparent that Rivera (2015) stands for a more traditional definition of cultural diplomacy with clear ties to the government: “The absence of government is just as important for cultural relations as its presence is for cultural diplomacy” (Rivera, 2015, p. 11). He underscores the centrality of the government as the primary agent for cultural diplomacy, rather than civil actors: “Though the target audience of

cultural diplomacy programming may be individual citizens or groups, the programming itself is funded, designed, and delivered by government” (Rivera, 2015, p. 11)

Meanwhile, Goff (2013) argues that cultural diplomacy can go beyond “the official relations of two governments” (p. 421). She emphasizes the role of civil agents and the unique experience their interaction can have: “cultural diplomacy can also reach constituencies that might not otherwise be engaged by traditional diplomatic activity. There may be no official relations between two governments, but artists can communicate with each other and forge meaningful ties” (Goff, 2013 p. 421). Thus, the broader term of cultural diplomacy covers more nuanced relationships between civil actors. Another benefit from including this personal level in cultural diplomacy is that it “can tell another story about the country” (421). By doing so, it can “offset negative, stereotypical, or overly simplistic impressions arising from policy choices or from hostile portrayals” (Goff, 2013 p. 421). This interpersonal level of communication gives more opportunity for nuanced stories depicting the country that do not necessarily ally with the political narrative. Goff argues that: “cultural diplomacy is first and foremost about bridging differences and facilitating mutual understanding” (Goff, 2013 p. 420)

Similarly, Uminska-Woroniecka (2016) sees cultural exchange as the most crucial element of cultural diplomacy and “the target groups for such exchange are foreign societies, groups (scholars, artists) or even individuals.” (Uminska-Woroniecka, 2016, p. 5). Moreover, she argues that cultural diplomacy is composed of “practices designed to spread one’s own culture among other societies encompassing the presentation of cultural heritage, lifestyle and beliefs” (Uminska-Woroniecka, 2016, p. 5). At first glance, the idea of spreading one’s culture within another society might appear akin to propaganda. However, Melissen (2005) clarifies “the distinction between propaganda and public diplomacy lies in the pattern of communication. Modern public diplomacy is a ‘two-way street’... persuasion by means of dialogue that is based on a liberal notion of communication with foreign publics.” (Melissen, 2005, p. 18). This type of diplomacy is different because it involves a voluntary exchange rather than the imposition of a narrative.

There are various forms of cultural diplomacy. Language, cultural mission, social media, promotion of art, tourism, science and technology, national heroes, and icons are some examples of the tools that are used to build cultural relations. Through them “cultural diplomacy creates awareness abroad of the cultural attributes of the home culture by developing interaction through cultural activities with which the projecting culture wants to be identified” (Hurn, 2016, p. 81). The other important form of cultural diplomacy is nation branding.

2.3.1. Nation branding as forms of cultural diplomacy

Hurn (2016) refers to nation branding as a key tool of cultural diplomacy (Hurn, 2016, p. 81). The concept of nation branding is relatively new, having emerged in the second half of the 20th century from the field of marketing (Varga, 2013, pp. 827 - 828). Beyond using nation branding as a marketing tool for fulfilling economic benefits for a country, such as attracting businesses and tourism, it can also be used to foster intercultural communication. For example, nation branding can help to develop mutual understanding and improve international relationships, through building a nation's brand image that does not reinforce old stereotypes or misconceptions (Fans, 2005 p. 12). Nation branding has multiple denotations. Fan (2010) defines nation branding as “a process by which a nation's images can be created, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to improve or enhance the country's reputation among a target international audience” (Fan, 2010, p. 6).

Nation brand (or in other words, nation image) is the centre focus of nation branding. Fan (2010) argues that each country has a nation image regardless of whether it actively engages in nation branding (Fan, 2010, p. 3). A nation brand is the “total sum of all perceptions of a nation” (p. 3) that are present in the minds of its global audience (Fan, 2010, p. 3). It represents elements such as people, place, culture, language, history, food, fashion, famous faces (celebrities), picture or image, and global brands. (Fan, 2005, p. 5; Fan, 2010, p. 3). Various factors and associations are thus combined in this concept. A nation brand can also be understood as “the set of beliefs and impressions that people form about countries” (Papaioannou, 2022 p. 48). These beliefs can be gained in different ways. Hakala et al. (2013) emphasize that people's experiences are not the only factor that shapes a nation's image. The two other important sources are prior knowledge and stereotypes (Hakala et al., 2013, p. 542). Moreover, Hakala and Lemmetyinen (2011) conceptualize a nation brand as a crossroad of fragmented sets of images (knowledge, experience, stereotypes) and three levels of identity - symbolic, experiential, functional (Hakala & Lemmetyinen, 2011, pp. 14-16).

Nation branding involves different types of ambassadors. The role of civil actors in the nation branding is increasingly recognized as important. Hakala and Lemmetyinen (2011) present the idea of co-creating nation branding by “engaging and empowering the people and having them decide what should be portrayed about their nation” (Hakala & Lemmetyinen, 2011, p. 16). Similarly, Varga (2013) asserts that “nation branding cannot be effective without the participation of citizens who are at the same time representatives, stakeholders, and customers of the brand” (Varga, 2013, p. 829). Dinnie (2022) uses the concepts of nation ambassadors, arguing that “the behaviour of individual citizens when abroad in foreign countries can be interpreted as being representative of their home nation”

(Dinnie, 2022, pp. 224-225). Their behaviour can influence the country's image in a good or bad way. Dinnie provides the example of English football hooliganism during the 1980s as a bad influence on the nation's image. While not every citizen can act as a nation ambassador, there are individuals who are "qualified and willing to play such a role" (Dinnie, 2022, pp. 224-225). Thus, individuals abroad can be representatives of their countries and play an important role in nation image branding and, more globally, in cultural diplomacy.

2.3.2 Civil actors as agents of cultural diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy can be seen as a form of public diplomacy in which non-state actors and individuals play a significant role, distinguishing it from more traditional, state-centric approaches. Bukina and Perminova (2021) identify the main distinction between traditional and public diplomacy as the involvement or lack thereof of non-state actors (Bukina & Perminova, 2021, p. 26). Consequently, civil non-state actors play a key agentive role in public diplomacy, and accordingly in cultural diplomacy. Hurn (2016) reinforces the idea that cultural diplomacy is not limited to governments, highlighting the presence of "high-profile individuals" (p. 81) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the cultural diplomacy context (Hurn, 2016, p. 81). Additionally, artists, art organizations, cultural associations, and private not-for-profit foundations can be seen as civil actors playing an active part in the creation of cultural diplomacy. Their activity can be driven by a desire for peer-to-peer collaboration or the desire for creative expression (Isar & Triandafyllidou, 2020, p. 394). As such, the goals and roles of civil actors in the context of cultural diplomacy can vary significantly.

In her investigation of cultural associations of migrants and refugees in post WWII Austrian society, Mokre (2017) found that they play a different role. They manufactured themselves as politically charged entities focused on dispelling notions of racism and xenophobia, while also being a centre for a national diasporic identity. In this sense they served as a kind of "cultural diplomacy from below" (Mokre, 2017, p. 65) for both forced refugees and voluntary migrants. Mokre (2017) also notes that Austrian artists' involvement and support of refugees and migrants helped their statements reach more people (Mokre, 2017, p. 64). Non-state affiliated individuals were able to create a community to mitigate culture between local and foreign. Accordingly, diasporic communities are important agents of fostering cultural diplomacy.

Diasporas are "unique actors in public diplomacy" (Brinkerhoff, 2019, p. 34) with their own "diplomatic goals" and agendas (Gülmez & Budrytė, 2022, p. 14). In certain cases diasporic communities use artistic expression to preserve their memories and identity. For example, Crimean Tatar and Lithuanian American diasporas (both deportees of the Soviet

Union) used historical films to “defend their memory” (p. 14) against the re-emerging Russian threat in Europe (Gülmez & Budryté, 2022, p. 14). According to Gülmez and Budryté (2022), diasporic communities that have experienced displacement and repression are more likely to engage in pro-democratic and anti-authoritarian activities (Gülmez & Budryté, 2022, p. 14). They use artistic forms of expression among other methods to “make the world remember” the injustices they had to suffer. They are able to represent past traumas through the arts to “both consolidate a sense of Self and delegitimize the political narratives of rival powers (such as Russia, here)” (Gülmez & Budryté, 2022, p. 14). In the Ukrainian context, the memory of Soviet-era repression and cultural erasure and current Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine drives diasporic efforts to assert cultural identity. Talking about Ukrainian diaspora in Canada, Holmes (2007) notes, “the [Ukrainian] diaspora... remembers the Russification process and Soviet control and attempts to reinvigorate the culture precisely because it had been suppressed in the past” (p. 136). This makes diasporic cultural work not only a form of identity preservation but also a response to historical injustice and an assertion of cultural resilience on the global stage.

3. Methodological framework

This chapter provides a detailed description of the research methods that were used to answer the research question and its sub-questions. The first section presents a justification for the chosen methods. In the following sections, sampling, data collection, data analysis and operationalization are explained. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the reliability and validity of the research and the positionality of the researcher.

3.1. Choice of methods

To investigate how Ukrainian initiatives in Rotterdam build bridges between diasporic Ukrainian and hosting Dutch cultures and communities, a qualitative research approach was employed. *Qualitative research* is particularly well-suited for uncovering the meanings of human reality by exploring the nuances and complexities of human experience (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 54). For the purpose of this study, it was essential to closely examine the experiences of members of the aforementioned initiatives, as well as those of Dutch community members who collaborate with these initiatives.

For collecting the data, several methods were employed. The primary method is collecting data via conducting *semi-structured interviews*. According to Brennen (2017), qualitative interviews focus on understanding the in-depth context of shared opinions and experiences (Brennen, 2017, p. 29). The semi-structured interview format provided the flexibility to explore topics in depth, allowing for follow-up questions that clarified responses and added context to the answers (Brennen, 2017, p. 30). This method enabled the collection of rich qualitative data through the personal experiences of the founders of the initiatives, their volunteers and members, as well as professionals from the Dutch community who have collaborated with these initiatives. Their insights shed light on how collaborations between Ukrainian and Dutch communities support cultural exchange, what activities build bridges between the two cultures, and how social media are used to attract and engage audiences. For the purpose of the study, ten interviews were conducted.

Additionally, *participant observation* was used as a supplement to the interviews. Hurst (2023) defines participant observation as “a field approach to gathering data in which the researcher enters a specific site for purposes of engagement or observation” (Hurst, 2023, p. 74). To gain a better understanding of the described interview participants’ experiences, the researcher participated in three events organized by VATAHA foundation: Pysanka workshop (about the Ukrainian traditional waxed coloring the Easter eggs technique), Film screening in Het Wijkpaleis (dedicated to 24 February, anniversary of full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine) and The Embroidery Shirt Day (a big event organized

in The Hague). Field notes from these activities complemented the findings from the interviews. It provided valuable information about common work experience and the audience interaction during workshops, such as the Pysanka workshop (Appendix C, images 7, 8). Participating in Embroidery Shirt Day helped to investigate the bigger-scale events organized by VATAHA and provided insights into the cultural exchange process, as Dutch and Romanian craft creators, as well as a Ukrainian embassy member, participated in these events.

Lastly, the *walkthrough method* (Light et al., 2016b) was used for observation of VATAHA foundation and Ko-station social media. It provided valuable information about the language they used (English, Ukrainian, Dutch) and the general focus of their social media, which, among other things, helped in making conclusions about who their targeted audience is. Moreover, the images and photos published on their social media were used in the results chapter and Appendix C of this thesis for visual representation of the discussed events and findings.

3.1.1. *Research ethics*

The data collection took place in accordance with the *ethical guidelines* for an interview study involving adult participants. Prior to the interviews, interviewees were informed about the research objectives, the voluntary and anonymous nature of the interviews, their right to withdraw at any moment, and the measures in place to maintain the confidentiality of their names and other personal data. Additionally, participants were also asked whether they agreed to the mention of their role within the initiative in the thesis. They were made aware of potential privacy risks, as revealing their role in the initiative could lead to identification. All elements of the consent form were reviewed and discussed with each participant again before the interview started, and clarifications were provided when needed. Participants were then asked to give either oral or written consent, including agreement to audio recording and, optionally, to the disclosure of their role in the initiative.

Additionally, ethical considerations were taken into account during the fieldwork observations. The researcher informed VATAHA foundation and Het Wijkpaleis about the fact that she started the research project on them prior to the fieldwork. The researcher aimed to be non-disruptive and strived to blend into the setting. In reporting observations, private conversations and interactions were avoided to respect the privacy of the participants. Moreover, the participants were anonymized in the field notes and reports to keep their confidentiality. As the researcher was observing the community she belongs to, she was self-reflective about her being a member of the Ukrainian community and tried to be objective during the observations to mitigate the risks of potential biases.

3.2. Selected case studies and sampling

This research is based on two in-depth case studies of Ukrainian initiatives operating in several Dutch cities, including Rotterdam: the VATAHA foundation and Ko-station.

VATAHA foundation (Appendix C, image 3) was established March 2022, just weeks after the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. In Ukrainian, the word *“vataha”* means *“a large crowd of people with a common goal”*. The founders of VATAHA are two young Ukrainian women who immigrated to the Netherlands years ago. Their team of volunteers consists of both long-term Ukrainian migrants and recently displaced individuals. VATAHA is a “platform for Ukrainian art and culture in the Netherlands” (VATAHA, n.d.). On their website, they define their mission as *“promoting Ukrainian art and culture throughout the Netherlands by building bridges between cultures and creating opportunities for creative Ukrainians”* (VATAHA, n.d.). An additional core aim is *“to advocate for Ukrainian freedom and justice against Russian oppression”* through art and the celebration of Ukrainian roots, culture, and heritage (VATAHA, n.d.). To date, VATAHA has hosted over 80 cultural events, including art exhibitions, craft workshops, and memorial gatherings in Rotterdam and other cities (Appendix C, image 3). In particular, the initiative is interested in collaboration with local partners. Thus, VATAHA foundation is an excellent example of a civil agent which acts as an ambassador for cultural diplomacy.

Ko-station (Appendix C, image 5) is described as *“a knowmad community”* (Ko-station, n.d.) founded in 2022 in Rotterdam by four Ukrainians residing in the Netherlands. Their main goal is *“sharing knowledge and multiplying thoughts and actions connected to it”* (Ko-station, n.d.). The initiative’s core activities include an intellectual club, a podcast series, and public events, all grounded in the central idea of community (Appendix C, image 6). Through their public events, Ko-station seeks to share “Ukrainian voices, stories and culture” (Ko-station, n.d.) with a wider international audience. In their podcast series, they attempt to explore “more sincere and unfamiliar information about Ukraine from Ukrainians” (Ko-station, n.d.). The initiative is distinctive in its dual focus, targeting both Ukrainian and international communities. This is also reflected in their social media presence, which maintains separate accounts in Ukrainian and English to engage both audiences. Moreover, Ko-station organizes two types of public events: *Rendezvous*, aimed at international participants, and *Zdybanka* (not a commonly used word, meaning “a meeting” in Ukrainian) intended members of the Ukrainian community.

VATAHA foundation and Ko-station both play a significant role in connecting Ukrainian and Dutch communities and in creating a Ukrainian narrative through culture in Rotterdam. An investigation of these initiatives contributes to the understanding of how diasporic and local communities can interact with one another through organized cultural

exchanges and experiences. This research also examines the active role of VATAHA foundation and Ko-station in facilitating cultural exchange and dialogue between the Ukrainian diaspora and the Dutch community. By doing so, the study contributes to bottom-up cultural diplomacy studies by providing insight into how grassroots initiatives can serve as agents of intercultural connection and informal cultural diplomacy.

While both VATAHA foundation and Ko-station operate across several major cities. Rotterdam was chosen as the setting for this study for both conceptual and practical reasons. Rotterdam is widely recognized as “a super diverse” city with a long history of migration (Scholten et al., 2018, p. 15). As Peterson (2016) notes, migrants “always bring with them a variety of customs, traditions, languages, and experiences” (Peterson, 2016, p. 1069). Consequently, Rotterdam is home to a wide range of communities that differ “in their socio-economic, cultural, religious and linguistic profiles” (Peterson, 2016, p. 1069). This diversity has fostered the development of places and practices aimed at bridging differences and encouraging interaction among various groups of Rotterdam citizens (Angelucci, 2019, pp. 137-138). Given this context, Rotterdam offers a fertile environment for examining how grassroots initiatives, such as VATAHA and Ko-station, facilitate cultural exchange and intercultural understanding. Finally, the researcher was familiar with the Rotterdam context, having lived there for several years, which contributed to the feasibility and depth of the study.

In addition to the two case-study initiatives, other organizations were approached for this research due to their experience in collaborating with or hosting events by VATAHA foundation and Ko-station. These organizations include Dok Huis, Het Wijkpaleis and Graaf Floris 88a (*Ter Bevordering*).

Dok Huis is a community house in the Rotterdam Charlois area, which aims to be a place where “you feel invited to participate and feel the space to bring yourself in. A great place where things can happen and curiosity can arise. A welcoming place where we make the world a bit more beautiful together. More sustainable, fairer” (Dokhuis, 2024). VATAHA foundation organized multiple events in Dok Huis, the ones discussed in this thesis are: Christmas party and several events dedicated to the third anniversary of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, such as a poetry evening, and the textile art project “*The Carpet of Love and Sorrow*”.

Het Wijkpaleis is a neighborhood community house. The organization presents itself as a place for “making, learning from each other, meeting and doing business”, where you can “walk in for a cup of coffee or a meal, help build at Het Wijkpaleis or help in the garden. You can go for creative advice from professional makers and implement your own ideas”. Het Wijkpaleis features various activities and workshops (Huize Middelland, 2025). VATAHA foundation organized the shared event in Het Wijkpaleis dedicated to the third anniversary of

Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine: a film screening “*Warning! Life Goes On*” and a photo exhibition “*February 1097, 2025*”.

Graaf Floris 88a (*Ter Bevordering*) is a street association that brings together residents from their street and surrounding areas. The group collectively rents a corner building in their street, where a variety of community activities take place, including “cooking and eating together, street drinks, film club ‘*Floriscoop*’, children’s activities, meetings, and workshops such as drawing lessons” (Huize Middelland, 2021). Graaf Floris 88a serves as a regular meeting space for Ko-station’s Ukrainian community events has also hosted several Ko-station events for the international community. Notable examples include an event centered around Dutch author Liza Weeda’s book “*Alexandra*” (Appendix C, images 10, 11), which tells the story of a Dutch-Ukrainian girl, and a discussing titled “*Finding common sense in turbulent times, shared sense-making to face our common anxieties*” (Ko-station Instagram, n.d), which focused on shared emotions about the global news.

Het Wijkpaleis and Graaf Floris 88a are both located in Rotterdam West and are part of the neighborhood communities’ network called Huize Middelland (Huize Middelland, 2025). Reflecting Rotterdam West’s multicultural character, the website of Huize Middelland is available in five languages: Dutch, English, Polish, Turkish and Portuguese (Huize Middelland, 2025), demonstrating the network’s commitment to diversity and inclusion.

3.2.1. *Recruitment of interview participants*

Interview respondents were selected using *criterion sampling*, a method that focuses on pre-established criteria of importance to ensure the suitability of participants for the specific research objectives (Patton, 2002, p. 96). In this study, the primary criteria included individuals’ roles within VATAHA foundation and Ko-station, or their involvement in collaborations with these initiatives. This approach was crucial for collecting insightful and meaningful data for the study.

Specifically, the study targeted members of the VATAHA foundation and Ko-station who organize events involving both Dutch and Ukrainian audiences, collaborate with Dutch partners, or are responsible for managing the initiative’s social media.

In addition, the study included representatives of Dutch community organizations in Rotterdam, Dok Huis, Het Wijkpaleis and Graaf Floris 88a, who have collaborated with the case-study initiatives, either by co-organizing cultural events or by providing space and support for such activities.

Participants from the Ukrainian initiatives were approached through social media (Instagram, What’s up). Their roles were identified through the initiatives’ social media content, the researcher’s personal knowledge, or via referrals from insiders within these

organizations (i.e. individuals from the personal network of the researcher). Representatives from Dok Huis and Het Wijkpaleis were contacted via email.

In addition to criterion sampling, snowball sampling was employed to recruit participants for this research. Snowball sampling involves one individual recommending another, often within their own network, and is particularly useful for accessing hard-to-reach or closely connected communities (Parker et al., 2019, p. 91). For example, during the interview with respondent 9, the researcher learned about the location where Ko-station hosts its events (Graaf Floris 88a). At the end of the interview, respondent 9 was asked to recommend a contact person from that location, which led to an interview with Respondent 10, a board member of the Graaf Floris 88a street association.

A complete list of respondents, including their demographic details and their roles in the initiatives, is provided in Appendix B. In total, ten individuals respondents participated in this research: six of Ukrainian origin and four of Dutch origin. Of the Dutch participants, three individuals are members of Dok Huis, Het Wijkpaleis and Graaf Floris 88a respectively. The fourth is the only Dutch member of Ko-station and is actively involved in organizing its international events.

Among the Ukrainian participants, two are members of Ko-station, who help organize events; one of them has also experience managing the initiative's social media. The other four participants are associated with VATAHA foundation, including the two co-founders of the initiative, a volunteer responsible for social media, and a project leader running several current projects of the VATAHA foundation.

Notably, one of the co-founders of VATAHA foundation also directs the Ukrainian House in Rotterdam.

3.3. Operationalization

For the clarity of this research several concepts should be explained.

By “building bridges” the researcher means the connections that appear between Ukrainian migrants and Dutch citizens, mutual understanding between them, as well as learning to live with the difference of each other.

Diaspora community - is long-term settled and new-coming migrants from Ukraine, that are located in the Netherlands.

Host community - is the local Dutch population.

In this study, I refer to non-governmental cultural diplomacy, where civil individuals play the active role of promoting their country-of-origin's narrative and culture from bottom-up level.

By civil agents of cultural diplomacy, I mean the high-profile diasporic individuals who intentionally promote the culture from their country-of-origin and initiate the cultural exchange between the migrants (from their country-of-origin) and host communities (from their county-of-residency).

3.4. Methods of analysis

This study used *thematic analysis* as the primary method for interpreting interview data. The analysis of the interview transcripts followed three coding phases: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Open coding is “the process of “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data” (Boeije, 2021, p. 96). Axial coding aims “to determine which elements in the research are the dominant ones and which are the less important ones” (Boeije, 2021, p. 109) and selective coding is defining core repeated themes (Boeije, 2021, p. 111). Thematic analysis was chosen because of its ability to uncover meaningful patterns and themes within the participants’ responses, providing deeper insight into the research questions.

For transcribing the interviews, a combination of tools was used to ensure accuracy and efficiency. [Otter.ai](#) was employed for interviews conducted in English, while TurboScribe was used for interviews in Ukrainian. Both tools generated initial transcripts from the audio recordings. To refine these transcripts, the researcher utilized OTranscribe, a web-based platform that allows users to listen to audio recordings, regulate playback speed, and make manual corrections directly within the transcripts. This tool was particularly helpful for proofreading and ensuring transcription accuracy.

Thematic analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti, which facilitated the organization, coding, and comparison of data across transcripts. The software helped the researcher to systematically apply and compare codes across transcripts, making it easier to identify and analyze patterns and recurring themes within the dataset.

3.5. Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are fundamental concepts in establishing the credibility of academic research (Silverman, 2011, p. 367). To enhance the reliability of this study, several measures have been taken. First, the research process has been made transparent through a detailed account of research choices and methods, and the steps taken during data collection and analysis. Silverman (2011) argues that transparency is a key element in ensuring the reliability of qualitative research (Silverman, 2011, pp. 360-364). Furthermore, all interpretations and argumentations are grounded in a close and systematic engagement

with the data. To ensure the validity of this research, the constant comparative method and deviant-case analysis will be used (Silverman, 2011, pp. 377-378). These strategies help to refine emerging themes, challenge initial assumptions, and ensure that conclusions are firmly rooted in the data.

3.6. Positionality of researcher

The researcher's membership of the Ukrainian community in Rotterdam proved beneficial for the fieldwork, particularly in terms of access and rapport-building. This insider position facilitated contact with several respondents who might have been difficult to reach otherwise. For example, contact with Respondent 1 was initially hindered by Instagram's privacy settings, which prevented her from seeing the researcher's direct message. However, after the researcher submitted a follow-up request, Respondent 1 recognized her from a previous Ukrainian community event and accepted the message request, a detail she later shared during the interview. Subsequently, Respondent 1 informed Respondent 5 about the researcher's outreach, again overcoming the visibility issue caused by Instagram privacy settings.

Another instance of community-based access involved the Ko-station initiative. Through a personal connection - a sponsor who was already a member of the Ko-station community - the researcher gained valuable insights into the community's structure and activities. This connection enabled her to identify and contact two relevant individuals from Ko-station who matched the research participant criteria, one of whom (Respondent 4) agreed to be interviewed. The researcher contacted the person (Respondent 4) via the What's Up and arranged the interview. Afterwards, Respondent 4 acted as a sponsor for reaching out to Respondent 7, the only Dutch member of the community who organized several events for a mixed Dutch and Ukrainian audience. After initial contact from Respondent 4 and receiving consent, Respondent 7's details were shared with the researcher. This process exemplifies the use of snowball sampling, where one participant facilitates access to another.

Moreover, the researcher's prior short volunteer experience in the Ukrainian House helped bypass potential gatekeeping with one of the co-founders of VATAHA, who also manages the Ukrainian House. Since the researcher had already had direct personal contact with this person, initiating an interview was easier.

Finally, several interviews were conducted in Ukrainian, which enabled participants to express themselves more comfortably and helped the researcher to get deeper, more nuanced insights into their experiences. Attending several events organized by the VATAHA

foundation and Ukrainian house events also allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of the nature and dynamics of these gatherings.

However, the researcher's position as a member of the Ukrainian community also carried the risk of preconceptions about certain topics and concepts discussed during the interview. To mitigate this, the researcher asked follow-up questions to elaborate on the meanings attributed to key terms, ensuring that their meanings were derived from the participants themselves rather than assumed.

Additionally, fieldwork observations and prior experience attending VATAHA events or encountering their promotional materials on social media enhanced the researcher's contextual understanding of the described activities and experiences of VATAHA respondents, helping to interpret the narratives they shared more accurately.

4. Analysis and results

This section presents the research findings, based on a thematic analysis of recurring ideas, concepts, and patterns within the data. Three main themes have emerged: (1) the organizational framework of VATAHA foundation and Ko-station; (2) bringing people together; (3) collaborative relationships.

The results are organized into separate sections, each concentrating on one of the three main themes identified.

The first theme - organizational framework of VATAHA foundation and Ko-station - reveals the main findings about the structure of these initiatives. This theme is further divided into subsections, covering the importance of engaged experts and cultural diplomacy as a core of the initiatives.

The second theme - bringing people together - is divided into the following sections: providing a space for encounters; connecting by doing, making and creating; connecting through cultural practices and experiencing commonalities.

The third theme - collaborative relationships - focuses on networks and partnerships.

4.1. Organizational framework of VATAHA foundation and Ko-station

During the research process, both similarities and differences between the two initiatives were found. Comparing VATAHA foundation and Ko-station, Respondent 7 refers to Ko-station as “inwards community” and to VATAHA as “outwards organization”. Being a member of Ko-station, he defines it as “more private” and community-oriented and VATAHA foundation as “public” and “oriented on external collaborations”. Respondent 7 thus draws a clear line between the two initiatives in terms of their openness and modes of interaction.

“[VATAHA foundation is] an organization that is very effective at creating impact, producing discourse, producing activities that bring not just people together, but also work together: they create work [for example, involvement of artists to work on their events], or they create big events. They acquire funds from the government. They work together with bigger institutions, if they can. So, they are a little bit more professionally oriented at making, they're a bit more like a company... VATAHA is trying to make the Ukrainian culture survive by really forcing it out there, actively spreading it.” (Respondent 7)

Respondent 7 thus emphasizes the broader scope of VATAHA, its influential nature, as well as its outward focus, which is supported by the findings of this research. Ko-station is

described as a community-oriented organization, with a smaller scale than VATAHA foundation.

“Ko-station is more like a community... Ko-station really tries to connect people, provide a safe space, density and friendship ... Also [it is] a bit smaller bubble.” (Respondent 7)

Respondent 7 also noted similarities between the two organizations, underscoring the active and visible presence of both VATAHA and Ko-station, stating:

“Both of them play an important role in creating culture, creating community, generating a lot of money for Ukraine, and also through other initiatives... Ko-station and VATAHA have quite an important role ... in creating events and knowledge ... [they] create awareness”. (Respondent 7)

The various activities and efforts of VATAHA and Ko-station, echo Holmes' (2007) idea that diasporic groups possess the capacity to effectively “organize and strategize abroad while maintaining and reinvigorating culture at home, abroad, and in spaces in between” (Holmes, 2007, p. 134). In this scenario the Ukrainians in Rotterdam were able to create a community for themselves in Rotterdam. Moreover they serve as links between home and the host through cultural and social engagement (Akçapar and Aksel 2017). Both initiatives operate on a volunteer basis, meaning all members of the initiatives are volunteers who contribute their time and efforts without financial compensation. This volunteer-driven model, while rooted in passion and commitment, is identified as one of the main challenges by members of both organizations. Respondent 9, who is part of Ko-Station, explains:

“Volunteering is usually extremely draining, and as it suggests, you do it next to your job, next to your family and all of that ...it's really the cycle of people trying to do things as volunteers and feeling very passionate about them and then burning out.” (Respondent 9)

Volunteers despite having positive motivations often experience burnout (Morse et al., 2020, pp. 229-230). Similarly, Respondent 1, who is a former social media manager of VATAHA foundation, noted:

“You start volunteering with the thought of setting aside an hour a day, but you see that this hour is not enough to do what you want, to be of sufficient quality. But in order for it to be of sufficient quality, you have to allocate more time. And it turns out that you have to choose either between your volunteering work or come exhausted to [official] work.” (Respondent 1)

The risk of burnout and the strain of navigating between volunteering activities, work, and personal life are thus seen as real problems, contributing to a shortage of people in the organizations. Respondent 1 sees the possible solution in providing paid positions, which

are currently not feasible for either organization: *“If you can at least have a part-time position, you no longer need to think, well, what to eat”*.

4.1.1. Importance of engaged experts

During the investigation it became evident that the driving power behind both VATAHA foundation and Ko-station are the people, an engaged and passionate community with a strong interest and expertise in culture.

For instance, Respondent 4, talking about one of the co-founders of Ko-station, refers to her as someone who used to be a *“steering wheel of all the events”* for a long time:

“She’s so immersed in Ukrainian culture and history, because she’s also studying something related to that, and it’s just her genuine interest, and she just knows so much. So she was always pushing these ideas, and then we were supporting her and handling the organization process...” (Respondent 4)

This account highlights how the co-founder’s deep personal interest and educational background in the cultural realm helped her to generate ideas that were later brought to life by other members. This illustrates how engaged leaders with a background in cultural expertise play a key role in the success of these initiatives.

Similarly, both co-founders of VATAHA foundation - Respondent 5 and Respondent 2 - are experts in culture-related domains: Respondent 5 in culinary arts and music, and Respondent 2 in architecture. Respondent 5 sees it as her personal “mission” to preserve Ukrainian culture and maintain its development. This is the apparent purpose of cultural diplomacy - to preserve and disseminate a nation’s culture (Uminska-Woroniecka, 2016, p. 5). Respondent 5 is genuinely passionate about this topic:

“I am a fan of Ukrainian culture. And especially Hutsul [region in the West part of Ukraine] culture, because I have a large part of the family, they are representatives of Hutsul people ... For me, the preservation of all this [culture] (because I see how it is getting lost in Ukraine) and promotion of this topic is about culture having an incredible resource, only it needs to be seen. This is one of my missions.”
(Respondent 5)

Respondent 5 describes her connection with Ukrainian culture as deeply personal and as part of her family roots. She sees it as her cultural heritage and she feels personal responsibility for preserving and promoting it. Interestingly, the aspects of Ukrainian culture that she aims to protect are, according to her, increasingly neglected or disappearing even within Ukraine itself. In this sense, her efforts to preserve it may have been transferred from there to the Netherlands. Otero (2021) suggests that entrusting the preservation of cultural heritage to individuals without formal training may lead to deleterious outcomes (Otero,

2021, 1-7). This makes the presence of individuals like Respondent 5 - who combine personal investment with cultural knowledge and a passion for it - particularly valuable.

The other notable characteristic of the founders and volunteers of these organizations is that they are already proactive individuals. Many of them have been involved in community related activities for much of their adult lives. During the 14 years she has been living in the Netherlands, Respondent 5 joined the Ukrainian choir in The Hague and participated in opening the first Ukrainian school in the Netherlands. Maintaining strong ties to home culture while navigating life in a new country is a feature of diasporic identity (Brinkerhoff, 2019, p. 58). After the full scale invasion started she took more active position and started leading meetings in the Hague:

“And after the war began, a full-scale invasion, everyone went to the Russian Embassy...And people knew me because of the choir a little bit. I can't say I was a public person, but some people recognize me. So someone gave me a loudspeaker, and I'm already leading this meeting. That's how my activity began.” (Respondent 5)

Respondent 2 has also been active, living in the Netherlands for 7 years, she ran for mayor of the neighborhood, so she was known to be active in the Dutch community through that. After the full-scale invasion she felt the need to help and take action immediately on that front: *“On February 24 [2022], I opened the news, saw what had happened, immediately realized that I should do something...I need to find a way to help right now.”* She started fundraising, and in March 2022 joined the Ukrainian House team, first as a volunteer, but almost instantly she was given the position of the coordinator of Ukrainian House, which is a project of Rotterdam municipality: *“And since I lived here, spoke the language, understood both cultures, I could be this bridge to understand what, in fact, is needed, how to organize it, how to communicate it, how to convey it, and so on.”* The fact that these individuals were already involved in general community activities and were well known amongst the community (both Dutch and Ukrainian) meant that their involvement was almost inevitable. It also meant that being known through a network of active community participants she was able to quickly rise to a leadership position. Her story correlates with what Brinkerhoff (2019) calls the “in-between advantage” of diasporans, as her experience in both cultures made her “capable of bridging the people-to-people understandings” (Brinkerhoff, 2019, pp. 58-60).

As Dinnie (2022) stated, diasporic networks bring together people with strong “intrinsic motivation” (Dinnie, 2022, pp. 225-226) to represent their country of origin in the host country setting. Thus, both Respondent 5 and Respondent 2 were involved in volunteering activities, where they met and started VATAHA:

“At some point I met [Respondent 2], also through some volunteer activity. And we decided that after all we want to work more in the field of culture, within the culture,

because this is both my profile and her profile, we just have different ones. And we decided to found VATAHA.” (Respondent 5)

Their backgrounds in cultural studies and employment meant their deep desire to help after the beginning of the invasion, was thus channeled in this direction - that of cultural diplomacy.

4.1.2. Cultural diplomacy as the core of initiatives

Both initiatives demonstrate a clear orientation toward engaging international audiences. Targeting foreign audiences for cultural exchange is also one of the features of cultural diplomacy (Uminska-Woroniecka, 2016, p. 5). However, while in the case of VATAHA this international outreach is their main focus, for Ko-station it represents just one of two core directions.

Ko-station, originally established in 2022 under its Ukrainian name Stantsiya Konovaltsa, initially focused exclusively on serving the Ukrainian community. Over time, the initiative expanded to include an international dimension. Respondent 4 clarified the Ko-station’s dual nature as follows:

“At Stantsiya Konovaltsa [Ukrainian for “station of Konovalts”] we have two different directions, let's say two different branches. We started as just a Ukrainian oriented organization, so we have been fully concentrating on Ukrainians as our target audience. But then we also developed some events for an international audience, not just Dutch people, but also just anyone. And we also opened another branch, which is an English international oriented version of Stantsiya Konovaltsa, which also has a different name. It's called Ko-station. So, we shorten Konovalts to ‘Ko-’ and it's “Ko-station.” (Respondent 4)

Explaining why Ko-station “cannot become just an organization for diaspora”, Respondent 9 argues that it is essential for the initiative to engage external, non-Ukrainian audiences. This outward orientation, she suggests, helps avoid what she refers to as “the conservation of the culture that happened to other diasporas”. She cites the example of the Ukrainian diaspora after World War II, where cultural preservation efforts led to a form of insular traditionalism. According to Respondent 9, this approach resulted in a disconnect between the diasporic group and the broader society, stemming from a lack of universal ideas and what she metaphorically describes as “cobwebs” that prevented meaningful cultural exchange. In this context, she also brings up the term of “cultural diplomacy”:

“Conservation of the culture looks very authentic, very touching. On the other hand, there was very little being done about this cultural diplomacy that was coming out. There was little idea of Ukrainian independence, for example, coming from the

Ukrainian diaspora. There were a lot of embroideries [traditional Ukrainian clothes], a lot of hopak [traditional Ukrainian dance], a lot of churches. But in the end, there were very few universal ideas, because of which these communities [that] are huge in Canada to a million ethnic Ukrainians (this is a huge population), that could not build these cobwebs outside. And we, as a Ko-station, we do not yet know, we do not have a perfect formula for how to do this, but at least we are aware of this, we often think about it and try to build our agenda in this direction.” (Respondent 9)

Respondent 9 provided an example of a diasporic community that focuses inwardly on its own members, illustrating a dynamics that resonates with the notion of separation, discussed by Chao and Xie (2024): “When individuals have limited interaction with the host culture while maintaining strong connections to and reaffirmation of their native culture, the resulting acculturation outcome is referred to as separation” (Chao & Xie, 2024, pp. 110-111).

In her reflection, Respondent 9 touches upon two reasons why Ko-station aims to target an international audience: first, to avoid the risk of cultural “conservation” or stagnation in a closed diasporic setting, and second, to contribute to shaping a Ukrainian narrative within the host society. The latter one that can be achieved through communication between Ukrainian and Dutch individuals, and sharing nuanced stories on interpersonal level (Goff, 2013, pp. 420-421). This dual aim reflects a commitment not only to preserving cultural identity but also to ensuring its relevance and visibility within a broader, multicultural context.

A similar concern is expressed by one of the co-founders of VATAHA, who emphasizes the importance of intercultural engagement:

“We are trying to have a local partner at every event ... to prevent forming “a bubble”, to have a sharing, intercultural exchange and dialogue.” (Respondent 5)

This intentional approach to local partnerships and collaborations reflects a broader understanding of cultural diplomacy - not as a one-sided projection of identity, but as a dialogical process that fosters mutual recognition and learning. It supports Goff’s assertion that bridging differences and facilitating mutual understanding is the essence of cultural diplomacy (Goff, 2013, p. 420). By involving local Dutch partners in their events, initiatives like VATAHA aim to ensure that Ukrainian culture is not only preserved but meaningfully integrated into the social and cultural fabric of the host society.

The intentional nature of efforts towards cultural promotion and exchange with a local culture, are the most essential element of cultural diplomacy (Uminska-Woroniecka, 2016, p. 5). Both Ko station and Vataha as civil agents of cultural diplomacy believe there are several distinct aspects of the culture that cannot accurately be communicated through a book or social media post but rather only through the person or group: *“Like these nuances that you cannot read in public sources, but all Ukrainians know it, because it is their heritage”*

(Respondent 5). This resonates with the idea that civil agents play a crucial role in the performance of cultural diplomacy (Hurn, 2016, p. 81) and can provide unique information through engaging on an intimate personal level (Goff, 2013, pp. 420-421).

4.2. Bringing people together

One of the co-founders of VATAHA foundation outlines their major realm of interest as “real-life contact with people”, which she describes as follows:

“Our whole focus is on organizing events where local residents can meet Ukrainians and get acquainted with them. And we do it all through the prism of culture... They come to workshops, lectures, concerts and so on. And in the process they learn something new and at the same time get acquainted with interesting Ukrainians, where new acquaintances and contacts are made. And these people already have more touch with Ukrainian culture, they learn something a little more than what they get from the news.” (Respondent 2)

Respondent 2 is talking about expanding the knowledge that local people have from the news about Ukraine by providing encounters with diasporic individuals. Thus, new associations and images of Ukrainians and Ukrainian culture have appeared, which correlates with the notion of a “nation image”, that is built from existing knowledge, and experiences (Hakala & Lemmetyinen, 2011, pp. 14-16). In this case Dutch people may have had some preconceptions of Ukrainians created by the media, however, Respondent 2 said that facilitating encounters could dispel or provide nuance to this.

Both VATAHA foundation and Ko-station play a significant role in advancing contact and cultural exchange between Ukrainian and Dutch individuals. They achieve this through a variety of approaches, such as providing physical and social places for encounters; fostering connections through collaborative activities such as by making, doing, and creating together; connecting people through cultural practices rooted in shared interests; and drawing upon commonalities, such as mutual interests, shared memories, or global themes. These approaches focus on building bridging capital, in other words interpersonal connections that are formed across diverse social groups, helping individuals to overcome barriers like ethnicity, cultural differences etc. (Madhavan & Landau, 2011, p. 476). Thus, using spaces for encounters, collaboration, cultural practices, existing commonalities and themes from the collective consciousness provides an entry point to communication.

4.2.1. Providing a place for encountering

Both organizations provide a space for meaningful encounters by bringing together Ukrainians and local Dutch residents into the same physical space. Through events,

workshops, or other collaborative activities designed for mixed audiences, these initiatives create opportunities for direct interaction. As Doornbosch-Akse and Van Vuuren (2019) emphasize, face-to-face communication plays a critical role in fostering understanding, trust, and relationships across different communities (Doornbosch-Akse & Van Vuuren, 2019, p. 493). Such encounters are, therefore, instrumental in bridging cultural divides and building mutual recognition between the Ukrainian diaspora and the host society.

However, these types of interactions do not always come naturally. Diasporans often form “bubbles” (p. 26) with others from their country of origin (Van Bakel et al., 2015b, p. 26), driven by shared identities and common experiences of adaptation and challenges in a new country (Cohen, 2008, pp. 7-8). A relevant example comes from the initiative Het Wijkpaleis, which initially observed that several neighborhood initiatives led by various diasporic groups were largely focused on their own communities and did not actively engage with others in the area. The co-founder of Het Wijkpaleis described a turning point when they began reaching out to different initiatives in the neighborhood, which in turn started the communication between these communities:

“And then we invited the Turkish group, and the Moroccan, and the Suriname. And they started to say: “Oh, we are here [in Rotterdam] for 20 years”, and then the Suriname group was... “we are 50 years already here” [in Rotterdam]... But the fun thing was that they didn’t really know each other, and they didn’t visit each other’s places. So we were able to make a tour along all the places and show them to each other.” (Respondent 3)

As a result of Het Wijkpaleis’s outreach to other neighborhood initiatives, the network of Huize Middleland (Buurtplekken) was established, which connects 14 community initiatives from the Rotterdam West Area. Respondent 10, a member of the street association Graaf Floris 88a, one of the participating initiatives, referred to Het Wijkpaleis as the “foundation” of this network.

In a similar vein, the VATAHA foundation provides spaces that facilitate encounters between local Dutch citizens and Ukrainian migrants in Rotterdam through its cultural events. Encounters “have the potential to turn into meaningful interactions by providing the first step towards building relationships across differences” (Peterson, 2016, pp. 1079-1082), and one of the possible outcomes of this turn can be befriending (Askins, 2016). Respondent 5 recounted an example of this dynamic, following the Run for Ukraine event. She described a moment after the race when participants - both Ukrainian and Dutch - were sitting and resting together:

“I witnessed when people started a real discussion that lasted a very long time. They are still friends. These were two people who met in the park [after the Run for Ukraine event], the guy was drinking Dutch beer, and a girl came and sat next to him

on a bench. And she told him, 'Oh, phew, I don't like Heinekein so much, Obolon is much better in Ukraine'. And that's it. And then they began to talk about factories, about water, why it is better, that malt is much better in Ukraine. And she pulled such a discussion." (Respondent 5)

By providing spaces for encounters through the event they organize, Ko-station and VATAHA facilitate social interactions that might not otherwise occur. These interactions create opportunities for the exchange of cultural knowledge and the development of mutual understanding. Sometimes this process takes place in unique ways through collaborative activities that involve doing or making something together.

4.2.2. Connecting by doing, making and creating together

One of the formats through which people can experience collaborative work is the workshop, which is commonly used by VATAHA foundation and several neighborhood initiatives both VATAHA and Ko-station collaborate with. While Ko-station uses this format less, favoring other formats such as lectures combined with discussions, it also incorporates workshops into its programming. In workshops individuals must work together collectively but may also express their own personalities and ideas (Hackney & Settingington, 2022, p. 320). Engaging in a task together can build bridges between people from different backgrounds. As noted by Hackney and Settingington (2016), workshops often function as a private and trusting environment (Hackney & Settingington, 2022, p. 320). This perspective is reflected by Respondent 8, the program leader of Dok Huis, who shared her vision of the benefits of workshops as follows:

"It feels like when you do something, I wouldn't say that you can hide behind that. That's not the right word, but it gives you a safe way of starting to connect."
(Respondent 8)

Respondent 2 echoed a similar perspective, sharing her general observations on the social dynamics of workshops organized by VATAHA:

"During workshops people spend a long time doing something together. That helps to get acquainted, and reduces this communication barrier, because you already seem to be doing something together. And there are some practical reasons to turn to each other and ask to pass something, for example, and it goes back and forth. It simplifies communication between people." (Respondent 2)

This highlights how the act of shared creation can naturally facilitate interaction, making participants feel more at ease and opening space for informal dialogue. Community arts activities provide a realm within which contact and encounters can occur which ultimately lead to mutual communication (Beauregard et al., 2019, p. 439)

A comparable example from Ko-station involves a Ukrainian dumplings (*varenyky*) workshop held in a neighborhood community house. Respondent 4 reflected on the experience:

"We were making dumplings altogether, eating dumplings. After we cooked the dumplings, it was just about eating. So it was basically just like a dinner with friends, you know, a big, big dinner, dinner party, let's say, and people were just talking to each other, and it was quite nice." (Respondent 4)

Workshops allow for mutual experiences of shared making which can foster communal bonds (Hackney & Settrington, 2022, p. 318). Making something together for respondents was a way of getting closer to one another. The role of food in connecting people was strongly emphasized by Respondent 8, who reflected on its significance through the example of the practices of Dok Huis.

Another important dimension of connection through doing, making and creating together extends into the professional sphere, specifically co-creation activities between artists. Braslauskas (2021) suggests that collaborative efforts to address a shared problem can facilitate mutual understanding and interpersonal closeness, even among the contrast of cultural differences (Braslauskas, 2021, pp. 200-201). VATAHA foundation creates opportunities for collaborative projects where artists from different cultures work together towards a common goal. One notable example is a music and poetry event dedicated to commemorating 24 February, during which Dutch and Ukrainian artists collaborated on a VATAHA-led project. Respondent 6, who was one of the project's curators, described how young Ukrainian and Dutch poets and musicians learned about each other's similarities, differences, and life experiences while rehearsing and developing the concepts they had been working on together:

"...throughout those three weeks, they had their online and offline meetings and rehearsals... They got to work together interculturally, a Ukrainian and a Dutch person, learning about each other's histories, and general perspectives on life, finding similarities and differences themselves to create their pieces together, learning more about each other again, and just spending time with each other to create those pieces. And then further bonding by performing them and then involving the audience in that also, and showing the audience when we have the performances those kinds of similarities and differences that they found." (Respondent 6)

This example shows how engaging in a shared creative task can serve as a powerful bridge between people from different cultural backgrounds. It supports Perrault et al. 's (2011) findings that collaborations tend to "establish informal relationships and communication links" (Perrault et al., 2011, p. 296). Working together in a non-occupational setting is predicated on some sort of interpersonal connection. Moreover, it reveals three

interconnected levels of connection: between Dutch and Ukrainian artists, and subsequently between both groups and the audience. These layered interactions highlight how collaborative artistic processes may foster not only interpersonal bonds but also broader intercultural understanding. Respondent 6, reflecting on her experience as an organizer and curator of such activities, and as a creative practitioner herself, emphasized the significance of person-to-person engagement in the context of intercultural exchange:

“they [creatives] mainly got involved through the staffing of their ideas. When they discuss their ideas for specific work, they of course, start asking each other questions about generally how did you come up with this? Why did you add that? Why did you add this? And then larger conversations about life experiences flow, and they learn about each other, as in the shoulder to shoulder, voice to voice”.

Alongside poetry and music, these organizations use other cultural practices in order to connect people.

4.2.3. Connecting through cultural practices

Culture lies at the heart of both Ko-station and VATAHA foundation. This research explored several of their cultural practices, including poetry, music, forgotten craft, visual art, and dance, all of which play a role in their programming and community engagement.

During fieldwork, the researcher attended the “Embroidery Day” event, a large-scale gathering that began with an official part and presentation, during which most Ukrainians wore traditional embroidered costumes. The program opened with a speech by the Ambassador of Ukraine to the Kingdom of the Netherlands. This was followed by presentations from two Dutch embroidery artists, who introduced various regional styles of Dutch traditional costumes. They pointed out similarities between Dutch and Ukrainian traditions, noting shared elements like red necklaces and explained different Dutch embroidery techniques. The next presentation featured the “Carpet of Love and Sorrow” – an art initiative that transforms personal emotions into woven tapestry. In this project, Ukrainian participants weave braids as a symbol of their experiences - red strands represent those who are living through the war in Ukraine and black strands commemorate those who have been lost. Following this, the project “My own Vyshyvanka” was presented, showcasing embroidered shirts created over several months by both Ukrainians and international participants. The official part concluded with a joint performance by a Ukrainian ballet troupe with Dutch dancers, highlighting the fusion of cultural traditions and the unifying power of the arts. Beauregard et al. (2019) asserts that “different arts forms foster awareness, understanding, recognition, and dialogue across people from different backgrounds” (Beauregard et al., 2019, p. 439). So using multiple art forms during the event was beneficial

for fostering connection between Ukrainian and local residents who visited the Embroidery Day event.

The second part of the event featured six different workshops taking place simultaneously, along with live Ukrainian choir music. A notable aspect of this part of the event was the creative integration of traditional techniques into modern applications. For example, participants used traditional embroidery methods to create contemporary items such as keychains or putting “prints” with traditional symbols on T-shirts and bags to make cultural heritage “part of your day-to-day outfit.” Respondent 1 discussed this prior to the event, highlighting the significance of blending tradition with modernity and the importance of making cultural symbols accessible and relevant to contemporary life.

“The event about embroidery, which will be presented already, I think it will also work, because these are such expectations. It meets the expectations of the Dutch about these traditional crafts, and at the same time it can present not just traditional crafts, but what you can still do with them cool, modern.” (Respondent 1)

The revival of traditional ‘forgotten’ crafts for presentation to new, foreign audiences can also serve to reconnect people - both migrants and members of the host society - with their own cultural pasts and identities. Similarly, in Hackney and Settingington’s (2022) study on Bangladeshi embroidery textile workshop practice in United Kingdom, they found that the comforting domestic associations of working with textile materials and stitch processes were a key contributory factor here, with the added value for the kantha stitchers of engaging with participants heritage. Moreover, they found that working with a tangible material product that has a cultural history behind it encourages some level of understanding of that culture’s past and present (Hackney & Settingington, 2022, p. 320).

Respondent 8 reflected on this idea, emphasizing how the performance and exhibition of these forgotten crafts can foster a renewed sense of cultural connection. She explained:

“There are people there who come because Persian weaving connects them to their background, but there are also people who are just really interested in a new thing that they don’t know,” and “weaving can be a metaphor for everything.” (Respondent 8)

The metaphor she is referring to here is a remembrance of a collective past and its performance. In this context, weaving thus becomes a powerful symbol of collective memory and cultural continuity, a tangible, performative act that links the past with the present.

Another example of building a connection through art was an event organized by Ko-station, called “*Vinyl and Wine*,” which was devoted to Ukrainian pop music from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. This event drew both Ukrainian and international audiences. A

distinctive feature of this event was the presence of authentic vinyl recordings of pop from that era, which one of the members brought from Ukraine.

“She went to Ukraine, and she bought some of the records, and then she brought them here, and we had a charity auction where we sold those records. It was very authentic, and it was interesting for both Ukrainians and internationals, because it was just about music and culture”. (Respondent 4)

Here we can see once again how a niche interest, centred around a particular form of art, can bring together people who share a common passion - in this case, at an event where they could experience authentic recordings from their country of origin. It can be inferred from this that the event attendees were already audiophiles and that this connection, through a shared passion for music, brought them together in a context where such interaction might not have happened otherwise.

Moreover, Respondent 6 points out that artists in the fields of poetry, music, visual art and dance often co-create with one another and, therefore, are already engaged in collaborative work. She also notes how artists are already working within collectives composed of both Dutch and Ukrainian members, and how these specific projects provide opportunities for meaningful co-creation and intercultural artistic collaboration.

“... poets and musicians, but it can also be artists, just visual artists, in the exhibition where we have Ukrainian and Dutch artists work together...I know VATAHA had experience with bridging Ukrainian and Dutch dance collectives in co-creating a performance.” (Respondent 6)

Music, poetry, and other forms of art can be seen as commonalities across cultures that provide an avenue for people from different cultures to connect and, in a sense, speak the same language. However, the arts are not the only universals that human beings share. The following section will explore other commonalities that facilitate a connection between diasporas and locals.

4.2.4. Providing experience of commonalities

A degree of sameness or commonalities is needed to achieve communality, togetherness, solidarity and collective harmony (Cunliffe et al., 2024, pp. 354-355).

During the analysis, several recurring themes of commonalities were found. These include a shared passion for creating, mutual interests, shared memories and experiences, artistic commonalities across cultures (as discussed in the previous section), and engagement with universal themes. One illustrative example came from a film screening at Het Wijkpaleis, featuring a film by a Ukrainian artist, who went to a de-occupied city in Ukraine. Respondent 3 reflected on this experience, stating :

“It was important that it was also showing a maker. That was also interesting. You know, the power he gave to people by making his art. Yeah, that for me, it was like a sociological connection to here.” (Respondent 3)

The respondent identified a parallel between the film's focus on artistic creation and one of the principles upon which Het Wijkpaleis is founded - bringing people together through the act of making:

‘It's called Wijkpaleis, a place for making. And we do have all different kinds of makers upstairs. And for us, it's about making as he is doing [meaning ‘creating’ like the artist from the movie is creating street art] and doing, but also about the sentence ‘making it in life’ and ‘succeeding in life’, and how you can make interconnections between people and helping each other. And that was also something, I mean, his art wasn't like autonomous. It was really making a connection to people and doing something for it’. (Respondent 3)

In this instance, a connection was formed around the shared act of making or creating, highlighting a commonality between the Ukrainian filmmaker and the respondent at Het Wijkpaleis. This illustrates how a bridge can be built through a shared passion for creating.

Speaking about Dutch audiences, Respondent 2 mentioned the importance of common interest as one of the main motivating factors for participating in specific cultural events:

“The more specific the cultural aspect, the more specific people it attracts. For example, the Easter egg painting workshop attracts a specific group of people that like crafts. Embroidery Day attracts people who work with textile, maybe embroidery is their family activity. For example, when we do this in The Hague, the local embroidery club participates. In general, people with common interests are interested in seeing each other. Through these common interests, there is some kind of search for points of contact [point of tangency]. Another example, the Run for Ukraine event attracts people from running clubs.” (Respondent 2)

It is evident from this excerpt that more specialized events draw individuals who will already have commonalities based on a niche interest, and this facilitates an initial connection that can lead to a deeper understanding with one another. As Sumi and Mase (2000) suggest, identifying and visualizing shared interests among individuals in community settings can facilitate meaningful encounters and contribute to informal social bonding (Sumi & Mase, 2000, pp. 35-40).

Another point of commonality is a shared universal experience, such as hardship, embodied specifically in this case by war. Both the Netherlands and Ukraine have experienced war and this is a point upon which individuals can connect. Respondent 6,

referring to a collaborative exhibition where two artists from both countries were to work together, remarked that:

We had two artists [working on the project together]. One Dutch poet wanted to write a poem connecting the experiences of her grandma, who lived through World War Two as a child, to the theme of the event, which was about person to person support between Dutch and Ukrainian people in regards to war. And so she brought up this, her connection, let's say, to war through the grandma that brought her to understand Ukrainian experiences a bit more. The Ukrainian artist heard of the Dutch poet's story [about WWII], and she remembered her grandma, who had a [similar] experience: who lived through Holodomor [artificial famine in Ukraine 1932-1933] and then World War II. And so they started talking. And then from that conversation, they learned more about each other's histories and the similarities between our experiences historically.” (Respondent 6)

This quotation illustrates how the remembrance of a common hardship faced by the families of artists from both the Netherlands and Ukraine drew them together and made their collaboration and relationship more profound. It resonates with a relational approach to building common ground. As discussed by Steenkamp and Fourie (2022), the search for and creation of cultural commonalities can strengthen cooperation and solidarity in multicultural settings (Steenkamp & Fourie, 2023, p. 49).

Another example of the universality of war as a commonality to build bridges was made evident by Respondent 7, a member of Ko-station. He shared his experience of organizing a book event and discussing universal topics from the book:

“Because what you could tell is that, hey, we have these themes that are very relevant for Ukrainians. But they are universal themes. They are themes like migration. They are themes like ancestry, themes of war...I think they were talking quite openly, like, without too much restraint. I feel like everyone had something to say about it, because the topics were very personal and universal at the same time. So it's like, you really everyone can relate.” (Respondent 7)

Here it is apparent that Ko-station chooses to organize certain events around these universal themes because they believe that an organic discussion can grow from these themes. This is echoed by Respondent 9 when she says, “it was very casual. It was something like, come along, you know, let's chat,” and, “it does not necessarily have to be about Ukraine.” The respondent also discussed how people would be more motivated to discuss pertinent world topics, which is something they encourage:

“The most interesting part about it is that it's intellectual [nature of Ko-station]... So it [events] can be about the history of any other country, political formation, the world. It can be about biology. It can be about computer science ...I think despite these

events either having clearly yellow and blue on them [Ukrainian theme] or being more of a like, let's talk about some kind of more global topic, motivation is still the desire to make sense of what is going on in the world.” (Respondent 9)

4.3. Collaborative relationships

This subsection focuses on various dimensions of the networks, including networks between artists, the role of networks in securing Dutch partners, reaching broader audiences through networks, and the internal networks within the Ukrainian community- both on a personal level and through organized initiatives. Additionally, the topic of partnerships with neighborhood initiatives is discussed in more detail. The analysis begins by considering how these partnerships contribute to a sense of belonging to the local community. It then discusses the role of partner initiatives in promoting events organized by Ko-station and VATAHA foundation events, highlighting how Dutch partners are often seen as intermediaries between local audiences and Ukrainian organizers. Lastly, some findings reveal the importance of aligning new events with the regular schedule of the community houses, as a method for improving attendance of the VATAHA foundation and Ko-station events in neighborhood settings.

4.3.1. Networking

The investigation shows that networking is important for the case-study initiatives on several levels. For instance, there are the networks between artists, as Respondent 6 mentions about current projects that:

“Ukrainian artists helped select Dutch artists, and so they were familiar with each other beforehand, and they knew with whom they want to start working when they went in the project, it wasn't us who was who were trying to connect them together.” (Respondent 6)

So an existing network of collaborators built around art can bring artists from both communities together for VATAHA's projects.

Another role of networking is finding Dutch partners for collaboration. The co-founder of VATAHA foundation mentions that they can use the network of their local partners, and that sometimes new collaborations come from recommendations from their former partners:

“For example, someone [Dutch partners] have already worked with us. These people are active, so they are usually friends with the same active people who maybe work in another area ... they share our contacts so that is how new partnerships can begin.” (Respondent 5)

Individuals and organizations operating in the same cultural space know of each other and help one another secure new partnerships. Thus it resonates with the idea that network representation of relationships between people and knowledge (Sumi & Mase, 2000, p. 41).

Ko-station members use their personal networks to find audiences for their events. In this regard, Respondent 7 mentions that they have: *“an improvised outreach team, promotion team, and they put it [announcement of event] on Instagram. I put it on my [personal] Instagram. We made posters. I invited friends, mostly people who came through our own network. So we are just asking friends whether they want to come.”* (Respondent 7)

Using the word ‘improvised’ speaks to the informal nature of their marketing and network building. They also use personal networks to promote their creative content. Respondent 4 mentions:

“If we were to promote an English podcast, we did it through an English Instagram account, and we also shared it with our international friends and acquaintances, because obviously we all have this kind of context”. (Respondent 4)

They used their network of online friends, both local and international, to spread their content.

Moreover, a lot of respondents mentioned that one of the reasons Dutch and international audience join the events is through personal relationships with Ukrainian individuals, such as partners, friend, or co-workers, or in some cases, host families for Ukrainians under temporary protection (Respondents 1, 2, 4, 7, 9). For example, referring to Ko-station events, Respondent 4 states: *“I rarely see people who are Dutch and they do not know anyone, like, they don’t have any Ukrainian friends. I have to say that happens, but it’s really not common.”* (Respondent 4). This suggests that a significant part of the audience at these events consists of individuals who are already socially connected to members of the Ukrainian community, underscoring the importance of interpersonal networks in facilitating cross-cultural engagement.

Lastly, one of the most vital networks identified in this study is the internal network within the Ukrainian community itself. As Dinnie (2022) argues, diasporic networks bring together “people with strong intrinsic motivation” (Dinnie, 2022, pp. 225-226), which is clearly reflected in the collaborative spirit observed among Ukrainians in the Netherlands. Respondent 5, provides insightful reflections on this dynamic, describing the nature of collaboration within the Ukrainian diaspora:

“I’ve lived here for 14 years [in the Netherlands]. There has never been such good cooperation as there is now. Never at all. Really a lot of [Ukrainian] organizations. I know exactly if I’m writing to them, they definitely will support us. Just like if they write to us, we definitely support some of their things.” (Respondent 5)

Thus, following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, solidarity and mutual support within the Ukrainian diaspora in the Netherlands have significantly strengthened. Diaspora's often have a strong sense of collective identity, in terms of language etc, and also a shared sense of fate- so they build strong networks within the host countries (Cohen, 2008, pp. 7-8). In many cases these networks are stronger than simply civil ones made up of citizens who do not share those bonds in a society (Epstein & Heizler, 2016).

Diasporic Ukrainian network in Rotterdam operates both on an organizational and personal level.

At the organizational level, Respondent 9 notes that Ukrainian initiatives are:

"reinforcing each other's voice, so we know as a community, you can amplify the good things while sharing the sorrows and do. Two communities come together, well, you can amplify it further. So I think it's really reaching each other's audiences, making sure that our projects also are reaching more people where people can get help, more people can learn things. Yeah, tapping into each other's resources."

(Respondent 9)

The initiatives work together to reach as many people as possible and rely on one another to amplify their voices.

On the personal level, Respondent 4, who is a member of Ko-station, mentions:

"There was a poetry event as well, organized by VATAHA, where not as Ko-station members, but as individuals who are members of Ko-station, someone helped them with organizing that. So I think it's more on an individual level, rather than officially."

(Respondent 4).

The network between Ukrainians initiatives does not always operate through organizational channels, but also through interpersonal relations and individual-level support. Respondent 4 provides another example:

"I think it's really based on interpersonal relations, because, for example, I was tasked with organizing the memorial walk this year. So I'm organizing that. And I'm thinking, huh, I need this, this and this. And I already know the people. For example, I know that I can text [name of the Ukrainian from another initiative] and ask her: 'can we borrow from you some stuff, some supplies, some equipment that we need for the demonstration?' ... So I'm contacting her as a member of Ko-station, but at the same time, just because I know her and she knows me. Okay, and it's much more interpersonal." (Respondent 4)

Ties to the community and mutual help to one another are typical for Ukrainian initiatives both on personal and organizational levels.

4.3.2. Partnerships

Het Wijkpaleis, Dok Huis and Ter Bevordering are neighborhood initiatives that serve as “micro-spaces” of local encounters, which are crucial sites where social and cultural differences are both visible and negotiated (Amin, 2002, p. 959). According to Peterson (2016), such places “form an important point of reference for understanding expressions of diversity and how people negotiate these differences” (Peterson, 2016, p. 1069).

In these kinds of settings, local engagement and community orientation are very important. The co-founder of Wijkpaleis explained that for individuals or groups from outside of the immediate community to organize events in their space, the activity must resonate with the neighborhood, and be relevant on a local level. She described this local link with Ukrainians as follows:

“We know people around here that really housed Ukrainian people [in the neighborhood of Het Wijkpaleis]. And we know Ukrainian people living here, so we saw it in such a way. And I think people, anyways, are involved in this situation.”

(Respondent 3)

According to Askins (2015) “living with difference” (p. 473) is a key subject in discourse about migration and encounter (Askins, 2015, p. 473). Discussing the role of encounters in hyper-diverse neighborhoods of Rotterdam, Peterson (2016) asserts their function to negotiate cultural differences at the local level.

Similarly, the important role in the relationship between “Ter Bevordering” street association and Ko-station has the concept of local community.

Some members of Ko-station live on the street of Ter Bevordering, which gave them access to the community house, as they could become its members. Respondent 10, who is on board of the street association, recalled the moment when Ko-station joined the street association: *“We thought it was such a beautiful initiative, and this is about, well, discussing literature, discussing philosophy, and they are people in our community. The Ukrainian population is part of our community, so welcome, we said* (Respondent 10).

This respondent thus already refers to Ukrainians as part of their community. The social boundaries in the neighborhood community settings generate between “us” and “them” (Beauregard et al., 2019, p. 430). In this situation it is seen that Respondent 10 begins to blur these boundaries by expressing a sense of shared belonging, indicating a shift toward inclusive community perceptions. Respondent 10 mentioned that Ko-station *“have organized three things [English-speaking events in Ter Bevordering], and I've been participating in two of the three... I think this is a nice way of trying to, yeah, bond and get to know your neighbors, get to know their different backgrounds and the issues they're dealing with.”* (Respondent 10) She sees them as neighbors, and again as a part of their community.

This shows how the neighborhood level can be really beneficial for building the relationship between Ukrainian and Dutch individuals, as *“people get to know real people”* (Respondent 9) in this kind of setting. Familiarity with difference and diversity is essential in cultivating a sense of ‘home’ and belonging in diverse societies (Peterson, 2016, pp. 1079-1082)

Referring to Ter Bevordering community house, Respondent 9 mentions that Ko-station has become an integrated part of *“the community of the house we’re using”*. The Ukrainian initiative not only organizes events for the international street community but is also invited to participate in the events hosted by Ter Bevordering. This example illustrates the development of reciprocal, two-way relationships between Ukrainian initiatives and local resident communities. Additionally, Respondent 9 highlights another important benefit of these connections: they help counteract the pervasive sense experienced by Ukrainians under temporary protection. As she puts it, these relationships offer a sense of continuity and rootedness, helping to alleviate *“the kind of the temporary-ness of how [Ukrainians under temporary protection] life is at the moment”*. She says:

“I noticed it with my friends that really had to flee Ukraine after the war, that everything feels temporary. Once you get to know your neighbors, your neighborhood and your city, you just kind of start to settle a little bit better”.

This type of connection helps Ukrainians to gain a sense of stability, which is crucial for people with temporary protection.

Another important aspect of collaboration with local partners is that it brings local audiences to the events organized by VATAHA foundation and Ko-station. Each of partner organizations actively promotes upcoming events on their channels: through their websites, newsletters, and social media (Respondents 3, 8, 10). For example, the program leader of Dok Huis recalls inviting people to one of the Ukrainian events happening in Dok Huis:

“We really then tried to write the invitation to be there so that people could feel welcome, even if they were like, ‘Oh, but I don’t know anyone from the Ukraine’ Well, that doesn’t matter. You can still contribute by doing this, by asking questions, by doing that.” (Respondent 8)

Members of collaborative initiatives also build bridges between their audiences and Ukrainian communities, acting as mediators between them.

Lastly, the investigation revealed that aligning Ukrainian events with the regular programming schedule of the collaborative neighborhood initiatives can significantly enhance attendance, particularly among the existing local audiences. For example, referring to the relatively small amount of local audience showing up to the film screening in Het Wijkpaleis, Respondent 3 suggests that *“the regular things work best... like a movie night here, like a regular movie night [that they have], because ... people are expecting [this event to happen].”*

This insight is echoed by Respondent 2, who pointed to differences in cultural expectations around event planning and communication: *“(for Ukrainians) time management, it is such a different term than the Dutch. The announcement of all events is always too late for the Dutch.”* (Respondent 2)

Respondent 10 added a related observation, noting that local audiences at Ko-station events are often made up “the ones who are always there”, referring to the regular visitors of *Ter Bevordering’s* events.

Additionally, Respondent 8, talking about the art textile workshop organized by VATAHA foundation dedicated to 24 February, noted that if a project matches the programming and themes of their collaborative partner, more people tend to visit, as they are already familiar or have an interest in it.

“So it was really cool that we could have this really important thing going on here [in Dok Huis], but that it also fitted in what we were doing [their project]. And that's why there were people from our community joining in.” (Respondent 8)

These comments collectively underscore the importance of strategic scheduling and early communication when organizing events in collaboration with local community spaces.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This section presents the answers to the main research question and its sub-questions, highlighting the most significant findings. Following this, the study's limitations, contributions to the research literature, and suggestions for future research are discussed. Finally, the section outlines several societal and practical implications of the research.

5.1. Key findings in relation to the research questions

To address the main research question, three sub-questions were formulated. The answers to these sub-questions are presented below. Together, they form the basis for answering the overarching research question of this study: *How do Ukrainian initiatives in Rotterdam build bridges between diasporic Ukrainians and host Dutch cultures and communities?*

The first sub-question asked: *How do activities (e.g., workshops/events) enhance dialogue and mutual understanding between Ukrainian and Dutch cultures and communities?*

The findings show that VATAHA foundation and Ko-station foster intercultural dialogue by organizing various activities that create opportunities for interaction between local residents and members of the Ukrainian community, building bridging capital between them (Madhavan & Landau, 2011, p. 476). These events serve as spaces for encounters that may not otherwise occur, enabling them to come into contact. This initial, personal contact is a crucial step toward building mutual understanding, particularly in an urban environment where such contact between locals and newly arrived migrants is not guaranteed (Peterson, 2016, pp. 1079-1082).

The workshop format emerged as one of the most effective means to build connections between participants. This effectiveness stems from the collaborative nature of the activities, where individuals work toward a common goal and engage in joint creative tasks. Such collaborative creation encourages social bonding through shared effort and interaction. Previous studies have found that workshops allow for mutual experiences of shared making which can foster communal connection (Hackney & Setterington, 2022, p. 318). Moreover, even collaboration around informal links can lead to deeper personal bonds and feelings of mutual respect (Perrault et al., 2011, p. 296). On a more professional level, VATAHA foundation provides opportunities for co-creative experiences between Dutch and Ukrainian artists through various projects. Working together on a creative task opens a space for dialogue, allowing participants to explore similarities and differences, share

personal stories, and ultimately build meaningful interpersonal connections. As Braslauskas (2021) notes, even in the presence of cultural differences, working together to solve a common problem can foster closeness and mutual understanding (Braslauskas, 2021, pp. 200-201).

Activities rooted in cultural practices also played a significant role in connecting people. This resonates with the idea that “different arts forms foster awareness, understanding, recognition, and dialogue across people from different backgrounds” (Beauregard et al., 2019, p. 439). For example, the revival of traditional, “forgotten” crafts, as well as niche interests centered on specific art genres, proved effective in bringing together individuals from different backgrounds. Notably, such activities often evoked cultural memory and performative expression, allowing participants to reconnect with their own backgrounds and cultural heritage while simultaneously engaging with the cultural narratives of others. This aligns with Hackney and Settingington’s (2022) study, that found that working with a tangible material product that has a cultural history behind it, such as embroidery textile tradition, encourages some level of understanding of that culture’s past and present (Hackney & Settingington, 2022, p. 320).

The most frequently occurring theme in the data was the concept of “commonalities”. A shared interest in specific events or topics often served as a primary motivation for joining. According to Sumi and Mase (2000) shared interests among individuals in social context can facilitate meaningful interactions and contribute to creating interpersonal connections (Sumi & Mase, 2000, pp. 35-40). Accordingly, the diversity of activities organized by the two case-study initiatives - from sports events to textile workshops - enabled them to reach out to and engage a wide range of people from different backgrounds. To achieve communality, togetherness, solidarity, and collective harmony, there must be some degree of similarity or commonality (Cunliffe et al., 2024, pp. 354-355). Within the broader theme of commonalities, several more specific types were identified, including shared passions for creative expression, shared universal experiences, and a common interest in universal topics. Among these, universal topics were most commonly used by Ko-station in events involving international audiences. Each of these commonalities serve important entry points for initiating interpersonal relationships, finding common ground, and building mutual understanding. As discussed by Steenkamp and Fourie (2022), commonalities can strengthen collaboration and foster solidarity in multicultural settings (Steenkamp & Fourie, 2023, p. 49).

The second sub-question asked: *In what ways do collaborations with local partners foster knowledge exchange?*

Collaborations with local partners foster knowledge exchange through networks and relationships that operate on both organizational and personal levels. Firstly, local

partnerships expand access to existing networks, enabling Ukrainian initiatives to reach new audiences, find collaborators, and obtain necessary resources. These networks serve as crucial channels for informal knowledge sharing and support, aiding the initiatives in areas such as connecting Dutch and Ukrainian artists, event promotion and logistical coordination. This resonates with the notion that network represents of relationships between individuals and knowledge (Sumi & Mase, 2000, p. 41). Local Dutch partners often act as cultural intermediaries who introduce Ukrainian initiatives to their communities and help navigate cultural differences.

Secondly, neighborhood-based partnerships play a vital role in grounding Ukrainian initiatives within the local context. Askins (2015) asserts that a crucial topic in discussions concerning migration and encounter is "living with difference" (p. 473). Peterson (2016) emphasizes that the local level, such as neighborhood community level, is crucial for negotiating cultural differences. Through co-hosted events and shared spaces (like those at Het Wijkpaleis, Dok Huis, and Ter Bevordering), Ukrainian organizations gain insight into local customs and expectations, such as the scheduled nature of events, and are able to reach local audiences. In turn, Dutch partners gain first-hand exposure to Ukrainian perspectives and experiences as well as the opportunity to engage with Ukrainian audiences.

These collaborations contribute to the integration of Ukrainian individuals into local communities by giving them a sense of belonging and permanence. Simultaneously, Dutch participants are offered a direct window into the lived realities of displacement, war, and cultural resilience through Ukrainian narratives. Furthermore, interpersonal relationships, both within the Ukrainian diaspora and between Ukrainians and Dutch residents, foster trust, solidarity, and a sense of shared ownership of collaborative initiatives. Familiarity with difference and diversity is essential in cultivating a sense of 'home' and belonging in diverse societies (Peterson, 2016, pp. 1079-1082). This network of personal and professional connections enables the co-creation of meaningful cultural experiences, ultimately deepening intercultural understanding and, potentially, informing more inclusive future policy-making.

The final sub-question asked *How do Ukrainian cultural initiatives in Rotterdam serve as civil agents of cultural diplomacy?*

Both initiatives are powered by highly motivated individuals with deep cultural knowledge and a strong commitment to preserving and promoting Ukrainian cultural heritage. Co-founders and volunteers often possess formal or informal expertise in specific cultural domains, ranging from architecture and music to social media. Otero (2021) suggests that it is important to have individuals with some cultural knowledge to helm its preservation, and if not there may be negative outcomes (Otero, 2021, pp. 1-7). Their

personal motivation to sustain Ukrainian identity, often rooted in personal histories, family backgrounds, and educational experiences, inspires a sense of responsibility to represent and safeguard Ukrainian culture in ways that are outward-looking rather than insular. Their intrinsic motivating factors are higher (Dinnie, 2022, pp. 225-226). In doing so, both VATAHA and Ko-station exemplify a bottom-up approach to cultural diplomacy. They create programming that fosters cultural understanding and exchange between Ukrainians and the host society in the Netherlands. Hurn (2016) emphasizes how important individuals are in cultural diplomacy and unlike officially empowered cultural diplomacy which relies on state-level institutions and formal mandates, this grassroots form of cultural diplomacy is enacted through everyday interactions and shared experiences, demonstrating that ordinary individuals can act as cultural ambassadors in informal yet impactful ways.

5.2. Limitations of this study

This study has several limitations that could be addressed in future research. Firstly, the research was conducted over a relatively short period, providing only a snapshot of the situation at a given point in time. As a result, some significant events organized by the initiatives at other times occurred outside the observation windows and are not covered in the study. Having access to a broader range of events could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how intercultural connections are built and sustained over time. Secondly, and relatedly, future studies would benefit from more extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the micro-public spaces that bring together local residents and Ukrainians. Such an approach would likely yield deeper insights into the exact mechanics that enable individuals from different cultural backgrounds to connect, as well as the challenges they face in doing so. The challenges, in particular, would probably be more clearly discernible from participant observation than through interviews alone.

Lastly, the study's limited geographic scope presents another constraint. While this research focused on Rotterdam, some major events relevant to Ukrainian cultural initiatives, such as Run for Ukraine, also take place in other cities, including The Hague and Amsterdam. Expanding the geographic focus could provide a more holistic view of how these initiatives operate across different urban contexts.

5.3. Contributions to the research literature

This study contributes to the broader discourse on Ukrainians under temporary protection living in Europe during a watershed moment, the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It adds to the growing body of research literature on diasporic and bottom-up cultural

diplomacy studies. While much of the existing scholarship has focused on traditional definition of cultural diplomacy, associated with state actors and formal diplomatic channels (Rivera, 2015, p. 11), an increasing number of studies acknowledge that cultural diplomacy can go beyond “the official relations of two governments” and can also take informal forms, engaging non-governmental actors (Goff, 2013, p. 421). Despite this broader understanding, the role of civil agents in cultural diplomacy has received relatively little scholarly attention (Mark, 2010, pp. 62-63). This study addressed this gap by examining the significance of civil actors in bottom-up cultural diplomacy outside of official state structures. It highlights how individuals and community-led initiatives, such as VATAHA foundation and Ko-station, function as civil agents of cultural diplomacy. Through their bottom-up efforts, they foster intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding between Ukrainian and Dutch communities at a citizen-to-citizen level. This research thus contributed to the theoretical discourse on how diasporic communities actively shape cultural and social relations in host societies by providing a contemporary, real-world example of civil agents actively initiating cultural exchange between Ukrainian and Dutch communities in Rotterdam.

5.4. Suggestions for future research

Future research can build upon this study in several directions. Firstly, the current investigation into the contributions of Ko-station and VATAHA foundation to building bridges between Ukrainian and Dutch communities could be expanded by broadening its geographical scope to include Amsterdam and, especially, The Hague. The latter city is home to some of VATAHA foundation’s major annual events (Run for Ukraine and Embroidery Day). Moreover, during the research, it became clear that they have some long-term partners for these events, such as a running club and an embroidery club in The Hague. Reaching out to these partners, who have been collaborating with VATAHA for several years, could offer deeper insights into how the relationship and understanding between them have developed. Moreover, The Hague holds a special significance as a hub of international diplomacy, being home to many embassies. As revealed in one of the interviews, diplomats from different countries have attended VATAHA’s cultural events, as regular visitors, not in any official capacity, but due to the proximity of the event venues to the embassy district. This highlights the potential of cultural events to attract attention from international officials informally and underscores the relevance of The Hague for further research. Moreover, a major project – *The Carpet of Love and Sorrow* made by Ukrainians – which features red strands (representing those who are living through the war in Ukraine) and black strands (commemorating the deceased) will cover the whole main square of The Hague. This project is expected to be presented in the *Guinness Book of World Records*,

adding another layer of international visibility and significance. Amsterdam is also relevant as it serves as a second location of Ko-station. Including both The Hague and Amsterdam in future studies would provide a more nuanced understanding of each initiative's activities, their audiences, and their evolving relationships with local partners.

Secondly, future research could investigate the role of the “Ukrainian house” as a project initiated by the municipality of Rotterdam, which functions not only as a crisis information centre for displaced Ukrainians but also as a communal gathering space. Other Ukrainian initiatives, “Opora” and “Empatia”, are also supported by the government of the Netherlands and were organized to provide mental health support for Ukrainians in the Netherlands. Investigating these three organizations will contribute towards a broader understanding of how displaced Ukrainians are integrating into Dutch society and how government-supported structures facilitate this process.

Finally, future research could examine the attitudes of Dutch-born citizens toward Ukrainians who have relocated due to the ongoing conflict. Surveying these attitudes could provide valuable insights into the current state of intercultural relations and help assess the broader social climate surrounding displacement and integration in the Netherlands.

5.5. Practical implications

One key recommendation for the initiatives themselves - Ko-station and VATAHA foundation - is to consider aligning and integrating their event schedules with those of regular, local neighborhood programming. By doing so, they could increase their visibility and reach a larger audience, particularly those who already frequent these community spaces due to the predictability of recurring events. As highlighted in the interviews, attendance tends to be higher for regularly scheduled events than for unexpected or one-off activities. For example, Het Wijkpaleis hosts a regular film screening series, and its audience has come to expect and plan around this routine. Integrating Ukrainian cultural programming into such established time slots could foster more consistent engagement and intercultural exchange. Another way to enhance outreach for one-time or pop-up events is through robust social media promotion carried out well in advance, ideally, several weeks prior to the event. Early and consistent promotion increases visibility, ensuring that a wider audience is aware of these less predictable gatherings and thereby improving attendance and engagement.

In terms of cultural policies and the government, a recurrent theme raised in the interviews was the desire for permanence. Both the initiatives and many Ukrainian individuals expressed a need for sustained, long-term support for cultural activities. As many now view Rotterdam not as a temporary stop but as their new home, they seek structures and resources that reflect this shift towards permanence.

The success of initiatives like VATAHA and Ko-station, and the diversity of individuals who frequent their events, underscore the critical role of grassroots cultural spaces in fostering interpersonal and intercultural relationships. These spaces provide informal, community-driven opportunities for integration that are often more effective than top-down policy measures. Volunteers play a huge role in achieving this success. Their commitment, creativity, and personal investment drive much of the work of these initiatives, making it essential to prioritize and support them in future policies.

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Appendix A

Interview guide

TOPIC 1: Background of the respondent

Could you briefly introduce yourself— country/place of origin, occupation or field of study, and how long you've been living in the Netherlands?

How are you related to the initiative? What is your role in this initiative? For how long have you been engaged?

What did you do before joining this initiative?

What is your connection with the Netherlands and Ukraine (both personal and professional ties)?

TOPIC 2: Story and focus of the initiative

(a) How did the initiative get started? (question for the founders)

(b) How did you first become involved? (question for social media volunteers, Dutch collaboratives)

What does initiative do (core activities or services)?

Within the initiative, what is **your** main activity or area of responsibility?

TOPIC 3. Activities (events/workshops) connecting people culturally

What are the activities that bring the Ukrainian and Dutch communities together? Could you share a few examples?

How involved are the participants in each other's culture?

Why do you think they are involved? What motivates people to get involved in these events?

Why do these activities bring people together? What makes them effective at fostering connections?

What are the main challenges/strengths of these events?

TOPIC 4. Social media strategies (for social media managers)

What is the main focus of the social media you run for the initiative?

What do you do, and what social media do you run?

Who is your target audience?

What languages do you use in social media and why?

What is the most challenging part of running it?

What (marketing/promotion) strategies do you use?

What is the audience activity on your social media?

TOPIC 5. Audience

Who is your audience (in social media/workshops)?

Why do you think Dutch citizens join?

What is their connection with Ukraine?

How do you involve them?

How effective is social media in attracting people to workshops?

What is your motivation for involving the Dutch audience?

TOPIC 6. Collaboration with local partners

How involved are you with local partners (Municipality of Rotterdam, creatives, local citizens, etc.)?

What is your motivation for collaborations?

What do you do with them? / Can you share some examples of collaborations?

What do you find challenging in collaborations?

What are the advantages of collaborations?

Do you have Dutch citizens in your team?

TOPIC 7. Evaluation questions

Besides this project, how involved are you with other Ukrainian initiatives in Rotterdam and the Netherlands more broadly?

How do you perceive the extent of support and appreciation in Dutch society and the city of Rotterdam for Ukrainian people and culture?

In your assessment, how your initiative - and other initiatives like yours – helps raising understanding and support?

Topic 8. Concluding questions

What are the main strengths and challenges you experience?

What additional resources and support would you need to achieve your objectives?

Appendix B

List of the respondents

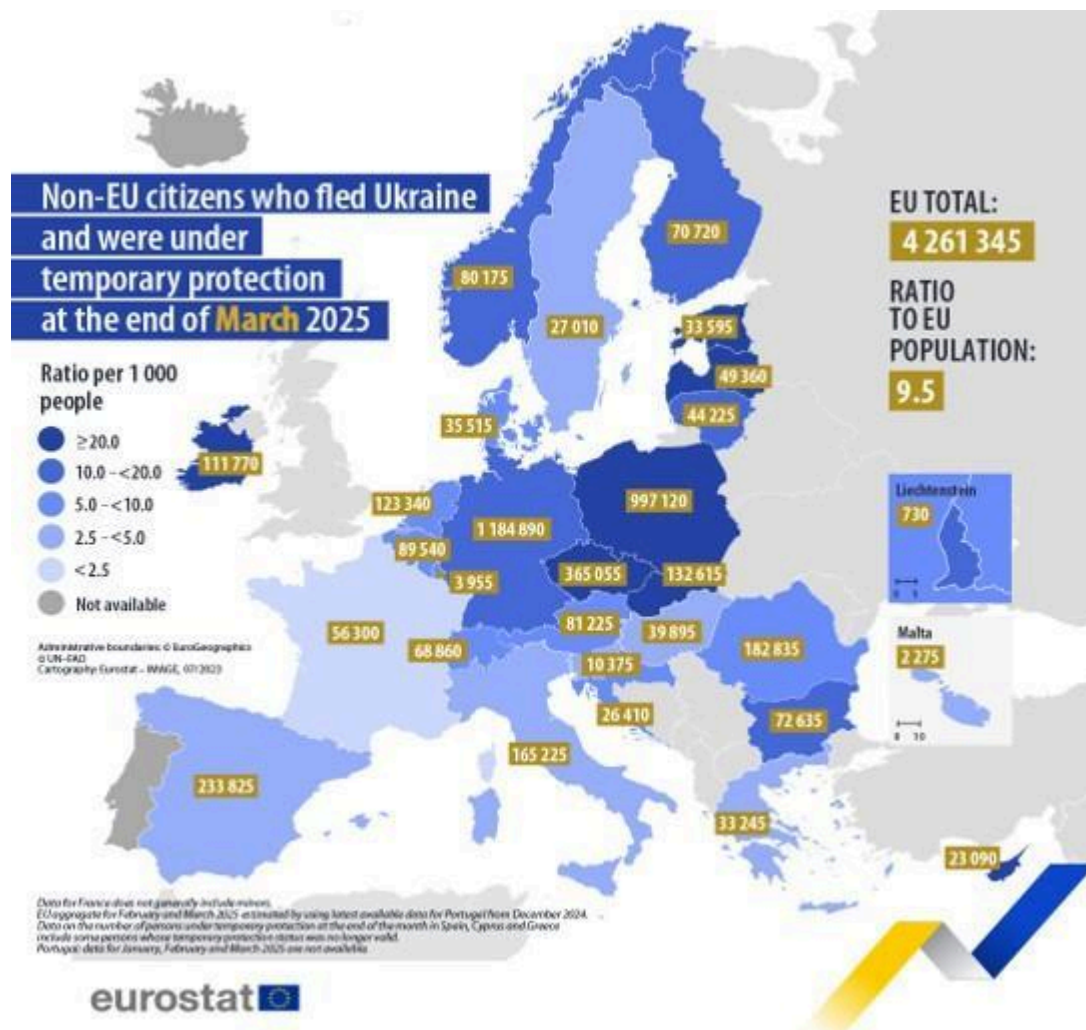
Respondent	Demographics, and work/study experience	Consent to reveal the role in the initiative	Role in the initiative
Respondent 1	Ukrainian, in-her-early-40-s, arrived to the Netherlands after the full-scale invasion; female	Agreed	SMM (social media manager) volunteer for 2 years in VATAHA
Respondent 2	Ukrainian; live in the Netherlands for 7 years; in her-30-s; female	Agreed; gave consent to full reveal (name etc.)	run Ukrainian House, co-founder of VATAHA foundation
Respondent 3	Dutch; in-her-50-s, female	Agreed	member and co-creator of WijkPaleis; collaboration with VATAHA in February 2025:
Respondent 4	Ukrainian; 18 years old; arrived to the Netherlands after full-scale invasion; student; female	Agreed	member of Ko-station; used to be social media manager of Ko-station, currently coordinating public events
Respondent 5	Ukrainian; live in the Netherlands for 14 years, 35 years old; married with kids; female	Agreed; gave consent to full reveal (name etc.)	co-founder of VATAHA foundation
Respondent 6	Ukrainian; 19 years old; student; female	Agreed	Volunteer at VATAHA, manager of one of the current projects
Respondent 7	Dutch; 27 years old; male	Agreed	the only Dutch member of Ko-station; organized several events for Dutch and Ukrainian audience
Respondent 8	Dutch; in her-40; female	Agreed	a program leader of Dok Huis;
Respondent 9	Ukrainian; in her 30-s; female	Agreed	member of Ko-station, organizes events

Respondent 10	Dutch, in her 50-s, female	Agreed	on board of Graaf Floris 88a (<i>Ter Bevordering</i>) street association
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Appendix C

Image 1

Map: Non-EU citizens who fled Ukraine and were under temporary protection at the end of March 2025

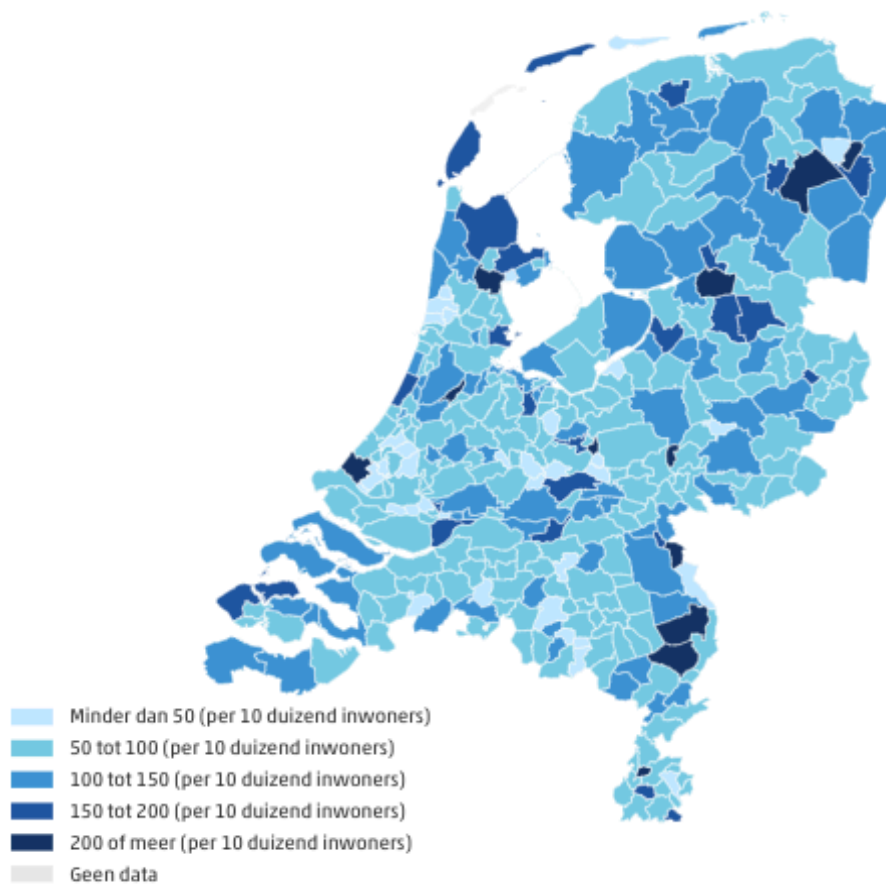


From: Eurostat, 2025

(https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Temporary_protection_for_persons_fleeing_Ukraine_-_monthly_statistics)

Image 2

Number of Ukrainians per 10 thousand inhabitants, one month after settlement in the Netherlands from 2022 to the first half of 2024



Source: *Statistics Netherlands*, 2025

(<https://longreads.cbs.nl/asielenintegratie-2025/oekrainers-in-nederland/>)

Image 3

Poster “VATAHA foundation” from Lera Manzovitova’s exhibition *Power of Unity*

VATAHA Foundation




Uliana Bun

Oksana Savchuk



In Ukrainian, VATAHA means “a large crowd of people with a common goal”. Ours is to promote Ukrainian art and culture in the Netherlands. For centuries, Russia has attempted to systematically obliterate and oppress the beauty of our culture. VATAHA contributes to the healing of this generational trauma by creating opportunities for creative Ukrainians to replant seeds of our heritage on the stage and the screen. Doing so invites our Dutch peers to connect with us and see how our arts and culture scene is unique just like yours. Founded just weeks after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, VATAHA’s ranks consist of recently displaced and long-term Ukrainian residents in the Netherlands. Regardless of how we arrived in the Netherlands, we are united around a shared purpose of showing our host nation and ourselves the deep heritage of our culture.

In our 2 years we have hosted 80 arts & culture events, reaching nearly 10,000 people via intimate crafts workshops, informal art education for teens, and mass memorial events mostly in the Hague, Rotterdam and Amsterdam. (For example, more than 500 runners and 200 spectators took part in the third annual “Run for Ukraine”.) Doing so not only expands Ukrainian identity abroad, but also shows the Netherlands stands with Ukraine in the fight for our freedom and shared values.

We are grateful for the extensive support we continuously receive from the Dutch community, ranging from technical support, financial donations and network sharing. For example, we partner with HAAG Atletiek for our annual memorial Run for Ukraine. Mieke Klaver assists us yearly with celebrating national Ukrainian Embroidery Day, and SKVR provides shared spaces & facilities for our various art workshops. We are open to long-term partnerships with volunteers and cultural institutions with existing infrastructure across the Netherlands!

Also we believe that allowing the right to self-employment for Ukrainian artists and cultural workers would benefit both cultures enormously.








Source: Lera Manzovitova personal archive

Image 5

Poster "Ko-Station" from Lera Manzovitova's exhibition *Power of Unity*

Ko-Station

Станція Конвальця

Ko-Station - a knowmad community. Our goal is to drive positive change and make meaningful contributions to society by openly sharing our knowledge. We are dedicated to fostering unity between Ukraine and Europe, actively engaging with local communities, and establishing a valuable network.

The idea to create our community came to us one autumn evening during the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This was after another demonstration in the Netherlands in support of Ukraine which we, along with all the co-founders of the community, had organized. And now our accomplishments achievements in numbers are:

- Two active clubs in Rotterdam and Amsterdam
- Six public charity events
- 6320 euros raised from public events
- Released 2 seasons of the podcast.



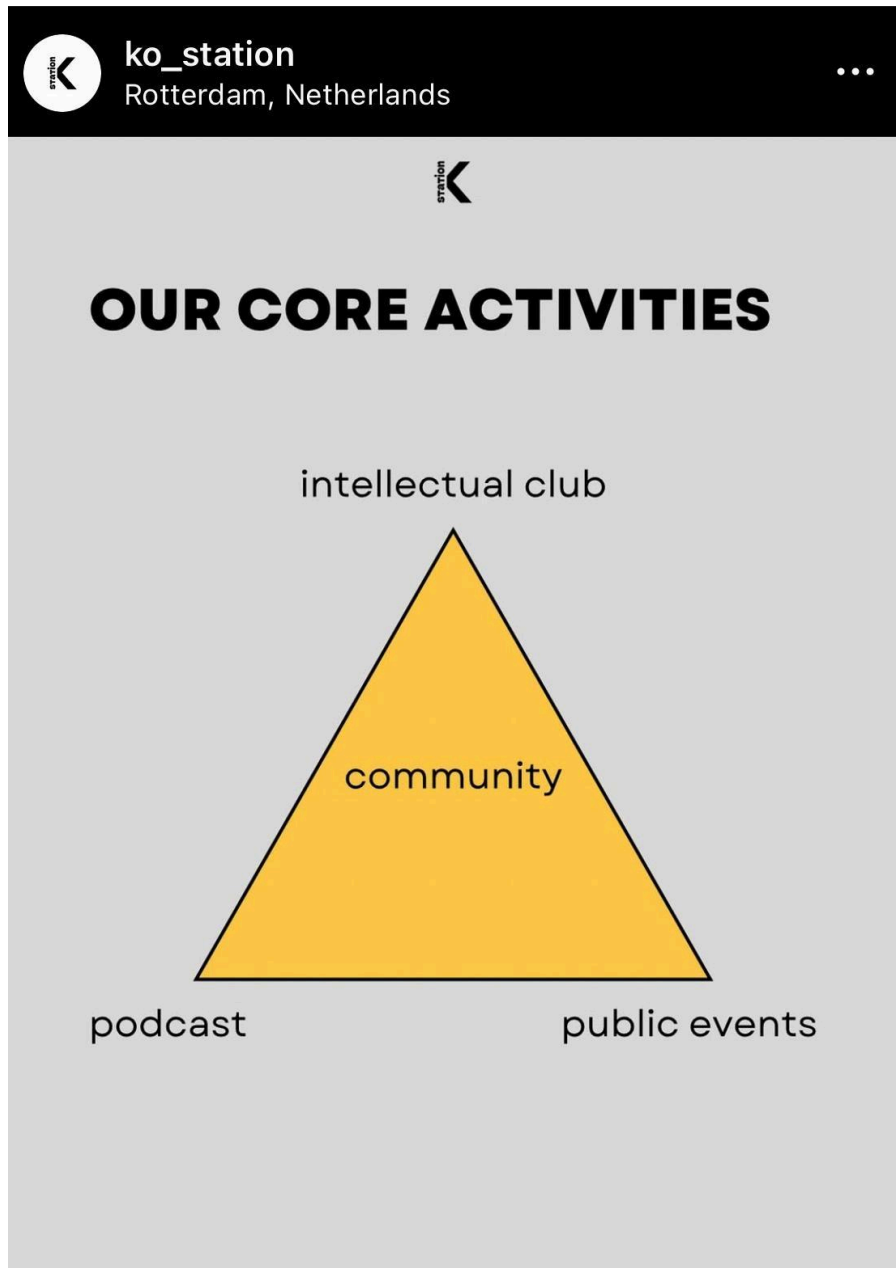




Source: Lera Manzovitova personal archive

Image 6

Instagram image. Ko-station “core activities” from carousel “What is Ko-station?”



Source: Ko-station [@ko_station] (2024, July 2) “Discover the World of the Ko-Station!

Hey, Ko-Station community! We’ve created an amazing infographic just for you!

  Dive into the lifestyle, values, and habits of these knowledge-driven wanderers”

[Image]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C85lQJOoSo0/?img_index=1

Images 7, 8

VATAHA's Pysanka workshop in Ukrainian House on 17 April 2025



Source: *personal archive of the researcher* (from 17 April 2025)

Image 9

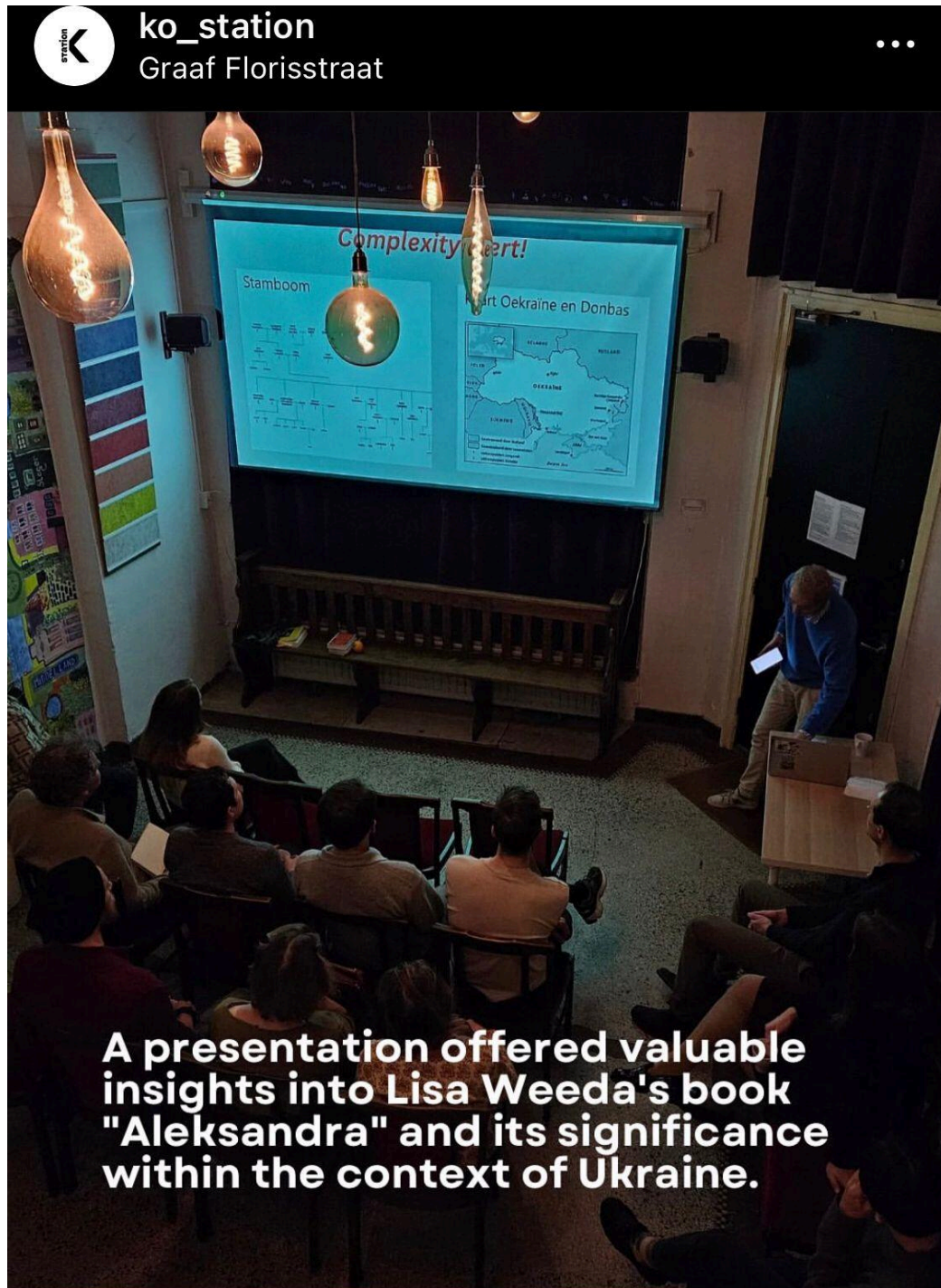
In front of Wijkpaleis in Rotterdam on 22 February 2025



Source: *a personal archive of the researcher* (from 22 February 2025)

Image 10

Instagram image. Liza Weeda's book event



A presentation offered valuable insights into Lisa Weeda's book "Aleksandra" and its significance within the context of Ukraine.

Source: Ko-station [@ko_station] (28 November 2024)

https://www.instagram.com/p/DC6zFN4Mz9q/?img_index=4

Image 11

Instagram image. Liza Weeda's book event



Source: Ko-station [@ko_station] (28 November 2024)

https://www.instagram.com/p/DC6zFN4Mz9q/?img_index=4