

TALLINNA ÜLIKOOLI RAHVUSVAHELISTE SOTSIAALUURINGUTE KESKUS

HOSTING IN AIRBNB:  
PLATFORM WORK AT THE  
INTERSECTION OF  
HOSPITALITY,  
ACCOMMODATION AND  
HOME-MAKING

RASI toimetised nr. 14

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ÜLIKOOL

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Rahvusvaheliste Sotsiaaluuringute Keskus (RASI) on Tallinna Ülikooli Ühiskonnateaduste Instituudi sotsiaalteaduslik interdistsiplinaarne teadus- ja arenduskeskus, mis teostab teadusprojekte. RASI teadurid on tegevad ekspertidena ühiskonnaelu analüüsimisel ja kujundamisel. TLÜ RASI uurimisteemad hõlmavad ühiskondliku ebavõrdsuse (või ka kihistumise) erinevaid tahke – sugu, rahvus, vanus, põlvkond, haridus, ametipositsioon. Viimastel aastatel on hakatud suurt tähelepanu pöörama elukestva õppe problemaatikale kui eluteed kujundavale ja sotsiaalset sidusust Eestis ning laiemalt kogu Euroopa Liidus tagavale tegurile. Teine uuem temaatika osakonna uurimistöös on seotud aktiivse vananemise küsimustega.

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## Executive summary

The current working paper is based on empirical research conducted in Tallinn between 2019 and 2021 for a Horizon 2020 funded project Platform Labour in Urban Spaces: Fairness, Welfare, Development (PLUS)<sup>1</sup>. The project aimed to map the situation and changes in the platform economy in general and in the accommodation/hospitality sector and ride-hailing/taxi industry in particular, with the main emphasis on labour relations and the social security of platform workers. This paper focuses on the processes related to the Airbnb platform in Tallinn, both on the institutional level and from the perspective of individual hosts. The qualitative research was based on document analysis, expert interviews and in-depth interviews with individual private hosts.

Airbnb, a platform facilitating a peer-to-peer accommodation service, has offered individual private hosts the opportunity to earn by renting out their property since 2008. Starting out as part of the *sharing economy*, commercial and professional hosts are now observed as dominating over individual private owners on the platform. Airbnb's efforts to promote affordable accommodation, and the promise of a more authentic and experiential type of travel, is perfectly in line with increasing trends in tourism towards more individualised forms of travel. This global trend conceptualised as "new urban tourism" takes place away from known tourist sights and takes advantage of emerging digital technologies (Stors et al., 2019). Airbnb provides opportunities for private owners to generate revenues from housing by bringing together the host and the guest as strangers. Airbnb is based on utilising assets; therefore, it differs from platforms offering labour and services, such as Uber (Schor et al., 2020) in the sense that the hosts earn not only from their labour effort, but significantly from the rents commanded by their property. Previous research has shown that in comparison to more work-intensive platforms, Airbnb hosts tend to be more satisfied on the basis of a combination of higher earnings, lower work effort, social benefits from meeting strangers, and a sense of higher agency in their platform activities (Schor et al., 2020); this finding was also confirmed by the current study. More control over hosting activities resonates better with an entrepreneurial identity and it is one of the aspects distinguishing Airbnb from, for example, ride-hailing or delivery platforms. Airbnb hosting is more easily combined with other work activities; therefore, the hosts seem to be less dependent on the platform and also less precarious.

Estonia stands out for its very limited public regulation of platform work and short-term rental activities (Altenried et al., 2021), and with a general market-liberal and techno-optimist context (cf. European citizen's ... 2021; Lanamäki & Tuvikene, 2021); therefore, providing an interesting case to analyse from the perspective of platform work via Airbnb. The public debate on regulating Airbnb activities has remained vague in Estonia, as have the more general debates on regulating platform work. The rapid pre-pandemic increase of Airbnb short-term rental flats in Tallinn induced public discussion on sustaining the liveability of residential neighbourhoods targeted by

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<sup>1</sup> <https://project-plus.eu/>

intensive tourism loads; problematising hosting as part of *platform work* has not been part of any of the public debates.

The interviewed Airbnb hosts do not consider themselves as workers but rather small entrepreneurs using the opportunity to use their existing underused property (whether a room or entire flat). Therefore, concepts such as working conditions are also difficult to use to interpret daily hosting activities, and they do not make sense from the perspective of the hosts either. It is important to notice that some Airbnb hosts tended to use non-economic arguments to explain their attachment to Airbnb hosting. The possibility to meet interesting new people and to have meaningful – albeit brief – insights into the worlds and mentalities of the guests was highlighted as an important motive for the hosts. The algorithmic management of hosting by the platform is in general not problematised, although this depends on the individual perceptions of the platform affordances and control. The control mechanisms on the Airbnb platform are mostly based on reputation and thus seem to function in a more hidden way.

Becoming engaged in Airbnb has been supported by the general trust in and image of the platform and low entry barriers in terms of skills and knowledge. In the Estonian context, the relatively unregulated institutional context and general high level of owner-occupation<sup>2</sup> contribute to the accessibility of those activities to a presumably more heterogeneous group of home-owners than in many other European countries. However, as hosts have learned from experience, providing a hospitality service in one's home or property does require specific skills. When competing with other hosts on the platform to earn the most positive reviews, good service needs to be provided. The meaning of "good service" appears to vary, not only from customer to customer but also from host to host, even if digital feedback collected by Airbnb is standardised (under – value, communication, check-in, cleanliness, location and accuracy). Given the immobility of housing, some aspects perceived as important for customers are out of the hosts' control, such as location, planning, or building typology. Although property in more peripheral areas (such as Soviet-type housing areas) was sometimes constructed in the listings and interviews as more authentic and offering a genuine experience of local living, more often the hosts tried to compensate by using other, softer skills such as smooth communication or cleanliness. The hosts expressed the clear relevance of univocal and clear self-expression: in terms of communication, good language skills and written self-expression in listings and in pre-communication with the guests. Technology related skills are relevant, and internet skills were somewhat more emphasised by Airbnb hosts than, for example, by Uber drivers. Time planning and working around one's own schedules to combine hosting with other daily activities are relevant as well, especially when waiting times are included in the equation. The relevance of 'emotion work' that emerges from the interviews is important to acknowledge, both in terms of managing customer emotions and self-control. This involves presenting customer service in platform activities in a much more traditional way than was expected. Fellow hosts are mainly perceived as competitors, so the level of solidarity appears to be low, although sharing experiences via local or global internet forums is appreciated and used.

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<sup>2</sup> Owner-occupation is denoting a situation where the person/family owns the dwelling (home) they are living in.

The demand for short-term rentals with a touch of “genuine local lifestyle” as in the Airbnb slogans, is not likely to disappear in the future. The potential influences of Airbnb and tourism on the liveability of the neighbourhood were not brought up by the interviewees, but if asked, the presence of Airbnb rentals and tourists in the neighbourhood was seen rather as an asset, increasing the diversity of the neighbourhood by those who engage in hosting. Being the owners and in many cases also the residents of the same flat, they expressed narratives with a mix of responsibility towards their neighbours, and confidence in the owner’s right to earn revenue from the property. Individual private hosts renting out their homes or a spare property are in more immediate contact with their dwelling and locality than commercial and professional providers, even in cases where there is no contact with the visitors, and some of the work is outsourced. Therefore, the potential disruptive influence of private hosting on neighbourhood liveability can be expected to be more constrained than in the case of professional large-scale providers, given that the intensity of hosting and the amount of short-term rental flats will give preference to the rhythms and patterns of residential use in buildings or residential areas.

Welcoming strangers at home can be conceptualised as part of current trends towards less differentiation between *home vs work spaces*, or *intimate vs commercial spaces*. The boundaries between *work* and other activities at home become blurred, contributing to a systematic underestimation of the amount of work of hosting at home. In those cases, homes as the most intimate spaces are opened up to commercial interests and the extent to which hosts are willing to do that is seen as an imperative for creating feelings of belonging by the host as well as by the guest, informing the ratings and reviews following the stay (Roelofsen & Minca, 2018, p. 178). This is where the logic of the platform intersects with the processes of hospitality and home-making. Such encounters of ‘the private’ and ‘the public’ call for a reconceptualisation of the meaning of “labour” in the case of private hosting and the influence of platformisation on the commodification of the home.

## Introduction

This working paper is based on empirical research conducted in Tallinn between 2019 and 2021 for a Horizon 2020 funded project – Platform Labour in Urban Spaces: Fairness, Welfare, Development (PLUS)<sup>3</sup>. The project aimed to map the situation and changes in the platform economy in general and the accommodation/hospitality sector and ride-hailing/taxi industry in particular, with the main emphasis on labour relations and the social security of platform workers. The current paper focuses on the processes related to the Airbnb platform in Tallinn<sup>4</sup> both on the institutional level and from the perspective of individual hosts.

Airbnb, a platform facilitating peer-to-peer accommodation services, has offered individual hosts the opportunity to earn by renting out their property together with their “labour of care” (Roelofsen, 2018) since 2008. Over time, the platform's activities have widened towards offering a range of hospitality services besides accommodation, and commercial and professional hosts have dominated over private individual housing owners for some time. It has thus been claimed that Airbnb is one of the most influential disruptors in the tourism and hospitality industry, and, there is widespread concern over short-term renting influences on the liveability of urban neighbourhoods and access to housing for local residents (Hoffman & Heisler, 2020; Minca & Roelofsen, 2019). Airbnb’s efforts to promote an affordable alternative form of accommodation, and the promise of a more authentic and experiential type of travel, runs perfectly in line with increasing expectations towards more individualised forms of tourism. This global trend conceptualised as “new urban tourism” in tourism studies does not take place near crowded tourist sights, and takes advantage of emerging digital technologies (Stors et al., 2019). Estonia stands out here with its limited public regulation of platform work and short-term rental activities (Altenried et al., 2021), and with a general market-liberal and techno-optimist context (cf. European citizen’s ... 2021; Lanamäki & Tuvikene, 2021), thereby providing an interesting case to analyse. The wider context of relevant institutional processes –interrelated with the platformisation of accommodation and tourism in Tallinn – will be discussed in Section II of the current working paper.

Airbnb extracts a share of the profit from hosts and visitors, and provides in return an easy-to-use payment system and access to a global marketplace. While using housing property to extract capital is not a new phenomenon (e.g. as collateral for credit), Airbnb has created an opportunity for private owners to generate revenues from housing without incurring any debt (Hoffman & Heisler, 2020, p. 12) by bringing together the host and the guest who are ‘strangers’. To a significant extent, Airbnb is based on utilising assets; therefore, it differs from platforms offering labour and services, such as Uber (Schor et al., 2020). Airbnb hosts are not only earning from their labour effort (cleaning, welcoming guests, communication, etc.), but a significant share of the revenue is drawn from the rents commanded by property. Previous research has shown that in comparison to more work-intensive platforms, Airbnb hosts tend to be more satisfied on the basis of a combination of higher earnings, lower work effort, and social benefits from meeting

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<sup>3</sup> <https://project-plus.eu/>

<sup>4</sup> For analysis on taxi-industry, see Kall et al (2021)

strangers; and a sense of higher agency in their platform activities (Schor et al., 2020, pp. 843, 845). More control over hosting activities resonates better with an entrepreneurial identity and is one of the aspects that distinguishes Airbnb from, for example, ride-hailing or delivery platforms.

Airbnb has been called the “poster child of the “sharing” economy” (Hoffman & Heisler, 2020, p. 9), discursively supported by the concept of sharing, connoting anti-consumerism and socially beneficial objectives (ibid, p. 10). As is widely known, commercial and professional hosts have come to dominate the listings and revenues over individual hosts (ibid, p. 136); therefore, scholars have increasingly criticised “sharewashing”, or using the term “sharing” to mask practices that are rather neoliberal in nature (for an overview, see e.g. Schor & Vallas, 2021). Nevertheless, individual private hosts renting out unused property or rooms, following the initial ideas of the “sharing economy” still exist despite representing a marginal share in the market overall. The experiences of this group will form the focus of Section III of the current research paper. Hosts in the sample of our qualitative research operate mostly (but not exclusively) with their “underutilised assets”, defined as property not bought for investment or renting purposes only. The boundaries are not clear though, as the opportunity to use the property to earn revenue might have been the motivation for the purchase or made it possible to retain a property that is temporarily unused by the family.

Understanding the experiences and perspectives of individual hosts is linked to the question of how those actors relate to the platform and platform “work”; and what it means to welcome strangers into their home as the most private and intimate space. Airbnb brings hosts and guests into direct contact by facilitating trust that is especially crucial for sharing one’s home with strangers. Trust in this context is based on the digital ratings by app users on their past experiences and on the ability of users to profile themselves favourably. On the one hand, this reflects the importance of reputational data as a source of disciplinary and regulatory power. On the other hand, it represents the rather narrow conceptualisation of trust in platform work, especially when considering how trust is generated and experienced outside the realms of the platform (Roelofsen & Minca, 2018; Vallas & Schor, 2020). How their (work) situation and relation to the platform is perceived by the individual hosts themselves will be discussed in more detail in Section III.

This paper has been written in the midst of the Covid-19 global pandemic. In Section IV, some initial reflections on the experiences and assessments of the potential influences of the crises will be discussed, again both from a more institutional as well as from the hosts’ perspectives. As neither the interviewees nor the authors could have a full view of future developments in the hospitality sector while compiling the analysis, the chapter serves mostly the aim of documenting and providing insights “from the ground”, as the pandemic situation unfolds with all its more or less unexpected turns.

The research team would like to express their gratitude to all the participants and interviewees of the PLUS project who have devoted their time to share their experiences with us.

## 1. Methodology

### Data

The report has been compiled on the basis of different data sets. The analysis of the institutional circumstances of Airbnb activities presented in Section II was conducted on the basis of secondary literature and available data: publicly available state administrative statistics, survey data, newspaper articles, research reports/articles, legislation (acts), and the homepages of relevant companies and organisations. Between 2019 and 2021, five semi-structured face-to-face and three e-mail interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including experts in the field of social security, taxation, the accommodation industry, and platform work in general. The main aim of the expert interviews was to elaborate on the role and impact of platforms on the field in general. The face-to-face interviews lasted 25 to 60 minutes.

Section III of the paper is compiled on the basis of qualitative in-depth interviews with Airbnb hosts conducted January–September 2020. The focus of this sub-study was individual private hosts who were renting out their individually owned properties (a room in a flat or an entire flat) in different locations in the city. In Tallinn, large-scale hosts are publicly more active and visible in the media; therefore, our research aims to give more voice to the private hosts who tend to remain in the background and are quieter about their concerns and activities, and whose activities resemble the initial idea of the sharing economy more.

Hosts meeting the criteria were contacted through the Airbnb platform by sending them an invitation to participate in the research along with information about the PLUS project. Interviews were conducted with all the hosts who responded positively. In addition to the main sample criteria mentioned above, the selection of contacts was made with the aim of increasing the heterogeneity of the interviewees in terms of gender, age, location and the nature of their Airbnb practices, based on the information provided in the Airbnb listings. Two suitable interviewees were also found through the wider networks of the research team (social media, where team members posted calls for interviews). Therefore, the interviewee selection was made by following the principles of purposive sampling, but the final composition of the sample was influenced by the willingness of different hosts to participate in the research.

The final selection of interviewees (17) is dominated by women (13) and those having a higher education (15, see Table 1). Nine of the interviewees rented out a room and 8 rented out a whole flat. All interviewees had other income sources but for some (4) those other sources were random and/or considerably limited. All the interviewees were Estonian; their age ranged from 26 to 59 years. Furthermore, highly educated women, and people using Airbnb as a side-activity all-year-round were more represented in the sample. The average monthly income from Airbnb activities varied from €100 to €800, but these figures need to be taken with some caution because of the high seasonal variability of the hosts' Airbnb activities. Although the collection of interviewees is less heterogeneous in demographic terms, it still encompasses multiple reasons for using Airbnb and patterns of Airbnb practices, as will be revealed in the paper below (see Section III). One of the interviews was made as a pair interview – a mother and daughter – co-hosting in their home

with quite a clear division of tasks. This interview gave valuable and multi-faceted insights into the dynamics of the meaning of home and family, also in intergenerational terms, among the cases where hosting is conducted in close cooperation within the family.

Based on the number of listings on the Airbnb platform at the beginning of 2020, hosting offers are concentrated in central locations of the city. Therefore, it was more difficult to find hosts from more distant areas that matched the selection criteria and were ready to participate. It needs to be stressed, however, that because of the relatively small size and compactness of the city of Tallinn, even more peripheral locations are usually accessible from the city centre within 20–30 minutes by public transport. Altogether 4 hosts living in modernist residential tower blocks in more peripheral residential areas were also interviewed.

All interviewees were able to choose a place and time that suited them. While most of the interviews took place on the premises of Tallinn University, one of the interviews was made on the campus of another university in Tallinn, TalTech, for the convenience of the location for the interviewee. Two interviews were conducted online. During the interview session, the interviewees were offered refreshments and, as a thank-you, a gift card valued at €20 to compensate them for their time. Generally, the interview situation was relaxed and the people were willing to discuss their experiences and opinions rather openly. Perhaps the most difficult topics to discuss were connected to taxes and involvement in public social security systems, especially in those cases where the interviewee did not have another full position on the labour market. The interviewees themselves explained their motivation for participating in the research either on the basis of their broader individual interest in the topic via a previous connection to the university or research in other fields, or just due to curiosity and an openness to share their experiences. Since the interviewees were approached through the Airbnb portal with no previous real-life contact, it might be that only those already more positively attuned towards such research projects responded to our calls, as a kind of self-selection process. At the same time, although some participants did ask about the research project and its course, interest towards its future results remained modest.

The structure of the interview guide divided the discussion into three broad topics: hosting and work processes, skills, and social protection; but as characteristic in semi-structured in-depth interviews, we allowed people to reflect their perceptions more freely and did not always strictly follow the interview plan, enabling the interviews to follow their own flow. The interviews lasted from 68 to 108 minutes, they were conducted by the research team members and transcribed verbatim by a trusted subcontractor. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the respondent and all interviewees signed an informed consent form.

In addition to individual interviews, a focus group interview was conducted on 6 November 2020, consisting of 4 participants working for different platforms (1 Airbnb, 3 Uber). All participants had experience of platform work from pre-pandemic times as well as during the pandemic. An invitation to join was circulated amongst Uber drivers and Airbnb hosts active in Tallinn, as well as some additional recruitments through social media. This interview was conducted face-to-face within the premises of the university, with the moderation of the PLUS team members. The focus group guidelines were constructed with the aims of introducing the participants to the first

results of the analysis of the interviews in Tallinn, and to ask for additional reflections, comments and further experiences related to the topic. The duration of the focus group interview was 1 hour 30 minutes, all participants signed an informed consent form.

### Analysis

The analysis followed the principles of thematic analysis, especially for Section III based on the interviews with the hosts. First, analytical summaries were compiled on all interviews by the interviewers, following the main research questions and aims of the PLUS project. We applied the inductive approach keeping an open eye for unexpected topics, aspects and nuances from the interviews. Then, based on the analytical summaries as well as the interviews as raw data, the central themes found in the material were developed and structured into the report. The analytical findings in Section III are supported by direct quotations from the interviews with the hosts.

*Table 1 Characteristics of interviewees (individual)*

Sex	Male	4
	Female	13
Age group	Below 30	4
	30-50	11
	Over 50	2
Nationality: majority/ minority	Estonian	17
	Estonian-Russian	0
	New immigrants	0
Education level	Below secondary	0
	Secondary	2
	Higher	15
Monthly working hours on all platforms	Up to 40	13
	40-100	0
	More than 100	0
	Hard to say	4
Main source of income	Airbnb	0
	Regular employment	12

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	Own company	1
	Pension/scholarship/other allowances	2
	Other sources	2
Basis for social security	Platform labour	0
	Other	16
	None	1
Type of rental	A room	9
	Entire apartment	8

*Source: own calculations*

## 2. Institutional context

### 2.1 General regulatory context

In different European countries, three general types of regulations appear as central for the Airbnb platform (Altenried et al., 2021): a) those applied at the state level on accommodation and tourism industries, b) state level regulations for taxation, and c) various regulations applied at the local level (city). Estonia and Tallinn represent a case with no specific regulations for Airbnb. The state has so far mainly followed the principle of not imposing new rules for new players in the field, but rather to loosen the general regulatory framework for both *traditional* as well as *platform* actors. The declared aim has been not to create special regulations for the “sharing economy” but to follow the principle of treating all actors in the tourism sector in a similar manner irrespective of business format. That the reality is not perceived in that way by incumbent actors will be explained in sub-section 2.2. below.

There has been neither a general public discussion nor a demand on behalf of the Airbnb hosts to deal specifically with issues of social security in relation to Airbnb. The few existing public debates about the need to regulate Airbnb have related to the problems of the urban neighbourhoods targeted most by tourism. However, local governments (including Tallinn City) have currently no legal means to regulate short-term rental activities at the municipal level. Mainly due to the high level of owner-occupation in Estonia (81.4% as of 2020, Eurostat), contrary to many other cities in Europe, short-term rental flats have contributed less to increases in rental prices; nevertheless, there is a clear concentration pattern of Airbnb flats in central Tallinn, adding their share to the generally high property prices in those areas. The impact on property markets also became clear during the Covid-19 pandemic, when rental prices, especially in the Old Town, an area subject to significant touristification during the pre-pandemic years (Paadam & Ojamäe, 2021; Talk, 2021), and adjacent areas, underwent a significant decrease; by 2021, it has been estimated that rental prices have recovered their pre-pandemic levels (see also Section IV of current report).

The Estonian **Tourism Act** and its recent changes in 2020 and 2021 have perhaps raised issues related to Airbnb most vividly at parliamentary level concerning the tourism sector and requirements on service providers in general. According to interviewed experts from the accommodation sector, before those most recent changes, the regulation of the sector in Estonia has been more detailed than respective regulations in Europe or internationally, creating quite a remarkable contrast in respect to the requirements and responsibilities set for the incumbent industry and for Airbnb hosting. Therefore, according to the interviewed experts, the Estonian Hotel and Restaurant Association has been lobbying to achieve respective changes in the legislation, and, as estimated, rather successfully. The changes in the Tourism Act reached the Estonian Parliament in September 2020, and the renewed Tourism Act came into force on 1 May 2021, clarifying differences between accommodation services and short-term renting and relaxing the requirements for accommodation service providers (amongst others, diminishing the requirements for desk-service due to the increasing use of digital booking and giving the sector more responsibilities and thus flexibility to regulate accommodation services). An

exploratory memorandum to the draft Tourism Act from September 2020<sup>5</sup> compiled by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications makes an explicit reference to the impact of the “sharing economy” on the tourism industry, and the need to adjust the current situation by making rules and regulations more flexible for all actors in the tourism sector. Whether the recent changes in legislation will induce more companies hosting via Airbnb to register as accommodation providers remains to be seen; so far, only a limited share of companies acting via Airbnb are registered as such, and therefore most do not appear in the official statistics. Furthermore, when a service is provided by a private person, the Tourism Act does not apply.

In parallel with the above-mentioned changes to the Tourism Act, the Ministry of Financial Affairs attempted to propose amendments to the **Income Tax Act and Taxation Act** to commit the platforms to sharing information about people providing services via platforms with the Tax Office<sup>6</sup> – a practice that has been lacking so far. Those changes were rejected by many parties (including the Airbnb corporation, as well as the Estonian Association of Sharing Economy) and were postponed with the argument that respective changes in the tax legislation concern all platform work and therefore require more extensive discussion and stakeholder involvement beyond the tourism sector. So far, private individuals are obliged to declare revenues for income tax but since there is no automated information exchange between Airbnb and the Tax Office, in reality part of Airbnb hosting remains in the grey economy.

Concerning the impact of Airbnb activities on **neighbourhoods**, state-level discussions have also been scarce. In the explanatory memorandum of the draft Tourism Act, the need to address issues of noise and safety in residential areas and around apartment houses caused by Airbnb hosting have been mentioned, but also that the current legislation (e.g. Apartment Ownership and Apartment Associations Act, Law Enforcement Act, etc.) creates enough options for dealing with those problems at the local level. This view is not shared by local residents and neighbours of short-term rental flats, who especially in the case of commercial and large-scale operators of Airbnb flats feel there is no opportunity to exercise their rights in case of problems (Paadam & Ojamäe, 2021). A similar view was also shared by a representative of the Estonian Hotel and Restaurant Association, who stressed the near lack of cases where residents as private owners of their apartments have been able to bring those problems to court. Since the burden of proof relies on the residents and neighbours and the right to regulate guest apartments by the apartment-owners’ associations at the level of individual apartment buildings is not institutionalised, in real life, local residents have struggled to maintain their quality of life when there are problems with guest apartments. According to a recent study among Old Town residents in Tallinn, the residents have experienced Airbnb as a strong factor for diminishing the liveability of the Old Town (Paadam & Ojamäe, 2021). Tallinn City approached the central government in 2021 with a request to open the debate on regulating short-term renting at the state level but so far there has

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<sup>5</sup> processing of the changes of the tourism law in Estonian Parliament are documented here: <https://www.riigikogu.ee/tegevus/eelnoud/eelnou/f8c28784-fc52-4eaa-a02c-555b2369a55c/Turismiseaduse%20ja%20tarbijakaitseaduse%20muutmise%20seadus>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.err.ee/1143893/riik-tahab-jagamismajandusest-rohkem-maksutulu-saada>, see also previous footnote

been no political will to change the current situation. The general discussion about regulating Airbnb activities has remained quite moderate and signals from Tallinn city government indicating the will to regulate Airbnb at the local level have been confronted in the media mainly by commercial and professional actors calling for no interfering or “overregulating” of market relations.

## 2.2 Airbnb and the hospitality sector

According to a report by the Estonian Qualifications Authority (Lepik & Uiboupin, 2018), the platform economy has increased competition in the hospitality sector and will continue to in the future. This was also confirmed by the experts interviewed in this study, who emphasised the seasonality of the Estonian tourism market, and especially the high competition between accommodation providers during the low season. Although no directly comparable statistics exist on Airbnb and “traditional” accommodation, an analysis from pre-pandemic times in Tallinn suggests a higher impact of seasonality for Airbnb apartments. Traditional hotels were able to reduce the effects of seasonality by being more successful in attracting business guests (EAS, 2019).

The digitalisation of the field is inevitable; the interviewed representatives of the traditional accommodation sector also agreed on this point. The use of digital booking platforms, such as booking.com, has also been a widespread strategy in the traditional sector. Assessments have shown that the arrival of platforms such as Airbnb as well as different social media platforms (TripAdvisor etc.) have also shaped consumer expectations and behaviour towards more personalised, segmented, “authenticity”-oriented tourism experiences in Estonia (Lepik & Uiboupin, 2018); therefore, incumbent actors also increasingly feel the need to take this into consideration to stay competitive.

For the incumbent actors, the main problem with “guest apartments” has been Airbnb’s privileged market position in respect to legal regulation and taxing (see also sub-section 2.1). According to the Estonian Hotel and Restaurant Association representative, the association considers that this situation does not contribute to a fair market for the hospitality sector. The requirements (level of services, fire-safety etc.) set for registered accommodation mean additional investments that do not apply to informal hosts using Airbnb. In relation to the lack of control of the level of services and safety measures in Airbnb apartments, the interviewees have also highlighted potential quality problems in Airbnb that might influence the overall image and trust towards the accommodation sector in Estonia (since there are no known cases about that, this concern can be considered rather theoretical). In respect to taxes, the main differences stem from the way Airbnb activities can remain in the ‘grey area’ due to a lack of information exchange between the platform and state institutions. For example, if a service is provided by a private individual who does not declare this income, no taxes will be paid for providing the service, influencing both the net returns of the service provider and tax revenues of the state.

In general, the spillover effects of platform-mediated gig work for the traditional accommodation sector are expected to continue, mostly influencing lower-skilled jobs in cleaning and catering services (Lepik & Uiboupin, 2018). The tendency to hire on a task-by-task basis, and not into a

specific position (cf Vallas, 2019) and the concurrent trend towards increasing job insecurity for workers in fields adjacent to hospitality services have also been noted by our interviewed experts. A general assessment has been that the market share held by platforms is expected to continue to grow in the field, and at a higher speed than for incumbent actors.

### 2.3 Airbnb and platform work

As will be explained in more detail in Section III, Airbnb hosts do not consider their activities in terms of *labour* relations and employment but rather identify themselves as providing rental and hospitality services via a platform or as small entrepreneurs. Despite these peculiarities of Airbnb activities within the spectrum of the heterogeneity in *platform work*, hosting activities generate income and require work effort. Therefore, from the societal point of view, the question of the regulation of work relations and social protection is also important in the case of Airbnb hosts.<sup>7</sup>

As emphasised by Schor et al. (2020), the nature of employment relations varies from platform to platform as well as within one platform yielding heterogeneity, variation in conditions of work and by extension, differences in the levels of precarity in platform work. In comparison to many other platforms, Airbnb hosts are much more in control of their work situation; therefore, complementing other sources of income and social protection with Airbnb activities is completely feasible according to our study; this finding also confirms previous research (e.g. see Vallas & Schor, 2020). On the other hand, hosting itself, as with other types of platform work, appears largely to provide a low level of social protection if not complemented by other, more traditional forms of work and income. As indicated by Schor et al. (2020), and confirmed by the current study, when platform income is supplemental, there is less dissatisfaction and precarity, suggesting a parasitic relationship between the two labour markets where platforms are as if free-riding on the security provided by conventional employment as the primary source of social security.<sup>8</sup>

Although platform work can be rather demanding in respect to the skills necessary to do it well (starting from soft skills like emotional work to being tech savvy), no special training is provided to hosts. Securing health and safety at work mostly falls on the hosts, as health and safety regulations are the responsibility of the employer / service provider<sup>9</sup> themselves. There exist no specific unions for platform workers and traditional unions have also been rather reluctant to mobilise them. In addition, unionisation is very low in the hospitality sector in general, and

<sup>7</sup> In Estonia, platform workers in general do not have employment contracts with platforms, and the consideration of the workers on the part of the platforms as “individual contractors” leaves them legally in an indecisive position. For more detailed explanations on the topic, see Kall et al. 2021

<sup>8</sup> For the European context, see e.g. a study by European Parliament: “The Social Protection of Workers in the Platform Economy” (2017) [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/614184/IPOL\\_STU\(2017\)614184\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/614184/IPOL_STU(2017)614184_EN.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/522042021002/consolide/current>

neither did the interviewed Airbnb hosts consider the need for collective activities as something relevant for their activities (more on that in Section III).

The fact that the majority of platforms in Estonia operate as service providers (as a virtual market where sellers and buyers can meet), and not as employers, has been accepted so far by state authorities. Experts consider that there might be a considerable grey economy within the platform economy: some service providers do not declare income at all and so some platform work might stay out of focus for the authorities. In general, the public attitude regarding the employment status of platform workers is very liberal; therefore, changes in this respect will need to be more likely driven by European Commission initiatives than by local initiatives.

## 3. The perspective of Airbnb hosts

### 3.1 “Doing Airbnb”

The qualitative in-depth interviews with the hosts provided evidence of a peculiar identification of the hosts in terms of their work on the Airbnb platform. Using “*doing Airbnb*” to describe their activities in their interviews creates a rather clean break with the concepts of *labour* and *employment*, and perhaps resembles a hobby-like sole entrepreneurship. This can partly, but not entirely, be explained by the composition of our interviewees who “*do Airbnb*” mainly as a side-activity.

#### MOTIVATION

In the underlying motivation to be engaged in Airbnb activities, two different types can be analytically distinguished, although in the narratives of the interviewees the motivations become mixed:

a) **economic** orientation (related to notions of “*paid hospitality*”, “*hosting clients*”): hosting is used as an income opportunity by taking advantage of having a spare room/property. Airbnb activities can contribute to personal/family income on different levels: either by providing needed certainty in an otherwise precarious labour market position and fluctuating income; or, by providing extra income in a situation where there is no direct economic pressure.

*“Airbnb gives me this freedom; I do not need to worry about where the next money will come from. Or, it allows me not to give up certain projects that I’m drawn to but that would not be reasonable for me to accept because of income and time-use”. (Air\_F\_TLL\_9)*

*“We knew that this would not be a business as such for us. It is good money that comes in, though /.../ really a very welcome bonus for, I don’t know, a family vacation or something like that” (Air\_F\_TLL\_11)*

Airbnb hosting, according to our hosts, was also taken up with the aim of adjusting to changes in the family and life-arrangements without moving (e.g., “empty-nesters”; after a divorce; in anticipation of enlarging the family in the future). The extra income generated by Airbnb can make it possible to stay in the home and keep the property, thereby indicating how hosting activities and the dynamics related to family and home are intertwined.

b) **lifestyle** orientation (related to notions of “*paid hospitality*”, “*hosting guests*”): appears as related to a passion for travel and having new encounters, meeting new people and cultures at home. This orientation tends to be linked to previous experiences of couchsurfing and/or an inclination towards couchsurfing-like hospitality exchange but with monetary compensation:

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*"I love travelling a lot ... but I can't do that as much as I'd like to because resources are limited, time and money, right, but it [Airbnb] is an opportunity to bring the world into your home. And to get some small monetary return for that as well." (Air\_F\_TLL\_1)*

*"I just love it when people keep coming to my house. Well, in the sense that they'll come and they'll go, they'll bring in a fresh breeze and then they'll leave." (Air\_F\_TLL\_3)*

In addition, the inclination, or, the "mission" to introduce one's culture and the city to visitors from abroad also emerged from the interviewees reasoning about their motives, and enabling them to distinguish Airbnb from other accommodation types. The next quote provides an example of how from the perspective of the hosts, different motivations become intertwined:

*"This certain feeling of having a mission, somehow it's always there in tourism. Personally, I have had it all the time, I've worked as a guide since the end of high school, well, you do it to earn money but a certain feeling of a mission is still needed, it works for your own sake. If you have it, it is reflected in your service and then clients value that and you get better feedback bringing in more clients, eventually it is good for economic purposes as well." (Air\_F\_TLL\_16)*

Hosts being dependent on tourist flows was not problematised much in the interviews from before Covid-19 (see also Section IV). The potential influences of Airbnb and tourism on the liveability of their neighbourhood were not brought up by the interviewees, but if asked, the presence of Airbnb rentals and tourists in the neighbourhood was seen rather as an asset to increase the diversity of the neighbourhood by those who engage in hosting. Being owners, and in many cases also the residents of the same flat, they expressed narratives with a mix of responsibility towards their neighbours and confidence in the owner's right to earn revenue from the property.

### HOSTING AT HOME AND WITHIN THE FAMILY

A significant difference appears between renting out an additional flat owned by the host and hosting in the host's own home. Renting out the primary home (a room, or an entire flat while the family is away) is deeply intertwined with daily routines at home and with the dynamics of the partnership/family relationships unfolding within the same space. Hosting practices and hosting work taking place at home need to be constantly negotiated within the family and with the guests, to maintain the borders between private/shared and acceptable/unacceptable activities.

*"Well, this is my home /.../ I have had guests who think that this is their home. And I have found myself feeling that I need to stay in my room because I don't want to go upstairs [to the living room] because he is all over the place" (Air\_F\_TLL\_4)*

Sharing the hosting work between family members – whether inside the primary home or in a spare flat – can foster cooperation and new kinds of relationships within the family. Amongst the interviewees there are different examples of that, like the case of the co-hosting mother and

daughter with a clear division of tasks and cooperation, or spouses who share hosting by combining each other's skills, preferences and time available:

*"With my husband we have developed such a division of work. My husband sees that all needed things are in place, well, from toilet paper to shampoos and liquid soaps. And, if bulbs need to be replaced or something similar needs to be done, this goes to him. Since I'm better with languages I do the responding to clients. /.../ I make sure that in the flat there is various tourism information and books /.../ what concerns cleaning and letting in the guests, we divide this as needed, who has more time available or who is in town."*  
(Air\_F\_TLL\_16)

Therefore, hosting in the private home intersects with everyday practices within home and family, unsettling and shaping social relations between those "already *at home*" (Roelofsen, 2018, p. 38, emphasis in original), referring to the close interrelation of the fields of work, family and leisure in the case of individual private hosting activities. The expectations in the family or partnership as to the privacy of the home, family relations and "*doing Airbnb*" need continuous adjustment by all parties involved.

#### HOSTING VIA THE PLATFORM

Hosting activities require different kinds of work. Meeting and letting the clients in are considered the most demanding moments in hosting work: because of the time-management involved (dependence on client arrival) and to establish the first "real" contact with the client. There are hosts who prefer to meet the clients themselves with the aim of establishing trust and personal commitment; other hosts prefer new technological solutions (code-locks) because of the freedom it provides. The most time-consuming appears to be cleaning; to reduce and optimise the respective workload, some hosts require longer stays and try to keep at least one free day between different clients. As a rule, the interviewed hosts provided all the necessary work themselves; although, even when the hosting is done in the private home, there is at least the occasional need to mobilise support from one's social circles. Paid support is also used, especially when the scale of activities increases (e.g. renting out the entire flat).

In general, the interviewed hosts value the Airbnb platform and app as accessible technological means that facilitates their hosting activities. While some have previous experience in the "traditional" rental sector and possibly would have been active in the sector anyway, Airbnb as a platform has been an opener of new earning possibilities for all, not the least by enabling people to reach out to much more client groups than before. A central feature of how the Airbnb platform contributes to the functioning of "hosting strangers" appears to be the review system. Interviewed hosts consider reviews about the guests important for building trust; and reviews about the hosts themselves are expected to contribute to "managing" the guests' expectations by informing about the hosting situation. Especially during the beginner phase, acquiring a critical number of reviews is considered necessary to become a "local" on the platform, to be better accepted and visible to potential clients.

*"I started at a very low price, to get my first visitors and first reviews. To get things going, so to say." (Air\_F\_TLL\_5)*

The review system is expected to be based on reciprocal information sharing amongst Airbnb members. However, in reality the provision of reviews might be felt as a burden or create feelings of frustration after negative feedback is received and felt as unjust. Some of the interviewees admit difficulties in writing negative reviews themselves. Although being dependent on honest reviews, there is a reluctance to contribute to this system by making one's own negative experiences public. Giving public negative feedback is sometimes considered even more problematic than receiving it, especially in "milder" or not so clear-cut cases where extra care is given in the wording of the messages. This is in line with the "highly positive commentary" found to be characteristic of Airbnb in previous research (cf. Bridges & Vásquez, 2016).

The issue of trust has a central significance in letting strangers into a family property, especially if it is the most private and intimate space – the main home. For the beginner phase of Airbnb hosting, trust seems to be based on the perceived reputation of Airbnb, this is reproduced by the review system and in the case of the Tallinn interviewees, supported by generally positive hosting experiences. More experienced hosts argue about a kind of "intuition" developed on the basis of their experience, to judge the client and his/her trustworthiness already before hosting: based on the listing, reviews, and personal communication.

*"with years, those skills have developed that while looking at my clients I can sometimes already tell what kind of questions or problems they might have" (Airbnb, FG)*

Still, since a significant part of the communication is conducted online and in certain cases hosts do not even meet the clients in person at all, Airbnb's ability as a platform to create and maintain trust at a necessary level is crucial here. In addition to the review system, it appears that a feeling of security is supported by the hosts' expectations that Airbnb "knows" who the guests are and Airbnb's provision of insurance against damages, even in cases where the host has no clear knowledge about the platform's policies in that matter. Based on the interviews, it can be said that trusting clients is largely based on the trust that hosts have in Airbnb as a platform and in the anticipated reciprocity of Airbnb hospitality; Airbnb has been rather successful so far in that matter.

*"Well, those reviews give a big picture to you. So, the platform itself creates this trust because no-one... well, you'd ruin your reputation if you'd do something, or, you couldn't use this platform basically any more if you'd do something very bad" (Air\_F\_TLL\_10)*

*"I have a feeling that those people who are using this website have a certain state of mind or so... more open-minded people with a certain mind-set, I somehow trust those people more. If they are ready to stay at someone's home, trusting that I will not hurt them, or, if my home would suit their expectations and standards in the first place, then somehow, I trust them. That they would come in good faith and wouldn't mess up." (Air\_F\_TLL\_5)*

For those renting out rooms while staying at home, the issue of personal security might become relevant. Single female hosts admitted occasionally feeling insecure when hosting men. Different strategies have been used to forestall those situations, from a clear decision not to accept any single men, especially if the guest belongs to a more distant cultural background, to placing a lock on the room door. Refusing a client might be perceived as difficult or impossible to do, especially if the host has chosen the “direct booking” option strongly recommended by Airbnb: cancelling those bookings would affect the host’s status on the platform. Still, no interviewees claimed to have experienced any real problematic situations in relation to this topic so far.

Hosts tend to use certain simple strategies to secure their position and rights in their work on the platform, such as: pre-selecting guests; deciding price levels without following Airbnb’s automated advice; setting lower and upper limits to the number of nights per booking to optimise the length of the stay and labour needed; using pre-prepared messages for different possible client inquiries. Sight-impaired people value the fact that the Airbnb platform is accessible to them (something that is still not all that common); there are mixed experiences with customer support, although support services are contacted more rarely than frequently.

It appears from the interviews that the algorithmic recommendations provided by the platform are often trusted because they reduce the level of individual effort needed and support easy access to platform work also for those with no previous experience in the field of hosting.

*“This system, a large number of people are using it, and it has been going for a long time now, it gives a very good experiential basis. So, it is very easy for me to join as a newcomer and to act there, so much good advice has been provided already.” (Air\_M\_TLL\_6)*

However, perceptions of platform affordances and algorithmic controls differ and so too do the individual practices of using the platform. With increasing experience and knowledge from hosting (or a background in rental activities), there appear more critical attitudes towards the default settings and “nudging” done by the platform (e.g. pricing recommendations that are considered unjustly low for the average level in the neighbourhood), as well as the perceived lack of transparency about the platform fee (e.g. principles of calculation and justification of fee levels) and the uneven position of the hosts in relation to the company.

*“When I started, I did put a very low, very low price, just to get those reviews, to get some people /.../ in surroundings, the prices are something like 30 euros per night. I put 12 euros per night, and really, I had people every night in the house. I [still] earned /.../ little, because Airbnb /.../ takes a lot [commission]” (Air\_F\_TLL\_4)*

*“After all, this is just a big corporation /.../ this Airbnb, it started very nicely, as a kind of further development of couchsurfing. But now, it is rather a global large corporation. Even for a Superhost like me, for whom it should be easier to contact them, well, this is not the case.” (Air\_F\_TLL\_9)*

Prompt communication with clients is considered to be significant, and this can be explained in terms of either the aim of providing a good hosting experience or the need to meet the standards

set by the platform – influencing the Superhost status and client reviews. While the former was presented by the interviewees as part of their inner motivation, the latter can be interpreted more as an example of external influence (platform sanctions); still, in the narratives of the interviewees these motives become intertwined as they strove towards providing a good service.

*“if someone has made an inquiry – ‘I want to visit you during those dates’ – then for me the clock starts ticking. The sooner I reply /.../ the more points I will earn. Thus, if an inquiry comes, I will answer immediately” (Air\_M\_TLL\_2)*

*“I have my phone always with me, so in that sense this is the usual life of an entrepreneur (laughing). I do not have days off.” (Air\_M\_TLL\_11)*

Being always available for online communication is not taken as a burden but is rather perceived as part of contemporary social expectations: to be constantly immersed in online communication flows.

The individual standards the host has set for her/his own hosting services vary along this underlying motivational basis. It is quite characteristic that when the host has a lot of personal travel experience or a previous connection to service work, the level of hospitality provided is “measured” against one’s own expected level and the nature of the service. Providing basic amenities together with a personal touch (“local” recommendations, small gestures like flowers, local candies, etc.) seem to be the hosts’ shared understanding of the specificity of Airbnb hospitality in comparison to more traditional accommodation services. More long-term hosts have experienced a shift in the composition of clients and their expectations indicating a change in the nature and identity of Airbnb accommodation. Instead of the clients’ searching for *authenticity* and guest-host interaction, more characteristic of the early years in Airbnb, according to the interviewed hosts, client expectations tend now to vary more and there are more cases of taking Airbnb as a standard hotel-like accommodation. This has also influenced the activities of the hosts. Those offering a room within their own home have especially felt the need to adapt their listing texts and communication strategies accordingly. To avoid misinterpretations, negative experiences and, not the least, negative reviews, they have learned to be more concise and provide the clients with precise descriptions of their shared accommodation.

The status of Superhost is valued for various reasons: as a token of acknowledgement by the clients (positive reviews as a prerequisite for the status) and by the platform; or as a special status giving advantages for Airbnb activities: for hosting as well as being hosted. More generally, the criteria for gaining this status are not considered as entirely transparent by the interviewed hosts, and some of the interviewees claim to have no exact knowledge about those criteria. Since the respective criteria are available on the Airbnb website, we can interpret this lack of knowledge as a lack of interest or motivation to self-inform, and that their situation in the “Airbnb market” satisfies them. The most visible and most-often-experienced criterion appears to be the no-cancellation policy for bookings. This motivates hosts who are eager to gain or maintain the Superhost status, to accept bookings also in cases they would actually prefer to cancel (e.g. single women hosting single men).

Amongst the interviewees, there were those with previous experiences of using couchsurfing that typically has grown into using Airbnb. Those having been active in couchsurfing tend to emphasise the lifestyle-oriented motivation in their hosting; a preference for meeting new people and cultures in their own home can be continued via Airbnb, but with the expectation of monetary compensation. There have been occasional attempts to use booking.com; in comparison between the two Airbnb is valued because of its review and insurance systems that are perceived as supporting the hosts more. Multi-apping is rather perceived as complicating the hosting processes with the need to synchronise bookings from different channels. The motivation of the interviewed hosts seemed to be less oriented towards maximising profits and rather constrained by the need to manage the hosting as a side-activity to other duties.

*“It feels like too much work to be active on several platforms at the same time. I’m not so motivated for that, it’s just a simple way to earn some extra money for me. But I wouldn’t want to spend too much time on it either.” (Air\_F\_TLL\_5)*

Among the interviewees, there was no significant interaction with other hosts, real or virtual/online. There exists at least one online community for hosts in Estonia, and international forums are also occasionally used. In real-life encounters, hosting other hosts stands out as a valued possibility for interacting with other hosts, although not something used strategically for exchanging experiences. Furthermore, the Airbnb newsletter can be seen as a means of creating a certain sense of community among the hosts. Still, having more communication with other hosts is mainly perceived as a potential way of learning “tips” for individual hosting activities, and not an argument in favour of the need to act in collective interests towards other institutions or processes in society. In stronger expressions, the other hosts are even taken as competitors with no possibility of trusting cooperation based on shared interests.

*“The clients, they can discuss with each other where it is better to stay overnight and who’s a better host. But, the hosts amongst themselves... they would only obstruct each other, really.” (Air\_M\_TLL\_11)*

*“It is always good to have a chance to discuss things with someone else. And, well, those others are competitors at the same time, so it is interesting to see, well, hear and see, more to listen to and less to speak out by myself, as to what are they doing.” (Air\_F\_TLL\_16)*

At the same time, the interviewed hosts can be considered socially active: memberships in different social and professional associations were represented in the sample. It appears that this kind of activism has not been “transferred” into the area of Airbnb, which is largely perceived as a matter of individual agency and interests.

#### INSECURITIES OF AIRBNB WORK

Hosting varies seasonally. Therefore, the workload and income also varies seasonally. As a well-known pattern in tourism, the summers and Christmas/New Year stand out as “hot seasons”, but, due to different approaches to hosting, different patterns also exist. For example, in one case

hosting is done mainly outside the “hot seasons” because during those holiday times the space is used for accommodating other members of the family (to bring the family together); in another case hosting is offered only during the summer holidays when family moves out to their summer house and the primary home can be rented out. Therefore, the seasonal fluctuation of Airbnb incomes can even be amplified by the patterns of using the flat as the family home. This finding emphasises again how economic motives become bounded by family-related needs in cases where private hosting is done in the primary home of the family.

It is quite characteristic that the interviewees had difficulty estimating or refused to estimate the average working hours because of the variation in seasons, the length of stays, etc. More implicitly, it can be seen that the working hours of the interviewed hosts tend to be systematically underestimated because of the blurred boundaries: what is done for Airbnb hosting and what is part of their “regular” life in the home. This seems to be especially characteristic again to cases of renting out a room in one’s own home. For example, cleaning the home can be seen as a routine necessity, something that needs to be done anyway. As cleaning is differentiated from the daily regular work, its meaning can even be reconstructed into spending good leisure time.

*“Well, in the case of a full clean-up I’ll need... don’t know, half an hour or an hour. But, usually I have my headphones on or something, or I’ll watch a movie ... a bit of quality time for myself...like a fitness programme or something.” (Air\_F\_TLL\_8)*

This finding relates to broader contemporary tendencies in the nature of work: how to maintain a work-life balance if those domains are not differentiated in time-space anymore. Even when an entire flat is rented out, the investments (including time) in the property are given meaning partly as maintaining or increasing the value of the property, something that would be needed without Airbnb activities. This kind of downplaying of the amount of active labour needed for Airbnb hosting can in certain cases be related to respective discourses in Estonian society: yielding towards a “passive income”, independence from a daily regular paid job, is considered a desired goal. However, the “not-so-passive” reality of Airbnb work evidenced in the hosts’ interviews is in contrast with this kind of aim.

Inclusion in the public social security system varies among the interviewees. The main pattern among the interviewees (not generalisable to the whole population of Airbnb hosts because of the lack of data) is that inclusion comes with the “main job”, a stable position in the labour market, or as a result of a special condition granting access to the public health care system (e.g. health condition, student status). If Airbnb is a side-activity in addition to some other main job, the issue of inclusion in the public social security system might not even be given any meaning as part of the expected outcomes of those activities, as exemplified by the next quote:

*“I wouldn’t expect any social guarantees in relation to Airbnb. Well, it is only a platform providing me the opportunity to rent out my flat under very good conditions, well, at least this is as it has been so far. I don’t need to create my own webpage and I do not need to purchase a payment terminal for that. At least, this is how I’ve seen that: they provide me a service, or an opportunity. I wouldn’t relate that to any social guarantees.” (Air\_F\_TLL\_16)*

In those cases, when joining the public social security system would require individual activity and payments, it is not prioritised because the costs are considered too high (direct as well as indirect costs, like time needed to complete the forms in due time, etc). According to the interviewees, Airbnb income is received either as a private person or through the host's company (in the case of a small entrepreneur). Paying the required income taxes from Airbnb income seems to be more dependent on how the person perceives the tax system and individual trust in public institutions in general.

### 3.2 Skills and resources

As already mentioned, the scope of and motivation for hosting vary significantly among the people interviewed. Therefore, there is not one but many, and possibly contradictory, ways of being a successful host. This also implies that there are multiple versions of skill sets required and in use. For example, renting out an entire flat solely for monetary reasons calls for somewhat different capabilities compared to hosting in one's home and with the chief intention of meeting new people and getting to know their culture. Due to this sort of diversity, it is not possible to compose any universal ranking of skills necessary for hosting in Airbnb; that is, a ranking that is agreed upon by every host involved.

But at the same time, it was discerned that most of these methods and styles of hosting can potentially lead to universal recognition, or Superhost status. Does this mean that there still is, at least in part, a specific set of capabilities all hosts should have, especially if they are striving for the aforementioned status? The answer is that although the interviewed hosts – both with and without Superhost title – frequently do refer to and have the same skills, they do not necessarily have them to the same extent or in the same way. Of course, it can be said that the degree of crucial skills is what separates the most successful hosts from all the rest. But often the picture is more complex: it is possible in Airbnb to compensate for a shortage in one area with strengths and capabilities in another area or areas. As one participant stated:

*“When I started, I felt embarrassed about my old-fashioned toilet and bath, barely big enough to turn yourself around in and everything, but I got the Superhost status immediately. I think it was precisely because, well, perhaps not everything was the newest and brightest but I felt I somehow compensated for those shortcomings... well, yes, the communication.” (Air\_F\_TLL\_9)*

Therefore, although what now follows is a shortlist of skills relevant for hosting, it ought to be kept in mind that hosts navigate, with varying degrees of success, between those skills. Furthermore, there prevails a plurality of ways hosting is being managed; that is, how one's specific strengths and weaknesses are reconciled and played out in practice.

It is worth highlighting that skills related to the hosts in Tallinn can in large part be connected with six criteria through which guests can leave feedback for the hosts on the Airbnb platform. These are: Value, Communication, Check-in, Cleanliness, Location and Accuracy. Although the hosts did not discuss these six aspects in our interviews, nor have we data on how they are interpreted by the guests, they are still helpful in illuminating an array of capabilities the hosts

need on a daily basis, how their actions are perceived and what is expected of them. In other words, considering these criteria can offer us ideas about how the capabilities of the hosts convert into ratings which, as we know, are an inseparable part of Airbnb. Therefore, *inter alia*, we propose what kinds of skills could correspond to each of these criteria.

The skill of univocal and clear self-expression is highly valued. Being able to give a realistic description of the listing on the Airbnb platform and via direct communications helps to avoid negative reactions from the guests when they arrive, and this also helps make hosting smoother. This is why the significance of this skill often comes to be recognised after unwanted experiences are caused by an information mismatch. These experiences ranged from instances of having to explain several times how to find the rented place or where to put the key after leaving, to more extreme cases like arguments over animal hair. Therefore, hosts try to communicate as precisely as possible the peculiarities of their listings (pets present, the fact that the host also lives there etc.) and to learn from past mishaps and listings written by other, more experienced hosts. But, as it was mentioned by the hosts, some guests do not read the host's texts carefully, which makes it impossible for the former to totally control the image that the latter forms about their listings. This in turn makes hosts ask themselves where the line is between too much and too little information. When discussing the skill of self-expression, hosts used phrases like *written self-expression* and *communication skills* and this also corresponds to *language skills*. In addition, Communication and Accuracy could probably be criteria through which that skill is reviewed in Airbnb's feedback system.

Empathy and the ability to get along with guests were also emphasised by the interviewees. Moreover, hosts deem it important to provide an emotionally positive service and the feeling that the guests are welcome and being looked after. To offer all that, they must actively manage their emotions and think about the needs of their guests. Usually, hosts start to build a warm relationship in the initial meeting phase (when communication takes place via the internet) and when guests arrive. This involves, among other things, chit-chatting, greeting guests personally and showing them around.

*“There was a couple from Saint Petersburg and then I was like - waw, awesome, I have been to St Petersburg a couple of times, such a beautiful place! To build up empathy like that. And, what I saw as important, especially in the beginning, was that I was there to say hello when the person arrived.” (Air\_M\_TLL\_6)*

After that, there begins a, so to speak, settling in phase during which hosts try to establish different kinds of borders between themselves and their guests. These borders pertain to factors such as amount of communication (avoiding being both intrusive and impassive and avoiding inappropriate discussion topics) and physical space (giving guests room, trying not to get in their way).

*“Yes, to develop a sense of empathy [is important] ... you'll learn to sense the person .. is it a good time for talking? .. no, it seems not right for her at the moment...” (Air\_F\_TLL\_10)*

The ability to find the right balance was seen as something that takes time and practice to develop. Therefore, it was expressed that hosts struggle with it at the beginning of their "Airbnb career" and sometimes deem it to be too demanding. This explains why gaining that skill was described as *finding yourself* and *figuring out your role as a host*.

In addition, empathy in the hosts appears in the form of thinking about what accessories the guests might need for a more convenient, personal and "homely" accommodation experience. For example, they have bought things like shoehorns and shoe cleaning devices after experiencing that guests ask for them. Also, the hosts try to provide comfortable furniture – taking into account the reviews, some of them have replaced old pillows and beds in order to please their guests. Those hosts who perceive that their guests primarily seek budget accommodation seem to have less to do with the skill of empathy which influences the nature of the service they provide. Besides mentioning *empathy*, hosts used terms like *flexibility* and having an *open mind* when speaking about "soft" skills of that kind. In Airbnb's feedback system, this set of skills are probably reflected in criteria like Check-in, Communication, and Value.

The skill of using the internet and finding information is also useful for hosts. That skill is applied in multiple ways and is related to both online and offline realms. On the one hand, the interviewees use the internet to get tips and suggestions about hosting and to learn about Airbnb policies. The ability to track down these types of information comes in handy especially because there is no community or network of Airbnb hosts in Tallinn. On the other hand, hosts often seek local information for their guests. This includes collecting brochures from tourist centres and putting together, in physical or digital form, "what to do and where to eat" guides and also helping guests to find activities, events and concerts.

*"Other skills, such as googling to find information for people if they want some music events, for example (laughing). Or, such small things, bits and pieces /.../ one said they'd love to go for Latin dancing and now I know where this can be done in Tallinn."*  
(Air\_F\_TLL\_8)

As that skill enables hosts to be reliable local guides for their guests and it works as a factor in creating the feeling of hospitality, it could correspond to criteria like Communication and Value in Airbnb's feedback system. But the ability to find valuable information about different aspects related to hosting can affect how hosts act in various ways (from how to communicate with guests to how to speed up the cleaning process). Therefore, it can possibly have an impact on all six feedback criteria.

Time planning should also be highlighted as a necessary skill. As a rule, the interviewees who work full time must constantly reconcile it with hosting. It seems that one of the hardest things for them is to make sure that activities crucial for hosting are in accord with their working rhythm. When these two realms nonetheless collide, hosts have to come up with ad hoc solutions. For example, one interviewee, working as a teacher, talked about how she had to ask her colleague to cover for her in order to clean up her apartment before guests arrived. In addition, there is a threat that hosting comes at the expense of personal relationships. To avoid tensions arising from a scarcity of time – as this can have a negative impact on work, personal life and hosting itself –

hosts use multiple tactics. For instance, some of them actively manage the dates they offer on Airbnb.

*“When I’m at home I always keep my calendar free unless I’m having an event or something with my partner. Then I will mark this evening as not available, so as not to worry about leaving the event, or to check in someone in the middle of an event.”  
(Air\_F\_TLL\_5)*

Sometimes even more thorough measures, like giving guests a lift, are taken to have more control over the situation.

*“I have, for example, picked people up from the airport or bus station ... or ferry terminal, but usually I do that for my own sake, for my own time plan. If I had to wait for them to walk, it would take half an hour, but, if I collect them quickly, then I know I can let them into their room, show them around and, make my own way, timely.” (Air\_F\_TLL\_8)*

It can be guessed that time planning is also a skill that affects guest feedback in several ways. A host’s ability to arrange in-person check-ins/outs and to do it on time, and without the feeling of being in a hurry, is possibly acknowledged through criteria like Check-in, Communication and Value. Besides that, as the incident of the host who works as a teacher indicates, the way hosts allocate their time between hosting and other aspects of their life could leave its mark on criteria like Cleanliness.

Finally, the skills hosts have and use often originate from life outside of Airbnb. Here we can point to factors like upbringing, past experiences and their educational and professional path. This is one reason why the skills at hand are not allocated equally among the interviewees. For example, one host’s background in the arts, design and communication can facilitate decorating the rooms, taking good quality photographs and communicating photos and texts in the listing in a well-conceptualised and attractive way, thus achieving a certain advantage in the Airbnb competition. By contrast, some hosts clearly struggle with these kinds of practices but are good at entirely different things like repair work or cleaning (in one instance, a host had worked as a cleaner in the past, and therefore had developed an “*eye for detail*” as she said). It is true that most hosts have become more skilful during their “Airbnb career”, but their progress is usually one-sided – it seems that instead of providing totally new skills, active hosting rather enhances existing ones.

*Story-box: Seeing Airbnb with an entrepreneurial spirit*

In addition to discussing skills that are useful or necessary when renting out a room or, more seldom, an entire flat on Airbnb, some also talked about how platform work experience could be used – or how they actually try to use it – as a springboard for future endeavours in the accommodation business. Those hosts suggest that Airbnb offers them new and valuable capabilities and knowledge in order to carry on in that field or at least sparks deeper interest in it. Take for example Susan, a woman in her early 30s, who, with her husband, moved to a countryside house in southern Estonia some years ago but at the same time rents out their small apartment in central Tallinn with the help of a relative. As we can observe, Airbnb plays

an important part in her plans regarding their new home: *we got this little plan going so that we could do something similar [hosting] also in our house in the future. I think that it would be easier to start if I already have something to lean on, that I do not have to start from zero but I already have something that functions and is trustworthy because I have done it for such a long time /.../ it is much more simple to connect new things with it. That is my personal reason for not wanting to give up all that [Airbnb account and activity], that is, perhaps I want to continue doing something similar in the future.* For Susan, the hosting experience seems to generate or uphold her interest in entrepreneurship. Furthermore, it also provides (in the form of reviews and other kinds of data, which her Airbnb listing and account contains) a presentable resume that, she believes, can be effectively utilised.

It is significant that Susan identifies herself with the people who *maybe don't even want to live in the city, and therefore their city apartment provides them income which allows them to live in the countryside.* And she then adds: *life does not have to be so Tallinn-centred.* That way she reveals her particular social position, namely, being someone whose economic resources, type of occupation (she can work from home) and social stability enable her to live outside the city in order to enjoy in many ways a healthier environment. But enhancing her quality of life is just one part of the story. Susan also mentioned an interest in giving back: her hope is that providing accommodation services could *perhaps help invite people here, to the countryside,* meaning that it can enliven local life. Here she points to a well-known demographic problem in Estonia, a noteworthy decrease in the proportion of people living in rural areas. Since she implied that this social issue can be in a sense solved through entrepreneurialism, she presumably sees her business-related plans – she explicitly defined herself as a part-time worker in the tourism sector – as ethical or even altruistic. This assumption relies on the local government's initiative to bring life back to non-urban parts of the country and the positive public image of those who have already attempted to do it.

Besides indicating that her aspirations are intertwined with societal concerns, Susan also expressed sympathy towards the mundane activities which are part of hosting. For example, she talked about how she enjoys communicating with her guests. Nevertheless, her favourite part seems to be decorating, as she explained: *I like to see that room as a canvas in a sense /.../ you can move things around when you happen to go there; for example, replace the curtains and do that sort of thing.* Lastly, her third reason for hosting is earning extra income. Although she stated that her family would survive without the money from Airbnb, the interview nonetheless revealed that they use it in several ways: for taking care of the house, for paying the mortgage on their apartment and for retaining their living standards. Comprehension of all those reasons makes us realise how strongly Susan is tied to hosting. That in turn tells us why she tries to get more skilful at this line of "hobby-work" and what role Airbnb, an easily accessible platform, plays in this process. It becomes evident that hosting via Airbnb, which is for people like Susan both a hobby and paid work, helps – in connection with aspects like the dominant economic mentality – to legitimate entrepreneurship and, moreover, could make earning money next to other job(s) and in one's leisure time seem even a necessity, especially now when the Covid-19 pandemic causes the feeling of a ubiquitous precariousness.

## 4. Covid-19 influence and experiences

The Estonian government first declared a state of emergency on 12 March 2020 until 18 May. In the following period until autumn 2021, various restrictions have been imposed and relaxed, depending on the state of the epidemic in the country. Accommodation services have not been prohibited during the crises but as tourism nearly collapsed and people were staying mostly at home for the first periods of the crisis, these services have diminished considerably. It is important to note that during the lockdown in spring 2020, platform workers in general were not eligible for state support as they are not employed by the platforms. In the context of the current paper, relevant support by the state only concerned small enterprises up to 49 employees or the self-employed; it was possible to apply for support in the range of 3,000 – 5,000 euros (per month) depending on the turnover rate and losses.<sup>10</sup>

The global pandemic has changed the situation for all market actors in the hospitality sector: the near disappearance of international tourism and travel in Tallinn has only been marginally replaced by domestic tourism, both for Airbnb as well as for the traditional service providers. Although official statistics on traditional accommodation providers and Airbnb data (via AirDNA) are not directly comparable, these do highlight that while in 2018 there were approximately 7,700 rooms officially offered in accommodation in Tallinn, the average number of guest apartments (of different sizes) offered through Airbnb was approximately 2,500 and was annually increasing by about 30% (Alamets, 2019). In 2020, the rooms offered in the traditional sector were approximately 6,500 (annual decrease of 20%) and through Airbnb approximately 3,500 (annual decrease of 22%); the income from registered accommodation services decreased by 73% and for Airbnb flats the decrease has been estimated at 53%<sup>11</sup> (EAS, 2021b). Those estimations confirm the increasing market share of Airbnb flats in recent years in Tallinn, and also indicate that upper-market Airbnb apartments have resisted the downturn in the pandemic period somewhat better. During the pandemic period, it can be assumed that the use of platforms such as Airbnb or booking.com, which provide flexible digitalised booking services, have created some advantage in the current situation, and this is also enforced by automated or non-personal check-in processes that have been provided for platform-mediated guest apartments but not in hotels, where until recently checking-in in person was required by law.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic did not concern only the hospitality sector, but due to the decreased demand, a significant share of Airbnb apartments entered the long-term rental market (Rosenblad et al, 2020). Rental apartments that had previously been available on the short-term market were offered on the regular, long-term rental market, thus making the long-term rental

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.eas.ee/covid-19-toetused-vana/>

<sup>11</sup> a note: during the pandemic period, booking rates for Airbnb might be overrated by AirDNA since its algorithm is based on bookings not actual stays (cancellations might be left out, EAS (2021b))

market more affordable to local residents<sup>12</sup> to an extent, albeit most probably only temporarily (since long-term rental prices have been increasing again in 2021).

Part of the interview material also provides insights into the experiences of Airbnb hosts during the crisis. Three individual interviews and the focus group interview were conducted after the first wave of the pandemic, between August and November 2020. For the interviewed hosts, the first difficult period was March–May 2020, followed by a more promising summer season. While autumn 2020 and the new wave of the pandemic progressed, new and more serious concerns were also expressed by the interviewees about the future of Airbnb activities in the context of the remarkable decreases in the tourism sector. To overcome the difficult times in March–May 2020, the main strategy was to lower the price and look for (long-term) clients using other channels, such as social networks and social media. All the interviewed hosts still planned to continue their Airbnb activities, but there were **strong uncertainties** expressed about the future.

*“Now [in September 2020] I’ve received two longer reservations for October. Both coming from England. Well, I am really not jolly about it yet because I can’t imagine if the flights are still there, can they get here or what the situation will be for them in England by then? One of them has even made the reservation for two and a half weeks, but he can cancel it five days before. So, to put it briefly, this situation is very uncertain right now.”*  
(Air\_F\_TLL\_16)

The interviewed hosts had already experienced changes in their accustomed clientele. In addition to the generally diminished number of tourists, the composition of countries of origin have also changed: more visitors have been received from neighbouring countries. The number of Estonian visitors has increased but not entirely making up for the decrease in foreign tourists. In addition, clients with new motives have emerged; for example, renting the nearby Airbnb flat as a kind of home-office or a place to retreat from the primary place of living during lockdown periods; or using the rented place for quarantine after returning from abroad:

*“reservations from foreigners were cancelled and then ... yes, some Estonians were there, those who returned from abroad and had to remain separated from their families, in quarantine, so they were there [in the interviewee’s Airbnb flat].”* (Air\_F\_TLL\_15)

Owners of larger flats were said to have more problems with the flat being used for private parties without the owner’s permission, creating problems with noise and the condition of the flat. Those cases also demonstrate some weaknesses in the Airbnb system that can be used to exploit the flats for purposes not approved by the hosts.

*“I have a big problem with my large flat, there are partygoers, they come from Tallinn, usually very young. Then someone with no bad reviews is used [to make the reservation], they say there are less of them than how many actually turn out to be there. In reality, they just come to make a party. I used to have very good relations with my neighbours,*

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<sup>12</sup> <https://news.err.ee/1098886/Tallinn-rental-offers-in-may-up-75-percent-from-in-a-year>

*usually families or circles of friends were renting my flat. /.../ and you can't really pre-select them!" (FG, Airbnb)*

In regard to relations between the hosts and Airbnb as a platform, it could be concluded on the basis of the interviews, and also the observed discussions in the respective Facebook forum in Estonia, that contacting Airbnb support systems has become more complicated for the hosts, since it involves more effort (waiting times, prolonged answers, trying out different channels for getting quicker replies) in order to get into the contact with Airbnb support systems.

Airbnb provided the hosts with a set of recommendations about how to clean up and sanitise the flat to keep visitors safe. On the one hand, hosts were not compensated for the additional costs following those practices, but on the other hand, the hosts felt that being provided with certain standards to follow created a way to demonstrate their compliance with Airbnb-approved rules in the eyes of the clients.

*"this moves the responsibility to the platform, to a certain extent /.../ [I can say] well, you see, I followed the guidance exactly /.../ I don't need to worry too much about someone getting the virus and blaming me about it" (Airbnb FG)*

During spring 2020, cancellations of reservations were paid back to the customers by Airbnb, and also some of the interviewed hosts received compensation for cancellations. Individual private hosts did not qualify for that compensation, and this has led to certain feelings about the unfair treatment of hosts. At the same time, there are also hosts who seem to be more sympathetic towards the efforts of Airbnb to provide them with guidelines, notifications and suggestions regarding the state of affairs and to keep everyone informed about constantly changing regulations. This move, together with the fact that the client base was not totally lost, managed to generate a certain (albeit limited) feeling of certainty and community among those hosts by autumn 2020. Furthermore, as one host explained, although this perspective probably emerged only retrospectively, due to the temporary stability regained by the time (September 2020) the interview took place, the rather radical change of situation also had some benefits; for example, having more long-term clients reduced the overall workload:

*"Well, actually the situation was easier, with less mess. So to say, you had a person in for two weeks, with all peace and quietness. And then the next came in. In that sense it was easier to an extent, less of those quick changes [of clients] and more long-term guests." (Air\_F\_TLL\_15)*

As mentioned above, individual private Airbnb hosts did not qualify for the public subsidies provided in Estonia, but the expectations of the interviewed hosts were not high in this regard. This can at least partly be explained by the generally limited recognition of platform work in the Estonian legislation and respective institutions:

*"it was obvious that we can't fall under any of the support schemes with our activities. So, to be honest, I had no expectations of the Estonian state. Here it was only everyone's own duty to save oneself." (Air\_F\_TLL\_16)*

In addition to the decrease in numbers of tourists and thus also incomes, unclear messages from local and state governments about whether the short-term renting will be regulated in the future and how, were also mentioned as factors influencing planning for the future. Therefore, as expectations of continuous change are “in the air”, the future remains unclear.

## Concluding remarks

Conceptualising Airbnb as *platform work* within the PLUS project has opened up many peculiarities of this platform in comparison to more labour-intensive platforms, such as ride-hailing or delivery. The individual private Airbnb hosts interviewed in Tallinn see the Airbnb platform rather as a tool enabling them to earn some extra income, mostly – but not always – in addition to their main income from regular work. Therefore, concepts such as collective relations or working conditions are not applicable for them when interpreting their daily hosting experience. Despite this, hosting activities generate income and require work to provide the service; and, in the case of private hosting, all efforts related to, for example, work safety, social security (if not provided by another position/status), work-life balance, and so on, are the responsibility of the individual, and as such, not always acknowledged. Therefore, from the societal point of view, the question of *work* is also important in the case of Airbnb hosts. In the context of platform work, hosts appear to perceive a relatively high level of agency over their activities, resulting in their high level of satisfaction with the Airbnb platform. This is supported by the reputation-based algorithmic control mechanisms characterising the Airbnb platform that operates in more hidden ways than, for example, the algorithmic management in the case of ride-hailing platforms.

Working on Airbnb is supported by a general level of trust and the image of the platform and low entry barriers in terms of skills and knowledge. In the Estonian context, the relatively unregulated institutional context and general high level of owner-occupation contribute to the accessibility of those activities for a presumably more heterogeneous group of home-owners. However, as hosts have learned from experience, providing hospitality services in the private home or property does require specific skills, and a re-construction of the meaning of home and property for the host and the family. Welcoming strangers at home can be conceptualised as part of current trends towards loosening the differentiation between *home vs work spaces*, or *intimate vs commercial spaces*. The hosts' homes, as indeed the most intimate of spaces, are opened up to commercial interests: the extent to which hosts are willing to do that is seen as an imperative for creating a sense of belonging for the host as well as for the guest. In its turn, the latter is shaping the ratings and reviews following the stay (Roelofsen & Minca, 2018, p. 178). This is where the platform logic intersects with the processes of hospitality and home-making. Such encounters of the *private* and *public* call for a reconceptualisation of the meaning of labour in the case of private individual hosting and the influence of platformisation on the commodification of the home.

Individual private hosts renting out their homes or spare property have more immediate contact with their dwelling and locality than commercial and professional providers, even in cases of no contact with the visitors, and outsourcing some of the work. Therefore, the potential disruptive influence of private hosting on the liveability of a neighbourhood is expected to be more constrained than in the case of professional large-scale providers. This finding is also supported by research on residents in the Old Town of Tallinn, an area most heavily targeted by tourism (Paadam & Ojamäe, 2021). Despite, or perhaps even because of, the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on (mass-)tourism, the demand for short-term-rentals with a touch of “genuine local lifestyle” is not likely to disappear in the future. Airbnb claims it offers visitors an alternative to

the impersonal and mass-produced travel services with the promise of living “like a local”. Capitalising on the life of “locals” paradoxically enables investors and commercial actors to erode that local life, among others, by competing with those residents (the private hosts) whose hospitality is promised by the platform (Roelofsen & Minca, 2018, p. 177). Whether individual private hosting will prove to be more promising for the liveability of neighbourhoods increasingly under pressure from contemporary “new urban tourism”, remains to be seen. In any case, a prerequisite for a meaningful regulation of Airbnb activities would be the exchange of real-time information between the platform and state institutions to enable a more detailed understanding of the forms and intensity of hosting via the Airbnb platform.

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