

The background of the cover is a complex architectural line drawing in white on a dark blue background. It features various geometric shapes, lines, and patterns, including a grid, circles, and irregular polygons, suggesting a technical or engineering drawing.

HUMANITARIAN AID AND EMPOWERMENT OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEES

**THE CASE OF VISEGRAD GROUP COUNTRIES:
CZECHIA, HUNGARY, POLAND, AND SLOVAKIA**

Edited by

Dorota Moroń, Małgorzata Madej and Judit Csoba



Humanitarian Aid and Empowerment of Ukrainian Refugees

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9 Integration instead of ghettoisation

Integrating refugees with the local communities

*Alžbeta Brozmanová Gregorová and
Jana Šolcová*

Refugee integration models

The integration of refugees is the subject of attention in policy measures at different levels; it is also a research area and includes different practical programmes. Pennix and Garcés-Mascareñas (2016, 14) define integration as “the process of becoming an accepted part of society”. Esser (2004) defines integration as including individual actors in existing social systems. Heckmann (2006) sees integration as a generation-lasting process of inclusion and acceptance of migrants in the core institutions, relations, and statuses of receiving society. These definitions emphasise the process character of integration rather than defining an end situation.

Integration is a two-way process in which refugee communities and the receiving society come to know and influence each other. When we speak of integration, we mean creating an integrated, i.e., cohesive society. In such a society, people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds form a new whole, one that is based on their equal status. This requires living side by side and, above all, genuine coexistence. Integration is based on reciprocal respect for the rights and obligations of refugees and the majority of society.

A country’s immigration policy and welfare state influence the level of integration of immigrants into society. Currently, different countries apply different models of integration (Bolečková, 2011; Bírešová, 2016):

- Traditional models of refugee integration focusses on measures for rapid societal inclusion.
- The multicultural model prioritises preserving immigrants’ cultural identities and fostering multicultural entities.
- The assimilationist model emphasises immigrants fully adapting to the dominant identity, often at the expense of their own culture.
- The exclusionist model, marked by restrictive immigration laws, confines migrants to specific societal spheres, assuming a temporary stay.
- The integration model, in a narrower sense, seeks a two-way adaptation, encouraging migrants to contribute to a shared culture while upholding diversity and individual civic integration.

EU Member States still differ considerably in their approach to refugee integration. These differences are rooted in historical backgrounds, social models and traditions, and migration routes. For many years, during communism and socialism, the V4 countries were rather emigration countries. Since the 1990s, they have also gradually become destination countries for refugees and migrants, but to a greater extent, this has been the case in the Czech Republic and in the case of migrants from Ukraine, Poland. The Slovak Republic was one of the countries with a low proportion of migrants and refugees.

The basic framework of refugee integration

In order to establish a basic framework and determine the direction and content of Member States' integration policies, the European Commission adopted in 2005 the Common Basic Principles on Integration Policy (European Commission, 2005). The European Commission defined integration in its 2005 *Communication "A Common Agenda for Integration Framework for the Integration of Third Country Nationals in The European Union"* as "a dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants and residents of Member States". This means that not only immigrants but also receiving societies have to change; at the same time, receiving societies have the task of creating opportunities for immigrants to participate fully economically, socially, culturally, and politically.

The second of the basic principles is about what is expected of immigrants. It is respect for the fundamental values of the European Union. At the same time, political liberalism gives priority to integration over assimilation – the European Union's common basic principles include respect for the language and culture of immigrants.

Immigrants' access to institutions, and public and private goods and services, to the same extent as guaranteed to citizens and in a non-discriminatory manner, constitute the last of the basic principles of immigrant integration. However, this principle is formulated as a recommendation to the states and not as an obligation for them.

In the renewed European Agenda for the Integration of Third Country Nationals, the principle of country-of-origin involvement was added, and integration was introduced as a three-way process. (European Commission, 2011).

The majority of society often expects refugees to adapt to the host culture and way of life entirely, relinquishing their original identity. It is assumed that for the local societies to consider them integrated, they must wholeheartedly embrace local customs, language, faith, and beliefs. In such a case, however, we are not discussing integration but assimilation. Assimilation is not only unjust but also impossible. One can never rid oneself of the culture in which one grew up because it largely shapes their identity. Integration means that we can be fully part of the society even if we are different, but the crucial aspect is mutual respect for our differences.

Dimensions of refugee integration

Integration is generally referred to as integrating a person into society. This process has different dimensions. Esser (2001) speaks of four dimensions: cultivation (similar to socialisation), location (position in society), interaction (social relations and networks), and identification (belonging). Heckmann and Schnapper (2003) distinguish between structural integration, cultural integration (or acculturation), interactional integration, and identification integration. Pennix and Garcés-Mascareñas (2016) discuss integration in terms of legal-political, socio-economic, and cultural-religious dimensions. Concentrating on these dimensions shifts the emphasis from immigrants to their interactions with the host society. It is not just about what immigrants do, who they interact with, and how they identify but also about whether they are accepted and positioned within these three dimensions.

Pennix and Garcés-Mascareñas (2016) describe these dimensions as follows:

- The legal-political dimension involves assessing immigrants' residency and political rights, focusing on whether they are considered full political community members. Immigrants' degree of integration spans from irregular immigrants, not legally part of the host society to those who become national citizens. The considerable variety in between has grown due to European states' efforts to regulate international migration and the introduction of new statuses and rights through the EU migration regime, including distinctions between EU nationals and third-country nationals.
- The socio-economic dimension examines residents' social and economic standing, regardless of their national citizenship. This involves immigrants' positions and access to essential domains crucial for all residents, such as equal access to institutional facilities for employment, housing, education, and health care.
- The cultural-religious dimension involves perceptions and practices of immigrants and the receiving society, along with their reciprocal responses to diversity. If newcomers view themselves as different and are perceived as culturally or religiously distinct, they may seek recognition in these aspects. The receiving society may accept or reject cultural and religious diversity, from complete assimilation to embracing ethnic identities, cultures, and worldviews in pluralistic systems. Between these extremes are various positions, including partial acceptance of diversity in private rather than public spheres.

It is essential to realise that these three dimensions are not entirely independent. The legal-political dimension may condition the socio-economic and the cultural-religious dimensions.

Local integration of Ukrainian refugees

The mentioned dimensions of integration are sought to be fulfilled by receiving states through various guidelines and measures. However, a significant part of the refugee integration process occurs in specific localities (communities or broader regions) where refugees come into contact with many actors. These actors can significantly influence how refugees become part of existing social relationships. Therefore, the most significant potential for ensuring a successful integration process lies in working with the local community, encompassing the refugee minority and the local majority.

Creating relationships and connections between Ukrainian refugees and the community in which they live is a crucial part of integration. During this process, refugees encounter various barriers that they must overcome, and the support available to them in overcoming these barriers is essential for integration. Refugees arriving in a new society need assistance in navigating the new conditions. To lead a satisfying and fulfilling life, they must familiarise themselves with the given society's language, culture, values, and rules and align them with what they bring from their native country. At the same time, they need to understand how life functions in the new country and city. They explore the new country through everyday life in this environment – encounters with local people and observations of life in the local community.

Ukrainian refugees in this area require even more support than other foreigners because they left their country involuntarily, often without the opportunity to prepare for living in a specific country or place. They often found themselves in a city without choosing it or having any prior information about it. In the case of Ukrainian refugees, it frequently happened that they arrived in a city where there were currently available accommodation capacities. They knew nothing about their new residence and had to start entirely new lives.

This is precisely why the local government and community play an indispensable role in integration. They are closest to people's everyday lives and have the best tools, so-called practical policies and measures, to create a space for a content life for everyone.

It is essential for local governments to actively strive for equal access to services and activities for refugees. This could include social services, education in kindergartens and primary schools, cultural and sports events, community activities, and more. However, equal access does not mean no one is prevented from participating in activities or requesting a service. Different population groups face different barriers to accessing individual activities and services. For example, refugees may not even know that a particular service exists, that they are entitled to it, and that the local government provides it because it functions entirely differently in their country. They may also not understand information often only available in the national language or is formulated very professionally. Ultimately, the service may be inaccessible to them because interpretation is unavailable during its provision.

It is also crucial for refugees if their city recognises them as part of the local community, allowing them to feel welcome. A tool that local government can use is external communication not only towards refugees but also communication about them towards the majority population. This is called symbolic policy because it is not a specific strategy that deals with the organisation of observable processes (such as providing services) but a policy of creating values and symbols that can connect.

For the benefit of social cohesion between the receiving communities and refugees from Ukraine, preparation for the long haul should mean formulating a clear, transparent, and long-term integration and communication strategy with a strong emphasis on supporting initiatives to promote inclusive and welcoming societies as soon as possible. This should include a robust, sustained, multi-stakeholder focus on combating xenophobia, racism, and discrimination (Ariner, 2022).

Integration is primarily about mutual understanding and building relationships between refugees and the majority population. This dimension is referred to as social integration. The term “integration” might suggest that integration has a beginning and an end, that a refugee begins to integrate on the day they enter the territory of the immigration country. One day, it will be possible to say they are fully integrated. Integration in the context of national measures and support systems focuses on labour market participation, obtaining housing, etc. Local-level integration focuses on establishing relationships with people from the majority society, friendships, and other connections with residents (Gallo Kriglerová et al., 2023).

Dual-intent integration approach of Ukrainian refugees

As the conflict in Ukraine extends into its second year, communities are seeking effective ways to provide enduring support for displaced Ukrainians. However, the conventional practices for integration may not fully align with the unique circumstances, as many Ukrainian refugees intend to return home once conditions permit.

Given the uncertainty surrounding future developments and timelines, adopting a dual-intent integration approach becomes crucial. This approach aims to prepare for the possibility of refugees staying indefinitely and the potential return to Ukraine. Operating within the framework of dual-intent integration involves implementing measures and activities that facilitate the socio-economic inclusion of Ukrainian refugees. The goal is to empower them to attain self-sufficiency, rebuild their livelihoods, and enhance their human capital, thereby improving their prospects for the future, regardless of their ultimate place of residence. Simultaneously, this approach deliberately seeks to minimise obstacles to a potential return in both host countries and Ukraine. (OECD, 2003) This approach can address what has been referred to as a waiting dilemma (European Commission, 2023), where various parties, including

the refugees themselves, hesitate to engage in integration activities due to anticipating the imminent return of Ukrainian refugees. People who fled tend to keep an eye on their home country and want to return as soon as it is safe, making it difficult to decide whether to start learning a new language, embark on more severe training or education programmes, or integrate children into the education system of the host country.

Community work in the process of integration of Ukrainian refugees

One of the tools for integrating refugees without the dual creation of isolated subcultures or communities is community work. Each person is a member of several communities. In most cases, communities represent a place where individuals, their needs, values, and interests come together and are realised. Therefore, a community represents a grouping of individuals with something in common. When working with a community, it is impossible to consider the individual in isolation from their surrounding world. We always consider the individual as part of the community, with all the ties that it creates or that surround it (Šiňanská & Šlosár, 2020).

Community work is one of the methods of working with people, which historically arose mainly because of migration consequences. The aim of community work is the development of the whole community and its strengthening. The content of community work is to promote the empowerment and motivation of an existing community or to build a newly emerging community (Šiňanská & Šlosár, 2020). Community work focusing on interconnection and cooperation between communities can help achieve social inclusion and reduce stereotypes and prejudices. Such community work is essential not only for minority communities but also for the majority community, as it contributes to diversity, tolerance, and social cohesion in society. Cooperation and understanding between communities can lead to mutual benefits and harmonious coexistence. (UNESCO, 2001)

Community work focuses on building relationships and other contexts of life that strengthen the community and make it easier to embrace change. Community work and connecting communities as such (Gallo Kriglerová et al., 2003; Šiňanská & Šlosár, 2020):

- Enable the various subcultures that exist in the community to maintain their identity and participate in the social life of the whole community;
- Enable different groups to develop mutual understanding and to actively address changes, conflicts, and problems that arise in the community and its subgroups;
- Use a shared value base that affects all members of the community, all institutions, and all processes in the community;
- Improve the coexistence of the town's inhabitants;
- Prevent polarisation of society;
- Develop the potential of communities in the city;

- Help in the integration of refugees by creating new bonds and friendships;
- Strengthen the voice and participation of refugees;
- Send a positive signal to all city residents that everyone has a place in the city.

Community work is a vital tool for integration, encompassing planning, organising, and development activities to enhance people's quality of life and prevent exclusion. It collaboratively addresses various aspects defined by the community and holds the potential for promoting intangible cultural heritage, particularly relevant for refugees from Ukraine. Intangible cultural heritage, including personal rituals and celebrations, aids newcomers in adapting to a new country, coping with trauma, and building resilience at individual and community levels (Centrum pre výskum etnicity a kultúry et al., 2022).

In community work with refugees from Ukraine, community activities in the V4 countries are mainly organised by non-profit organisations involved in community work with refugees and other minorities for a long time. Informal groups of active people, which have been significantly activated due to the war in Ukraine and include members of foreign communities themselves or organisations that bring together primarily Ukrainian citizens, play an important role in integration.

The principles of community work, as outlined by Grundělková et al. (2022) and Brozmanová Gregorová et al. (2022), highlight its unique contribution to refugee integration:

- Community-based approach: community work starts with mapping the real needs of the community, ensuring integration activities are tailored to the specific context, population, and infrastructure of the locality;
- Community empowerment: the community, including majority and minority members, determines goals and actions, fostering a sense of responsibility among individuals involved in designing and implementing tasks;
- Utilising internal resources: community work actively involves community members and utilises internal resources, making the community proactive in addressing integration challenges;
- Empowering, not providing: community work is a collaborative process, emphasising an enabling approach rather than simply assisting. All parties involved are considered active change makers;
- Holistic impact: change initiated through community work affects the entire community, even those not directly involved. With long-term and sustainable results, individuals become community members organically through their daily lives and activities.

Community work is an opportunity to enhance living conditions and empower and activate the community. This empowerment involves strengthening

community members' competence, knowledge, and confidence. In essence, community work serves as a means to develop the organisational, human, and social capacities of the community, enabling individuals to address challenges using their acquired skills and knowledge (Stanková & Bindasová, 2022; Gojová, Gojová & Stanková, 2020).

Presentation of good practices examples from the Visegrad Group countries focused on the integration of the Ukrainian refugees into the local communities

As part of the signals scanning, we have identified several good practices in the V4 countries that focus on integrating refugees locally at different stages of arriving refugees from Ukraine. According to Gallo Kriglerová et al. (2023), we differentiate stages into the humanitarian, integration, support, cooperation, and coexistence.

The humanitarian stage represents the first period immediately after arrival in the new country. In this phase, it is essential to encourage the participation of existing communities, voluntary associations, and various non-profit organisations that can provide support to the newly arriving refugee group or active individuals. Information about this stage and examples are included in Chapter 4. Examples of activities include help on the borders with Ukraine, which was crucial in the war's first stages and humanitarian aid consisting of food, clothes, groceries, and basic living. In the orientation in the first stages, an essential role is played by information points in which refugees can find support and basic information about living in the country. Examples of such information points are The Blue Dots Safe Spaces, created with the support of UNHCR, UNICEF, and other local organisations in several countries: Bulgaria, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. They offer safe spaces, immediate support, and services to all persons, women, men, and children of all nationalities fleeing Ukraine. The Blue Dots are provided with trained caregivers able to provide updated and verified information about accommodation, travel, and services. They can guide refugees about their rights and entitlements under temporary protection status and asylum procedures, as well as on family reunification and tracing of family members. (Blue Dot, 2023).

Another element in the process is the integration or support stage. In this stage, the local community should already have well-set cooperation with all relevant actors. In integration, it is vital that the different communities in the city (or town) are connected but also have a separate space and support in their activities. The local community can actively create offers for refugees' self-fulfilment, support them financially, or involve them in existing activities. Activities include education, housing, employment, language teaching, social services, and community work. Examples of good practices can be found in the separate chapters of this book and below.

In the coexistence or cooperation stage, a system of support and cooperation is established with the different expatriate communities in the city.

Refugees should be a regular part of life in the city and actively participate in it. The local population should have sufficient contacts and good relations with the refugees through the activities that take place in the city. Refugees should not be isolated; they should be able to create a sense of home in the city and participate in its development.

Good practice in the field of community work focused on integration can be divided into several categories of community work. These are often the result of cooperation between stakeholders acting in the public, private, and non-governmental sectors. The categories are:

- Cultural exchanges;
- Intercultural workshops and trainings;
- Creating safe and inclusive places;
- Joint community actions;
- Mentoring programmes;
- Involvement in volunteering;
- Focus on disadvantaged groups of Ukrainian refugees.

Cultural exchanges

The first category of activities is the organisation of cultural events and exchanges that enable people of different cultures and communities to share their traditional values, food, music, and other customs. This can create a space for mutual understanding and mutual respect. The examples of activities in this category can vary from one-day events to regular meetings and activities.

In Poland, the non-profit organisation Opole Cultural Association (Stowarzyszenie Kulturalne Opole) organised OPO VECHORNYCI series of integration evening meetings aimed at the Ukrainian community and residents of Opole. The meetings were initiated by a group of Ukrainian cultural animators, some of whom came to Poland after 24 February 2022. The main idea of the events was the adaptation and further integration of Ukrainians into the Polish society. The meetings took place almost every Tuesday at the social club café OPO, with an occasional travel event to Głuchołazy. The purpose of the evenings was to create a friendly, hospitable atmosphere for refugees from Ukraine to get to know Ukrainian and Polish cultures, lifestyles, traditions, rituals, music, songs, etc. and raise awareness of common cultural features. VECHORNYCI is a long-term project, which was supported by city institutions and NGOs by providing prizes for competitions, equipment, space for holding events, etc. Activities during the evenings included concerts, film screenings, quizzes, and integration games. (Stowarzyszenie Kulturalne Opole, 2023)

Intercultural workshops and training

Another type of community integration activity is organising intercultural education programmes to help people better understand different

communities' cultures, history, and challenges. These can help reduce stereotypes and prejudices and increase mutual awareness and respect. Some examples of activities in this category focus on children's and teenagers' education; some can be focused on adult people, and a specific category is an education focused on professionals.

The organisation in Poland Polskie Forum Migracyjne implemented workshops at schools for 4–8 grades titled “The whole world in our class”. The aims of the workshops were focused on the emotional support of young people in connection with the war in Ukraine and the emergence of new colleagues at school, sensitising students to the situation of refugees from Ukraine, strengthening the attitude of respect for cultural and linguistic diversity and openness to contact with refugee children and immigrants from different countries, and developing the ability to analyse information and disinformation about refugees and phenomena migration consciously. Polskie Forum Migracyjne, in cooperation with municipalities from Izabelin, Marki, Podkowa Leśna, and the Foundation for Freedom, also implemented the programme Welcome Neighbour (PL: Witam sąsiada). The project aimed to integrate and counteract the exclusion of migrants living in the three suburban municipalities of Marki, Izabelin, and Podkowa Leśna. These municipalities are often chosen as a more affordable housing option for refugees who at the same time take up employment in Warsaw. Within the project, there were organised intercultural workshops for students and teachers and also trainings for local government officials responsible for migration (Polskie Forum Migracyjne, 2023).

Creating safe and inclusive places

Creating safe and inclusive places where people can openly discuss their experiences and concerns can help resolve conflict and build community trust. A sense of acceptance is vital for people arriving in a new environment. It is also created by engaging in different activities and having safe spaces where they can realise themselves and at least partially return to everyday life. Safe places are places or spaces where refugees can meet each other. For example, Community activities can occur in contact/information points. However, they can also be in urban and other spaces where various cultural, social, and other events are already occurring. For example, schools, libraries, leisure centres, community centres, and old people's homes are often suitable spaces for such activities.

Several examples represent the principles of co-creation in building safe spaces, and an active role for Ukraine refugees has been vital in many initiatives. The concept of “user involvement” in designing spaces and community activities has long been praised for improving various services' quality, targeting, and uptake. Rather than being offered to them, services can be co-created based on actual needs and empowerment processes. The example of this co-creation can be seen, for example, in the integration centre in Botova

Street in Bratislava, Slovakia, where people from Ukraine are helping others by becoming – or pursuing their careers as – community interpreters, service providers, carers, or legal advisers.

Another example is the Ukrainian Centre established in March 2022 on the premises in Brno – Muzeika. The city hall provided a place in the very centre of the city for the self-organisation of Ukrainians. Since then, the centre's team has been working on several services and products designed to promote the integration of Ukrainians into Czech society and the presentation of Ukraine in the Czech Republic at various levels. The centre is engaged in activities such as:

- Czech language courses;
- Activities for children and exciting classes for adults – creative workshops, a club of interesting logic and mathematics, a film club, a choir for adults and children, individual piano lessons, groups and individual lessons for preschoolers and children of primary school age, and many other interests;
- Interpretation during a visit to Czech institutions – a telephone line for those who want to receive an interpretation during a visit to all necessary Czech institutions;
- Psychological and emotional support – experienced psychologists for children and adults work in the centre. Psychologists work both in an individual format and are invited to group meetings/classes (Ukrajinská Inicijativa, 2023).

Ukrainian Woman in Poland is an information platform for women who have left Ukraine. The organisation organises regular meetings for Ukrainian women who live in Lower Silesia and in Wrocław itself, supporting the process of their integration into a new country (Fundacja Ukrainka w Polsce, 2023).

Joint community actions

Organising joint events between the majority community and refugees, such as cultural festivals, exhibitions, workshops, concerts, dinners, picnics, and neighbourhood meetings, facilitates sharing of cultural aspects and traditions. These activities benefit Ukrainian refugees, fostering a sense of welcome in the local population and promoting understanding of residents from diverse backgrounds. This integration benefits the entire city, fostering community and breaking down stereotypes. The city plays a crucial role as a communicator, using its channels to inform about activities involving foreigners/refugees and contributing to the city's overall development. Community events create a friendly environment, providing a safe space for diverse groups to interact, establishing connections between communities, breaking down stereotypes, and involving foreign communities in planning and identifying needs. There

are several proven formats of those activities that are organised in the V4 countries in the framework of community activities.

Language Cafés or Clubs are an open, informal space for all to sit at tables where conversation with participants is led/moderated by people communicating in their mother tongue. In this way, organisations offer to improve language skills. In Slovakia, for example, Mareena organises language cafés regularly in different cities and involves people from different language backgrounds. In Czechia, in the border region with Germany, the National Volunteer Association has managed two “clubs” for displaced people from Ukraine. The first is for those who are sure they want to stay. It offers language courses, training, and exchanges with locals. The second club focuses on the Ukrainian language for those unsure – or still too emotional to think about it. Moves between clubs are frequent, but it shows how to cater to the longing for the motherland and, at the same time, create the conditions for smooth integration into a new community.

Community brunches, picnics, or dinners offering foreign food are also an attractive event format for the local community. Collaborative food preparation is also a way to support a disadvantaged group or individuals.

The gastronomic festival *Naše chutě* (Our tastes) has been offering people in Tábor in the Czech Republic an opportunity to taste selected delicacies from Tábor restaurants for many years. In 2022 and 2023, the festival joined forces with the Help to Ukraine Tábor group and offered visitors the opportunity to taste Ukrainian cuisine. It was a charity event of the Taste of Ukraine, the proceeds of which went to support war-affected areas in Ukraine. Specifically, it involved the purchase of material aid such as medical supplies, baby food for children’s homes, and defence and tactical equipment.

Café “city” is a concept of creating a space for discussion on a particular city or country, where table hosts – discussants present at their table a particular aspect of the city (e.g., cultural life in the city, political situation, and women’s life). People interested in the topic can take turns at the tables individually or move as a whole group and thus cover “travel” the whole city. The event should be complemented by thematic refreshments, for example, teas typical of the locality.

Mentoring programmes

Another type of community activity promoting refugee integration developed even before the arrival of people from Ukraine for refugees from other countries is mentoring programmes. These programmes connect Ukrainian refugees with local mentors who can help them adapt and integrate into their new environment. Mentoring programmes work on the one-to-one relationship. Mentors help refugees orient themselves in accommodation, education, health and social care, labour market, etc. Their help may include support in finding a job, orientation to the place, and advice on common problems. Mentors can guide Ukrainian refugees through the process of coping with

culture shock. There are examples of mentoring programmes targeted at adults but equally at children and youth.

A volunteer mentoring programme for foreigners in Slovakia, for example, is implemented by the non-governmental organisation Mareena, which has a system for working with volunteers and also many valuable materials that coordinators can use in the development and implementation of such a mentoring programme (Mareena, 2023).

The Stand by Me programme is a mentoring initiative to support young people fleeing the war in Ukraine. This comprehensive “buddy” programme facilitates the self-realisation and integration of children and youth, creating an equal and friendly school environment. The project, operating in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Romania, focuses on providing a safe space for young individuals to connect, collaborate on small projects, and build relationships under the guidance of a mentor. The programme targets children and youth aged 13–24, including those from Ukraine, speakers of different mother languages, newcomers, and those facing various challenges, such as special needs or psychological issues (DofE, 2023).

Involvement in voluntary activities

Involving refugees in volunteering activities is another strategy that promotes social inclusion, strengthens interactions with the local community, and is a means of developing refugees themselves as volunteers. Volunteering is a form of social participation in which refugees play an important role as active citizens. Involving them in volunteering activities enables them to mobilise and change their image as mere aid recipients. Involvement in volunteering activities can be seen in terms of participation of the people from Ukraine in the creation and provision of services by others to refugees from Ukraine but also in terms of the participation of refugees in projects to support the local community and their involvement in volunteering activities together with volunteers from the majority community.

An example of self-help activities is the Shelter Association in Hungary. People from the interior of Ukraine (Donetsk) who live scattered in the Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county are brought together, e.g., the Meski people to the people of Mariánské Lázně. They cook together dishes according to their traditions. The same organisation also organised craft workshops in several municipalities. For example, a group of elderly refugees from the interior of Ukraine travelled to Mierk, where they prepared together for Easter in the nursing home. In addition to the usual traditions, they cooked cottage cheese, etc. (Menedek, 2023).

Support for specific groups of refugees

Specific categories of integration activities are aimed at disadvantaged groups of refugees. These groups face specific challenges in their inclusion in their home country; they have specific needs that blanket measures may not address

at the national or local level. It is, therefore, important to reflect these needs in integration activities and to create opportunities for the inclusion and participation of disadvantaged groups.

Among the refugees there was a group which, as was gradually becoming clear, was discriminated against not only in peacetime but also during the period of flight. The problem, therefore, arose of discrimination, sometimes overt and sometimes latent, in support of refugees of Roma origin. In response to this situation, the Civic College Foundation in Hungary has tried to bring together all the NGOs involved in supporting refugees of Roma origin to take joint action against this particularly unfair discrimination. They have set up a coordination and cooperation group to address the problem and advocate for the rights of this group of refugees. At the border, at the Tiszabecs border crossing point and the Záhony railway station, members of the Gypsy Minority Foundation (full-time staff and volunteers together) actively assisted in the reception of Roma refugees by providing information, managing cases, providing meals, and distributing donations (CKA, 2023).

Romaversitas Foundation, Hungary helps pregnant women or refugee women – mainly Roma. They focus mainly on supporting refugee women accepting the differences between the Ukrainian and Hungarian systems of antenatal care, awareness of the differences in other health regulations, and providing information to staff in the Hungarian health care system on caring for pregnant mothers with refugee status and administrative difficulties. In many cases, the lack of basic needs is often the focus, while issues related to pregnancy/reproduction are neglected. Information about the situation of Roma refugees from Ukraine coming to Hungary is also reflected in the report (Eredics, 2022).

Another group of people who need to overcome specific obstacles in the integration are families with members with disabilities. To assist in the integration of these target groups, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, activities have been carried out mainly by non-governmental organisations, which have provided assistance and services in this area to the majority population. As an example, we mention an organisation from Slovakia – the Platform of Families of Children with Disabilities, which also provides its services to families with a member with a disability from Ukraine. Its website informs about the possibilities of assistance in the Slovak system but also offers a helpline in the Ukrainian language and lay counselling for parents (Platforma rodín, 2023).

Lessons learned and recommendations

Community work activation processes focused on refugees from Ukraine should be oriented towards mutual agreement, participatory and inclusive. It is essential for community work aimed at integration that not only all those affected by a given social problem but also the rest of the public are invited to participate (Gallo Kriglerová et al., 2023). Activation can be a manifestation of active citizenship. Both refugees and the host community engage with

each other and society in voluntary associations, religious groups, or politics. Active citizenship occurs here, and participation in joint efforts contributes to integration. While in service delivery, more attention should be paid to barriers to service provision for all and how to remove them, a focus on active citizenship highlights skills and recommends ways to make the most of them for the benefit of both refugees and the society (Huddleston & Niessen, 2009).

As in other areas, when organising community activities, it is essential to know what activities the intended target group is interested in. Different people may have different needs or interests, so it is a good idea for the local government to not only create events and activities that it identifies as beneficial or essential but also to consult and co-create them with the people they are targeting. Needs can change over time, as can the make-up of people from different countries in a city, so it is crucial to do mapping continuously. Many people from Ukraine have found help from their compatriots who were already living here before the outbreak of the war. Therefore, it is crucial to actively support these activities, have mapped different actors – organisations, associations, and active individuals – and coordinate and inform about what services they can provide (Gallo Kriglerová et al., 2023).

Active participation and ownership of Ukrainian communities in implementing activities, identifying problems and their solutions, and setting policies are vital in activation. However, the principle of participation should not remain only at the declarative level. Everyone is welcome to get involved. It is also necessary to eliminate barriers that practically exclude many people and communities from shaping life and society. For example, it is vital to use languages or channels of communication that convey information to the people we want to reach. It is also essential, for example, to consider the time and space availability of activities, etc.

The vast majority of services that support the integration of refugees from Ukraine in the V4 countries are organised by NGOs. However, since in the V4 countries, there are no stable conditions for the functioning of these entities and their financial sustainability, it is necessary to set up a system of systematic financial support for organisations at the national and local level that provide these services, whether they are organisations that have been providing these services for a long time or emerging initiatives that come from active citizens or foreigners, in order to sustain these activities. The recommendations summarised in the policy paper *Proposals for Solutions* (Centrum pre výskum etnicity a kultúry et al., 2022) as a result of the cooperation of organisations with long-standing experience and know-how in the area of the integration of foreigners and the provision of humanitarian aid stated that when setting the financial-administrative framework, it is vital to support communities in their functioning, self-realisation, and development. Through platforms of foreigners or cooperation with intercultural workers, a critical link can be established between the community on the one hand and the municipality or various institutions on the other hand, reflecting the needs of both sides.

In preserving living heritage, it is necessary to offer people from Ukraine (not only physically) a space where they feel comfortable and can express their identity through living heritage in its diverse forms – to offer a culturally sensitive and respectful understanding of integration. This includes mapping living heritage conservation needs, considering them, and facilitating access to ongoing practice.

Connecting the Ukrainian refugee community with the local majority community can ensure integration and support for these people. These activities can be tailored to the specific needs and interests of local Ukrainian refugees and the local majority community. Working with local organisations, NGOs, and institutions is vital to implement these activities effectively and achieve positive integration and mutual understanding.

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