

Beyond Borders: The Roles of Local Government in the Long-term Integration of Ukrainian Refugees. Insights from Poland and the Czech Republic

The scientific aim of the project is to provide **a comprehensive outline of the roles of the municipalities in the long-term integration of Ukrainian refugees in Poland and the Czech Republic**. The project is significant due to the unprecedented influx of Ukrainian refugees into these countries following the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022 and a role played by both local governments in managing the initial emergency as well as in introducing long-term solutions. The project's rationale is based on several key observations:

- **Historical Context** – The migration crisis in Europe has evolved over the years, with Poland and the Czech Republic initially having low percentages of immigrants. However, the situation drastically changed with the onset of the Ukrainian refugee crisis.
- **Local Governments' Roles** – Local governments have played a critical role in responding to this crisis, often being the first line of response. They have coordinated support and services for refugees, including accommodation, food, transportation, and psychological assistance, often with limited resources.
- **Integration Challenges** – The integration of refugees poses significant challenges for all parties involved. Poorly managed integration can lead to substantial issues, as observed in other European countries np. Sweden, France and Germany (Blank 2019)
- **Unique Demographics** – The demographic structure of the Ukrainian refugees, mainly consisting of women, children, and senior citizens, presents unique challenges for local authorities, especially in terms of social policy, education and healthcare.
- **Innovative Solutions** – Municipalities have been seen as arenas for testing new ideas and solutions for refugee integration, potentially serving as models for broader-scale applications.
- **Unpredictable Future** – The ongoing conflict and its implications for refugee movements remain unpredictable, necessitating flexible and responsive policies by local governments.

The project will achieve its goal through several intermediate objectives, such as examining legal and institutional frameworks related to Ukrainian refugee integration in Poland and the Czech Republic, comparing integration methods, identifying similarities and differences in refugee integration patterns, and assessing the attitudes of various stakeholders towards Ukrainian refugees.

The project refers to the idea of network governance and is based on a mixed-method framework – quantitative and qualitative analyses – including document scrutiny, media monitoring, and empirical research. The project focuses on **12 case studies** (6 municipalities in each country) that have different size, different number of Ukrainian refugees and have been using various solutions and mechanisms to support refugees. The planned research schema includes: **1)** examining – on the basis of international, national and local legal acts as well as relevant literature and media reports – the context of Ukrainian refugees integration in both countries; **2)** analysing of existing data on Ukrainian refugees at the local level; **3)** conducting qualitative empirical research that includes: **a)** expert panels in which various international specialists, representatives of a diversity of fields will take part; **b)** semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders, such as local politicians, bureaucrats, NGOs members as well as representatives of the national, central or regional authorities. In addition to the interviews, the researchers will also host focus groups with the refugees with the assistance of translators. The distinctive feature of the proposed research is its comparative nature. The comparison will be done on cross-country and cross-national basis.

The effects of the project will be visible in the theoretical, methodological, and practical areas. On the one hand the project will contribute to the academic realm including a better understanding of the roles of local governments in refugee integration. On the other, the research will provide important insights into effective integration practices, involving identification of systemic weaknesses, and recommendations for future policymaking. In this context the project will inform policy decisions, with implications for improving responses to current and future refugee crises. Finally, due to the international nature of the research, the results of the project will also allow for identification and comparison of the changes Central and Eastern European local administrations undergo.