

## **Support for Ukrainian refugees remains makeshift, strategic governance is failing**

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### **Summary**

The reception of Ukrainian refugees and their integration into Czech society lacks a clear vision based on continuously updated tasks as to what we want to accomplish in terms of coexistence and how to achieve it. Even where measures are taken, there is often no mechanism to monitor how the tasks are progressing. Responsibility for the execution of this agenda is also insufficiently addressed at the various levels (whether national, regional or local level, or in various sectoral policies). Nor is there any monitoring of whether the relevant level has sufficient capacity to pursue the agenda. This is despite the fact that the absence of the required systemic steps will fundamentally define how Czechs and newly arrived Ukrainians coexist in the future.

### **Recommendations**

- Harness the potential of a national-level coordinator for coexistence with migrants, and appoint regional coordinators dedicated to this agenda.
- Establish methodological and information support for those involved in assisting refugees at national, regional and municipal level.
- Define and pursue a clear vision on how to deal with refugees, including a set of clearly defined responsibilities and open communication both with key stakeholders and in relation to refugees and the Czech public.
- Finalise the vision and subsequent action plans for problem areas in the integration of refugees into Czech society (support for vertical mobility on the labour market, access to housing, access to upper secondary education...) and regularly review progress.
- Define a vision for future coexistence with Ukrainian refugees that reflects the strong transnational links between the two countries and the need for adequate residence rights.

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## Introduction

While the influx of some 400,000 Ukrainian refugees was an unforeseen and unprecedented wave of migration for the Czech Republic, the country initially handled it with aplomb. Almost overnight, there was an extraordinary swell of support from Czech society, accompanied by the mobilisation of large-scale volunteering and the involvement of NGOs. The central and local government response was also very swift. The opening of Regional Assistance Centres in all regions, despite glitches here and there, was a resounding success. Most regions approached the crisis with a proactive mindset, and a great many municipalities came up with their own activities and/or were accommodating in their response to the needs presented by the arrival of Ukrainian refugees, the overwhelming majority of whom were female. The government, too, deserves credit for adopting, in early April 2022 (unusually quickly for this country), [Strategic Priorities for the Management of the Refugee Wave Associated with the Invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation](#), a document setting out what form should be taken by coexistence with the newly arrived Ukrainians. The Strategic Priorities neatly identify three phases covering the Czech Republic's response: an initial humanitarian phase lasting about a month, followed by an adaptation phase, and then a third long-term phase beginning about six months after the arrival of the first refugees. While the document itself concludes that the Czech Republic coped well with the humanitarian phase, from today's vantage point we can see that the second phase, which was supposed to focus on *reducing the language barrier, providing education, housing, employment and health care, strengthening social cohesion, creating an information base and laying the groundwork for long-term solutions* (p. 5), has been rolled out only on a very limited scale. The third phase, which was scheduled to work on long-term solutions from the beginning of this autumn, has not materialised at all.

## Agenda-setting and situation monitoring

Looking at the guiding principles for successful policy implementation (např. Hill a Hupe 2002), it could be argued (simplistically) that the first priority is to set an *agenda* and define *tools* to *implement* it. To date, this has been largely absent from the approach to Ukrainian refugees, or has been dogged by serious difficulties.

While the aforementioned Strategic Priorities do outline an agenda for thirteen core areas, specific tasks are not anchored in strategic objectives, and there are no mechanisms to monitor how tasks are progressing or to track how the agenda is unfolding in real time. Individual agendas are supposed to be pursued and monitored by working teams that are made up of representatives of ministries and invited experts. However, the work being done by these teams varies in frequency, and there are mixed levels of cooperation between those involved. The conclusions reached by teams in their discussions are often not incorporated into the measures they formulate; conversely, central government, without prior consultation, sometimes comes up with measures that have not been peer reviewed. Thus, instead of rational and transparent agenda-setting, poorly thought-out measures sometimes come to the fore, which cost municipalities or the non-profit sector a great deal of effort to avert or subsequently remedy, or which complicate the lives of refugees.

Unfortunately, in this respect, the Strategic Principles are unable to draw on any solid experience gained from the strategically managed integration of foreign nationals. Until now, the integration of foreign nationals has been a marginal issue in the Czech Republic. The objectives of integration policy have been set quite cautiously, often reactively, and only a handful of stakeholders, with limited capacities at that, have been involved in integration. Consequently, the Czech Republic does not have a well-developed integration infrastructure on which to build. Other weaknesses include an underdeveloped system for monitoring and evaluating integration measures, and difficulties in obtaining and making analytical use of data on the integration of foreign nationals. This issue has long been plagued by the unavailability of baseline data and thus limited ability to capture the key characteristics of migrant integration (Čerychová *et al.*, 2020; Consortium 2021).

One example of constraints in the formulation of a clear objective and the subsequent lack of monitoring of its fulfilment is the refugee accommodation agenda. To this day, there is no clear vision of how to provide long-term refugee housing support, how to enable refugees to move on from emergency accommodation, or, conversely, how to secure the long-term provision of emergency accommodation to a decent standard. From a monitoring perspective, it was perhaps understandable that, in the first weeks of the crisis, no checks were run to make sure that the hostels housing Ukrainians (and receiving funding to do so) were up to the standards required of decent housing. The fact that such checks are still not in place three quarters of a year later points to incompetence, indifference and a lack of will. The absence of data on how municipalities experiencing higher numbers of Ukrainian arrivals are coping (or not) with the situation is indicative of the same issue.

### **Management and implementation**

No matter how well an agenda is set, it cannot work if there is no clarity on who will be responsible for its implementation at different levels (not only at national, regional and local level, but also within the scope of individual themes and areas of cooperation), or on whether they will have sufficient capacity to execute the agenda. The Strategic Principles rely on the appointment of a national coordinator as a key figure reporting to the government. The importance of this position was underlined when it was initially held by Vít Rakušan, but in the long run it is impossible for the Minister of the Interior, who has many other duties, to serve in this role effectively. As a result, the agenda has long been deprived of a key figure with a strong mandate and enough capacity to devote themselves fully to, and succeed in, the relatively complex coordination of coexistence with Ukrainian refugees.

A similar problem can be found at regional level. Talks on the appointment of “regional coordinators” are encouraging, but so far there has been a dearth of such officers. Yet it is the regional level that is close enough to what is happening at the local level to be in a position to guide national and regional policies in a way that takes into account the needs of all parties. A recent study (Jelínková, in press) shows that, with the exception of Prague and the South Moravian Region, regional strategy documents essentially overlook any issues that address coexistence with migrants. The current situation, in which the number of all migrants in the

Czech Republic exceeds 10% of the population,<sup>2</sup> cannot be managed unless some of the specific needs of this group are taken into account. Regional input is crucial for the setting of tasks at national level (Ager a Strang 2008; Scholten 2013). Even the attention paid to municipalities and how they handle coexistence with Ukrainians remains (with a few honourable exceptions) minimal. Yet recent research (Union of Towns and Municipalities, 2022) clearly documents the needs of municipalities that remain unmet and relate mainly to *funding, housing, information and guidance*.

### **Transparency and communication**

The most recent Concept for the Integration of Foreign Nationals (2016) acknowledges that many very different stakeholders need to be involved in the integration agenda. They differ in terms of the level at which they engage (from central government to regions and municipalities), their standing within the integration system (central government, local government, NGOs, schools, employers...), and their sphere of activity (education, employment, social services, the arts, civil society). Such diversity poses a challenge for the coordination of integration, which has hardly been a success in the Czech Republic. This is also reflected in the poor dissemination of information and the weak networking of those who need to be brought together.

Selective and erratic reporting by central government on pending measures has implications for the public, refugees, and professionals. Transparency, open factual debate, communication and sharing are hardly deep-rooted in public administration. The current challenges may have significantly advanced the capabilities of central government, with key ministries, for example, responding relatively quickly and creating good-quality sections on their websites to provide refugees with information, but there remains a propensity to withhold, and even to hide, strategic considerations and, for instance, information on methodology. For the sake of example, in the summer of 2022 the methodology used to calculate the humanitarian allowance was changed, but this was not communicated in advance to refugees, social workers in municipalities, or aid organisations. Subsequently, for unfathomable reasons, many refugees were denied a crucial benefit, and it took enormous effort to find out what changes had been made, why, or what their logic was, and, in particular, to force the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs to the table to discuss and find solutions to the difficulties that had arisen.

### **The extraordinary commitment of people on the ground is no substitute for systemic solutions**

The illusion that the challenges presented by the influx of Ukrainian refugees have been successfully managed rests on several pillars: (a) some of the strategic steps proposed have actually been implemented (e.g. the solution found to the legal status of refugees, efforts to integrate children into mainstream classes in primary schools, the provision of basic social security); (b) strong resolve, openness and flexibility on the part of the incoming Ukrainians; (c) the tremendous efforts of civil society; and (d) the professionalism and commitment of line

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<sup>2</sup> Roughly half of all migrants in the Czech Republic are Ukrainians, followed some distance behind by citizens of Slovakia and Vietnam.

workers (social workers, teachers, and even mayors and certain officials). The last two pillars in particular cannot be depended on indefinitely. High personal commitment cannot make up for the consequences of opaque management, the absence of structural measures or insufficient capacity at key institutions.

In some parts of the country, certain services (e.g. pre-school education, social care) had already reached the limits of their capacity even before refugees arrived from Ukraine. Central government officials and local government workers had already had to shoulder a considerable increase in their workload in response to the coronavirus pandemic. The further expansion of agendas currently being pursued therefore necessitates an increase in capacity, but this runs counter to the current trend of government streamlining and ultimately poses a tangible problem for public budgets. This is partly why we are seeing some authorities becoming overstretched, such as the Labour Office, which handles the payout of two newly created benefits: the humanitarian allowance and the host household allowance. A sign of a developed society is that it can cope with numerous (emergency) situations with the help of volunteering. However, alongside this, strategic management must identify areas where capacity needs to be strengthened and increased, and then deliver the appropriate increases.

### **A vision of the way forward is also crucial**

The causes of the current situation are not entirely trivial. Major factors include: the Czech Republic's long-standing approach to migrants, which is distinguished by extreme wariness about showing any significant accommodation to migrants (even if only symbolic); an ingrained, almost exploitative migration policy (Stojanov et al. 2022) that routinely acquiesces to the disadvantageous status faced by migrants on the labour market;<sup>3</sup> the extremely limited ability to manage more complex agendas (Potůček 2007); and the fact that the future situation regarding migration from Ukraine is unclear. While it is impossible to know how the situation in Ukraine will play out, we know for certain that some Ukrainians will want to live in the Czech Republic permanently or stay here in the long term, but also that a large number of them will return to Ukraine after having resided in the Czech Republic for a relatively long time. Ukrainians are granted their current residence status for one year (the relevant directive<sup>4</sup> allows for residence from one to three years). We already know that it will be extended by one year. However, transition to longer-term forms of residence is neither possible nor planned at the moment. For as long as there is uncertainty as to whether (some) Ukrainians will have the opportunity to stay in the Czech Republic, we can hardly expect them to put down roots here or for Czech institutions to be more responsive to their needs. The details of the future migration model need to be carefully considered so as not to weaken Ukraine by depriving it of the experts and manpower it will need to rebuild, while allowing for a sizeable amount of migration. It will be necessary to adopt a fair migration policy, to curb precarious forms of labour, and to choose to view migration not only as a resource for the Czech

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<sup>3</sup> Consider the principles of migration policy, which draw the line on combating labour exploitation at the point where an administrative burden starts to weigh on employers.

<sup>4</sup> Council Directive 2001/55/EC on minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between Member States in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences thereof.

economy, but also as a form of assistance that will ultimately be directed not at us, but at Ukraine. Migration policy will also have to be far more sensitive to transnationalism in practice (viz např. Vertovec 2004; Jirka a Leontiyeva 2022), i.e. a situation where some Ukrainians will be living partly in the Czech Republic and partly in Ukraine. In this respect, the government faces the task of elaborating on the vision it outlined in April, defining how it will seek to achieve a workable arrangement for future coexistence with Ukrainian citizens, and then, on the basis of that vision, it needs to set specific goals and more tangible steps to achieve them.

### **The future is open, but it is very much in our hands**

A great many studies investigating when coexistence with migrants succeeds and when it fails suggest that there are key principles which do not require much intellectual effort to understand. On the one hand, there is the openness of the host society, which includes fair treatment, being accommodative where necessary and possible, and establishing mutual points of contact. On the other hand, migrants are required to engage and accept the fundamental principles behind the way the host society functions. Other ingredients in the cocktail of “success” include the necessary patience, acceptance, and the knowledge that successful coexistence takes time. Examples from many countries clearly demonstrate that much of the above does not work “on its own” and that structural measures are absolutely necessary in these cases (just as they are in the care of other specific groups). A prime example of this is the prevention of exclusionary housing. If the current policy is continued, after a few years we will conclude that, as in certain other countries, migration has caused “problems” and that incoming migrants have not sufficiently “integrated”, but in doing so we will refrain from mentioning that the ball has actually remained in our court.

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