

Inclusion for all. Empowering vulnerable migrants in cities – Conference report

The 10th edition of the Integrating Cities Conference was held in Utrecht on 16 and 17 November 2022 and focused on the inclusion of vulnerable migrants. This report gives an overview of the different discussions and issues raised during the welcome speeches and the two high level panel discussions¹.

Conference opening & welcome speeches

The tenth edition of the Integrating Cities Conference was held in Utrecht, and was opened by **Rachel Streefland**, the city's Deputy Mayor for Asylum and Integration and Chair of the Eurocities Social Affairs



Rachel Streefland | © Koen Peters

Forum. Ms Streefland invited participants to use the two-day conference to come together and reflect on integration measures in our cities, underlining that migration and integration are more than highly politicised topics. Rather, they form the basis of building diverse societies and can be further improved by evidence-based policy making. The deputy mayor also spoke about the current context of high numbers of Ukrainian refugees seeking shelter in European cities and called for better asylum systems to respond to migration flows. More precisely, she

identified three points on which a political response has already been built upon in Utrecht:

1. Small scale asylum shelters that offer more flexibility: Thanks to funding from the European Commission, Utrecht's Plan Einstein has helped foster a feeling of togetherness between the neighbourhood inhabitants and the local asylum centre.

¹ See also the following articles on Eurocities website: [Cooperation and funding opportunities for cities welcoming refugees](#) [Gender matters including women in integration policies](#)

2. Fostering inclusive societies to ensure welcoming cities: while funding requirements sometimes require a narrower target group, Plan Einstein manages to bring different groups together, regardless of residence status.
3. Enabling legal pathways: In Utrecht, newcomers can be active from day one, but better access to the labour market is needed.

Following this first intervention, **Rutger Groot Wassink**, Deputy Mayor of Amsterdam and Chair of the Eurocities Working Group Migration & Integration, also welcomed participants. He underlined the value of international collaboration, especially in the face of climate change, rising inequalities and migrant integration and inclusion. Outlining Amsterdam's approach to this, the deputy mayor stated that focusing on specific target groups could sometimes be necessary, but that many elements of policies were relevant for all newcomers and even the local population. However, cities often run into walls with existing legislation, which shows that limitations set on the availability of services for migrants are political, and that we hence need to depoliticise the issue of migrant integration. Groot Wassink reminded participants that inclusion and integration do not happen overnight, but rather are a multi-generational process covering all life domains, from housing to work, from healthcare to education. In this context, integration requires positive, constructive and cohesive policies.

Panel debates²

Panel debate I - Cities welcoming refugees: exploring opportunities for multi-level cooperation and funding

What are the best approaches to receive and welcome refugees from Ukraine, as well as from other places? All over Europe, cities have struggled to find solutions, provide the best possible services, and formulate policies and initiatives. Despite the different approaches, cities have talked to each other, sharing experiences and tailoring initiatives according to their needs and legal and budgetary limitations.

Warsaw saw a peak of 400,000 Ukrainians arriving per day, following the outbreak of war in Europe earlier this year. With an average of 25-30,000 arriving each day, and 170,000 refugees currently in the city (about 15% of the local population), the city has had a lot to deal with. Thanks to the quick response of organisations such as the Norwegian Refugee Council, UNICEF, and other organisations with funding and expertise, and provisions from the city budget, Warsaw was able to increase school capacity, catering to the newly arrived young people, and upholding a human right to education, and was able to focus on other issues, such as long-term integration processes.

The city faces challenges on three main fronts. First, the humanitarian. According to **Michał Olszewski**, Deputy Mayor of Warsaw, "some national governments seem more interested in building fences and not in integration policies or in welcoming refugees/migrants or transferring funds for cities." Given these tensions that are prevalent not only between Warsaw and the Polish government, but in the

² The streaming of the two panel discussions are accessible [here](#) and [here](#)



cooperation between EU member states on all matters related to refugee reception and integration, the city did all it could, including looking for inputs and help from other cities throughout Europe.

Olszewski thanked other cities for providing assistance, saying that Warsaw received lots of offers of support to take some of the refugees, and “a very important support from Eurocities’ members and our sister cities like Dusseldorf and Vienna. Many Ukrainians were able to move on to avoid overcrowding.” In addition, he pointed to the fast mobilisation of other parts of society, which was essential to make the reception of so many Ukrainians possible in such a short space of time. “I was surprised by the mobilisation of civil society – being able to cope in such a short time,” he said. Without the mobilisation of citizens, businesses, and NGOs, it would be impossible to welcome as many refugees as Warsaw did and the same can be seen all over Poland. Companies ceded abandoned buildings and office spaces to host Ukrainians and the city was able to transform office buildings into accommodation centres for the most vulnerable (for around 1,500-2,000 Ukrainians). The fact that Poles and Ukrainians are culturally close helped the process, also many Ukrainians had family in the country, making the process even smoother.

The second dimension is the economic one, with the city mobilising huge assistance to refugees and aid support to Ukraine and receiving more than 5,000 pallets of goods from other cities.

Finally, the political dimension, considering that the Polish government is not as open as Warsaw to welcoming refugees. Warsaw disagreed with the national government on several issues. Given its history, Warsaw already had many migrants living in the city, and has well established city-level integration policies – but a chief source of tension centred on the political differences between the mayor, a Christian democrat with liberal slogans on LGBT rights and migration, and the far more conservative national government.

Nonetheless, as Olszewski pointed out, change was suddenly made possible due to the peculiarities of responding to a neighbour. “What had previously been impossible for years – happened in days, they adopted new laws and procedures for example a change in construction law to be able to refurbish buildings for reception. This shows political will to become more migration friendly,” he said.



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Hans Uneken, Director of the Department of Social Development of Utrecht, noted that Utrecht does not have to deal with the same number of refugees as Warsaw and Poland, but “we still needed to scale up our reception to find shelter for Ukrainians.” One key difference that helped with welcoming and integrating Ukrainian refugees is that they were automatically allowed to work in the city. In



contrast, other migrant groups are only allowed to work when they get their refugee status.

In any case, the city faces many issues when it comes to housing – with many people simply stuck in asylum shelters. However, Uneken added, “we scaled up to find shelter, and the next step is how to include them in society. We can learn from our immigration system and our Plan Einstein concept³, to provide social activities.”

Despite the success of the city’s integration policies and Plan Einstein, several issues remain:

- National policies/programmes cover only people with a residence permit, so EU funding is needed to support everyone in the city.
- The procedure to apply for EU funding is challenging, but this made Utrecht more creative and able to deliver at a high level.
- The city received direct EU funding for the start-up phase of its [Plan Einstein](#) through the EU’s Urban Innovative Action programme. Nonetheless, the city has identified a need for more funding and is now working with many partners, including local residents, professionals, volunteers and organisations, and encourages more cities to join this and other similar innovative initiatives. Funding for innovative projects is hard to get from the state level: “for innovative projects, cities cannot rely on national funds, therefore, cities need direct access to EU funds,” reinforced Uneken.

In Dortmund, a similar approach to Utrecht’s Plan Einstein is already being taken. **Birgit Zoemer**, Deputy Mayor in Charge of Labour, Health, Social Affairs, Sports and Recreation, said that the city adopted, in 2015, a decentralised concept to create ‘local welcome centres’ in different neighbourhoods of the city, also organising festivals and activities to gather both refugees and people living in these neighbourhoods.

The project was so successful that they tried it again once the Ukrainians started to arrive, and the city also set up in February 2022 a One Stop Shop, providing a space where all the different representatives from the different offices and the welfare organisations were together in one place for people to access. Despite the overwhelming numbers, the city also set up an information counter with information being provided in Ukrainian and Russian.

Dortmund, as well as other German cities, struggled with national legislation, particularly related to employment. The job centre usually only helps the unemployed and according to the previous system, asylum seekers had to wait 2 years to have access to the job market and health insurance. This changed after the EU’s directive of 1 June recommending that refugees coming from Ukraine should have the same access as long-term unemployed people to employment training and education services.

³ The Plan Einstein concept ensures that new arrivals get the same right to services, such as job support and activities, as the existing local population, and in so doing offers opportunities for people to meet and interact, building support for refugees and migrants in their adopted community.



As is the case in other cities, the budget was tight, and the city had to search for alternative sources of funding, such as making use of the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, and local networks. Zoemer noted that "we need flexible responses, sometimes the idea is very theoretical and misses the situation on the ground – we need to be able to take a holistic approach – the logic of funding should fit the project, not the other way around."

Distant from Ukraine, Nantes has not faced the same scale of refugees as cities in Eastern Europe. **Yves Pascouau**, Municipal Councillor in charge of European Affairs, Migrants and Travellers & Vice Chair of Nantes Metropole in charge of European Affairs noted that only around 100,000 Ukrainians were accommodated in France, with less than 10,000 accommodated in the entire region where Nantes is situated.

The role of Nantes is to accompany a state-oriented process that is decided at the local-national level by the state with representatives of the central government appointed for the local level. However, noted Pascouau, "we are as campaigning as cities. Nantes is the French city that has welcomed the biggest number of Ukrainian people, and provided daily services, even those not provided by law."

In other words, the city acts as a buffer, closing the gap or the delay between the period when the person is granted the rights and when they're able to access that right – money, food accommodation and other services. In France, explained Pascouau, "there is a territorial agreement, the State provides a lump sum to be implemented at the local level with partners, so they can experiment with new ideas to use the money where they want."

Above all, Pascouau noted that in Nantes the belief is that solidarity should be a recognised solution to help refugees, even if it is a complex process. "Nearly half of Ukrainians in France are with family hosts, this is 50-60,000 people. There is a high risk of exploitation as we don't know where they are, and most are women and children. The reception is state-oriented, and they are trying to organise this – both managing the hosted and also the hosting, it's difficult to prepare for a sustainable welcome," he said.⁴

From the EU Commission, **Giuliana Benedetto**, Policy Officer for Integration, Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs, stated that there is a dialogue between the institution and the cities, "this is not new and it's obvious, but it's useful to state this," she said.

With this in mind, Benedetto outlined some steps the EU commission has taken via its new Solidarity Platform, which brings together EU member states and Ukrainian authorities to detail how to welcome Ukrainians:

Already exchanges have taken place on the role of local authorities and civil society, as well as educational needs.

⁴ The European Commission has provided specific information for private individuals or families hosting refugees. For example: [Private accommodation for persons displaced from Ukraine | European Union Agency for Asylum \(europa.eu\)](#); [Safe Homes guidance \(europa.eu\)](#).



Benedetto also elaborated how cities can better access EU funds, noting in particular AMIF, which has a budget of €9.9 billion in the current programming period. Although most of this is targeted towards EU member states, €1.6 billion is specifically designed to incentivise and involve local level involvement in such plans, and 5% is earmarked for direct management by the local level.

Lastly, Benedetto suggested that cities must play a key role in the dissemination of information on different funding opportunities, and that doing so can also help shape the narrative on integration.

Taking this from a slightly different perspective, and as was brought up by the panellists, the EU role in reception and integration can often be seen by local populations as solely focused on Frontex and border management. On the other hand, directing EU funds to the local level and to organisations involved in welcoming and integrating refugees, would send a very strong signal to people who might then be more inclined to change their minds on this topic.

In terms of multilevel cooperation, there remains much room for improvement, as was explained by Zoemer, to understand the realities on the ground. For instance, while the federal government in Germany decided that refugees from five countries determined most likely to be granted refugee status should be entitled to language courses, it was in fact other people who most requested language courses locally.

In sum, the period since February 2022 has seen a lot of existing ideas brought to the fore of decision making on asylum and integration, while seeing a number of innovations. Nonetheless, the story told from the ground makes clear that, while this now makes for an impressive baseline, more must be done.

Panel debate II - The gender dimension of integration policies: How to include and identify migrant women’s needs when looking at migrant integration?

The gender dimension is an essential aspect of integration policies – how to facilitate the participation of women, integrate them, invite them to the discussions that matter to them and how to make it easier for them to find jobs and become independent.

With this in mind, Bristol has created a set of guidelines. According to **Asher Craig**, Deputy Mayor, Children's Services, Education and Equalities, it is necessary to challenge what we mean by integration, because the ‘everyday’ task of integration, is, essentially, inclusion, and involves an ongoing conversation with migrant women, and the involvement of entire neighbourhoods.

Bristol focuses on a bottom-up approach, ensuring that women are engaged and involved. The city has established a women’s commission, focusing on a range of relevant areas of concern, and has made sure that refugee women are also involved in providing a lot of support services offered by the city.



'[Horumar](#)' is a training programme focused on Somali women, which has been a huge success in Bristol, leading to women setting up their own social enterprises and entering the employment market for the first time. For Craig, "society is more fun when there's diversity and when women are included (and feel included)."

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Agreeing with Craig, **Thomas Fabian**, Deputy Mayor of Leipzig, noted that "women are less integrated into the labour market and face more violence." He noted that, in Leipzig inclusion is seen as an essential component of integration.

As with any such topic, there is a real complexity regarding female migrants. For Fabian, it is important to highlight the vulnerability of female migrants, but also that women are each very different – "they are the engines of integration," he said. On the one hand, women with children may have immediate contact with schools, childcare, and other parents, while, on the other hand, there are many vulnerable refugee women who are often less integrated in the labour market and less educated than men in a similar situation.

One way to start to change this is to encourage women to be more active in politics. Leipzig set up a migrants council where members are elected, and this provides the means for migrant self-organisation. The more integration is achieved, the more debates there are, the more issues are exposed, and the more solutions can be found.

In Riga, from the moment Ukrainian refugees began to arrive, a decision was taken to open a shelter specifically for women, explained **Signe Grube**, political advisor to the Mayor on Municipal and Social Issues. And there's a special law for Ukrainian refugees, meaning they are equal to Latvian citizens.

Employment is an important area, therefore, said Grube, "we have Ukrainians working in social support services, Ukrainian women working on the front line, together with Latvians, and these are the first people who welcome new Ukrainians, so Ukrainians are involved as equals in this process," having Russian as a *lingua franca* between Latvians and refugees.

In addition, given that many refugees are highly skilled, Riga organises daily job fairs within the support centre to find a placement for Ukrainians in, for instance, laboratories and hospitals. Out of 3,000 refugees placed in jobs within the city, at least one third are women.

Anila Noor, Founder and Managing Director of New Women Connectors, who advocates for policy change explained that "unfortunately in cities, the people who decided integration policies for women don't understand their reality and needs and don't ask the women what they want to do."

As a one time asylum seeker herself, Noor recalled being sent to work in a factory despite having an expertise elsewhere. She highlighted an expectation that migrant women don't want to work, and echoed Craig in calling for a bottom-up approach "so that migrant women can define what they want and how...It's time for women to have spaces to create their own visibility," she emphasised.

Bringing an academic perspective, and over 20 years of research on the topic, **Halleh Ghorashi**, Professor of Diversity and Integration at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, began by noting, as did Noor, that often refugees are seen as either *at risk* or as *a risk*, with women often falling into the first category.



On the one hand, it is good that they are seen as at risk, so they can receive much-needed help, but it is also a problem as they are not seen as political actors and as people who can contribute to society.

Often, married women arrive after their husbands, even if they highlight that they have an education, they rarely find opportunities, whereas men are given better opportunities to learn the language and get jobs. Consequently, any migrant women experience depression due to the expectation for them to stay home, creating a paradox in countries that see themselves as progressive.

“Imagine women who are seen as the second sex in their own countries,” proposes Ghorashi, they experience migration as “a new opening, a chance to start a new life, for growth, and emancipation. This is smashed as they arrive in Europe and, once again, they are seen as the second sex.”

To address this narrative, policymakers must be made aware of this reality, so as to not only find solutions but to actively include women in policy making and implementation, so that women can direct for themselves, with all possible support, their own future expectations, and possibilities.

Ghorashi highlighted this stigma through a story about her own time as a refugee: “30 years ago, I came as an asylum seeker with the ambition to study and go to university and learn the language. This was 1988 and I asked for Dutch classes at the university. I was told these classes were not for refugees, because they thought I was ‘not clever enough.’ I did the course, and I was the best in my class, and I became a professor. The risk is killing motivation at the start.”

One way to change that is to make connections between the perspective of refugee women and the perspective of politicians and institutions. This can mean taking actions such as creating safe spaces to bring people of different backgrounds together, celebrating differences and including migrant and refugee women in discussions. And, as several panellists pointed out, white men in positions of power must also become allies to migrant and refugee women.

